



The NCJA Podcast Episode 02: Community Coalitions with Dale Woolery and Dennis Wiggins

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Welcome to The NCJA Podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning, and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant Program, or Byrne JAG, contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you all so much for joining us on our NCJA Podcast series. My name is Gillian Caplan, and I am a Program Manager at the NCJA. And today, we're going to be discussing the role of community coalitions in Iowa. I am fortunate to be joined by Dale Woolery and Dennis Wiggins of the Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy in Iowa, and would love to have you both do quick introductions before we dive into the questions. Dale, would you like to start?

Dale Woolery:

Sure. Gillian, thanks for having us. My name's Dale Woolery. I'm the Director of the Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy. Just a bit more of my background, I'm a parent, grandparent, and love the family. That's priority number one, and that's why we do a lot of what we do.

Gillian Caplan:

Fantastic. Thank you. Dennis?

Dennis Wiggins:

Hi, Gillian. Yes. Thanks for asking us to talk about this. We're proud about what we do here in Iowa. I'm a grant manager, grant writer for the office. I've been doing this for about, well, I think 25 or 26 years now.

Gillian Caplan:

Amazing. As we start the conversation, I would love it if you all could provide an explanation of the initiatives that you've developed and funded with the Byrne JAG funding.

Dale Woolery:

I'll give it a start here, Gillian. This is Dale. We try to be comprehensive in our approach with the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant or JAG Program, looking at a range from prevention to enforcement and a lot of things in between. We do align our Byrne JAG strategy and our approach closely with our state's drug control strategy, and that's really born out of two things.

One, the frequent nexus between drugs and crime or criminal activity, and the other is knowing that the Byrne JAG Program, though, it is significant, it's a big piece of what we do in the state of Iowa,



it's not going to do it all. We try to focus and our focus tends to be on drug related activities. And again, in the areas of prevention, drug and crime prevention, treatment, intervention, recovery, and including things like diversion programs, diversion from criminal justice or juvenile justice systems into treatment.

We also fund some technology improvements, and I guess some other things as well. We do align our JAG strategy for the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant closely with our drug control strategy. And in doing so, as the state administering agency for JAG, we try to coordinate in a way so that what we do with Byrne JAG funding in Iowa is not only aligned, but coordinated with other efforts so that we're not duplicating effort. That's the goal. No duplication and also identifying those gaps that we need to address.

I guess the other thing I would add is that we do look actively for innovative approaches. While we like to fund evidence-based practices, we also encourage innovation because we are not satisfied with business the way it is, and we're always looking for another better way to do business. And in doing that, we do require a cash match. That's the other thing I would mention is that we believe that it's important to leverage other resources. The 25% cash match does that for the Byrne JAG grants. It also, we believe, helps to promote sustainability in the long haul.

Gillian Caplan:

That really goes to what we talk about when we talk about braided funding and making sure that a lot of these different puzzle pieces are put together instead of just having one piece of funding that you rely on. That's incredibly critical. And then from there, it would be really interesting to hear about why you chose to fund community coalitions at one point with the Byrne JAG monies.

Dennis Wiggins:

As Dale mentioned, the Byrne JAG strategy and the Drug Control Strategy sort of drives what we do here in Iowa. Community coalitions working to prevent drug use and crime are compatible with both of those strategies. As such, they're eligible to apply for a JAG funding to us, and they did so under the umbrella of a statewide network of coalitions, the Alliance of Coalitions for Change or AC AC4C. The Byrne JAG strategy embraces a comprehensive prevention, treatment, and enforcement approach.

And since most of the grant applications we receive tend to be in the areas of enforcement and treatment, we're always interested and consider a high priority of those quality prevention projects, especially those like this AC4C grant that are relatively low cost. That's sort of a multiplier effect to enhance community health and safety. The main objective of our grant with AC4C was to mobilize additional new community coalitions while also supporting existing groups.

One of the appealing aspects of community coalitions is the grassroots way in which they serve as a catalyst for collaboration and pulling people together from various backgrounds, striving for a community good. Those are really kind of the key ingredients in what made them successful in their application to us.



Gillian Caplan:

Awesome. Now that we've talked a little bit about what a community coalition is, I love if you could dive deeper into how it was formed and their role in identifying investment areas for your Byrne JAG and other funding streams.

Dennis Wiggins:

Yeah. Well, community coalitions to prevent drug use and crime have been around in Iowa and I think across the country for more than 20 years. Many of them start as a passionate member of the community or they rally around a particular event or an activity and eventually become part of a more comprehensive and unified effort. These tend to be loose knit groups with shoestring budgets. They rely heavily on other local resources, and they rely heavily on volunteers.

One of the more significant in recent developments with coalitions in Iowa has been the advent of the statewide Alliance of Coalitions for Change, a networking organization that describes itself as a coalition of coalitions. They provide coordination, they provide advocacy, and they provide subject matter expertise to local coalitions who would otherwise be doing their own thing in their own way.

They really kind of act as a hub to this bigger wheel of coalitions and bring them all together and get them going in the same direction. Currently, there are about 50 communities involved in AC4C. So instead of potentially fielding dozens of smaller individual community coalition grants, we've instead chosen to use Byrne JAG funding to support AC4C at the statewide network level.

In addition to our role as the SAA, one of the principle objectives in organizing and supporting emerging coalitions through AC4C is assisting local groups with the initial training, the skill development, and community assessment to qualify them for small Iowa Department of Public Health grants and eventually equip them then to access federal EFC or drug-free community grants through the CDC. As you probably already know, the DFC funding provides up to 10 years of coalition support for communities through a competitive grant process.

Our idea here is that we really help these coalitions to... With a small amount of Byrne JAG funding, we really help them to get organized, get going, push them in the direction of a more stable longer-term funding source through the CDC and really get them embedded in the community and off to a really great start.

Gillian Caplan:

And that's exactly how you make this work sustainable. Getting them to start with just a little bit of funding and then take off from there. And you've touched on this a little bit, but it would be great if you could talk a little bit more about the Alliance of Coalitions for Change, or as you refer to them AC4C, and how they have been that conduit between yourselves and then the communities that you're serving.

Dale Woolery:

Well, I'll take a stab with that, Gillian. One of the things as a grant funder that I think we find attractive in an organization like AC4C, and again, it's not limited to that organization, but organizations like that where you wind up with a modest investment into an effort that actually has a trickle down type of



multiplier effect. Indirectly, you wind up with many more communities in this case benefiting from a grant that actually went to one organization. There is that appeal, and we actually see it play out.

As far as our relationships, really AC4C and its member coalitions represent kind of the boots on the ground in a lot of ways for a lot of what our office and others in state government are involved in as part of a coordinated effort. If I had to pick one word I think maybe best describes the community coalitions and AC4C as their umbrella coordinator group here in Iowa, I'd say connector. These are connecting organizations.

They don't always have the expertise to do what agencies might in a governmental sense, but they are connecting a lot of those experts and a lot of those organizations, building bridges between local prevention, education, treatment, law enforcement, professionals, just to name a few. I can recall when I first started working here a long time ago being in meetings where I heard one police chief say to a substance use disorder treatment provider, "I've never had a reason to be in a room to meet with someone like you before and to understand your perspective."

Now that's pretty common and community coalitions have played a huge role in making that happen over and over again. They really are at the local level addressing gaps and coordinating efforts. That's what we do at a state level. That's what we try to do as an SAA and by state code and agency and state government that's charged with that type of responsibility.

When we work with the Alliance of Coalitions for Change and member of community coalitions, some of the, I guess, outputs, if you will, I think ways in which we can see the benefit that's mutual, those coalitions are gauging local trends. Examples would be drug overdose hotspots. It could be a new substance, a new drug type. It could be a new type of criminal activity that's being responded to. They identify needs, where the gaps in service are. Training often comes to the surface, but it could be something else. Promising policy changes.

A lot of what turns out to be effective policy at a state or a federal level start at the community level, and these coalitions are front and center involved with that working environmental prevention strategy. It's that bubble up notion by having a connection with these coalitions, we find out what they're doing early and can often watch and then replicate later. Innovative approaches, just one example of that I think is fairly innovative, during the pandemic with prescription drug take-back efforts.

Like a lot of other things, if not being paralyzed, at least being hampered, we had coalitions conducting contactless drive through prescription drug take-backs. These are the types of activities they get involved in. The other thing I would just add on this point is that when it comes to communications, we often rely on community coalitions and those they work with as a local early alert system, as I mentioned I think earlier, but it works the other way too.

When we have important information that needs to get out into the communities, those coalitions are in essence megaphones for us. So if we need to disseminate that information, one of the pieces we rely on heavily are community coalitions. Having this relationship in the form of a grant I think pays many other dividends as well.

Gillian Caplan:

That's amazing. And I think one thing that I would really like to dive a little bit deeper into is that relationship that you've been able to form with these coalitions and how that has given you a platform

to then communicate with your community. As we all know, strategic planning for Byrne JAG dollars is a big part of that work. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how that relationship with coalitions fits into your larger Byrne JAG strategic planning.

Dennis Wiggins:

It fits pretty seamlessly honestly. Prevention is one of the goals of our strategic plan. Coalitions are directly involved in a number of the activities which advance the strategy in general and the goal in particular. Our competitive grant application process prioritizes evidence-based efforts and AC4C program assist emerging coalition's adoption of evidence-based practices, starting with the community needs assessment. And that's all sort of geared towards qualifying them for other sources of funding.

We've also used Byrne JAG funding to partner with Iowa State University and the Iowa National Guard Counterdrug Program to develop an app-based assessment tool that meets the DFC assessment requirements. Once that is developed and we think that'll be done here in the next six months or so, that tool will be shared with anybody across the country who's using it. And given that it's being developed to be compliant with DFC requirements, we think there'll be a lot of interest in that.

All of this comes from a relatively small amount of funding to both AC4C and to the Iowa State University.

Gillian Caplan:

One of the main things that I did also want to touch on though, because while it's very obvious that there's been a lot of benefit and successes when it comes to working with coalitions, we have to talk about the other side of that. I was hoping maybe you could touch on some of the challenges or maybe some of the obstacles that you do encounter when you're working with coalitions, maybe some things that people wouldn't normally think about, maybe challenges.

Dennis Wiggins:

AC4C and its member community coalitions remain mostly decentralized system of small, gritty, sometimes kind of fragile organizations. While that's endearing, these qualities can also lead to frequent turnover or attrition within each of the local coalitions. The AC4C relationship has really been a steadying force. It leverages more stability and sustainability across the state. And of course, that's another reason why supporting an effort like this seems to be a really good investment in public funds.

But really sustainability is always a challenge with grant funded initiatives, especially when there isn't a... Typically there isn't a local funding stream to continue them past the point where they're showing some successes. I think really those kind of two things, sustainability and just turnover and attrition within the local communities are really the key.

Gillian Caplan:

Yeah. Sustainability always seems to be the main challenge when we're talking about these initiatives, but did want to take it and turn it a little bit on a positive side of things. Thinking about some of the



successes, you've touched on some earlier, what others have you seen either intended or unintended successes by working with these coalitions?

Dale Woolery:

I think improve lines of communications is a biggie between units of government, private, for-profit, nonprofit entities, kind of across the board. I'll throw out a few examples. I think of things that I think are really positives that might not have happened or might not be working as well without community coalition involvement. Some of it benefits our agency from an operational standpoint. But in the end, I think it's a benefit to all Iowans. Town hall meetings.

These coalitions here in Iowa put on a lot of those to get input, to share new information. And it's really a platform for Iowans to be heard. They provide input on strategies, whether it's our State Drug Control Strategy, the Byrne JAG strategy, or other strategies, when it comes to a coordinated response, they have a lot to say and they can help funnel other information. Just exchanges of data and information, they understand the value of that, and they're great ambassadors of that.

They also work on training issues, identifying needs and making sure that the training gets provided. They work closely, I think Dennis mentioned, with the National Guards Midwest Counterdrug Training Center. It's located here in Central Iowa and actually provides training across many States in the US, but community coalitions in Iowa have found a way to tap that resource and put it to great use working with professionals and volunteers in communities across Iowa. Prevention best practices. They are, again, champions of those.

They help put in place with retailers an alcoholic beverage server tips training. They work on media relations issues. They will work with media on how to better understand the needs of those the media may be pursuing for information, and then they also work on media literacy with those who maybe are being approached by media. They helped to build good relationships there. Just on some policy issues, I mentioned earlier that there's often kind of a bubble up approach where practice or policy gets put in place at the community level.

And if it's good policy, then it bubbles up and we wind up passing state laws, or we wind up with federal laws. Some examples that we've seen here in Iowa where coalitions have been the backbone for it include meth precursor regulations to essentially almost, if not eliminate, at least greatly reduce the meth production and the meth labs. We've gone from 1,500 back in I think 2004 to eight in the State of Iowa last year. The coalitions were big behind keg registrations to try to cut down on underage drinking.

They've worked on drug policy proposals of all kinds and have been instrumental in putting together the State's Drug Control Strategy that we talked about earlier. And then they've put together community resource guides to help Iowans who may be caregivers or in the role of parenting know who to contact and where to go for various services. Sometimes it can be a maze trying to figure out who you need to contact or where you need to go. They help steer individuals through that maze. I mentioned the drive-through prescription drug take-back a minute ago.

Different variations of that theme as well. I think those are just a few examples they've thought of in a short amount of time as far as how coalitions have been successful and making life better, the quality of life better for Iowans.



Gillian Caplan:

Absolutely. And before we wrap up, I think when we think about... Again, we've mentioned a few times throughout this podcast, but sustainability, sustainability, sustainability. How do you plan to continue and grow these initiatives in the future?

Dale Woolery:

Well, I think Dennis said it best that sustainability is a challenge and that's true of coalition work as well. With community coalitions in the network, the AC4C network that we've been funding, we're not talking about large investments. That's helpful in the long run, because you're not trying to sustain something that's expensive in relative terms, but we still have those challenges.

But I think the way in which we can help to sustain is to continue to help mobilize coalitions, to continue to support those coalitions already in place with training and information and dialogue to talk about what needs to be done next.

But with the kind of a hub and spoke approach that we're taking here in Iowa with the statewide network helping serve all the community coalitions, and we're just kind of behind the scenes supporting all of them one way or another to the best of our ability, it's really kind of a pay it forward mentality where I think stabilization leads to strength, and that in turn can lead to sustainability. We're going to continue down that trail. Training and tools are two things that are always on the list and hopefully that will serve Iowans well in the future.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you. I think that's the perfect note to end on. Wanted to just thank both of you for joining me today on this podcast and helping us learn a little bit more about how community coalitions can really move the work forward of Byrne JAG. Thank you both.

Dale Woolery:

Thank you, Gillian.

Dennis Wiggins:

Thanks, Gillian.

Audio:

Thanks again to Dale Woolery and Dennis Wiggins from the Iowa Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy for their time and expertise. To learn more about how Iowa allocates its Byrne JAG funding visit, www.odcp.iowa.gov/jag. You can find all of our podcasts, as well as additional information about Byrne JAG and examples of all the promising programs and practices funded by the Byrne JAG Program on the NCJA website at www.ncja.org. Thank you.