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Evaluation of Greater Mankato Area United Way’s Annual Allocations Process from the Partner Agencies’ Perspective

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Background
Greater Mankato Area United Way (GMAUW) has a rich history in the greater Mankato area with its origins beginning in 1931. The Community Impact Division (CID) of GMAUW is responsible for the annual allocations process in which community impact teams of volunteers work with GMAUW staff and partner agencies to determine how best to allocate funds raised during GMAUW’s annual campaign. This process has been in place since 2001, but has never been formally evaluated.

This project aims to provide information to GMAUW about the annual allocations process and level of engagement with partners from the partner agencies/programs themselves. GMAUW values their relationship with their partners and realizes the importance of evaluating their own practices to ensure that the relationship remain strong and mutually beneficial. GMAUW has never had the internal capacity to complete an evaluation of this nature and will use the findings to improve their processes.

Research Question: How do GMAUW’s partners view the annual allocations process?

Findings/Results
The importance of building capacity of organizations through collaboration in difficult economic situations is relevant to the struggles that GMAUW partners face as they are challenged to meet the demand for services with fewer resources (Mielke, Carman & Bies, 2010). Collaboration amongst organizations was further discussed in terms of relationships between grantors and grantees. The relationship between grantor and grantees needs to be reframed to think of it as one of equals because each has a valuable contribution and collaboration can facilitate more effective delivery of services for clients. Creating collaborative relationships between grantors and grantees is critical, but difficult so practitioners need to be aware of this so they can have a better understanding of how to improve it. A lack of collaborative relationships reduces the effectiveness of grantors and grantees to have open communication and future-oriented services (Fairfield & Wing, 2008).

A commonly identified struggle in the relationship dynamics between grantors and grantees similar to GMAUW is how programs can improve accountability measures and still convey the impact of their services. Sustainability of programs was also something that affected the relationship in the literature (Shaw & Allen, 2009). Nonprofit organizations value fairness, responsiveness, program outcomes, and costs. "Understanding what agencies are getting funding" was the most helpful aspect. "A chance to meet other programs in the area and talk with them" was helpful. The evaluation meeting is well organized. There is an efficient process.

Limitations
The present study, while providing valuable feedback from GMAUW’s partners, has some criticism that the data collection process involves CID volunteers from the community, the GMAUW staff, the partner organization. Recommendations for improvement include helping with marketing of agencies to the community, professional development, budgeting, and evaluation. The results from the survey suggested that making the funding application more user friendly would be beneficial and it also demonstrated the desire for GMAUW to share more feedback from the review completed by the CID team.

Conclusions & Recommendations
This research indicated that GMAUW has areas where they could improve their strategies when engaging with partner agencies, but overall the findings reflected positive interactions. As a result of this project, GMAUW has had the opportunity to re-evaluate the manner in which they engage with their partner agencies and conduct the annual allocations process. GMAUW staff is looking forward to incorporating suggestions from the research and are constantly looking for ideas on how to make things more user friendly and innovative.

Overall, the respondents felt that strengths of GMAUW are how the allocations process involves CID volunteers from the community, the GMAUW staff, the application itself, and that going through the process actually benefits the partner organization. Recommendations for improvement include helping with marketing of agencies to the community, professional development, budgeting, and evaluation. The results from the survey suggested that making the funding application more user friendly would be beneficial and it also demonstrated the desire for GMAUW to share more feedback from the review completed by the CID team.

Methodology
The sample for the present study consisted of 32 partner contacts as identified by the 2010 GMAUW funding applications. The study was designed to be administered as an anonymous online survey in which partner program/agency staff were asked to complete a survey that evaluated GMAUW’s allocations process and level of engagement. Survey questions were both qualitative and quantitative. The results from the survey suggested that making the funding application more user friendly would be beneficial and it also demonstrated the desire for GMAUW to share more feedback from the review completed by the CID team.