

The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Initiative: The Urban Health Initiative's National Program Office

Why would a foundation use an intermediary to manage a multi-site initiative? What are the important aspects of the relationships among a foundation, intermediary and local sites? How has The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's use of an intermediary played out during the life of a ten-year initiative?

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About the Urban Health Initiative

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) established the Urban Health Initiative (UHI) in 1995 to determine whether a concerted, collaborative effort can bring about region-wide improvements in multiple measures of child health and safety. Five cities were chosen to implement UHI. These cities and their respective UHI campaigns are:

- Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign
- Mayor's Time (Detroit)
- Safe Passages (Oakland)
- Philadelphia Safe and Sound
- Youth Matters (Richmond)

UHI campaigns work to implement proven programmatic strategies at such a large scale that citywide statistics will improve significantly. To do that, UHI campaigns must be change agents to secure systemic policy and fiscal changes necessary to get strategies to that scale.

The UHI was designed to be non-prescriptive, allowing communities to craft implementation plans based on local conditions without assumptions, mandates or imperatives set forward by RWJF, which made a ten-year funding commitment.

The National Program Office (NPO) based in Seattle provides guidance, technical assistance and oversight to the local UHI campaigns in a number of areas including research, management, systems change and communications. The NPO also helps campaigns attract and develop the local leaders essential to bring about and sustain change in their cities. Former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer is national program director.

About the UHI's Lessons Learned Project

The UHI has learned a great deal with regard to developing change agent organizations, and securing change in large cities. The NPO is working to catalogue these lessons so they can benefit future change agent organizations and their funders. As of March 2005, these papers had been written (and more are in the works):

- Political Strategizing in a Constantly Changing Environment
- Using Data in the Decision-Making Process
- Sustainable Funding for Program Strategies
- Reflections on the Start-Up of the Urban Health Initiative
- The Origins of the Urban Health Initiative
- Communications Planning by Change Agents
- The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Systems-Change Initiative: The Urban Health Initiative's National Program Office

All papers can be found on the UHI's website, www.urbanhealth.org. Comments, suggestions and questions about the UHI Lessons Learned Project are welcome. Contact Jerry VanderWood, UHI Director of Communications, at 206-616-3692 or jerryvw@u.washington.edu.

The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Initiative:

The Urban Health Initiative's National Program Office

By Prue Brown¹

Why an NPO?

When a foundation decides to mount a multi-year, multi-site initiative, among the many questions it must address is how to manage it. Who will be responsible for developing the ideas behind the initiative, selecting sites, monitoring performance, providing technical assistance, promoting cross-site learning, evaluating outcomes, and institutionalizing the initiative's accomplishments? Foundation staff members can take on all these tasks themselves. Or they can carry out some of the tasks and hire consultants and support organizations to do others. A third possibility is transferring initiative management to an intermediary organization. Some foundations develop their own hybrid models through which they retain responsibility for certain tasks and outsource others.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) standard practice for such initiatives is to establish what it refers to as a National Program Office (NPO), an intermediary² that provides general oversight and guidance to the participating sites. Foundation personnel cite a number of advantages of this approach:

- **Efficiency** — outsourcing program management allows the Foundation to avoid hiring large numbers of specialized staff people who might not be well suited to work in other program areas following the end of the initiative.
- **Talent recruitment** — hiring NPO directors, usually half-time, means that the Foundation can attract the best and the brightest in the field at the same time that these individuals can continue to work and stay current in their fields.
- **Credibility** — associating the Foundation's program with people who are well recognized in their fields can inspire belief in the value of the enterprise among various local and national audiences.
- **Overhead cost reduction** — grants to intermediaries are considered program rather than administrative expenses for tax purposes so the Foundation can keep its administrative overhead low.

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² The term "intermediary" is often applied to different types of entities. In this paper, intermediary refers to an entity hired by a foundation to oversee and provide assistance to multiple sites in a national initiative. Another use of the term, which is not the focus of this paper, is to describe local entities that are placed between funding agencies and service delivery systems to disburse funds, provide training, monitor grants and other activities.

Beyond these reasons for working through an intermediary, RWJ staff recognized that the NPO for the Urban Health Initiative required some particular capacities that differentiated it from RWJF's typical NPOs, which at that time were often headed by clinicians and other professionals associated with medical and nursing schools. More specifically, they knew that to be successful, UHI had to persuade political leaders that community resources would have to be used differently. Because politics and money were central to the Foundation's conception of UHI, RWJ staff felt the NPO needed a leader who had experience trying to change the way government and policy work at the local level on behalf of children.³

Already known to the Foundation through some previous work, former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer fit the bill very well. Royer selected a Deputy Director, Cindy Curreri, who also had deep experience in local and state government. Royer and Curreri constituted a leadership team that looked quite different than the physicians leading other NPOs, but RWJF staff was comfortable that it represented a good fit with UHI's needs. Foundation staff also recognized that UHI's NPO was also going to be larger than most other Foundation NPOs because Royer and Curreri were going to provide leadership and hands-on site work that went far beyond the traditional role of brokering technical assistance and monitoring site expenditures.

Early Challenges

Although Royer was involved in the site selection process as a consultant, the NPO did not begin operations until January 1996 when eight sites received support for the two-year planning period at the end of which the final group of five sites was awarded implementation grants. This planning period confronted the NPO with a mix of operational and strategic challenges. Although they seem fairly predictable in retrospect, these challenges were largely a function of the fact that neither the Foundation, nor the NPO, nor the sites had ever set out to do an initiative of this kind before. Some of these challenges were:

- The timing of its grant meant that the NPO had to open an office and staff up at the same time that it was charged with providing technical assistance to the sites on demand.
- Only a subset of the sites would be selected to move forward into the implementation phase, which constrained the development of trust and open exchange between the sites and the NPO. Sometimes the sites hesitated to ask for help because they worried about exposing their weaknesses, and sometimes the NPO hesitated to take the initiative to provide assistance because it worried about perceived favoritism among competing sites.
- The NPO had expected a more senior and experienced group of site directors but most lacked skills in key areas of strategic planning, communications, and navigating a constantly changing political environment. The NPO had also expected sites to more readily grasp UHI's system change goals and the need to use data and information on best practices to develop their local plans. The relative absence of good local data further slowed down the planning process.

Besides having implications for planning similar initiatives in the future, these and other challenges required the NPO to undertake much more intensive training and technical

³ See other UHI Lessons Learned papers, particularly Reflections on the Start-Up of the Urban Health Initiative and The Origins of the Urban Health Initiative, both by Paul Jellinek, Urban Health Initiative, 2004.

assistance than originally anticipated. Nonetheless, at the end of the two-year planning period, five sites were awarded four-year grants (with the expectation of a second four-year grant pending initial results), and the initiative officially entered implementation.

The NPO's Role

As UHI's intermediary, the NPO was charged with making the initiative happen, with translating the ideas behind UHI into action on the ground in five U.S. cities. NPO leadership describes its role as twofold: "trying to ensure the success of the sites and telling the unvarnished truth to the Foundation." To do this successfully, the NPO played a number of roles and assumed a range of functions over the life of the initiative. Its main activities included:

- **Technical assistance to site directors and board members.** The NPO provided direct one-on-one technical assistance to sites on all aspects of the initiative: hiring staff, board development, budgeting and accounting, strategic planning, finding and using data and best practices, communications, negotiating local politics, leadership development, fundraising, and problem solving about a wide array of individual site challenges and opportunities. Although the intensity of contact varied depending on site need and the stage of the initiative, each site was assigned a NPO staff person who made at least 5-6 site visits each year. These technical assistance visits were supplemented by regularly scheduled phone calls and more informal phone and email conversations as needed. The NPO provided considerable mentoring to site staff and board members over UHI's ten years.
- **Convenings.** The NPO arranged a host of annual meetings, retreats and trainings at which participants could network with each other and share their lessons, learn about a particular topic, gain exposure to experts in the field, and visit programs of interest. Some convenings, such as the Inner-City Leadership visits, involved up to 25 people from each site; others targeted smaller groups of board and staff members and UHI Fellows. Some lasted several days and allowed for significant cross-fertilization among participants; others involved one or two-day training sessions to impart specific knowledge and skills.
- **Connecting sites to resources.** NPO staff helped connect sites with local and national resources ranging from prospective board members and government officials to program research and funding opportunities.
- **Running interference.** Sometimes the NPO was called upon by sites to run interference locally as when it helped one site "get rid of some staff members who were political hires," another to "make sure our fiduciary sponsor did not spend our resources inappropriately," and still another to "keep the city at a distance when it wanted our funds for certain services and to endorse certain ballot initiatives that were unrelated to our agenda." In these cases, the NPO represented the public face of the Foundation and used this authority to help solve a local problem.
- **Program development.** The NPO had the flexibility to develop special programs as needed over the life of the initiative. Its main contribution was the Fellows Program, which involved individuals in each city who could expand and deepen the site's work by providing access to key policymakers, expertise in program or tactical areas, and/or help in implementing system-change strategies.

- **Program monitoring.** The NPO set up systems of tracking and reporting outcome and process data; the sites used this system to submit Getting to Scale Reports⁴ to the NPO every six months. Near the end of the initiative, the NPO had an independent data expert check, first, whether the data were correct and, second, whether the site played a meaningful role in securing the needed change.
- **Keeping the Foundation informed.** The NPO communicated with the Foundation through structured calls that initially took place weekly, then biweekly, and later monthly. Other forms of engagement included such venues as seeing Foundation staff at meetings, inviting them to join the NPO on site visits, and ongoing email contact.
- **Learning.** The Foundation's standard practice for long-term, multi-site initiatives is to support an evaluation carried out by an independent contractor. To evaluate UHI, the Foundation selected a team at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. The Foundation also supported the Urban Seminar Series at Harvard University, a forum that brought together leading researchers and practitioners with UHI participants to address the latest thinking on UHI-related issues. The NPO consulted with the Harvard team to help design seminars that would provide maximum utility to the sites. Additionally, the NPO worked throughout the life of the initiative to draw out lessons for participants and the larger field through discussion at cross-site meetings, reflections among its staff, and the Lessons Learned series of occasional papers such as this one.

Value of the NPO to UHI Sites

“A good intermediary knows how to do what it's telling the sites to do— that's basic, you need to have people who have lived the experience.”

“They kept the vision alive and our eyes on the prize.”

“They opened up a world of excellence and expectation that set our work on a sound path.”

“The NPO has helped to build capacity. They have tried to do it with me— advise me but not give me the answers.”

“NPO leadership is no nonsense but that's good once you understand what they are trying to accomplish.”

“The NPO's patience is extraordinary—they know how hard to push and when to back off.”

⁴ Getting to Scale (GTS) reports are mechanisms created by the NPO to chart site process outcomes, including numbers of children reached with each programmatic strategy, dollars generated for or redirected to each strategy, and policy changes achieved.

- **Fiscal Management.** Unlike some intermediaries, the NPO did not assume a substantial regranting role. The Foundation funded the sites directly but the NPO monitored the sites' fiscal operations and negotiated all site budgets before submitting them to RWJF with its recommendations to fund, to withhold or to modify the site requests. With grants under \$50,000, the understanding with RWJF was that the NPO's decisions would be honored without lengthy Foundation staff review so that the grants could be turned around rather quickly. Larger grants went through a more extensive internal Foundation process but the NPO's recommendations constituted a key basis for decisions. In fact, in no case over UHI's ten years have these recommendations been turned down by the Foundation.

The NPO had an annual budget of about \$1.5 million to carry out the roles described above. Costs varied by UHI's stage of development but broke down roughly into personnel (about 50 percent), travel and meeting expenses, consultants, and the direct costs of running an office. The staffing pattern varied over time depending on UHI's needs but included the director, deputy director, communications director, and administrative staff; staff responsible for specialized functions such as research and leadership; systems specialists who worked with sites; and operations and cross-site meeting staff. The budget also afforded the NPO the flexibility to support the costs of some program development, such as the staff and meeting costs of the Fellows Program. UHI's NPO costs were greater than some other NPOs supported by the Foundation but the roles and functions the NPO played were consistent with these costs.

Sites' Feedback Regarding the NPO

Although each of the sites faced different challenges and opportunities locally, they share the view that the NPO added inestimable value to their work. "If it hadn't been for the NPO's support, we would have gone belly up." The NPO "made us be sharp and rich and pushed and prodded us, that's what put us in a position to keep looking at data and be true to the idea of outcomes." Among the functions that the NPO served that the sites most appreciated were the following:

- **Inspiration and focus.** Sites felt that the NPO gave them an exciting new vision that was expressed in bold and inspiring terms. The NPO shared its deep concern for children with local staff and board members and was able to generate a sense of purpose that was more ambitious than any agenda previously undertaken by the community. When sites strayed from the vision, the NPO was relentless in its refocusing efforts.
- **Deep substantive expertise.** The sites viewed the NPO as a source of "very strategic and useful thinking" and of effective, practical help. The NPO's ability to troubleshoot on a wide range of issues and its political and systems sensibility positioned it as an extremely helpful resource in navigating the complexities of local systems reform. The sites felt that the NPO understood and could help them address the problems they faced in part because NPO staff had such deep and relevant experience in various public sector roles.
- **Exposure to new ways of thinking.** Over and over again, sites provided examples of ideas and experts to whom they were exposed by the NPO—new ways of thinking about a problem, new understanding of strategies being used around the country, new practice networks they could call upon. In many cases, site directors could trace the results of this exposure to new ways in which local officials were spending resources or new ways in which local provider networks were changing their operations.

- ***Flexible, capacity-building support.*** Sites felt that the NPO understood the critical role of local context and the need to individualize solutions rather than impose standardized ones. They felt respected by an NPO that did not claim credit or compete with them locally but, instead, seemed totally committed to helping them “look good” and meet their goals. The mentoring and leadership training provided personal and professional support highly valued by the sites.
- ***Ability to surface and manage differences.*** Sites felt that they had the kind of relationship with the NPO in which they could disagree but then negotiate and reach an understanding. Having enough confidence in the relationship to have dialogue about differences allowed the sites to avoid the time and stress of dishonest communications and strategizing about how to “get around” the NPO, a more common dynamic of funder-grantee relationships.

The sites also had some suggestions about what the NPO might have done more effectively. These suggestions include:

- ***Greater guidance early on.*** Sites would have appreciated more direction and guidance at the beginning (and note that this would have been easier if the NPO had been established before the planning period). They liked being able to select the local problems for focus, but more clarity about what they needed to do during the planning period and what staff leadership was needed to do it—backed up by some written materials—would have been useful. It took some time before the NPO developed an effective strategy—most importantly, the Denominator Exercise⁵—for helping sites gain a thorough understanding of UHI’s goals as a systems change initiative. Doing so earlier would have saved time and energy during this period and helped the sites understand UHI’s driving vision better and translate it into action sooner in UHI’s evolution. Setting interim measures of progress for each site early on in implementation would also have helped them maintain focus and mission. Some, but not all sites, would have liked more direction and structured assistance around various other aspects of the initiative such as the Fellows Program, communications, or strategies for sustainability.
- ***Stronger policy role.*** Most of the sites felt that the NPO could have played a stronger policy role. When sites worked with the NPO on a legislative briefing or a meeting with mayoral staff, for example, they quickly appreciated what a powerful force the NPO could be for them and they wanted more. Just the NPO’s presence (representing RWJF and speaking with the authority of a large national foundation) and the “force of its commitment seemed to make a powerful statement and allow us to walk through that open door.” One director felt that legislators came to the site’s briefing because of the RWJF name, which lent a different kind of credibility than her board could deliver. In retrospect, she would have put more emphasis on state level work, as achieving big city scale requires state support and, therefore, an investment by the change agent in generating both local and state buy-in. A different perspective came from a site that did not feel that an organization from outside the state could have sufficient clout either at the local or state level to be very helpful, while yet another site would have preferred the NPO to assume a more visible public advocacy role (within the bounds of nonprofit tax laws).

⁵ The Denominator Exercise is described on page 11 of the UHI Lessons Learned paper, *Using Data in the Decision-Making Process* by Jerry VanderWood, Urban Health Initiative, 2003.

- **More help telling the story.** Several sites would have liked the NPO to have started earlier to publish lessons learned pieces based on UHI's evolving experience. They view this as a strategy for getting national attention, positioning the NPO to do more policy work nationally, and helping to shape peoples' understanding of UHI along the way. In addition to the evaluation, the sites felt that multiple vehicles were needed in order to capture the richness and complexity of the UHI story, including both what UHI accomplished and how it did so.
- **More connection to RWJF.** The sites understood that their primary relationship within UHI was with the NPO, not the Foundation. But they all questioned whether the relationship with the NPO had to preclude a more direct connection to RWJF. As the initiative draws to a close and the NPO ceases to exist, the sites wonder how they can maintain some place on RWJF's landscape. In the short run, they would like RWJF's help accessing other big national foundations for possible support. But they also appreciate the possible long-term benefits of having an ongoing relationship with a foundation beyond that of grantee. Several also wondered whether RWJF could join with other funders to institutionalize an ongoing technical assistance and convening resource in their regions.

Lessons from the NPO's Experience in UHI

The NPO's experience in UHI suggests some broader lessons for foundations and intermediaries engaged in long-term multi-site initiatives:

#1: "IF THE RELATIONSHIPS DON'T WORK, WE'RE DEAD IN THE WATER."

Trust and good communication are central to an intermediary's ability to manage the inherent tension that surfaces in its relationships with an initiative's sites and with its sponsors. The intermediary has to "deliver the goods" to both parties but it has to do so with an astute blend of transparency, responsiveness and respect. It must constantly balance foundation and site needs and keep its eye on the overall success of the initiative: "we never pretend we are *just* there for the sites or *just there for the Foundation*."

Relationships take time. Each party needs to feel that the intermediary appreciates its particular context and demands. The foundation can worry that the NPO might embarrass the foundation or put it at risk by being too much of an advocate or by speaking for the foundation inappropriately. The sites can see the intermediary as an agent of the foundation that has the power to withdraw their funding or dictate their agenda. As one site director noted, "They [NPO] were wise in terms of the amount of personal contact it would take to make such an ambitious enterprise work. Face-to-face time with people with whom you have some accountability is very useful." Another site's board member commented that to understand why the NPO required them to put so much time and effort into the Denominator Exercise, "we had to learn about each other to get it, we had to get familiar." Then the group could move from performing for the NPO (and in some cases concealing problems) to understanding that the NPO was "on the same team and highly invested in our success."

Sites also understood that the NPO advocated for them with RWJF, but not indiscriminately. What made this work well was that sites knew that they could count on the NPO to say the same thing to the sites as to the foundation and that the sites could push back if they did not

fully agree with the NPO's perspective or assessment. This transparency meant that UHI did not experience the common problem of sites "going around" the intermediary to make their case directly to the funder.

#2: "A GOOD INTERMEDIARY STICKS TO THE VISION AND TELLS THE SITES AND THE FOUNDATION WHAT THEY NEED TO HEAR, WHICH IS NOT NECESSARILY WHAT THEY WANT TO HEAR."

Both the sites and the foundation underscore the value of an independent intermediary that speaks the truth. The following comments from a site leader and foundation representative illustrate the point:

"Initially the NPO was very useful—they played the Judge Judy role—and said (more politely): 'What you are doing is useless.' We couldn't hear it at the beginning; some here said the NPO was too intrusive . . . But the lack of a willingness to listen among some of our group meant that there was no chance of achieving scale, we were unwilling to see that some of our plans were worthless or, even if worthwhile, unlikely to produce the results we wanted. Real threat and confrontation was a significant value of the NPO. Basically they said, 'get your act together or you will lose the money.' The important thing was that it was not the same old message from people who needed to be liked. If the sole purpose of these initiatives is to make people feel good about themselves, then you have lost it in the beginning . . . They forced us to get off the dime." (Site leader)

"The NPO's leadership knows when to be supportive and friendly but also when to draw the line . . . Sometimes it was important to have somebody who could play hardball, sometimes you get intermediaries that just want to go along with what sites are doing, look the other way, and pretend it's all fine. Everybody likes to be liked." (Foundation representative)

Sites acknowledge that it was a balancing act for the NPO. Because an intermediary wants to gain the sites' trust and to engage them in honest discussion, overusing the ultimatum would have a chilling effect. "So the art of it is when and how much to push hard and respecting the boundaries around it."

Similarly, the foundation cannot make the NPO pay a price for candor. Rewarding "honorable failure" and learning from bad news is easier said than done given pressures within a foundation, but is key to the initiative's integrity and contribution to the larger field. One of the hardest jobs for an intermediary is keeping its focus on the initiative's vision in spite of mission drift or inevitable pressures to reframe its goals in the face of adversity. One observer credited the NPO with seeing its role as "not to confirm the success of the initiative but to actually try to promote change."

#3: “WE ARE CHANGE AGENTS, NOT TECHNICIANS.”

When a foundation decides to use an intermediary, it must determine the division of labor between the two organizations—who does what, and with what authority and responsibility. In UHI’s case, RWJF was not looking for simply a manager. Rather, the Foundation wanted an intermediary that would have significant input into all of UHI’s major decisions and, as a result, it gave the NPO a good deal of discretionary authority. For example, the NPO decided when and how hard to push sites, when to back off if a site was going through board leadership change, how often to visit sites, when to use the Foundation’s name in a good cop/bad cop way, and so forth. The Foundation was responsive to the NPO’s requests, as when asked, for example, to accompany the NPO on particular site visits, but it also deferred to the NPO’s judgment even when it might not fully understand or agree with all of its decisions. For example, the NPO devoted what seemed to some RWJF staff to be too much money for its cross-site meetings. However, the NPO believed that it was important for site leadership to have an opportunity to get away to a nice place in order to both reduce stress and burnout and create a space in which productive cross-site exchange and learning would most likely flourish. The Foundation ultimately supported this decision and others because both parties understood where the prerogative lay.

In some cases, a foundation may only want or need an intermediary to play a much more limited managerial role. The critical issue here is to make sure there is clarity upfront about what functions the intermediary is to play and to align sufficient resources with these functions. The NPO in UHI had both the role clarity and resources it needed from RWJF to function effectively.

#4: “MANAGING CHANGE IS THE NAME OF THE GAME IN A COMPLEX, LONG-TERM INITIATIVE.”

RWJF recognized that systems change is a long-term endeavor and thus designed UHI as a ten-year initiative. While clearly appropriate, the extended nature of the initiative puts a premium on the NPO’s capacity to anticipate and adapt to change at all levels.

Change at the Foundation. Over the course of UHI’s ten years, the NPO’s program officer changed several times, the Foundation’s leadership changed, and the three original champions for UHI, two of whom were in senior management, left the Foundation. Such changes are inevitable over a decade, as they are at the sites, but each one required the NPO and the Foundation to invest significant time and energy in building trust and new working relationships. Whether on the front line or in management, new staff may not understand or feel totally committed to past agreements, and often bring new ideas and new ways of working to the table. Staff who inherit grant programs are rarely as invested as the original designers and champions of these programs. Finally, as a long-term initiative evolves, overall donor fatigue can set in accompanied by increased worries at the staff and/or board level about the initiative’s costs, results and products.

Change at the sites. A decade has also brought significant change to the political, economic and organizational landscape of UHI’s participating cities: new mayors and governors, different (and generally reduced) funding streams, new federal legislation governing welfare

and education, and so forth.⁶ Most sites have undergone considerable staff and board turnover as the different stages in UHI's development called for different strategies and capacities. And in the final years when the RWJF funds account for a lower proportion of their overall budgets, some sites have their own version of initiative fatigue: other funders' goals become priorities, and the temptation to revert to becoming service provider intermediaries rather than change agents is ever-present.

The challenge for the NPO was to adapt its strategies and respond flexibly to changing conditions while keeping UHI's vision and goals at the forefront of both the Foundation and the sites' consciousness. Although it sometimes felt like the "maiden aunt in the basement," the NPO kept information flowing into the Foundation. And as sites confronted various obstacles and diversions, NPO staff was relentless about UHI's key focus on scale and the site's change agent role. It also found that it was useful to review the history of the initiative and its core ideas and values each time the sites and foundation met because the players changed regularly over time.

The NPO found that to manage change it needed to keep reinventing itself over the ten-year period. The changing nature of the support needed by sites required the NPO to shift its own staffing lines over time. In the early years, for example, the NPO had some dedicated staff focused on best practice research; this shifted over time to the need for staff who could help sites with development. Similarly, the NPO sponsored more convenings and did more direct leadership training in the first half of the initiative but reduced staff for these functions as the sites needed less support in this area.

The NPO's flexibility and ability to adapt to change while being steadfast in its commitment to UHI's core goals touches on a few operational issues:

- The NPO found that hiring staff, as opposed to brokering consultants, provided a much more effective way to provide assistance and training to sites. It was hard to get part-time consultants to internalize the driving ideas behind UHI, be consistent in their application of these ideas, and be available to sites in a timely way. While adding staff made the NPO larger than most other RWJF NPOs, it made sense for an initiative as complex as UHI.
- Foundations and intermediaries managing multi-site initiatives face an inherent tension between treating sites uniformly as a cohort and matching the size and timing of each site's grants to its performance and needs. In UHI, the NPO came to the view that individualizing the pace and the amount of grant funding each site received from the Foundation and that building this flexibility into an initiative's design at the outset had many advantages.
- The budget flexibility provided by the Foundation enabled the NPO to use its resources in a responsive fashion. When a program was not working as well as it would have liked, such as its Youth Leadership Program, it could redirect the resources to other functions. A University, however, may not always be the best home for an intermediary that wants to stay nimble and have the freedom to set its own guidelines for staff and consultant compensation.

⁶ See UHI Lessons Learned paper, Political Strategizing in a Constantly Changing Environment, by Jerry VanderWood, Urban Health Initiative, 2004.

#6: “ONGOING DIALOGUE AMONG THE EVALUATORS, THE INTERMEDIARY AND THE FOUNDATION WOULD PROMOTE LEARNING.”

As mentioned earlier, RWJF’s standard practice for long-term, multi-site initiatives is to support an evaluation carried out by an independent contractor. Part of the thinking is that an intermediary, particularly one managing a long-term initiative, is vulnerable to “going native,” that is getting so invested in the sites’ success that it fails to see weaknesses or exaggerates their accomplishments. So RWJF selects an outside evaluator to study the initiative’s impact, while the NPO assesses sites’ ongoing progress and promotes cross-site learning through meetings, written materials such as this Lessons Learned series, and other vehicles.

This arrangement poses two questions that have challenged UHI to date. First, how can the evaluators and the intermediary learn from each other as they carry out their different knowledge development functions? The risks of creating too impermeable a “firewall” between evaluators and implementers in complex, community change initiatives have been well documented. But few methodologies exist for connecting the two in a way that is mutually beneficial. It is not surprising that the evaluators, the intermediary, and the sites prioritize different research questions and sources of data and may end up with somewhat different views of the lessons from a complex initiative that unfolds over a long time period. Indeed, the exchange of ideas based in these different perspectives can be a powerful and useful learning exercise for the field. What needs more development, however, are the vehicles for structuring that kind of productive exchange on a regular basis over the life of a long-term enterprise like UHI. Periodic formal ‘checkpoints’ among the foundation, the intermediary, the sites and the evaluators could be one useful strategy to help maintain a shared understanding of the initiative and its definitions for success, while each entity lives out its independent role.

The second question is one that exists whenever a foundation “outsources” initiative management and learning to an intermediary: how can the foundation draw upon all the ways that the initiative is generating knowledge and make the learning accessible to its own staff and board as well as to the larger field? Foundation staff who are not involved in day-to-day initiative management and who, in fact, are responsible for many initiatives have little time, incentive or support for focusing on learning. But all agree that the learning cannot reside in the sites and NPO alone and acknowledge the importance of finding new ways to value and incorporate learning into their work.

These two challenges are not unique to UHI but are drawing the attention of staff at RWJF as well as other foundations concerned with maximizing learning from their initiatives to inform their work in the future and build knowledge more broadly. Developing some strategies for testing new approaches to these challenges and building in from an initiative’s outset periodic opportunities for dialogue among the different parties may constitute a beginning step toward this goal.

Summary Points

In UHI, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation took on an ambitious agenda based on ideas that had yet to be tested in the philanthropic arena. The NPO played a central role in translating that agenda into a reality and, in the process, generated some general observations about the use of an intermediary in a complex, long-term initiative.

1. Some of the advantages of a foundation's choice to work with an intermediary include efficiency, talent recruitment, credibility and reduction of overhead costs.
2. Having decided to use an intermediary, a foundation must think through exactly how to structure the relationship in light of both the initiative's goals and the foundation's operating principles, capacities and culture.
3. A successful foundation-intermediary relationship requires clarity regarding expectations and rules of engagement, effective communication, flexibility and trust. Appendix A includes a list of questions that the foundation and the intermediary can address together in order to establish a strong basis for launching the enterprise. The agreements that come out of this discussion represent institutional commitments that should guide the initiative thereafter, regardless of changing personnel at the foundation or intermediary.
4. A key function of an intermediary is to hold up the initiative's vision and tell the truth to both the sites and the foundation despite pressures to drift, accommodate or relay only good news.
5. Deep experience and expertise in the areas in which it is providing technical assistance help position the intermediary to be respected by and useful to the sites.
6. An initiative's evaluation and other learning activities need to be intentionally structured to inform each other and maximize learning for each key audience: the sites, the intermediary, the foundation and the field.

Appendix A

Questions for Foundations and Intermediaries to Address at the Outset of an Initiative⁷

- Does the intermediary fully understand the foundation's vision and goals for the initiative?
- How will we divide the tasks—who does what, who is accountable to whom for what? How will authority and responsibility be allocated?
- Who has responsibility for/control over which kinds of funds? How flexible are these funds?
- How will we communicate—how frequently, in what ways, about what?
- How will differences be resolved?
- What are the foundation's sensitivities and risk tolerance?
- What importance does the foundation attribute to candid reports on problems and progress, and what are the likely consequences of hearing various forms of “bad news”?
- What kinds of grantee problems need not be disclosed to the foundation?
- What degree of contact does the foundation expect to maintain with grantees?
- How can the foundation and the intermediary be learning partners? How will the foundation and intermediary relate to the evaluation?
- What degree of oversight should the intermediary expect from foundation staff?
- What degree of contact should the intermediary expect to have with the foundation's board?
- By whom and against what standards will the intermediary's work be evaluated?
- What expectations exist regarding the intermediary after the initiative is formally over?
- How can the understanding and commitments we establish at the outset persist over the life of the initiative while being reviewed on a periodic basis and modified as necessary?

⁷ Some of these questions are included in or adapted from the Funder's Checklist in P. L. Szanton, “Toward More Effective Use of Intermediaries,” in Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project, September 2003 (www.fdncenter.org/for_grantmakers/practice_matters/), p. 43.

: The following individuals were interviewed for this UHI lessons learned paper. The author
: wishes to thank all interviewees for their time and insights.
:

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: **Freddie G. Burton, Jr.**, Wayne County Probate Judge; Board Chair, Mayor's Time

: **Cindy Curreri**, National Program Deputy Director, Urban Health Initiative

: **Grenaé Dudley**, Executive Director, Mayor's Time

: **Hathaway Ferebee**, Executive Director, Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign

: **Peter Goodwin**, Vice President, National Program Affairs, RWJF

: **Ruby Hearn**, Former Senior Vice President, RWJF

: **Robert Hughes**, Chief Learning Officer, RWJF

: **Paul Jellinek**, Principal, Isaacs/Jellinek; former Vice President, RWJF

: **David Kears**, Director, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency; Board Chair, Safe Passages

: **James Knickman**, Vice President, Research and Evaluation, RWJF

: **Jo Ann Lawer**, President and CEO, Philadelphia Safe and Sound

: **Lynn McCashin**, Executive Director, Youth Matters

: **Floyd Morris**, Senior Program Officer, RWJF

: **Charles Royer**, National Program Director, Urban Health Initiative

: **Rush Russell**, President, Children's Futures; former Senior Program Officer, RWJF

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