



The NCJA Podcast Episode 04: Pennsylvania's Virtual Strategic Planning Success with Mike Pennington and Samantha Koch

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Audio:

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.

Allison Badger :

Thank you so much for joining us today on our NCJA podcast. My name is Allison Badger and I'm a program director at NCJA. Today, we're having a very relevant conversation about Pennsylvania's successful virtual strategic planning process. I am joined by Mike Pennington and Sam Koch with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. I would love it if we could start with some quick introductions from you all, and then we'll dive right into the discussion.

Mike Pennington :

Good morning, everyone. My name is Mike Pennington. I'm executive director of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. We're the justice policy planning and coordinating agency for Pennsylvania. And I've been with the agency about 18 years. Been in the justice system about 28 years. And appreciate the opportunity to be here today to share our experience with you.

Sam Koch :

Yeah, and hey, there I'm Sam Koch. I am a senior project manager with PCCD. Have not been with the agency as long as Mike has. I'm actually coming up on my second year anniversary with the agency. Prior to that, I was actually in policy focused roles within the governor's office and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. And then before I hopped into state government, I actually worked in a couple of different roles within the nonprofit sector. So I wear a lot of different hats here at PCCD. Really enjoy working for the agency and looking forward to sharing a little bit about our strategic planning experience with you all.

Allison Badger :

Thank you both. We all know that 2020 forced us into a more virtual way of life. So when your agency decided to do a virtual strategic planning process, what were the first steps that you took to begin that process?

Mike Pennington :

We knew that that would be important to have a clear plan in place for our strategic planning activities to be efficient and effective, especially in a virtual setting. Before we formally launched the agency strategic planning process in May of 2020, we created a project plan outlining our project goals, proposed approach, and a project timeline. At the outset, we identify goals for the planning process and



the strategic framework itself, including a commitment to a transparent and inclusive process, as well as to provide a basis for effective decision-making and measuring success. We identified some activities and milestones necessary for carrying the strategic planning process forward over three phases. One, was initial planning and information gathering. Two, was identifying priority areas and early drafting. And three, was refining and finalizing the strategic framework. The majority of the first phase, which took place between May and July was focused on reviewing existing agency and advisory committee strategic plans including our JAG plan, and other documents such as our performance phase budget plan, and our annual internal controls assessment work.

We pulled together an internal strategic planning team comprised of senior leadership, ops directors, deputy directors, and other key staff. This group met every other week, beginning in May. We knew we wanted to develop mechanisms to capture feedback and suggestions from a wide group of stakeholders working with and within our agency. So we also spent time during that first phase gathering information about best practices for surveying applicants and grantees, individuals serving in advisory capacity for our organization, and our team of nearly 100 staff members. It was very important to me that every staff member was a part of this process, no matter what their position. Our success depends on how well we function as a team. Basically, we spent about three to four months gathering information and laying the groundwork.

Allison Badger :

I love this approach. As we all know, a strong foundation only improves the planning process. So what did you see as necessary components to a successful virtual strategic planning process?

Mike Pennington :

I think one of the keys was to ensure there were multiple channels or mechanisms for team members to review information and provide their input and suggestions along the way. Not everyone has the same work style or communication preferences. So it's important to take a layered approach. Our strategic planning team held bi-weekly meetings virtually first using Skype, and then eventually transitioning to Microsoft Teams. We limited our time together to about an hour. Doesn't sound like a lot of time, but understanding everybody's busy schedules and trying to have a very focused discussion during that hour. To help keep the conversation focused and make sure we were making progress, we use the strategic framework project plan and sketched out deadlines for different activities and deliverables. And then develop agendas for each team meeting that reflected those items.

Sam Koch, who you will hear from shortly, was the coordinator of our strategic planning process and did an incredible job, especially during a challenging time in this virtual environment. And Sam usually had a document pulled up that we were working together on such as draft survey language, early drafts of emerging goals and priorities, really helping us to get immediate feedback from team members during our time together. While short and regular virtual meetings were important, we also relied on work in between meetings to make sure that team members were able to digest information, offer data or insights and, or run different ideas past additional staff or stakeholder. We also posted drafts of the strategic framework on our private SharePoint site for staff, as well as commission advisory committee, subcommittee, and other members to review and provide comments.

Allison Badger :

That's amazing. It sounds like a lot of work, but in a very digestible way. I'm sure your participants really appreciated that approach. Moving into a little more of a technical space. What tools did you develop and how did these tools help inform your strategic planning process?

Sam Koch :

Yeah, so as Mike mentioned from the start of our planning process, we really knew we wanted to focus on kind of having the strategic framework be shaped by people who were essential to our agency's work and mission. So that included groups who seek and access funding and other resources. Individuals who are serving in an advisory capacity to the agency as stakeholders on our commission, our advisory committees, various sub committees and work groups. As well as folks who obviously make up our agencies very hardworking team. And so we try to use SurveyMonkey to develop and deploy four online surveys to really help inform our strategic planning process.

So those four surveys, the first was an applicant perception survey. So these were surveys that went out to folks who had sought funding from our agency in the last couple of years. We also developed a grantee perception survey, so folks who had actually successfully gotten funds from our agency. The third was a broad external stakeholder survey. So this went out to our commission members, advisory committee members, subcommittee, and work group members. And then last, but certainly not least, we also developed and launched the agency's first staff engagement survey, which went out to our 100 or so employees. So these surveys really helped us gather important insights into different areas of the agency's programs and operations, and especially where there might be room for improvement. So it also allowed us to ask people who contribute directly to our agency's mission and work where they thought PCCD could have the greatest impact moving forward.

So we started out with our grantee and applicant perception surveys. We launched those in August of 2020. And I do have some numbers. So apologies, I'm a data geek. So I'll just roll through these numbers real quick. But we actually received 522 responses across both of those surveys. So that included 436 responses from grantees and then 86 responses from applicants. We asked respondents in those surveys to rate different aspects of PCCDs processes for requesting and receiving funding. That included the funding announcement process, navigating our e-grant system, as well as some of our fiscal and program monitoring activities for folks who had received funds.

So on the stakeholder side, we actually received 224 responses to that stakeholder survey between August and September, again from our commission advisory committee, subcommittee, and work group members. And this survey really gave us a chance to understand, in addition to broad themes about communication and just general agency operations, really to focus in on members' experiences in terms of their initial onboarding, participation in meetings and events that were hosted by the agency, and some other activities that they're involved in as advisors. And across these external stakeholder surveys, we asked individuals to respond to some common sets of questions so that we could compare responses.

So while there were some unique questions that we asked folks who had applied for funds and gotten funds compared to folks who advise our agency, there was also some common questions that we included as well. And those included asking people to rate the agency's communications and customer service levels, as well as asking them about awareness and accessibility of PCCDs resources for groups

that are working in the field. And then last, but certainly not least we also developed a staff engagement survey that was launched in November of 2020. And really the focus of that was to inform the agencies continuous improvement, and obviously our strategic planning efforts. So that survey included 19 questions asking employees to provide feedback on a couple of areas key to the agency's program and operations. That included recently implemented teleworking procedures due to COVID-19, engagement in the strategic planning process, as well as issues related to diversity, inclusion, empowerment, and engagement.

So we received 78 responses out of 99 staff. So that was a 78.8% response rate, which is very good. So we're really pleased with that. And I should say too partly why I think that response rate was so high, I'm just sort of conjecturing here, but we did really want to make sure that folks felt safe and comfortable giving us honest and constructive feedback. And so all of these surveys that I just described for both internal and external stakeholders were anonymous and confidential really to again, encourage folks to respond candidly and constructively.

Allison Badger :

As a data nerd myself, I just love that response rate. It's a really strong response rate. I really appreciate the approach you all took and really loved the staff survey piece. This can often be overlooked in the process and it really highlights the great leadership behind this. And so we all know that a strategic planning process is much more successful with a strong champion behind it. So what role did leadership play in ensuring the process ran smoothly and efficiently?

Sam Koch :

That's a great question. So this is not my first strategic planning rodeo, so I can tell you from experience. It was my first virtual pandemic strategic planning rodeo, but not my first in general. And I can just say, without any hesitation, it always makes your job easier as someone coordinating these efforts. If you understand where leadership wants the process to go, what they want it to look like. So from the outset, Mike made it really clear that he wanted us to build a process that was inclusive and sought input from staff, as well as other stakeholders. And something that was a transparent and accessible process as well. And so with that direction in mind, we were able to build protocols and procedures that allowed for multiple touch points, where folks could share ideas, where they could take a look at early versions of the strategic framework.

So as it was in development, getting feedback along the way, and then providing other opportunities for team members and for stakeholders to share input. So again, can't say it enough, Mike's leadership on this was really critical. And honestly, too just the structure and leadership of others on the team as well. Folks were able to I think, work really well together, especially considering the extraordinarily weird, and difficult, and stressful conditions that folks were working under. So that made my life a lot easier. And I'm certainly very appreciative of all of the hard work that folks did in that process. So I think the last leadership component that I just touch on is that as with prior strategic framework updates that the agency has undertaken, we also utilized a committee of chairs approach for the strategic planning process. And that was really to make sure that we aligned agency's strategic planning efforts with advisory committee priorities and responsibilities.

Allison Badger :

That's great. So knowing that 2020 was 2020, were there any obstacles whether technology or more generally, when developing and facilitating these virtual sessions? And if so, would you mind sharing those with us?

Sam Koch :

Sure. Well, we certainly experienced our fair share of technology hiccups. I think, especially in the beginning, as our team was still kind of getting adjusted to the experience of working remotely full-time instead of being together in the office. I think it's safe to say that Skype was a four-letter word at one point. But beyond kind of the expected tech glitches, probably the biggest challenge was just trying to find a balance between keeping the work moving, staying on track with our project plan, and just recognizing that we were all working and living in really unusual times. So just giving some balance for that.

Allison Badger :

I imagine finding that balance was not an easy task, but it sounds like you all handled it really well. Shifting gears just slightly. So your agency distributes JAG, VOCA, RSAT and other funding sources. How are you going to use this agency-wide planning process when developing the JAG strategic plan as well as others?

Mike Pennington :

Yes, we administer several different funding sources, federal and state dollars. And as with prior additions, our 2021, 2025 strategic framework sets agency wide priorities to inform decision-making by commission, advisory committees, training boards, subcommittees, and staff. The goals and objectives included in our strategic framework really I think, helps sets the stage for future planning efforts including developing the JAG strategic plan. So in the months since the strategic framework was adopted by the commission, which was December of 2020, our team has been working to create plans and tools to help guide the agency and our stakeholders as we move from planning to implementation. This will include more detailed action steps, timeframes, and performance measures to help us track our progress toward meeting our goals. Our hope is that the strategic framework and related implementation tools would serve as a resource as our advisory committees undertake their own strategic planning processes in the months and years ahead.

Allison Badger :

So given what a success this process was for you all, how do you plan to continue using virtual meetings as a part of your agency standard practices?

Mike Pennington :

That's a great question. And our agency like others in the Commonwealth and I am sure around the country, remain in some sort of work from home status. So we will be using virtual meetings for the foreseeable future. In our staff engagement survey, a significant majority of employees, our staff reported feeling more productive working remotely. And we anticipate that many staff will want to



create a hybrid schedule, blending in-person and remote work. We're currently working on that plan right now.

As folks eventually begin returning to office, we're anticipating a need to continue using virtual meetings to balance the needs of our staff, as well as our stakeholders. While there's nothing that really truly replaces the experience of gathering in person and getting together for meetings, certainly virtual meeting platforms have turned out to have some surprising benefits. Our participation and attendance in quarterly commission advisory committee meetings has generally increased since we've moved to virtual gatherings. I think a lot of that is attributed to members who are from areas further away from Harrisburg and central PA, so they can adjust their schedules. They can schedule meetings soon after our commission meetings rather than having to travel two, three, or four hours. So they no longer have to really worry about traveling long distances.

Allison Badger :

That's such a great point. The virtual platforms really does allow for more inclusion and engagement. So this has been a tremendously relevant and helpful conversation. And I just want to thank you both for your participation in the NCJA podcast. We look forward to having you back on for other topics as we move forward. Thank you both again. This was really wonderful.

Mike Pennington :

Well, thank you for having us.

Sam Koch :

Yeah. Thanks.

Audio:

Thanks again to Mike Pennington and Sam Koch from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency for their time and expertise on virtual strategic planning. You can learn more about their work at pccd.pa.gov. For more information about strategic planning, virtual or otherwise, and to find this and other podcasts you can visit us www.ncja.org. Thank you.