
Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: A Lesson for CED Professionals on The Tipping Point: When Local Partners Pull Out of Fed and State Programs

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Why would you, as a local CED professional, hesitate to bring in a federal or state program to your community? Why do some federal and state programs struggle to recruit and maintain local partnerships? Many federal and state programs rely on community-based partners to implement and/or deliver services – local governments, regional organizations and



non-profits. In fact, CED programs are often designed with

this

intergovernmental relationship in mind. Community-based partners know the target population, their needs, and what resources might already exist. State and federal players have a much broader and deeper array of resources and expertise. A common structure is program design and financial support at the federal level, administration and oversight at the state level, and implementation by local partners. Of course, the reality is much more complicated, but most from the outside, this structure seems logical and sound.

In particular, why would some local partners become so engaged that they enter into a program partnership only to leave a few years later? When does a partnership become 'not worth the effort'? This was the question behind a recent project conducted by researchers at the School of Government exploring the barriers faced by local partners trying to bring federal programs to the community. We examined why North Carolina local partners either stayed with or withdrew from a nationally available federal program offering food assistance to children in the summer. The key question was, when did the burden outweigh the benefit? Or running the program become unworkable?

The local burden was the focus of the study, specifically the burden experienced by those community partners implementing the program. The ability to absorb the burden depends in turn on capacity. We examined burden and





Infrastructure, and Personnel. An example of administrative burden would be required paperwork in applications or reporting. An example of financial burden would be required financial security, match, or ability to carry costs. An example of infrastructure burden would be the need to have storage or transportation capability. An example of personnel burden would be the need to provide staff or volunteers, with or without a particular expertise.

The program in question was always applied in areas of high need, low participation, and motivated community partners. Those who filled out significant applications, traveled to attend trainings, and took on the program were all clearly motivated. However, we found there were significant tipping points where partners felt they had to withdraw from the program, especially in terms of financial capacity. Especially in rural areas where the local partners are non-profits, often religiously based or, in this case, school systems that run meal programs during the school year, the burden of paying for food, staff, space and related program costs up-front, waiting several months for reimbursement that depended on correctly submitted paperwork, was too much. The organizations did not have the cash in the bank to implement the program on the front end.

When thinking about programs needed by the most distressed communities, it is important to remember the same communities may be willing to be an active partner in solutions, but not have the capacity assumed by the program designers. If there is a significant lack of capacity in any of the four frames, the program can't be implemented as planned. Solutions may lie in greater flexibility to work with specific capacity constraints, which could vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Some locations may have many volunteers but less financial backing; others ma



deal with administrative tasks.

y have infrastructure they can access but not skilled workers to

The full study, *A Local Programmatic Approach to Organizational Capacity: Summer Meals for Children, Federal Policy Failure, and a Threat to the Enterprise of Public Administration*, will be published this fall in *Public Administration Quarterly*.