

Ep. 21: Setting Priorities for Strategic Planning

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Intro:

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.

Amanda:

Hi everyone, and welcome to the NCJA podcast. My name is Amanda Blasko and I'm a program manager here at NCJA. Today I'm speaking with the program director of the Center for Justice Planning, Allison Badger. We'll be diving into how to set priorities for a strategic plan, why this is important, what you should consider when setting priorities and how to navigate the stage of the strategic planning process. Thank you so much for being here today on the podcast. Before we jump into our conversation, Allison, would you mind providing us with a brief introduction and describing your background?

Allison:

Hi, Amanda. Thank you so much for having me on. I am so excited to be here. As you mentioned, I am the director for the NCJA Center for Justice Planning. The Center for Justice Planning is the TA provider, the training and technical assistance provider for Byrne JAG SAAs. And also we were recently awarded funding to support Byrne SCIP SAAs with training and technical assistance as well. And so just really excited to talk about strategic planning and how we can support the states.

Amanda:

Thank you. So all the way back in 2021, you appeared on the NCJA podcast and discuss some key elements of creating an effective Byrne JAG strategic plan. That episode used some broad strokes to chart out major aspects of the strategic planning process, including stakeholder engagement strategies, how to use data in planning, and how to create successful and measurable goals. So since Byrne JAG is at the heart of this podcast, listeners might be familiar with the requirement to submit a strategic plan. This became a requirement in 2019 and states that a strategic plan is a required component of the state federal application for funding. That being said, strategic planning can be useful in all kinds of planning, whether you are working in criminal justice or beyond. Today we'll be talking about the priority setting stage of the strategic planning process. But before we get into priority setting too much, what I really want to know is why is strategic planning so important and why is this topic so deserving of an additional podcast episode?

Allison:

Well, I'm glad you mentioned the podcast from 2021. I'm viewing this as my redemption podcast a little bit. I was really stiff on that one. I was nervous, but it does have a lot of really good information in it, so I would recommend listening to that to get sort of the baseline information before diving into this one. But anyways, so the strategic planning process is extremely, extremely important. Whether you're doing a specific JAG, a strategic plan or a statewide criminal justice plan or a CJCC strategic plan, it's really important to go through the process. SAAs or state administering agencies administer over two and a half billion dollars in federal grant funds annually, not to mention all of the millions of dollars in state

funds that a lot of these SAAs also administer. And so properly planning for that funding and being a good steward of that funding is extremely important.

Allison:

And not to mention we all want to improve the criminal justice system, that's why we got into this work. So it's just a really important process to go through. And the most important component of that strategic plan is the priority setting. And so that's where you determine what your investments will look like and determining how that funding is going to be prioritized is really the bread and butter of the strategic planning process. And I'm wondering, based on your experience as a former grant manager in an SAA office, I'd love to hear from you why you think strategic planning is important and specifically why the priority setting is so valuable.

Amanda:

So when I was working in the SAA's office, for me in particular, strategic planning was so useful just because it provides you with an organized structure with very specific requirements. One needs to be included, one needs to be discussed in the plan and who you need to discuss it with. And I think that's a really wonderful starting point. But of course, like anything, we want to move beyond the strict requirements and think about how we can make the process as useful as possible and engage all of the relevant parties and all of the relevant stakeholders, even if they aren't explicitly required. And setting priorities in particular is so important just because it gives you somewhere to direct your funding efforts. And when you're setting priorities, you're not operating in a silo. And so once you have those priorities, you can use all of that information to guide all of your planning processes and eventually how you invest the funds as well. And even you use those funding priorities to guide what types of solicitations you push out when you get to that phase of the process.

Amanda:

So I think priority setting and the strategic plan in general are just very important for accountability, both in terms of the planning aspect and in terms of the investment aspect. And so in an ideal world, in a perfect world, what do you think is the best way for individuals to start when it comes to setting priorities?

Allison:

Well, you mentioned a really important part of priority setting in engaging stakeholders. And so I think there are really two main drivers for setting priorities that stakeholder engagement and data, and those two components can help narrow and identify your priorities based on actual needs. And so I'll start with stakeholder engagement. There's some obvious stakeholders that an SAA might include or someone going through a strategic planning process with criminal justice partners who they might include in their planning process. And this could be law enforcement, corrections, district attorneys, judges, but there are so many other stakeholders that are just as in touch, if not maybe more in touch with the needs of the communities impacted by crime. And they need to have a seat at the table. And I know you just recently did a wonderful podcast with Amir on community engagement, and I encourage everyone to listen to that on how to engage the community in a thoughtful way.

Allison:

But the need to include the community and to include behavioral health partners, public defense, state courts, reentry partners, all of these components of the criminal justice system and how a person moves through the criminal justice system, it's really important to include them in your engagement because you want to have a full picture of what the needs are in your state. Byrne JAG is so extremely flexible, which means there's a huge amount of things that it could be invested with. And engaging both those traditional stakeholders who may come to the front of your mind and those non-traditional stakeholders is key to making sure you have that full picture. Now, I will say a lot of this is easy for me to sit here and say on a podcast, it's easier said than done, especially if you have an established process that's been in place for a long time. And so I also kind of want to kick it back to you to ask if you have any advice for an SAA office who wants to engage stakeholders differently than they have in the past?

Amanda:

Yeah, I mean I think one of the most important aspects when you're thinking about how to engage stakeholders differently is really thinking about the stakeholder engagement process as a continuous and iterative process. Always going back to that list of stakeholders and looking at who's on that list and who ultimately is not on that list or who's missing. Because really at the end of the day, you want the stakeholders to mirror both the criminal legal system and ultimately mirror the community as well. And you want everyone to be actively involved in the priority setting process, not just present for meetings. And Amir had some really great thoughts about that, about going beyond the seat at the table to actively engaging specific partners, especially non-traditional partners that might have historically been left out of some of these planning and funding processes. If you have the same people in the same room, you're just going to get the same ideas time after time. And that also carries over to stakeholder surveys. If you send out a survey and you only get law enforcement responses back, it's just going to be one set of ideas.

Amanda:

And don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong at all with the law enforcement perspective. We want it, we need it in the priority setting process, but you don't want any one group of people to dominate the conversation. And we know that the factors that impact the criminal legal system are so broad. And so stakeholder engagement should reflect all aspects of the system and everything that you can think of. And so you might also keep in mind when you're coming up with that list of stakeholders, thinking about people who might not see themselves as part of the criminal legal system. So whether that be faith leaders, behavioral health partners, hospital personnel, citizens, people you might not traditionally think of as partners in this work. And that's partly I think the rationale behind non-traditional stakeholders that term. And so talking about non-traditional stakeholders, NCJA has been doing a lot of great work in terms of equity within Grants administration. Can you speak to what NCJA has been doing specifically in that space?

Allison:

Absolutely. So we've really been diving in the last year and a half to try and help SAAs think about how they can be more equitable in their grants administration and strategic planning processes. And so if you think about all the different stages that a grant goes through from stakeholder survey, the planning board, who creates the actual request for proposal, who reviews the application on the backend, you want to think about who's involved in all of those processes and make sure that you have a diverse group of folks involved. And let's just use JAG board for example. If your JAG board has five or six law enforcement agencies represented two district attorneys and only has one public defender, how does

that change the power dynamics in the room? In a lot of places, it might feel like the law enforcement agencies and the district attorneys are on the same team. And so now you have six or seven folks on one side and one person in the public defender role holding up on their end. And so that can really play with the power dynamics in the room.

Allison:

And so you just want to be mindful of those types of things all along your process. And you mentioned stakeholder survey, who do you send it out to and who's giving feedback? And you can't always control who's going to take the survey, but you can look at the backend of the survey to make sure that you're considering a larger population of law enforcement agencies, for example, filling out the survey and being able to look at that data differently depending on who has filled out the survey so that you're aware of, like I said, those different power dynamics. Last thing I'll say about that is the RFP or the solicitations that the SAAs put out themselves. Who's giving you feedback on that? Is it other grant administrators who understand and speak that sort of grant language, that grant vocabulary? Do you include practitioners to review this who might say, "I don't really know what that word means and can you make this a little more plain English? My job is on the frontline, but I really want this grant funding, so I'm not sure how to really move through this RFP."

Allison:

And just making sure you're having those diverse perspectives at the table, especially in the review stage and that you're not having the same people review the same applications every year. You want those diverse backgrounds, diverse perspectives, all throughout your process. So with all that said, if you really want your priorities in your strategic plan to reflect the needs of the criminal justice system in your state, you need to consider equity within and across all aspects of the grants' administration process and the strategic planning process. And I'm happy to share that we have a lot of resources on this. We can provide technical assistance on this. There are some states that are really doing some really great work in this space that we highlight in a report that will be coming out soon. And so I really encourage SAAs to think about that and reach out if they have any questions.

Allison:

And we talked a little bit about the JAG board and a lot of states do have a JAG board, and I know in your past role that you worked regularly with your JAG board. And since we're focusing on priority settings specifically, do you have any thoughts or advice for individuals who aren't going to engage with their JAG boards or their stakeholders differently?

Amanda:

Of course, I have a lot of thoughts about a lot of things, Allison. But seriously, I think one of the important things to think about in terms of board dynamics is to really take some time to analyze the board dynamics from your perspective as a SAA staff member or as someone who's working very closely with a funding board or a planning board. And think about things like, is the board heavily weighted towards one particular group of folks, like what we talked about with the surveys. So is the board heavily weighted towards prosecution, for example? Is the representation somewhat even, but certain voices are kind of overshadowing the conversation? I think the first step is to assess what your particular situation is, and maybe this takes place over a longer period of time as you analyze in the meetings themselves and see what the needs and challenges are.

Amanda:

But I think another great way to also fully and more intentionally delve into the analysis of the board dynamics is through board member interviews. I think this can be a really great way to find out how the board members themselves are perceiving the way the board is working, how do they see the board dynamics? Are there partners missing from the board? What do they think are the challenges and needs, both in terms of the board and also in terms of the criminal justice system? What do they think the direction of the board should be? And so when you have time and space to touch base with people on a personal level, I think new things crop up that you might not have realized or understood before. And sometimes when you do an interview with every single person on the board, you might realize, "Oh, I actually have more variety of opinions than originally thought." And so then you can kind of determine how best to lift up those quieter voices.

Amanda:

Another practice that can be useful in terms of navigating these dynamics is potentially considering creating a strategic planning advisory committee. So the main aim of this would be to help you with those board dynamics and to help you specifically with the strategic planning process. You can use the committee purely as an advisory board to help you address some primary challenges, whether that be in the planning process such as engagement strategies, reviewing stakeholder survey questions, hosting focus groups, giving more detailed feedback on the strategic plan, helping you with the annual report requirement and thinking about scoring applications on the backend. The advisory committee can be as broad or as niche as you want. It's really just thinking about what will best serve your needs and your particular situation.

Amanda:

And another just piece of advice about the advisory committee is I'd really just make sure you have it fully fleshed out before you bring it to the board. So think about what is the true scope of the committee, what are the goals? How often is the committee going to meet? What are the list of members and how did you come up with that list? What can the committee do and what can it not do? What are the powers of the committee, for lack of a better phrase? And have all of that in your mind before bringing it to the board. And I think another great use of the advisory committee is to help you get some additional non-traditional stakeholders involved that you might not initially be able to get involved through the board or through other ways and means. So for example, you could have people on the advisory committee that are very data focused, so they could be crime analysts from your statistical analysis center. They could be researchers from a local university, whatever best fits your need.

Amanda:

So on the subject of data, how important is data for the strategic plan and where does it fit within this priority setting stage of the process?

Allison:

Data should be an integral part of the process because you can look at it and identify prominent trends such as a rise in violent crime in the largest city in your state, or an increased percentage of individuals with mental illness in county jails. Starting with data is a great way to avoid confirmation bias. We all want to be right when we have our gut feelings or our opinions, but sometimes going out and looking

for data just to prove yourself can give you this confirmation bias. And so that data is the ultimate level setter. And there's a lot of places that you can find data that can be helpful in your planning process. You can partner with your statistical analysis center or a research partner to help, but if you don't have that resource available to you, there is a lot of data out on the web that can be really helpful in helping paint a picture of what crime looks like in your state. And so you can look at uniform crime data, court data.

Allison:

Many state courts do annual reports. Local criminal justice partners do a lot of reporting, and so you can collect those reports and identify trends within those reports. Everytown for Gun Safety has a great new tool out that gives each state snapshot of what their gun violence looks like in their state. And you can even draw down a PDF, it's amazing. And there's also the FBI crime data explorer tool, which can be really helpful. And so there's a lot of things out there that you can use if you don't have great data in your state. And so you want to be mindful of those options. We also provide technical assistance to help states identify what their data can look like, and so you just want to make sure that you have data to support your priorities. As I said, it's the most impartial level setter and it's necessary for every strategic plan.

Allison:

And I'll also add a helpful way to figure out your data landscape is by doing a data inventory. And so it's a very simple practice of writing down a list of what data you think you have access to and if you think it's reliable, and being able to then go out and find it. And you can include your board or other stakeholders in creating this list because every agency collects data in some way. Most often in state government, it is siloed. And so sometimes just asking for access is the easiest way to get some new data. And so going through and sitting down and just writing out what data you think you might have access to and talking to your stakeholders about what they might have is a really simple task that can help you get started on such a large concept.

Allison:

So you've engaged with your various traditional, non-traditional stakeholders about the needs and priorities. And when you have data, you can compare what are the stakeholders telling you and what is the data telling you and where is there a match. The stakeholders that are out working in the field every day have a really good pulse on what's happening, and the data should also be telling that story. And so matching those together is really important. It's not necessarily important you do one before the other, states do it differently, but it's really important that you intentionally do both. But I do want to add one thing because I do think it's important when you're engaging your stakeholders and when you're asking them for them to weigh in on priorities that you're asking them about what the issues are or what the gaps are or what the potential solutions are, not what should be funded. When you ask what should be funded, it can be harder for folks to take their own organization hats off and not think about what they need internally at their own organization versus what the state really should be focusing on.

Allison:

And so switching language from, "What should we fund?," to, "What's happening in your jails that wasn't happening two years ago?," you get more closer to the needs. And so just keep in mind, there's a lot of ways you can do this. You can do it through surveys, focus groups, town halls, calling people.

There's a lot of ways to do this, but being mindful of how you ask the questions can be helpful to getting down to the needs for the greater good of the state. And I did want to correct myself a little because I said there were two main drivers in priority setting, and it is stakeholder engagement and data, but there are other components that are really important when you're considering your planning. And so recognizing that it can be difficult sometimes to navigate priority setting if your state has programs that have been funded for a while. And most states do have long-term grantees.

Allison:

And so once you have your priorities based on data and engagement, then you can start to think about these long-term grantees to see where they fit. So specifically you might want to think about whether they are evidence informed programs. Are they collecting data? Are they showing promise? Are they a best practice? Are there evaluations or is there room to support an evaluation of these types of programming? Are you thinking about things outside of just the financial reporting requirements and what is the actual outcomes of the program that you might be supporting or have been supporting for a long time? And you can take all that information and combine that with your stakeholder engagement and your data to really narrow down those priorities. And I know you're familiar with this, and so what do you think about the historical long-term grantees and what SAA should consider when looking at that?

Amanda:

In general, like you said, you want to make sure you're evaluating all programs outside of just activity reporting because you could have some very successful programs in terms of meeting the established schools and objectives that the application stated, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the program itself is having the desired outcome in terms of reducing recidivism or whatever the main goal is for the program and also for your priority areas in terms of the strategic plan. And the program might be... it might be hitting the nail on the head, but you won't really know until you truly do an evaluation. And you did mention the evidence informed programs. If you have a broad priority area outlined and you have no idea where to start, these evidence informed programs can be a great launching pad. For example, Penn State, I think it's called the Penn State Results First Clearinghouse Database.

Amanda:

They have a wonderful repository of programs that have solid evaluations that you can browse and look at those evaluations and see the programs that have been proven via evidence and data to be effective in doing certain things. So that can be a really wonderful place to start if you're not sure. But I would also say don't rely too much on the evidence informed practices and programs because you don't want to exclude pilots and innovative programs that are just building capacity and getting started, because those could go on to be some of the most successful programs ever in terms of meeting those desired outcomes and having an impact. They just don't have what they need yet to be able to show it. And so you want to encourage programs to be evidence informed, you want to evaluate them, you want to help them build capacity. And this is also true for longtime grantees as well.

Amanda:

So at the end of the day, you want to invest the money the best you can, so it has the best chance of making an impact, but the aim is not to penalize anyone, and that includes those longtime grantees. And keep in mind that putting an evaluation component or better, helping a longtime grantee get the data

and the evaluation components that they need to prove that the program is evidence informed, that's not a penalty. And so I think in some ways it's about how you present that to longtime grantees. If you present it as an opportunity, it's going to go over differently because at the end of the day, it is an opportunity in some ways because the more you can prove that a program is effective at doing what it's intended to do, the easier it will be for that program to secure funding from other places, whether that be the city, the county, other state funding sources, other federal funding sources. I think in some ways it's about how you present it to those longtime grantees.

Amanda:

And JAG funds can also be used as I think you mentioned, to help fund those evaluation components in those data collection aspects, so that doesn't have to fall completely on those longtime grantees or completely on the small community-based organizations that are just trying to get capacity to do these things. And I think one other thing I'll add is just the concept of sunseting programs, which has been helpful for a lot of states. And the concept is basically just making sure that everyone knows from the beginning of the sub-grant process that all programs across the board will only be funded for a specific timeframe. And of course, you can decide what you want that to be. It could be one year, three years, five years, whatever. Whatever works best for you and your long-term priorities. And if you take that route and help these programs gain capacity with the knowledge that they're going to sunset, or even if you don't implement the sunseting policy, eventually they can seek funding elsewhere and continue that program under a different funding source.

Amanda:

And I think at the end of the day, that's one of the great things about JAG is that it can be used to pilot programs to help innovative programs get their footing build capacity and eventually go off into the world to be continued through other funding sources.

Allison:

That is such a really great point, and I love the concept of helping using JAG to help evaluate these programs. And JAG is really great at filling gaps like that, and it can be used with the data collection efforts as well. We all know that everyone in criminal justice is on this long journey to get solid data, and some states are further along in the journey than others, but everyone is struggling with data. And that is a great use of JAG funding and it helps the whole criminal justice system to have good data. And I even think about ways that having supporting data collection can help the SAA with requirements like death in custody. And if you have a larger data collection process that includes some of these things like death in custody, you can use JAG funds to support projects like that. And so I think using JAG to fill those gaps, like evaluation and data collection is a really great use of the funds. And so I'm glad you brought that up.

Amanda:

Yes, JAG is the gap filler. I like it. We've talked about stakeholder engagement, engaging both traditional and non-traditional stakeholders. We've talked about the role of data and about how you can use JAG to help support evaluation and data related components for programs and for the SAA. And we've also talked about the impact of longtime grantees on setting priorities and some things to think about if you want to do things differently or think about how you're going to evaluate those programs and help them build capacity to be more evidence informed. Is there anything else we haven't discussed yet that also might play a role in priority setting?

Allison:

Absolutely. There are a lot of variables that can change priorities. I mean, if we learned anything from the last few years, priorities can change overnight. A governor will come in and set their priorities that has an impact, what other funding essays might have available to them if they are also the VOCA administrator and the VOCA fund is dipping down or receive a new bucket of money for state funding to support CVI initiatives, that might change the funding priorities a bit. And so being able to be flexible within that is really important. Priorities change. And also you don't know sometimes who's going to apply for your funding. And we hear that a lot that there are priorities identified and then there aren't applications received for those priorities. And I think over time, as the relationships are built, as we talked about earlier, and having these strong relationships with stakeholders, meaningful stakeholder engagement, that can shift. And so I just think if you have those strong relationships, you can be much more nimble in your priorities shifting.

Allison:

I view the strategic plan as the backbone of your funding decisions, and so you nurture it so that it's flexible when you need it to be, and it's strong when you don't need it to be.

Amanda:

I love that metaphor as a big proponent of metaphors myself, but I think really what you said about the backbone is so true. And I love that way of thinking about the strategic planning process. I think that's just an excellent way to visualize the concept. And also remember that strategic planning is an iterative process, my favorite phrase, so don't complete the plan and toss it in a drawer for five years, right? You want to have it out on your desk. So you're looking at it, you're thinking about it, you're revisiting it often and intentionally, especially the priorities section, because as you mentioned, priorities can change so fast and so quickly. And because the priorities drive all the funding decisions, right? Well, thank you so much for being on the podcast, Allison, and for sharing your wisdom about the importance of priority setting. We really appreciate it.

Allison:

Thank you for having me.