

## GROUP HEALTH FOUNDATION

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

#### PUBLIC HEALTH-SEATTLE & KING COUNTY

#### BEST STARTS FOR KIDS

#### HEALTHY AND SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

As a government agency, Public Health-Seattle & King County (Public Health) has the responsibility of protecting and improving the health of all King County residents especially those most impacted by health inequities. However, many factors have made it challenging for small community based organizations (CBOs) to partner with Public Health to work on these issues. [Best Starts for Kids](#) (BSK) is a levy funded initiative that ties Public Health and Department of Community and Human Services together to address health inequities among children, youth and families. BSK addresses these inequities by engaging with community differently as well as improving our internal systems.

*"I appreciate the monthly check-ins and resources provided by our BSK manager. I value the connections between other CBOs that help enrich all of our programs through collaboration." ~ BSK Grantee-  
Upower*

Community-Based Organizations, many which are led by and/or have strong ties in communities of color and immigrant & refugee communities are at the forefront in leading efforts to address inequities and thus should have appropriate resources and support in order to be successful. However, some of these CBOs have not traditionally been successful at receiving County funds in order to work on behalf of their communities. Factors such as inequitable policies and practices related to Request for Proposal process as well as contracting have resulted in mistrust and frustration from many of these CBOs and culminating in many of them disengaging from the RFP process. This reality has required a partnership modeled on building trust, being inclusive and transparent as well as genuinely listening to begin relationship repair. This report provides quotes from our BSK community partners in order to demonstrate the changes we've been working on and work we still need to do.

#### **Engaging, Building Authentic Relationships and Convening Partners**

From the RFP process to contract development and implementation, BSK community partners are engaged by a project manager/monitor to help move them through the process and

remove barriers to application and project implementation. Multiple information sessions were/are held in community as each RFP was/is released to answer questions for any eligible group interested in applying for funds. These sessions were held in community settings such as libraries, community centers, at times that allowed for greater accessibility. Information sessions were also offered online and made available on BSK website after the scheduled time to allow as much access as possible to information about each strategy oriented RFP. In addition, for most BSK RFPs, King County contracted with external Technical Assistance providers to offer free support to all applicants in applying for funding. This technical assistance was intended to level the playing field between organizations that have professional grant writers on staff and those smaller more community driven organizations who were applying for government funds for the first time.

A community, representative of applicants, was also engaged in the review process. Community members, members of youth serving organizations that were not applying for the funding and youth themselves were asked to join our review panels. In order to appropriately value the time

reviewers spent in the process, BSK provided stipends or incentives for community and youth reviewers whenever possible.

*"I think BSK has taken into consideration the needs and constraints of small organizations and genuinely has made a significant effort to streamline and make the contracting/reporting as easy as possible." ~BSK Grantee-  
FEEST*

Once awards were announced, project managers met in person with each awardee to develop a scope of work and revised budget based on the community partner's initial proposal. This process allowed for relationship development and co-creation of agreed upon objectives that would work toward the goal initially proposed in applications and health indicators defined by BSK. Project managers were able to ask

questions about capacity, what kinds of costs were a reality for small organizations doing the work and able to make revisions based on input community partners provided. In addition, the invoicing process allowed awardees to request start-up funds (up to 25% of first year award) to assist small CBOs that may have cash flow challenges.

### **Co-Design/ Co-creations of Solutions**

Our community partnership model drives us to meet awardees where they are with regard to understanding and expertise, which has resulted in the community ownership of health equity oriented projects that address Healthy and Safe Environments as well as other BSK strategies. Grantee feedback (via one on one meetings, convening meetings, and surveys) to improve the

process continues to inform our practices and ensures that we mitigate unintended consequences and continue moving forward in reducing power imbalances to positively impact health inequities.

As a result, in the process of engaging with community, the Healthy and Safe Environments strategy as well as other BSK strategies is in constant co-design and co-creation with community partners. King County's BSK team offers expertise around data, research and best practices while ensuring space for organizations to bring community knowledge, historical context and a greater understanding of community needs to the table to create more equitable

*“BSK support us in developing program that works and is culturally appropriate. BSK has provided our communities-communities of South King County, people of color and low-income people who traditionally face health inequities the funding that allows us the space to focus on our needs and find solutions in order to attain our full potential”.*

*~ BSK Grantee-Living Well Kent*

and balanced approaches to addressing health disparities.

### **Addressing Structural Barriers, Power Differentials and Racism**

The work of addressing structural barriers related to inequities started over a decade ago and became institutionalized in 2010. King County passed an ordinance on equity

and social justice in 2010 that has directed the County's commitment to Equity and Social Justice. ("Equity' means all people have full and equal access to opportunities that enable them to attain their full potential" (King County Ordinance 16948, Section 2C). Since that time an Office of Equity and Social Justice was created and an equity and social justice strategic plan outlining our goals and objectives around increased equity, particularly racial equity, has provided us with guiding principles to be more effective in our community engagement. Best Starts for Kids and other BSK funded initiatives such as [Communities of Opportunity](#) have been able to use this plan as a starting point rather than a goal to reach for. As such, our ability to create structures that promote equity rather in addition to dismantling systems allows BSK to be more nimble in addressing structural barriers, power differentials and racism. Below is a quote from King County's Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan.

*“BSK is a strengths-based approach, working to maximize the assets and knowledge of our richly diverse county and its many communities and cultures. It reflects the County's adopted policy direction and was developed within the context of the King County Strategic Plan, the Equity and Social Justice Ordinance, the Health and Human Services Transformation Plan and the 2015 Youth Action Plan.”* ([KC ESJ Strategic Plan](#))

In addition to the ESJ plan, BSK has an advisory board that governs our work. The Children and Youth Advisory Board (CYAB), comprised of King County residents and stakeholders with geographically and culturally diverse perspectives makes recommendations and monitor how funds are distributed. The CYAB created an [equity statement](#) to guide and direct the action of the board and the initiative. CYAB has shared and continues to share this statement with other community leaders and organizations knowing that in order for BSK to achieve equity through systems we have to work collectively in several sectors.

Operationally, this has been done by hiring a workforce that better reflects communities served by BSK investment, ensuring community connections are built from a place of sustainable relationship rather than grant time lines and creating iterative processes that build in the realities of change and adaptation over time. Conversations are being had between BSK staff community members and partner organizations about what long term change looks like and how to plan for future funding while leveraging community assets and government funds.

### **Organizational and Structural Changes**

BSK intentionally addressed the systemic issues of power imbalances in the contract practice by making the RFP process more inclusive of community and youth voice, removing barriers for

*“The trust and flexibility in our relationship have been critical to our success. Our project is a new one, for our organization, so we are learning and adapting along the way. BSK has empowered us to be nimble and to respond to the evolving needs of our community in real time.”*

*~ BSK Grantee-Seattle Children’s PlayGarden*

non-traditionally funded CBOs, and conducting reviews through an equity lens. This has resulted in the funding of community based organizations that have not historically benefited from the funding of county dollars. To support these structural changes free technical assistance was offered to applicants throughout the RFP process, an anti-bias training was required for all RFP reviewers, and the inclusion of an equity tool was used in scoring, which has since resulted in a model practice among fellow BSK funded

review panels. Focusing on the strengths of an organization as opposed to deficits in comparison to traditionally funded organizations has shifted the power dynamics of who gets funded to include CBO’s with strong community connections that serve diverse geographic, racial and underrepresented populations within our community.

In addition, the BSK Evaluation team, understanding the importance of community owning and interpreting their data has brought the discussions (working with a team from [Community Café Collaborative](#)) out to the communities who truly own the data. BSK Evaluation team have conducted several of these meetings called “[Data Dives](#)” with community residents where the community reviews the data and interprets the findings with their cultural lens and unique perspectives. Since the BSK Evaluation team may not necessary have the context and/or history of the community, partnering with those who do, creates a more authentic experience for all.

The Best Starts for Kids Healthy and Safe Environments team focused on doing things differently with the RFP process and are now moving this focus to how we contract, how we interact with grantees/partners, and how we provide technical assistance and support. The Healthy & Safe Environments team developed the following six principles to hold ourselves accountable.

*“I want to tell you that this work is showing (BSK-King County working very hard to change the contracting relationship to one where there is a definite partnership). The meeting and the process my BSK Project Manager outlined are such a dramatic change from past contracting experiences. Not to say those have been negative, but they have been less connective than what is clearly happening under BSK. We are excited about finalizing our work plan and all of the other elements, meeting with the evaluation team, and getting to work! “~BSK Grantee-Vashon Youth and Family Services*

**Using an Equity Lens**-Using an equity lens by answering the following questions: who benefits and who does not by our policies, programs and practices, who is impacted and how are they involved in the solution, who is involved in decision making, who are we engaging and who is not at the table, and how are we contributing to/maintaining the status quo.

**Transparency**-being transparent means sharing information/being clear about our process and our outcomes (successes & challenges) with our partners and with each other (BSK Team and other KC programs).

**Valuing the journey**-making sure we have enough time to do authentic outreach and community engagement with community partners. This means having enough time to do outreach during RFP release process. It also means making sure we continue to grow and develop relationships with our community partners (those funded and those not). We need to be able to demonstrate through our actions that we value and incorporate our community partners’ opinions and ideas. We also need to acknowledge and behave like we believe that the community has the answers and community partners/leaders are capable of solving their own challenges.

**Removing Barriers**-improve the entire process to makes it easier for partners to navigate our systems by removing barriers in applying for funding, contracting and invoicing with King County and implementing and evaluating efforts.

**Being non-prescriptive/balancing evidence based**-Applicants and grantees tell us what they want to work on and how they would like to implement. Because we have done the work of forming a respectful & positive relationship with our community partners, we can share what we know about promising and evidence-based strategies-with the caveat that inequities continue to persist so there may be a need to tailor strategies to specific populations.

**Funding projects adequately**-making sure we are providing our grantees the funds they need to do the work and to be successful.

### Challenges, Obstacles, and Missteps

BSK still has much to address with regard to working with smaller organizations. Some RFPs have been presented in ways that require larger organizational resources to engage. While the intention of BSK has been to create more accessible and inclusive systems of outreach, request for proposals and contracting, this initiative still exists in the walls of a large government bureaucracy. As such, we are having ongoing internal conversations about how to attract a range of organizations that can have significant impact in the community, and looking for community and youth feedback to incorporate into designing changes in systems and structures.

*“Many of the RFP’s that we see, appear to be designed for larger organizations with more resources. We’d love to see more opportunities for smaller organizations to have access to funding. Smaller orgs tend to be more nimble and innovative, are more likely to be led by women and people of color, and often have more direct hands-on experience with marginalized communities.”*

*~ BSK Grantee-Seattle Children’s PlayGarden*

### A More Equitable Future

We know that we have years of mistrust to overcome. Our approach has been to be humble, to treat CBOs and community members as the experts they are and to admit when we make mistakes and work on fixing them. We believe these efforts have resulted in projects that are community designed and led and a culture that supports collaboration and collective impact among grantees and staff. We believe in time, these efforts have the capacity to change power dynamics and inequities at a systemic and perhaps a structural level.

*“I feel like BSK is trying their best to reach the community. If they can keep it up together we will make change!”*

*-BSK Grantee-UPower*