

“What Science and Common Sense Say About Collaboration and Sustainability”**Valley Care Community Consortium Breakfast - 10/23/07****Thomas E. Backer, PhD, *Human Interaction Research Institute*****< Key Elements of Successful Collaborations**

- 1 - Systematic planning, leading to objectives and activities that collaboration members can support.
- 2 - Addressing psychological challenges, such as power differences or resistances based on previous bad experiences with other collaborations
- 3 - Clearly identifying the strong core idea at the heart of the collaboration
- 4 - Finding the needed financial and human resources for the collaboration to be successful
- 5 - Incorporating learnings from other collaborations, both successes and mistakes made
- 6 - Encouraging the collaboration to evolve, responding to the changing community environment
- 7 - Looking at costs and benefits of collaborating over the long haul, including evaluation when appropriate
- 8 - Planning for sustainability at the outset, including creation of a revenue model to provide financial support beyond initial funding

< Cautions About Collaborations

- 1 - Not all collaborations work, and the science about effectiveness of collaborations is still limited
- 2 - Not all problems can be solved by collaborations - sometimes the right decision is *not* to collaborate
- 3 - People come to any new collaboration burdened by any negative experiences they've had with them in the past
- 4 - People are tired of putting resources into collaborations that often have limited success (like endless meetings without any noticeable results). This can increase “collaboration fatigue” - people complain about spending half their lives in collaboration meetings
- 5 - Collaborations can sometimes be a tactic for delaying action or obscuring responsibility so that change doesn't happen - but no one individual or organization can be blamed for this outcome

< **Strategies for Promoting Sustainability of Projects**

1 - **Early planning for sustainability** Long-surviving successful projects plan early for the long run, including plans for leadership transition and for long-term funding support.

2 - **Technical assistance** Help both with maintaining and improving the project and with creating a strategy for sustainability, can come from outside, and is often peer-based.

3 - **Integration** Interventions that are well-integrated into their host organizations are more likely to survive, as are those having high congruence with staff or community values.

4 - **Early and continued involvement by key community leaders** Community leaders need to have voice in implementing a project, and active engagement in these activities, ideally as part of a comprehensive plan that was embraced by those who live and work in the community.

5 - **Re-invention or adaptation** A project may face changes in the environment where it is operating that require flexibility so it can adapt itself to the changes occurring, while maintaining “fidelity.”

6 - **Continued funding support** The single most common cause of a project’s failure to survive (assuming it is worthwhile and doesn’t end due to poor quality) is simple...the money runs out.

< **Resources on Collaboration and Sustainability**

Backer, T.E. (Ed.) (2003). *Evaluating community collaborations*. New York: Springer.

Backer, T.E. & Norman, A.J. (1999). Partnerships and community change. *California Politics & Policy*, 39-44.

Cornerstone Consulting Group (2000). *Preservation and perseverance: Sustainability lessons from transitional neighborhoods*. Houston: Author.

Cutler, I. (2002). *End game: The challenge of sustainability*. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

David, T. (2002). *Reflections on sustainability*. Woodland Hills, CA: The California Wellness Foundation.

Langford, B.H. & Flynn, M. (2001). *Sustainability planning workbook*. Washington, DC: The Finance Project.

Lasker, R.D. & Weiss, E.S. (2003). Broadening participation in community problem solving: A multidisciplinary model to support collaboration research and practice. *Journal of Urban Health*, 80(1), 14-47.

Nonprofit Finance Fund Website: nonprofitfinancefund.org

Ray, K. (2002). *The nimble collaboration: Fine-tuning your collaboration for lasting success*. Minneapolis: Wilder Foundation.

The Finance Project Website: financeproject.org

Note: The VNR website will be operational in late December 2007. Current telephone contacts are for offices of the Human Interaction Research Institute.