



# **PROMISING PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING THE CAPACITY OF FAITH- AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The federal government is turning to intermediary organizations to help both faith-based and community-based organizations strengthen their programs and improve the services delivered to residents in low-income neighborhoods. The Compassion Capital Fund (CCF), established by Congress in 2002, provides funding for intermediary organizations to provide training, technical assistance and financial assistance to faith-based and community organizations.

This report documents the range of services that intermediaries provide to their constituent organizations, and highlights those that constitute promising practices. The report defines as promising practices those efforts undertaken by the intermediaries that show potential for producing successful outcomes—they improve the organizational capacity of faith-based and community organizations, are broadly used and accepted (although not universally), and have the potential for replication among other organizations.

This study was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families, and was conducted by Branch Associates, Inc. and its partner Abt Associates, Inc. Following guidelines from HHS, about half of the intermediaries in the study were funded in the first cohort of intermediaries selected through the competitive CCF application process. The remaining were chosen from among intermediaries with a track record of working with faith-based and community organizations, but which had not received CCF funding. This report is designed to provide additional information that can be shared with intermediaries funded under CCF and, potentially, be used in defining the types of services that the CCF should support.

### **Promising Practices**

The practices documented here fall into two categories. First, those that include sound, useful and easily replicable practices governing organizational assessment, group training, the sub-award process, and the facilitation of partnerships. The second category of promising practices entails holistic activities that require more intensive engagement on the part of the intermediary and the frontline organization.

### **Organizational Assessments**

The first capacity-building activity for most of the intermediaries was to conduct an assessment that identified the organizational strengths and weaknesses of each FBO and CBO. The intermediaries then used the assessment results to tailor technical assistance in ways that addressed each organization's most immediate and pressing needs and interests. Promising practices include:

- **Participatory Organizational Assessments**

Participatory self-assessments involve multiple staff from the FBO or CBO—from senior leaders to volunteers—and allow for dialogue and discussion among them about the organization’s strengths and weaknesses. Intermediaries reported that this approach provides them with an in-depth and reliable grasp of the key issues facing grassroots organizations. They also reported that by increasing the organizational staff members’ involvement in the process, this type of assessment increases those members’ dedication to the resulting work plan and capacity-building efforts.

- **Document Review as Part of Organizational Assessment**

In addition to conducting interviews and facilitating group discussions, intermediaries can learn about FBOs and CBOs by reviewing relevant documents. This additional method of data gathering was reported to enhance the assessment process by helping intermediaries gain a fuller view of the organization with which they were working.

## **Group Training**

Group training in this report refers to seminars, workshops, courses or lectures delivered in large group settings and designed to teach key concepts related to a particular topic. Training content included grant writing, financial management, board development, personnel management, marketing and creating partnerships. Intermediaries in this study provided trainings at no cost to participants, and were delivered either by intermediary staff or outside experts. Group training exposed some direct service providers to more sophisticated approaches to managing their organizations and helped foster networking among the attending organizations. Promising practices include:

- **Integrating Hands-On Assignments into Large-Group Training**

Stand-alone workshops increased awareness about many aspects of nonprofit management—much of which was new to small FBOs and CBOs. But this awareness did not necessarily translate into action. Intermediaries reported that providing technical assistance as part of the training (involving a form of “homework” that requires FBOs and CBOs to apply training concepts to their own organizations) helped put their newly gained skills to work.

- **Building on a Shared Culture to Enhance the Benefits of Training**

Shared backgrounds and values among trainers from the intermediaries and staff from the organizations attending the workshops can help shape an environment that facilitates learning among the workshop attendees. For instance, primarily Hispanic organizations benefited from working with bilingual intermediary staff members who could move back and forth between English and Spanish, and had similar cultural backgrounds.

## **Technical Assistance**

Technical assistance—as it is defined in this report—refers to instruction or guidance provided in one-on-one or small group settings. It is tailored to an organization’s specific needs and is, thus, a more customized approach than workshops, conferences or other group training activities. The areas addressed through technical assistance reflected the needs that emerged from the organizational assessment, as well as the organization’s interests and willingness to expend time addressing these issues. Among the most common topics addressed, four dominate the list: board development, strategic planning, financial management and fundraising. Promising practices include:

- **Project-Based Technical Assistance**

Project-based technical assistance provides FBOs and CBOs with tools and expertise in conceptualizing, designing and pursuing an actual program initiative. Thus, the learning takes place in the “real world” of program development.

- **Using the Expertise of Existing Staff**

In making decisions about who will provide technical assistance, intermediaries must balance the costs associated with using existing in-house staff against those associated with hiring consultants. Leveraging the expertise of in-house staff who are either involved with direct service (e.g., running an after-school program) or administrative functions (e.g., responsible for payroll) to provide technical assistance can be more cost-effective—and it grounds the assistance in real-world problems and constraints.

## **Sub-Awards**

Each of the CCF intermediaries in this study distributed a portion of its HHS award to FBOs and CBOs with which it was working. The amounts of these sub-awards varied, ranging from several thousand dollars to grants as large as \$50,000. In accordance with federal guidelines, all of these funds were awarded on a competitive basis. The CCF intermediaries used these sub-awards to encourage two distinct types of projects: capacity building and program expansion. Capacity-building awards were used for purposes such as hiring consultants to train board members, facilitate strategic planning retreats and develop fundraising plans. The program expansion sub-awards were used by organizations for such purposes as hiring full-time and part-time staff, so they could extend their program to an additional location and/or target additional groups of people to serve. The following promising practices cover every stage of the sub-award process, from proposal writing and revision, to learning from the experience of having an unsuccessful proposal:

- **Providing Group Training to Prepare for Writing the Proposal**

The sub-award process provided an opportunity for training FBOs and CBOs in the essentials of writing a grant proposal.

- **Giving Feedback on Drafts of Sub-Award Applications**

Intermediaries reported that having an early feedback process helped the organizations strengthen their ability to write effective proposals.

- **Having FBO and CBO Leaders Serve as Peer Reviewers**

Leaders of organizations that were not applying for the sub-awards learned important lessons about grant writing by serving as peer reviewers and, in that role, examining the proposals from a different perspective.

- **Providing Feedback for Organizations Whose Proposals were Not Funded**

Unsuccessful sub-award applications can provide a learning opportunity that helps organizations ultimately write more effective grant proposals.

### **Serving as a Bridge Between Organizations**

The intermediaries served as bridges, or liaisons, between their constituent organizations and other organizations, businesses and government agencies. Intermediaries helped their constituent FBOs and CBOs to make connections that could help them secure funding, as well as bring larger numbers of organizations together to create viable and effective coalitions. Promising practices include:

- **Linking Grassroots Organizations with Funding**

Intermediaries drew on their network of resources to introduce grassroots organizations to potential partners and funders that they would not otherwise have access to.

- **Creating Partnerships Among Organizations**

Intermediaries attempted to increase the effectiveness of neighborhood coalitions and partnerships by mobilizing new organizations to join the groups, helping member organizations develop effective working relationships and training them to increase their impact.

### **Strengthening the Capacity of Intermediaries**

Intermediaries in this study took additional steps to strengthen their own capacity. Partnerships, in particular, proved to be a key strategy for providing a fuller range of services to a diverse group of organizations. One important way that intermediaries can strengthen operations is to perform evaluations of their current effectiveness. Measuring outcomes of their services to organizations provides an opportunity for intermediaries to test their own perceptions of their value, improve services, and provide evidence of this value to funders. Promising practices include:

- **Organizational Mentoring**

Organizational mentoring at the executive level involves frequent communication between senior leaders of different organizations. The mentoring relationship is focused on helping to develop specific organizational capacities. The intermediaries engaged in organizational mentoring reported that this approach enabled one of the partners to develop the skills to function as a lead intermediary and provide services on a larger scale.

- **Using External Evaluation**

Having outside professionals conduct evaluations provides an opportunity for intermediaries to make their services more effective.

- **Using Internal Approaches for Measuring Outcomes**

Well-designed reporting forms completed by sub-award recipients document, in a systematized and comprehensive manner, how the sub-awardees used and benefited from their grants. These reports can provide valuable outcomes data that can be used by intermediaries to improve their own services and provide documentation of the value of such services to funders.

## **Lessons**

Taking all of the practices together, this report draws the following specific lessons from the study and recommendations for improving intermediaries' effectiveness.

### **Intermediaries provide an efficient means for the federal government to work with faith- and community-based organizations.**

Through CCF, HHS has invested in intermediaries to work with FBOs and CBOs more efficiently than it could work with them directly. This study found that intermediaries successfully recruited a range of grassroots organizations at different levels of capacity, from some that were barely even formal organizations, to others that were sophisticated and experienced.

### **HHS should continue to recruit both faith-based and secular intermediaries. Both types demonstrate strength in building relationships with constituent organizations and providing quality services.**

Faith-based and secular intermediaries in this study represented effective vehicles for government support of grassroots organizations. Both types developed good relationships with staff from the constituent organizations, and provided a range of services designed to improve the effectiveness of both FBOs and CBOs.

**There is an important role for large group training, but the bulk of resources should be directed to more intensive technical assistance.**

Large group training sessions serve several purposes—for example, by exposing staff of emerging grassroots organizations to new terminology, the ingredients for writing a good proposal, the process for submitting a proposal and methods for developing a budget.

However, one-on-one technical assistance has several advantages for strengthening organizations. One-on-one technical assistance allows for an in-depth exploration of issues that directly affect an organization. While group training provides useful information to organizations, the goal should be for FBOs and CBOs to not only be more aware of how they should be operating, but to also take action toward improved capacity. As anyone who has attended a professional conference, workshop or training can attest, awareness does not necessarily lead to action.

**Organizational mentoring for the intermediaries, at the executive level, is an approach to consider.**

A special type of partnership, organizational mentoring, is one approach worth considering for improving intermediaries' own capacities. Unlike technical assistance that is limited by contractual specifications, organizational mentoring relationships provide an opportunity for senior leaders to receive guidance and support in an ongoing, flexible and supportive manner around a variety of related topics. This approach—involving clear goals and intensive contacts between high-level staff—was used effectively for developing and improving staff infrastructure, financial systems, and proficiency with grants management for less experienced intermediaries.

**Intermediaries should do a better job of assessing their own services.**

Other than plans to re-administer organizational assessments and compare the initial and subsequent assessment scores, intermediaries in this study did not routinely measure outcomes associated with their technical assistance services. Intermediaries should assess their own services and measure their attainment of the desired outcomes. External evaluations and the collection of uniform and specific data from participating organizations will enable intermediaries (and HHS) to improve their programs, set realistic expectations and goals, and measure progress toward achieving those goals.