

BUILDING CAPACITY TO SERVE

**A Report on
THE CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVE
in Howard County, Maryland**

September 2009



Department of
CITIZEN SERVICES

A MESSAGE FROM KEN ULMAN, HOWARD COUNTY EXECUTIVE



I wish to express my appreciation to the Department of Citizen Services for its leadership in developing and implementing the Capacity Building Initiative and bringing it to fruition. The findings of this report offer fresh perspectives that can infuse the work of human service providers in every field of service with new vigor and provide them with proven strategies for meeting the human service needs of our vibrant community.

This Initiative is most appropriate for the Department of Citizen Services, for it is the mission of the Department to enhance the quality of life for all residents by ensuring that Howard County has a comprehensive system of human services that is accessible, responsive and effective. It is our hope that the report will be useful for those wishing to build the capacity of their own organizations and for those interested in exploring new approaches to the delivery of services in Howard County.

As County Executive, I am very proud of the wide range and quality of human services available to the citizens of our County. Every citizen of Howard County is an important contributor to the life of the County, and we, in turn, have pledged ourselves to creating an environment in which they can achieve their dreams.

To all of you working to serve and benefit our citizens, Thank You. This report is dedicated to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ken Ulman'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Ken Ulman
County Executive

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- Christ Church Link
- Community Action Council of Howard County
- Conexiones
- Congregations Concerned for the Homeless
- Domestic Violence Center of Howard County
- FIRN
- Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center
- Korean American Community Association of Howard County
- Legal Aid Bureau
- Rebuilding Together of Howard County
- The Salvation Army Howard County Service Center
- Success in Style

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2008, the Howard County Department of Citizen Services launched the Capacity Building Initiative as the next step in advancing the priorities identified in the Howard County Human Services Master Plan (HSMP) 2005-2010. This nine-month long project was created with a dual purpose: 1) to strengthen the system of service delivery within Howard County for low-income and foreign-born individuals and families, and 2) to provide capacity building to strengthen key nonprofit organizations serving low-income and foreign-born communities.

Thirteen organizations accepted the Department of Citizen Services' invitation to participate in the project: Alianza de la Comunidad, Christ Church Link, Conexiones, Community Action Council of Howard County, Congregations Concerned for the Homeless, Domestic Violence Center of Howard County, FIRN, Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center, Korean American Community Association of Howard County, Legal Aid Bureau, Rebuilding Together of Howard County, The Salvation Army Howard County Service Center, and Success in Style.

Initiative activities included focus group sessions with human services clients in the County, individual interviews with County human services leaders, best practices research related to effective service delivery and organizational management, as well as six facilitated sessions of training, brainstorming, and analysis with participating organizations.

The findings of the focus groups and stakeholder interviews provided insight about the impact of environmental trends, as well as issues of service delivery related to access, quality, and gaps. Both stakeholders and clients agreed that gaps in available health care, affordable housing, and public transportation exacerbated challenges for low-income and foreign-born clients. While clients and stakeholders generally shared many of the same views about service delivery in Howard County, clients were more likely to have concerns about the barriers to access and quality of services.

The best practice research provided a description of key characteristics of an effective service delivery system, guidelines for serving foreign-born populations, an overview of centralized client intake systems, a review of different nonprofit organizational structures, best practice principles for improving organizational collaboration, and tips for fundraising in affluent communities. This research identified the same critical factors that surfaced in the focus groups and stakeholder interviews—the importance of access to services, quality of services, and

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collaboration to enhance effective service delivery—and introduced nonprofit organizational capacity building as another key factor.

The project integrated information from research and participant sessions to explore new approaches to human service delivery in Howard County. Core elements of service delivery were identified as:

- Grounding the service delivery system in community-based values
- Creating user-friendly access
- Strengthening collaboration to leverage effectiveness and efficiency

Based on the HSMP priorities, research, and results from working with the cohort of nonprofit providers, a framework emerged for human service delivery that is:

- Client centered—accessible, high quality, offers the right mix of services
- Effective and efficient—results oriented and uses resources wisely
- Broadly supported by the public—the community understands and responds to the needs of its citizens

As a result of these findings, this report makes the following recommendations to help Howard County improve the system of service delivery and to support the provider community offering those services:

Access to Services

- Periodically assess and address the barriers and obstacles to service access.
- Support efforts to develop a universal application.
- Identify one central “point of information” about services in the County.
- Support programs to expand language accessibility and disability awareness in human services.
- Review public transportation resources to identify areas for improvement.
- Replicate the successful North Laurel-Savage Multiservice Center model.
- Support marketing efforts to expand awareness of County services.

Quality of Services

- Periodically assess and address the quality and effectiveness of services.
- Support efforts to enhance customer service, cultural competency, and disability awareness.
- Support opportunities for joint staff training.
- Support efforts to meet the diverse needs of foreign-born residents.

Holistic and Coordinated

- Expand use of the County’s Homeless Management Information System to include a wider range of services.

Mix of Services

- Conduct periodic needs assessments to measure changes in the community environment, and address identified gaps in services.
- Expand prevention and self-sufficiency programs.
- Provide funding for crisis services, expanding where possible.
- Conduct reviews of services to be more efficient and client-centered.

Effectiveness and Efficiency

- Promote greater emphasis on outcome measurement.
- Establish deeper levels of collaboration among service providers.
- Provide targeted capacity-building opportunities for nonprofit organizations.
- Pursue opportunities for shared back-office support for nonprofits.
- Identify shared priorities among local funders and coordinate support for organizational capacity building and stronger systems of service delivery.
- Seek other funding sources to support systemic improvements.
- Provide ongoing support to maintain connections among participating organizations.

Public Support for Human Services

- Support efforts to raise public awareness about human services needs in Howard County.
- Support initiatives that foster public support for investments in needed services, such as health, housing, and transportation.
- Utilize existing governmental, nonprofit, and private communication channels to highlight communities in need and how to help.

These recommendations and their implications for action outline a path forward for partnerships among public agencies, private nonprofit providers, and funders to strengthen the system of service delivery—and ultimately benefit the community members who depend on its services.

II. INTRODUCTION

The Capacity Building Initiative was created as a strategic response to rising community needs. In early 2008, before the economic downturn, Howard County, Maryland was already seeing a significant increase in demand for crisis services such as energy and rental assistance. Anecdotal stories told of the difficulty that clients were having in navigating the network of services available in the County to obtain the assistance they needed.

Three years earlier, the County's Human Services Master Plan (HSMP) 2005-2010 identified four overarching issues which were relevant to this increasing need: housing, homelessness, transportation, and access to services. The recognition that these were all economic issues highlighted the needs of low-income families, and made the concept of "self-sufficiency" an important focus in Howard County's planning for services. It was also evident in the findings of the HSMP that the issue of access to services was particularly critical to the foreign born, who may be struggling with language and cultural barriers.

With funding provided by County Executive Ken Ulman to support implementation of the HSMP, the Department of Citizen Services developed this Capacity Building Initiative to explore creative, new approaches to service delivery. To address the overarching issues in the HSMP, it focused on those nonprofits that address issues of poverty and self-sufficiency, and those that serve the needs of the foreign born.

Project Description

Purpose of the Initiative

The purpose of the project was two-fold: 1) to strengthen the system of service delivery in Howard County for low-income and foreign-born individuals and families; and 2) to strengthen the capacity of individual participating organizations.

The specific goals of the Initiative were to:

- Examine current service delivery in Howard County, including the nature and scope of any gaps in service, and barriers or obstacles to accessing services.
- Identify and develop actionable strategies for addressing identified gaps, barriers, and obstacles in the County's system of service delivery.
- Provide capacity-building support to participating nonprofit leaders to support their ability to implement changes in their own organizations.

Project Participants

In September 2008, Citizen Services invited eighteen nonprofit human service organizations to participate in the project. Requirements for participation included providing general background information about their organization, as well as attending three half-day and two full-day sessions. Participants were offered a \$1,000 stipend to offset the costs of the time commitment for the project.

Thirteen organizations chose to participate in the Initiative. Their major reasons for participating were: 1) to benefit from capacity-building training; 2) to provide input about ideas for improving the Howard County human services delivery system; and 3) to build relationships with other nonprofit providers in the county.

This cohort of organizations represents a diverse cross-section of nonprofits serving low-income and foreign-born communities in Howard County. They provide a wide range of human services, and vary greatly in organizational size and scope. Five of the participants concentrate on crisis services, while four of the participants focus on self-sufficiency services. While all participants include foreign-born residents among their client base, four of the participating organizations specialize in services to foreign-born individuals.

The group divided fairly evenly between larger organizations with more than three full-time staff and smaller organizations with fewer than three full-time staff, with two of the smaller organizations all volunteer-run. Most of the participating organizations were represented by executive directors, but in some cases it was either the volunteer leader or a designated staff member who attended the participant sessions.

The following provides a brief description of the mission/program area and size of each of the participating organizations:

- **Alianza de la Comunidad** works on behalf of the Howard County Hispanic community and provides information and referral services through its “Centro de Ayuda,” parenting classes, and workshops about accessing social services and health care services. Alianza has one part-time staff member and many dedicated volunteers.
- **Christ Church Link** directs vulnerable Howard County neighbors to emergency services—e.g., food, shelter, housing, medical, and job training assistance—through its volunteer-run information and referral service. Christ Church Link is an outreach ministry of Christ Episcopal Church in Columbia.
- **Conexiones** is a volunteer-run organization dedicated to helping Latino students in Howard County maximize their academic achievement through advocacy, tutoring services, and scholarship awards.
- **Community Action Council of Howard County** provides emergency services for economically disadvantaged residents through energy, food, and housing assistance programs. CAC has a staff of more than sixty professionals, all dedicated to alleviating the effects of poverty and promoting long-term self-sufficiency.

This cohort of organizations represents a diverse cross-section of nonprofits serving low-income and foreign-born communities.

- **Congregations Concerned for the Homeless** works with dedicated volunteers and a staff of five to enable homeless families in Howard County to become self-sufficient through its transitional housing, case management and life skills coaching programs.
- **Domestic Violence Center of Howard County** provides emergency and transitional shelters, counseling, legal assistance, and prevention services for victims of domestic violence and their families. With its staff of thirty, DVC is an outspoken voice of advocacy and outreach education on domestic violence issues in the wider community.
- **FIRN** helps ensure equal access to community resources and opportunities for all foreign-born residents. Led by their nine-member staff, FIRN is a community leader in information and referral, immigration/citizenship services, interpretation/translation services, English tutoring, employment services, and advocacy.
- **Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center** provides comprehensive shelter programs for the homeless, a 24-hour crisis hotline and counseling services. Its goal of creating positive, empowering change for people in crisis is carried out by a staff of more than seventy full and part-time individuals.
- **Korean American Community Association of Howard County** provides information, referral, and counseling services to Korean American residents in Howard County through its volunteers and small part-time staff.
- **Legal Aid Bureau** offers high-quality legal services to Maryland's poor in a range of areas, including: child custody, welfare and unemployment benefits, bankruptcy, foreclosures, child abuse and neglect, and medical access assistance. Headquartered in Baltimore, the Howard County office is run by a single paid staff member and many dedicated volunteers.
- **Rebuilding Together of Howard County** is dedicated to preserving and revitalizing housing and communities, with particular focus on residents who are elderly, disabled, or low-income. With one part-time staff and legions of devoted volunteers, Rebuilding Together provides free home repair and modifications for residents who need assistance maintaining their homes.
- **The Salvation Army Howard County Service Center**, with a staff of two, provides information and referral services, case management, emergency assistance (food, utilities, rent), and life skills training for low-income residents of Howard County.
- **Success in Style** offers free business attire and coaching for disadvantaged women seeking employment. The organization is run mainly by volunteers, with one part-time staff member.

Design Overview

The Initiative utilized a wide array of methodologies to balance the dual project goals of developing ideas to address systemic issues for Howard County human services delivery, while also providing meaningful training for participants in related capacity-building topic areas.

The consultants retained for this Initiative conducted focus group sessions with clients and individual interviews with stakeholders about the strengths, weaknesses and trends in the Howard County human services system. The consultants also reviewed research for principles and best practices related to building an effective human services system and serving foreign-born populations. The findings from this research were integrated into participant training activities and priority-setting discussions.

Participant sessions were conducted in November 2008, and January, February, March, April and May, 2009. These sessions blended formal training about organizational development topics, presentation of research results, experiential activities to apply training and research learning, small and large group discussions and brainstorming, as well as networking and relationship-building activities. Each session also included an evaluation component to gather participant feedback about new areas to explore, topics for deeper discussion, and the “real world” applications of ideas being developed.

At the conclusion of the project, participants completed a confidential survey to provide their feedback and recommendations about the Initiative and its implications for the future.

The Howard County Environment

Strengths

Howard County has the distinction of being a community that is both affluent and caring to those in need. The Howard County human services community (i.e., governmental agencies, funders, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, etc.) enjoys a great deal of good will, and the familiarity with each other that naturally comes from being in a relatively small community.

Private and government funders regularly meet to share information, and have served as sponsors and conveners of a range of capacity building programs. The Association of Community Services regularly convenes human services providers to share experiences and best practices.

The government and citizens of the County have prioritized support to human service delivery that goes beyond that of most counties,¹ and the County has increased its funding to nonprofit human service providers in recent years. The excellent public school system not only delivers on its core mission of educating students to high levels, but also provides an entryway into other services that families may need to thrive.

*Government,
nonprofit, and faith-
based organizations
are working hard
every day to ensure
the most fundamental
needs of County
residents are met.*

¹ See “County Funds to Local Non Profits: A Survey of Maryland Counties” published by the Governor’s Grants Office and the Maryland Association of Counties, August 2007”

The network of human services in Howard County provides a wide range of critical services for low-income and foreign-born individuals. Government, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations are working hard every day to find ways to reach more individuals in need, to engage volunteers in the community, and to ensure the most fundamental needs of County residents are met. County organizations are paying more attention to cultural competency in their service delivery, in receiving training, hiring more bilingual staff, and translating more materials into other languages.

Howard County government has been proactive in identifying and meeting the needs of low-income and foreign-born residents. The Board to Promote Self-Sufficiency, created in 2008, acts as a planning and coordinating mechanism for initiatives to promote the economic stability of individuals and families and to reduce the incidence of poverty in Howard County. The Department of Citizen Services works closely with nonprofits, foundations, and other governmental departments to provide support for critical human services programs.

Challenges Exist

While these are great assets, there are still significant challenges in the County and weaknesses in the system of service delivery.

Need is Hidden: Those serving low-income and foreign-born residents often face assumptions that there are very few people in need of services in Howard County. While it consistently has one of the lowest rates of poverty in Maryland (4.5% for 2007, compared to 8.3% statewide), even that low rate means more than 12,000 Howard County residents live below the federal poverty line.

Those serving low-income and foreign-born residents often face assumptions that there are very few people in need of services in Howard County.

Demographic Changes: Howard County's demographics are changing rapidly. According to the U. S. Census, between 1990 and 2000, Howard County gained 60,000 new residents, a 32% increase. During that same period, the County diversified significantly, more than doubling the number of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanics, and attracting a 62% increase in African Americans. The growth of various foreign-born communities necessitates that human service providers develop broader outreach to, and deeper understanding of, the specialized needs and concerns of these growing communities.

Focus on Crisis Services: Like most jurisdictions, Howard County tends to focus more on services for families and individuals in crisis than programs to foster long-term self-sufficiency, although a number of agencies focus on both in their service delivery. Crisis services include programs such as eviction prevention, shelters, food pantries, legal assistance, protective services, energy assistance, etc. Long-term, self-sufficiency programs include education and job training, financial counseling, youth development, community development, etc. Greater investment in prevention programs in the future may be one way to reduce the long-term growth in the need for crisis services.

Systemic Issues Create Barriers and Inefficiencies: Funder requirements, state or federal regulations, limited funding, or internal organizational policies can all create barriers to providing holistic services. Common examples include:

- Services are often not available until the individual is in crisis. For instance, an individual must have an eviction or turn-off notice before s/he is eligible to receive rental or energy assistance.
- Individual organizations limit the amount of financial assistance they provide, based on their own funding levels. This often leads to clients needing to go to multiple sources to obtain the amount of assistance they need, and/or being turned away by organizations that have run out of funding.

The consequence of these realities is a patchwork system in which service providers attempt to piece together resources from different agencies and funding streams to meet the needs of their clients. It is a frustrating process for the individuals and families in emergency, crisis situations. It is also costly to the system overall if, for example, multiple agencies conduct intake interviews and eligibility assessments. That administrative cost adds up and reduces available resources that could be devoted to clients.

Economic Downturn

The project's goals became even more critical as the economy declined. All participating organizations reported increased pressure to serve more clients, making it necessary to find creative solutions to "doing more with less." Participants also noted an increase in first-time clients, who were often uncomfortable receiving assistance ("I'm a giver, not a taker" was a common comment). The new clients were also troubled by concerns of confidentiality and how to navigate the system.

Some participants reported a surprisingly robust community response in the face of these challenges, with increased volunteerism and donations. The increased volunteerism necessitates a well-managed response, however, so that new volunteers are matched with appropriate activities and organizational needs.

The economic pressures created a sense of opportunity in some organizations as board members became energized by new challenges and re-committed to the core mission of the organization. Some participants also noted that the downturn requires a fundamental re-examination of organizational priorities, a transformational perspective that is driving innovation, and perhaps even expansion, in the face of crisis.

III. UNDERSTANDING HOW PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE HUMAN SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM IN HOWARD COUNTY

The starting point for the project was to find out how the system is working now. Hearing directly from low-income and foreign-born residents themselves was fundamental to analyzing strengths and weaknesses in the system. The Initiative also gathered input from a wider group of stakeholders: community leaders from nonprofit, public, and faith-based organizations.

Between November 2008 and January 2009, the consultants conducted a series of focus groups and stakeholder interviews as part of this Initiative. Five two-hour focus groups were held with foreign-born and low-income individuals, each consisting of eleven to fourteen people. Eleven 45 to 60 minute interviews were conducted with stakeholders from public agencies, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations.

Interviewers asked similar questions of both stakeholders and focus groups participants. Questions addressed respondents' perceptions of the human service system in Howard County, with a focus on the quality of, access to, and gaps in services, as well as overall coordination of services and collaboration among providers (nonprofit and public). In interviewing stakeholders, consultants asked respondents to consider the service system as a whole, and how well it serves all community members in need, especially those with low-income who have greater needs. In addition, given the growth of the foreign-born population in the County, the consultants asked stakeholders to particularly consider issues related to serving this population.

Trends in the Environment

Client Perspectives: Clients were asked to discuss the major needs and challenges they face.

The economic crisis is having a significant impact on individuals living in or near poverty. The most frequently mentioned challenges were: access to affordable health care and housing, job training and assistance finding employment, and emergency assistance such as food, clothing, and rental/utility assistance. The two most critical needs, those that participants mentioned repeatedly, were affordable health care and emergency assistance. Both of these needs are related to job loss and/or the availability of jobs that provide health insurance, as well as increased housing and transportation costs.

The most frequently mentioned challenges were: access to health care, job training and assistance finding employment, and emergency assistance

Focus group participants noted that the needs of low-income residents are growing, and shared their own observations on the increased demand for services and the ability of providers to handle this increase. As one client commented on a particular agency, "There's a lot of gatekeeping. They see 100 people per week and turn away another 100 people per day." Other clients

commented about long waiting lists to receive emergency assistance or affordable health care services, and noted wait lists for Section 8 and other subsidized housing are now years long.

Stakeholder Perspectives: Stakeholders were asked to discuss important trends in the community such as demographic changes and needs of foreign-born and low-income residents. Stakeholders noted the significant increase in foreign-born families, and named the influx of Burmese refugees in particular. Stakeholders commented on the significant number of people who are financially vulnerable. “People with less resources are falling further and further behind,” said one stakeholder. Another stated, “the rich are getting richer, the poor getting poorer, and the people in the middle are getting more vulnerable.”

Service providers are seeing an increase in the demand for services, including shelter, food, rental assistance, and transportation. “Nonprofits are feeling stretched to do more,” said one stakeholder. In a shaky economic climate this demand poses added burdens for providers. “The challenge is, what do you do when federal funds for programs dry up?” asked one stakeholder. Nonprofits in particular are struggling to make adjustments in staffing

and programming in order to accommodate the downturn in funding. The faith community is also seeing an increase in demand but believes that it plays a unique role in providing services because they do not have the same funding restrictions as nonprofits. Faith-based organizations are also able to seek support from their members.

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Access to Services

Clients and stakeholders were asked about the barriers to access to services for low-income and foreign-born residents. Clients were also asked how, if at all, they have been able to overcome the barriers.

Client Perspectives: Clients named four main barriers to access: difficulty navigating the system, language, immigration status, and transportation. Challenges navigating the system appear to be a significant barrier to access. Many clients commented that government programs are often hard to navigate, stating that some processes are “cumbersome” and “disorganized.” One complaint was “having to complete too much paperwork.” Some mentioned long waiting lists and not having calls returned. One client stated the need for more communication and collaboration across agencies.

For the foreign-born in particular, language is a barrier to accessing services. Participants in the Spanish-speaking focus group identified a lack of forms and applications in Spanish, as well as a lack of bilingual staff and/or interpreters available at agencies. Clients would like to see more documents available in multiple languages and more bi-lingual staff. Translation and interpretation services need to be high quality to be effective. Access to trained interpreters is

rare. Some clients mentioned attempts in the County to offer websites in Korean that are of such poor quality “it would be better if they didn’t do any translation at all.”

Participants in the Spanish-speaking focus group in particular identified the lack of legal immigration status as a significant barrier to services. Focus group participants, about half of whom were undocumented, had inconsistent information about which services individuals without legal status are eligible for and which they are not.

Clients named four main barriers to access: difficulty navigating the system, language, immigration status, and transportation

Focus group participants identified transportation as a barrier to being able to physically access services.

For those without cars, the inadequate public transportation system may mean that getting to a church food pantry takes all day, or it may mean some cannot get to a service at all. A few people shared problems with county transportation for older adults and people with disabilities, including long waits for rides and rides that never show up. Clients applauded agencies that provided free transportation, such as Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center and Chase Brexton Clinic, and would like to see more such assistance.

Stakeholder Perspectives: Stakeholders named transportation, language, undocumented status, and lack of information as barriers to services.

Almost all stakeholders view transportation as the leading barrier to accessing services, stating that Howard County’s public transportation system is “inadequate” for those without their own cars. Some suggest the need for more emergency transportation services that would help clients who are in dire situations. “We get calls from people all the time that have no way of picking up their sick child from school during the day.” Others suggest the need for more one-stop centers such as the North Laurel-Savage Multiservice Center, stating that services located close to where families live reduces the heavy reliance on public transportation, making it more convenient for families.

Language is seen by almost all stakeholders as both an access issue and a gap in service. The increase in the foreign-born population has created an increased demand for translation and interpretation services. Many cited the need for more documents in multiple languages. “There’s sometimes a lack of access to even the most basic information.” Those serving the foreign-born noted that language barriers affect all immigrants regardless of income level. As one stakeholder commented, “immigrant business owners want to comply with laws, but they often don’t understand the regulations provided to them.”

Some stakeholders stated that there are insufficient safety nets for undocumented immigrants and cited a need to have more immigration counseling and advice for the undocumented. “The situation with the undocumented will explode. Most people don’t want to touch it,” one stakeholder noted, adding that the County “doesn’t have a specific policy for dealing with the

undocumented—each agency basically comes up with their own policy.” Service providers to the foreign-born stated that the County needs both more immigration counseling services, as well as better dissemination of information about the services for which undocumented individuals are eligible.

Stakeholders also identified lack of information as a major barrier to accessing services. Several suggested that the issue is not that there aren’t sufficient services but that “the services that do exist aren’t known to those who need them.” As one commented, “sometimes it’s hard to get the word out about available services.”

Quality of Services

Stakeholders and clients were asked to rate the quality of services offered in Howard County, as well as to discuss the extent to which they find services to be culturally and linguistically appropriate. It is interesting to note that stakeholders widely agreed that the quality of services in Howard County is high, while clients’ views about quality were mixed.

Client Perspectives: For clients, “high quality services” means being treated well; that is, being treated as a person and “not as a statistic.” Non-English speakers said it was very important to them that staff members speak their language or at the very least understand their culture. Clients also said that it is important that staff members have the appropriate expertise in providing services.

Clients commented that quality was not consistent across the board; some agencies provide excellent services while others provide poor services. When asked to rate services on a scale of 1-4 (with 4 being the highest), clients gave ratings in the full range from 1 to 4, suggesting different experiences with quality at

For clients, “high quality services” means being treated as a person and “not as a statistic.”

different agencies or even with different staff at the same agency. Many clients praised the Howard County Public School System, Howard Community College, the Health Department, Community Action Council, FIRN, the Korean American Community Association of Howard County, the public libraries, and faith-based organizations for providing good services. Some clients felt that faith-based organizations provide some of the best services in the County, stating that they tend to be more accessible.

On the other hand, some clients in the Spanish-speaking focus group stated that they sometimes feel discriminated against by workers, especially at government agencies, because they are Latino. When asked if they knew where to file a complaint, many said no or that they were not willing to do so.

Client experiences at Department of Social Services (DSS) reflect that agency's staffing shortages and ever increasing volume of applicants. Clients cited problems such as “being treated as a number,” “being ignored by case workers and in some cases never actually meeting the case

worker in person,” and “staff not returning calls.” Clients generally felt that there is little they can do to overcome the access barriers there.

Stakeholder Perspectives: When stakeholders were asked to rate the quality of services provided in the county, most agreed that on a 4 point scale (with 4 being the highest) Howard County ranks between a 3 and 4. Stakeholders commented that “the leadership within our organizations is very strong” and that “the level of service we have here in Howard County is higher than in other counties.” Stakeholders praised Howard County Public Schools for improving its cultural and linguistic capacity over the past 10 years, as well as the Howard County Police Department for providing Spanish classes to officers and staff.

Gaps in Services

Both clients and stakeholders generally agreed on the greatest gaps in services, i.e., the services that are just not available or not available in the amount needed to meet demand. These included:

Affordable Health Care: In all five focus groups, clients noted affordable health care as the most significant gap, noting that there are no free, primary care clinics for the uninsured in Howard County. Clients commented that although Chase Brexton has a sliding scale for the uninsured, the waiting list is long. Other clients mentioned waiting six months or more for medical benefits. Healthy Howard was just launching its program at the time of this research; some mentioned a need for better outreach to the foreign-born communities for this program.

Affordable Housing: Clients pointed to the lack of affordable housing for low-income community members. Almost all stakeholders cited affordable housing as a major gap in the county. Many acknowledged that it is a complex issue with no easy answer, but one that affects both low and middle-income families in the County.

Adequate Transportation: There was widespread agreement that the public transportation system in Howard County is seriously inadequate for low-income community residents who do not own a car. There are not enough bus routes or buses going to the places clients need to go at the times they need to go.

Other gaps noted by some focus group participants:

Opportunities for Education and Job Training: Undocumented immigrants mentioned their desire to attend Howard Community College but not being able to do so without legal status. Other immigrants who are permanent residents or citizens stated that the degrees they earned in their home countries are not valid in the U.S., forcing them to take on less challenging, lower-paying jobs. Some participants in the low-income focus group also identified a desire for job training that will allow them to get better jobs.

Assistance with Financial Management: Several low-income focus group participants noted a need for credit/debt counseling services to help them prevent getting into vulnerable financial situations in the future.

Programs for Older Adults: This was a major concern for the Korean focus group, including housing, social programs, and the needs of seniors who are raising grandchildren.

Level of Coordination Among Organizations Serving People Who Are Low-Income and/or Foreign-Born

Stakeholders were asked to comment on the extent to which Howard County agencies are collaborating with each other to provide a strong coordinated system of care. Reactions were mixed, with some stating that collaboration is occurring often, and others believing that it is not occurring as often or as effectively as they would like to see it. They noted that referral relationships between agencies are common. No one stated that there is duplication of services.

One stakeholder stated, “generally Howard County is extremely fortunate to have a long history of organizations working together to provide safety nets for our clients.” Stakeholders cited the Human Services Master Plan and Healthy Howard as examples of successful collaborative efforts in the County. Other successful efforts mentioned included:

- The Association of Community Services (ACS)
- Grassroots’ Cold Weather Shelter
- Community Bridges (partnerships between faith-based organizations and nonprofits)
- Bridgeway Community Church Health Fair
- Mobile Crisis Team (partnership between Grassroots, the Howard County Police Department, and Howard County Mental Health Authority)
- Domestic Violence Lethality Screening (partnership between the Howard County Police Department and the Domestic Violence Center)
- Partnership between Bridgeway Community Church and FIRN

Although agencies in the county have strong relationships, i.e., they know each other, there are not enough substantive collaborative efforts.

Some stakeholders stated that although agencies in the county have strong *relationships*, i.e., they know each other, there are not enough substantive collaborative efforts. “More collaboration is needed in the County to help vulnerable individuals,” one stakeholder commented. Stakeholders noted that the main obstacle to stronger collaboration is the lack of time, especially for those agencies or organizations that are already stretched thin. “I don’t think we have the time to collaborate to solve broader community issues. You have to have the resources to do that.” Another remarked, “everyone is in survival mode.” Some stated that in some cases there is a lot

of effort dedicated to getting agencies to collaborate but that sometimes it does not work unless there is a central person or organization “pushing the agenda.”

Summary of Focus Groups and Interviews

The results of the focus groups and interviews identified several key issues—*access to services*, *quality of services*, and *collaboration among service providers*—which became critical touchstones of this Initiative.

Overall, clients and stakeholders shared many of the same perceptions about trends in the environment, as well as quality of, access to, and gaps in services. All agreed that the needs are increasing, especially with the current economic climate, and that there are some key gaps, especially in health care, affordable housing, and transportation. They also agreed that Howard County, through its network of nonprofits and government agencies, provides some very good, helpful services.

In general, clients were more likely to identify concerns about the quality of existing services, and barriers to accessing them, than were stakeholders. Stakeholders seem to be less aware of the high level of frustration many clients feel as they attempt to navigate the system, the inconsistency of the services they receive “depending on the worker they get,” and the feeling they sometimes get of

Clients were more likely to identify concerns about the quality of existing services, and barriers to accessing them, than were stakeholders.

being treated as “less than human” when they seek services. At the same time, the conversations with stakeholders suggest many are aware of the challenges, are taking to steps to address them, and could benefit from opportunities to think creatively and strategically about new models and approaches.

IV. INTEGRATING BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH

The Initiative included a review of best practices in systems of service delivery and in nonprofit organizations. These characteristics may be helpful in Howard County to benchmark current practices, seek ways to expand upon strong practices already underway, and improve where needed.

Characteristics of Effective Human Services Delivery

A national review of best practices in human service delivery shows that the leading systems are designed with the client in mind at all points. Effective human service delivery systems are:

Integrated and Coordinated. Effective service delivery systems allow individuals and families to easily access services through single points of entry, and provide a “seamless”

range of services from multiple organizations, to ensure clients do not “fall through the cracks.” The issue of “single points of entry” emerged as a significant area of concern for Howard County, so additional research was undertaken on jurisdictions that had implemented common intake procedures.

Holistic and Client-Centered. While program delivery may in effect be in silos (for example, one agency handles housing, another handles health and a third handles job training), efforts are made to serve clients as a whole person or a whole family. Staff in different program or service areas understand how needs are interrelated, actively work to identify other issues and needs, and address them through referrals and partnerships.

The leading systems are designed with the client in mind at all points.

Delivered by Trained, Qualified, and Committed Staff. Effective systems have human resources policies and practices that ensure that all staff have the qualifications, experience, interest, and training to perform their jobs effectively.

Accessible. Effective service systems assess the barriers to access across service areas and target populations. Services are then designed and delivered in a way that ensures they are accessible to those who most need them.

Well Managed. This requires good planning, clearly defined outcomes, and skilled managers who ensure that programs and services have the resources they need to meet their objectives, including appropriate data systems and technology.

Identify and Respect Clear Rights for the People being Served. All service providers must be aware of and respect the legal rights of their constituencies. A growing number of human services systems and individual service providers are developing client/consumer bills of rights.

Designed and Planned with the Involvement of the People being Served. Effective service systems provide clear and consistent opportunities for the people being served to have input into how programs and services are designed and delivered. This may mean including clients on the board of directors and/or creating client advisory groups. Conducting surveys, focus groups and holding community meetings are important to gain input and feedback on services provided.

Consistently Evaluated and Shown to Have Positive Outcomes. Effective service systems have policies and practices to support consistent system-wide evaluation of performance and outcomes.

Best Practices for Serving the Foreign Born

Achieving high quality in serving the foreign born is not an easy task for any agency. Although the three best practices below sound rather straight-forward, actually implementing them can be a long-term and resource-intensive process for many agencies. Best practices in serving the foreign-born include:

Providing Language Access. Providers must address language access for limited English proficiency (LEP) populations. This includes providing written information and forms in multiple languages, as well as interpretation or bilingual staff for service delivery. Having bilingual staff is the best option, followed by contracted interpretation services or phone-based interpretation services. Community volunteers may also be used, with caution, on highly sensitive topics.

Ensuring Cultural Competency. In addition to being language appropriate, services should also be delivered in ways that are respectful of the clients' cultural beliefs and practices. This includes attention to the physical environment, materials and resources, communication styles and mediums, and values and attitudes.

Identifying and Adhering to Service Standards. Standards have been developed for cultural competency in a number of fields, including social work and health. Clear standards on service delivery to the foreign-born can help ensure they receive services that are appropriate to their needs.

Best Practices for Developing Central Intake Systems

When individuals have needs that go beyond the services of one agency, individuals are often sent from place to place, going through intake procedures at multiple agencies. This is frustrating for clients and costly for agencies. In response, some human services agencies began to experiment with common intake forms, procedures, and systems in the 1970s. These efforts were challenged by the limited technology of the time, among other factors.

A growing number of counties and states have developed common intake forms and procedures.

With the availability of new technologies, recent years have seen a growing number of efforts. There are many specific service areas that have developed common intake forms and procedures, including HIV/AIDS programs, legal services, disability services, and early childhood services. In addition, there are a growing number of jurisdictions—counties and states—that have developed common intake forms and procedures across a variety of human services programs.

The approach in Massachusetts, for example, yielded a state-wide system (“Virtual Gateway”) that enables a single application point that feeds back eligibility information for MassHealth (Massachusetts Medicaid and SCHIP programs), Food Stamps, WIC, emergency housing

assistance, certain senior services, certain veteran’s services, and others, all administered by government agencies. They are currently working on adding fuel assistance that will be the first time nonprofit providers will be involved in the central intake process.

Organizational Best Practices

In addition to reviewing best practices in human service delivery, the consultants also researched organizational best practices for nonprofit organizations.

Organizational Structure

Often times, individuals and groups will see a need in the community and immediately set up an independent nonprofit organization under section 501(c)(3) of the internal revenue code. The burden of governing and managing a 501(c)(3) organization can sometimes overwhelm community groups. Other structures that could be considered include:

- Becoming a project of an existing organization
- Establishing an unincorporated association
- Establishing an incorporated nonprofit without 501(c)(3) status
- Asking another 501(c)(3) organization to serve as its fiscal sponsor

Collaboration

Collaboration can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery to best meet the needs of clients and fulfill organizational mission. The term “collaboration” is commonly used to refer to a range of organizational relationships. (This is, in fact, how the term is used throughout this report, as well as in the specific meaning provided below.) These relationships, from lesser to greater levels of engagement and complexity, include:

- **Coordination**—working in the same field or geographic area in harmony
- **Cooperation**—working together on specific, time limited activities
- **Collaboration**—working together on an ongoing basis with formal agreement and pooled resources
- **Joint venture**—two organizations create a third structure that is jointly managed
- **Coalition**—three or more organizations work together for specific aims, usually advocacy
- **Merger**—two or more organizations combine to become one

Collaboration can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery to best meet the needs of clients.

Best practices for making collaboration successful include being clear about goals and roles, setting expectations in writing, and communicating proactively throughout.

Fundraising in Affluent Communities

Some may assume that fundraising is easier in affluent communities. However, when the needs of low-income and foreign-born residents are not widely seen or understood, it can be challenging both for nonprofits who seek to cultivate individual donors, as well as government agencies that need to build public support for the use of tax dollars to provide critical safety net services.

Promising practices for fundraising in affluent communities start with education and public awareness. This is an area where nonprofits and government agencies can cooperate. Another important practice is to engage members of the faith and business communities. Focusing education efforts on people who can themselves become powerful messengers and champions can be an effective way to reach more people with an education effort. Finally, promoting volunteering is a good way to get people involved who may then become life-long supporters.

Promising practices for fundraising in affluent communities start with education and public awareness.

Summary of Best Practice Research

The review of best practices provided important background information for the Initiative, and reinforced the main touchstones of *access to services*, *quality of services* and *collaboration*. The research also highlighted the importance of *organizational capacity* in the delivery of quality, client-centered services.

Many of the best practices described in the research are already being used somewhere in Howard County. The challenge will be to lift up and spread these practices county-wide and to foster greater collaboration among agencies to advance common interests in serving low-income and foreign-born communities.

NOTE: “A Report on the Best Practices Research of the Capacity Building Initiative” is available at www.howardcountymd.gov/CitizenServices/.

V. STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

As noted in the research, *organizational capacity* is closely inter-related with quality service delivery, and must be addressed for nonprofits to respond effectively to needs within the community.

Nonprofit organizations that have high levels of capacity are characterized by having active and engaged boards of directors, strong volunteer or staff leadership, high standards of ethics and accountability, effective programs that demonstrate positive outcomes, and a diversified base of revenue. Organizations that have these characteristics are more likely to achieve greater impact

with the scarce resources available, AND they are more likely to garner greater public support that leverages public funds.

Setting Capacity Building Priorities

“Capacity building” is the term generally used for a range of approaches to strengthen the ability of nonprofit organizations to achieve their mission and respond to their fast-changing environments. Providing capacity building support for organizations is an important way to help ensure scarce resources are used effectively and efficiently. It can include training, consulting, research, peer networking, coaching, and other forms of support that help strengthen organizations.

It is important to note that capacity building is not a silver bullet. It requires investment and buy-in on the part of the participating organizations in order to be effective. When organizations do invest in their own capacity, the results can be transformative.

Organizational capacity is closely inter-related with quality service delivery, and must be addressed for nonprofits to respond effectively to needs within the community.

Capacity-building priorities identified by participants in this Initiative included:

Board Development. Nonprofits are governed by volunteer boards of directors. An effective board can make an enormous difference in setting clear strategy for organizations and garnering community support for the mission. A dysfunctional board can quite literally lead to the demise of an organization. Since board membership rotates, training for board members is generally advisable every two to three years. Facilitated planning retreats are another way to support strong board development.

Training for Staff and Case Workers. Front line staff in human service agencies are the individuals who spend the most time with clients. Therefore, the qualifications and skills of these staff are critical to the quality of service delivery. Often, nonprofit salaries are very low and agencies have difficulty attracting staff with strong experience and training. Therefore, on-the-job training is even more critical for those positions. Some areas of training are cross-cutting for different agencies such as customer service, cultural competency, and orientation to the nonprofit sector.

Support for Collaboration: Facilitation and resources for collaboration are needed to overcome the obstacles many organizations face to successfully collaborate. It should be noted that at the beginning, middle, and end of this Initiative, both stakeholders and participants stressed the difficulty of collaboration in the present environment. Nonprofits are in “survival mode,” government agencies are overwhelmed, and people do not feel they have the time, authority, or resources to advance robust collaborative strategies. External support can be critical for overcoming these barriers.

Shared Back Office Services: One challenge faced by most small and mid-sized nonprofits is the fact that they must meet all the requirements of being a fully functioning organization with financial controls, human resources benefits packages, and information technology, before they are large enough to support these services in house. Nonprofit communities across the country have experimented with management services organizations that consolidate these services in one office (as an independent entity). This approach may benefit the Howard County nonprofit community, and is being further explored by Association of Community Services and others.

Co-Location of Services: The North Laurel-Savage Multiservice Center is an excellent example of co-location of services that both helps strengthen the nonprofit organizations and, more importantly, offers “one-stop” services to clients. Such service centers would also benefit other Howard County communities.

Training Provided to Participants

Continuous learning and development is needed throughout organizations to ensure they are able to deliver high quality programs and services and engage the community in supporting their organizations. To strengthen participants’ individual organizational capacity, the training provided through the Initiative (both formal presentation and experiential) was geared to developing a greater understanding of critical elements in organizational development.

Ethics and accountability are fundamental issues for all nonprofit organizations.

Understanding Organizational Best Practices

Ethics and accountability are fundamental issues for all nonprofit organizations. The *Standards for Excellence: An Ethics and Accountability Code for the Nonprofit Sector* developed by the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations was used as a training and discussion guide. The Standards provide a framework for examining organizational best practices in eight key areas:

- **Mission and Program**—should be well-defined, effective and efficient
- **Governing Body**—determines the mission, develops policy, assures resources, and monitors performance
- **Conflict of Interest**—policies that ensure that staff and board members act in the best interests of the organization
- **Human Resources**—policies that clarify expectations and provide for performance evaluation
- **Financial and Legal**—policies that ensure sound financial management and legal/regulatory compliance
- **Openness**—establishing a core value of accessibility and responsiveness to the public

- **Fundraising**—consistent with the organization’s mission, compatible with its organizational capacity, and respectful of its donors
- **Public Affairs and Public Policy**—a voice for their community through public education and advocacy

Participants received an extensive resource packet of best practice summaries, tips, and sample forms and policies for each of the eight areas. All participants found the information very valuable. Some expressed interest in key areas, including: personnel policies, conflict of interest policies, and whistleblower policies. Some participants also expressed interest in pursuing certification by the Standards for Excellence program for their own individual organization as a way to learn best practices, recognize quality management, and support the long-term viability of their organization.

Understanding Nonprofit Lifecycles

Organizational life stages are significant considerations for capacity building. While there are many overarching issues common to most nonprofits—e.g., the need to maintain stable fund development—the specific challenges associated with these themes, and the most effective strategies for managing them, often vary according to the lifecycle stage of the individual nonprofit organization. Therefore, specific capacity building strategies need to be tailored to the appropriate life stage of the organization.

Capacity building strategies need to be tailored to the appropriate life stage of the organization.

The organizational lifecycles model developed by Judith Simon, [Five Life Stages of Nonprofit Organizations](#) (Fieldstone Alliance) was shared with the group. This model includes the following stages:

Stage 1—Imagine and Inspire: At this stage, an organization is at the idea or vision stage. The primary question is, “Can this dream be realized?”

Stage 2—Found and Frame: This is the formal start-up phase for the organization in which it receives official nonprofit status. The primary question is, “How are we going to pull this off?”

Stage 3—Ground and Grow: The organization has hired its first paid executive director and expanded the board beyond the founding members. Organizational capacity is focused on developing the business model and planning for sustainability. The primary question is, “How can we build this to be viable?”

Stage 4—Produce and Sustain: This is the mature phase of the organization’s life and production is at its peak. The primary question is, “How can we sustain the momentum?”

Stage 5—Review and Renew: The organization is reinventing itself in some way. It is a time of necessary change that may be catalyzed by a loss of major funding source,

executive transition, changing external environment, or changing needs in the community. The primary question is, “What do we need to redesign?”

Beware—Decline and Dissolution: Decline or dissolution can happen to an organization at any stage in its lifecycle. This stage may be characterized by high levels of conflict, lack of passion for the mission, or severe programmatic or financial crisis. The main questions are, “Should we close?” or “Can we engineer a turnaround?”

Another factor to be considered is organizational size. Size differences were evident in discussions among participating organizations. Agencies that are all-volunteer or have only one paid staff member faced challenges of volunteer management, board leadership, and basic capacity challenges. Larger organizations identified needs in staff development, quality assurance, and organizational alignment.

Understanding the Role of the Board

It is broadly understood that an active and engaged board of directors is essential to a high-functioning organization. In order to build and sustain the organization’s long-term success, nonprofits must rely on a dedicated and effective board of directors to support the organization’s stability, growth, and vision.

Four major categories of board activities were discussed with participants:

- **Planning**—Mission, vision, values of the organization; strategic plan; budget; annual plans; results/targets
- **Governance**—Executive director oversight; recruiting and orienting new board members; overseeing bylaws and organizational policies; annual board self-assessment; board training
- **External Relations**—Fundraising, advocacy and relationship building
- **Monitoring**—Progress on mission and strategic goals; executive director evaluation; program evaluation; quarterly financial reports; annual audit

Some organizations have found these four categories to be useful in establishing a committee structure and to balance the proper board vs. staff roles in an organization. Strengthening the board of directors is an excellent way to develop a “leaderful” organization that can help build organizational sustainability and resilience.

Participants recognized the value of building consensus with their board members in undertaking any major new systemic initiative. However, they were also circumspect about how to best engage their board members. The most effective approach was felt to be one that provided a clear benefit for the individual organization, with a goal of building long-term understanding of the impact of systemic challenges.

VI. IDENTIFYING CORE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

Participant sessions provided an opportunity for rich, in-depth discussion of how services are currently delivered in Howard County, and how service delivery could be enhanced. Discussion was informed by the findings of the focus groups and stakeholder interviews, the best practice research, as well as the knowledge and experience of the participants. The core elements of effective service delivery which emerged were a shared set of values, user-friendly access, and a high level of collaboration.

Shared Community Values that Support Quality Services

In order to provide the highest quality services, participants strongly believed that the system needed to be grounded in community-based values (a goal also voiced by the project's Advisory Committee). The Howard County Human Services Master Plan (HSMP) 2005-2010 was considered to be a solid foundation for these values. This plan states that "The human services community shares the following values: people-centered, affordable and accessible, comprehensive and integrated, collaboration, responsible, integrity and trust, respect and equity." These values link with common themes and best practices throughout the Initiative.

The participants' discussion deepened this description of community values. They believed that:

- **Respect** for clients is paramount.
- Effective **communication** with clients is critical, with particular emphasis on cultural competency, including both specific language access as well as general understanding of the cultural values and mores of clients.
- Appropriate **physical access** is important. Clients should be able to reach services through public transportation, and facilities should be accessible to individuals with disabilities.
- **Responsiveness** to client needs is fundamental. Clients should receive timely responses to requests, and they should be referred to quality services that are demonstrably effective.
- Clients should be offered more than emergency services; they should be connected to **preventive services** that promote self-sufficiency.
- Finally, **well-trained, knowledgeable staff** are key to effective service delivery.

Participants strongly believed that the system needed to be grounded in community-based values.

In the group's initial discussion, participants expressed a desire to develop the values included in the HSMP into more actionable standards for human service delivery in Howard County. For example, participants suggested that Howard County residents should be able to connect with an appropriate service provider within two phone calls, that no one in Howard County goes hungry, or that no Howard County resident sleeps outside in the cold.

It is difficult to build actionable, county-wide standards for human service delivery, however, since conditions vary so widely from one organization to another. For example, a large professionally staffed organization may have more capacity to respond to a client request than a smaller volunteer-run organization, so the larger organization would be better equipped to set a standard of returning all calls within 24 hours or providing cultural competency training to all staff.

It is difficult to build actionable, county-wide standards for human service delivery, since conditions vary from one organization to another.

It could be more practical for each organization to create its own specific service standards within the broader context of the county-wide values. An organization's adherence to external standards may also be influenced by the professional practice standards (e.g., social work, mental health) that are required for ethical and effective service delivery of the organization's programs.

User-Friendly Access to Services

Difficulty in accessing needed human services is a critical issue. It was highlighted in the focus groups, interviews, multiple participant discussions, as well as an interactive group exercise in which a rough diagram of the Howard County human services network was created. The diagram was characterized by a large number of organizations active in each particular service area (especially in crisis services), each with its own niche, priorities, and connections with other organizations.

Although the diagram was certainly not a comprehensive map of the network of Howard County services, it did provide a vivid visual representation of the challenges faced by clients in navigating its multiple entry points. Clients often begin with public schools, public agencies, or faith-based organizations in their search for assistance. If client needs cannot be completely met at this initial point of entry, the quality of referrals to other organizations is often inconsistent.

Many different organizations are involved in providing referrals, and informal—sometimes incomplete—networks have emerged among them. However, for clients, this “system” often appears opaque and confusing. Participants reported that this “patchwork” system creates situations where clients frequently must go to five or six different agencies to address one aspect of their crisis (e.g. energy assistance, eviction prevention, food). This is frustrating for clients, and generates inefficiency among service providers.

Members of foreign-born communities also have particular problems accessing the appropriate social services. Language and cultural barriers make it difficult for clients to understand and/or feel comfortable finding the services they need in an already confusing system. Participants reported that some organizations and institutions have participated in cultural competency training, and some have made operational changes to serve the foreign-born more effectively.

However, participants noted that more training, outreach, and relationship-building are needed in order to serve Howard County’s growing and diverse foreign-born communities.

Participants strongly believed that development of a universal application would significantly improve access. As envisioned by a participant working group, the universal application would enable clients to complete one form that is valid at multiple agencies, and would be used and shared by a wide range of County service providers. This would increase the service providers’ ability to determine a client’s eligibility for a more comprehensive array of needed services, and direct them to the appropriate assistance more effectively and efficiently.

This “patchwork” system creates situations where clients must go to five or six different agencies to address one aspect of their crisis.

Other participant ideas to improve access focused on outreach efforts such as:

- leveraging the 211 system more effectively
- enhancing the information and referral network within the County
- developing a mobile, van-based outreach program
- developing a “kiosk” system to provide information and referral centers throughout the County (in malls, libraries, social service locations)

Collaboration to Support Effectiveness and Efficiency

Participants shared information about their current collaborations at the start of the project. With some exceptions, most of these were less intensive, referral-type relationships—e.g., distributing brochures for other agencies, making referrals to other agencies, or sharing meeting space. The Initiative gave participants an opportunity to learn more about the programs at other organizations that could be helpful to their own clients, uncover new ways to work together to improve efficiency, expand resource development, and extend the reach of their mission to benefit their clients.

There was a general assumption that since Howard County is a small community, “most of us know each other,” and that working together was an established part of the nonprofit sector’s culture. In reality, many participants were not fully aware, or had incorrect impressions, of the services provided by other organizations.

The consultants provided training about best practices for different models of nonprofit collaboration along the continuum identified in the best practice research. For example,

- A nonprofit could **coordinate** by sharing information about geographic reach of programs, and designing programs to ensure that all areas are covered by one of the agencies without overlapping.
- A nonprofit could **cooperate** with another agency by co-locating services or sharing intake and referral information about individual clients to better meet their needs.

- **Collaboration** could occur if a nonprofit were to work together on a program with pooled resources, such as a ride-share program or sharing a bilingual staff member.
- A nonprofit could undertake a **joint venture** if both organizations decided to create a new, long-term, stand-alone program that includes pooled resources and shared revenue, such as launching a new clinic together.
- Three or more organizations could come together to form a **coalition** to advance a particular advocacy agenda.
- If two nonprofits decided that their separate organizations could function more effectively if permanently under a single entity, then a **merger**—the most intensive form of collaboration—could take place.

Participants examined their current organizational relationships to determine if there were ways to intensify the level of collaboration in order to have more impact. This prompted many new ideas around program development, public policy advocacy, public awareness, fundraising, and operations.

One of the later sessions included a “round robin” activity where participants met briefly one-on-one with each other, to find resources that they could share. This exercise created a wealth of ideas for potential collaborations among participating organizations, most of which would not have been as deep without the trust that was built during the Initiative.

Most frequent matches during the “round robin” were in cross-training of staff, expanded outreach, and volunteer recruitment. Other matches were donation of a computer, and one participant agreed to serve on the board of directors of another participating organization. Participants were enthusiastic about the value of pursuing these and other collaborations in the future as a way to manage economic stresses, leverage the reach of their mission, enhance staff and volunteer recruitment/retention, and create new resource opportunities.

Participants built relationships and trust by . . . being given “permission” to ask for help and think differently about relationships between organizations.

Participants built relationships and trust during the Initiative by meeting regularly, being invited to problem-solve in small groups, and being given “permission” to ask for help and think differently about relationships between organizations. This allowed participants to seek deeper collaborations on behalf of their organizations, and seek to address more complex systemic problems. By the end of the project, some significant collaborations emerged as a result of this relationship-building.

The importance of this learning was also reflected in the results of the final evaluation survey. Participants cited the ability to effectively network and feel connected to other colleagues as the “most important light bulb” moment, and most important project “take away.” It was the highest rated activity in the series of participant sessions.

Addressing Gaps and Barriers

The participants also brainstormed strategies to address the systemic gaps and barriers identified in the focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and their own experience. The ideas were concentrated in three major areas:

Quality: Joint staff training for basic human services orientation and specialized skills, cross-training to enhance understanding of the range of available services for low-income and foreign-born clients, shared cultural competency training and outreach to provide language assistance to human service providers and greater service access to previously under-served foreign-born communities.

Organizational Capacity: Partnering for grants, leveraging volunteers from faith organizations, joint advocacy, shared back-office functions (e.g. information technology, office support, finance), multi-tenant service centers.

Public Support: Joint public awareness campaign about the County's human service needs, developing a common county-wide website about available services, joint fundraising events.

After prioritizing the extensive brainstorming list, the participants moved into working groups over several sessions to advance the following ideas:

Universal Application: This working group aims to establish a common application form for use among a wide range of service providers. This will improve access to services by enabling clients to complete one form that is valid at multiple agencies, and will increase efficiency in the intake process for organizations. This group has committed to continuing to develop this idea after the completion of the Initiative.

Shared Back-Office: This working group is providing input to the Association of Community Services as it explores potential to provide back-office services in areas such as human resources, information technology, financial management, receptionist services, and other areas.

Joint Marketing and Outreach: This working group aims to develop joint marketing initiatives to educate the general public about needs in Howard County, as well as joint initiatives to outreach to individuals in need of services. This group would like to continue to develop the idea, but will need resources to put the ideas into action.

Summary of Core Elements of Service Delivery

The participants developed a wide range of ideas—some of them immediately actionable and others more long-term and systemic—that would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of

service delivery in Howard County through greater collaboration. Improving program quality with a set of underlying values, improving access through a universal application and joint marketing and outreach, and improving organizational capacity through shared back-office were direct responses to the main themes that emerged from the research and the participant sessions.

In addition, participants looked outside the scope of the nonprofit sector for other factors that impact low-income and foreign-born residents. They agreed with the findings of the focus groups that the most significant barriers faced by the low-income and foreign-born communities were lack of health care, adequate housing, and transportation. Participants noted that many nonprofits address these areas in small-scale ways, but these are systemic problems that go beyond the nonprofit sector's ability to solve without wider involvement from the community.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR HOWARD COUNTY

A Framework for Service Delivery

The mission of the Human Services Master Plan, to foster “a coordinated network of human services that identifies, anticipates, and addresses needs while enhancing the quality of life for all residents through collaborations and partnerships,” was advanced by this project. With research findings and input from stakeholders, a new framework for human services delivery is being developed in Howard County that is client centered, encourages collaboration to enhance effectiveness and efficiency, and is broadly supported by the public.

Client Centered

The HSMP stated that being person centered is one of the fundamental values guiding services in Howard County. The terms “client centered” and “person centered” are meant to be synonymous. In order to be client centered, services must be accessible, of high quality, holistic and coordinated, and meet the needs of the clients.

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Services Are Accessible: Accurate information about services is broadly available, in languages that are spoken by members of the community. Applying for services is a simple, one-time event. Bureaucratic processes are minimized, and applications at one agency are recognized and honored in other agencies. Services are located near public transportation, transportation is provided, or services are provided in the community. Facilities and transportation are accessible to individuals with disabilities. Services are provided in multiple languages and accommodations are provided if needed for individuals with disabilities.

Services Are High Quality: All individuals who interact with any part of the human service system are treated with dignity and respect at all times. Services are provided by

highly qualified staff or trained volunteers. Staff and volunteers are competent in working cross-culturally, and value the diverse backgrounds of their clients. Services are appropriate to the needs of the individual, rather than the needs/interests of the agency. Programs adhere to relevant practice standards that include regularly receiving and acting upon input from individuals served.

Services Are Holistic and Coordinated: Service providers assess and address needs as identified by the clients themselves and treat individuals as a “whole person.” When people are in need, their unique circumstances may include a range of different issues—such as needing housing and mental health services, or dealing with domestic violence issues and job loss—which require strong coordination among agencies to address in a seamless fashion. Services are integrated to ensure that when individuals access programs from multiple agencies, those agencies communicate regularly to ensure the individuals’ needs are met and unnecessary duplication is minimized.

Mix of Services that Meet Client Needs: Priority needs such as health care, food, housing, and transportation are addressed in the mix of services. Services include both short-term crisis intervention as well as long-term prevention and self-sufficiency programs. Service providers understand and respond to the range of services clients may need, not just the immediately presented issue. For example, clients seeking utility assistance may also be assessed for related needs such as rental assistance or job training. Services are available for different populations in need, including low-income, foreign-born, youth, seniors, individuals with disabilities and mental health needs, etc.

Effective and Efficient

The system of human service delivery should be effective in achieving results and efficient in its use of resources. It is important for all those involved in the system—government agencies, private funders, nonprofit organizations, and faith based organizations—to regularly share information and seek ways to maximize their efforts to serve foreign-born and low-income communities. Specific outcomes for programs are established and measured, and all agencies are accountable to their clients, funders, and the public for showing results and accounting for the funds invested in them.

No single agency or organization can work in isolation, given the interconnectedness of the community and the needs of individuals. There is regular support for collaborative efforts to enhance service delivery and/or increase organizational efficiency and effectiveness.

Capacity building (training, consulting, research, etc.) is provided for agencies and organizations that serve foreign-born and low-income communities. Capacity building is designed to promote

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best practices in organizational governance and management as well as best practices in service delivery.

Broad Public Support

The best human service delivery system is one that enjoys broad public support. Members of the community understand the needs of individuals in their community and are motivated to respond to those needs. Information is widely available in the community about ways to volunteer and contribute. Nonprofit organizations are able to achieve diverse and balanced revenue streams that include private donations, corporate support, foundation grants, earned income, and government grants and contracts. In this way, the investments of each are leveraged for the greatest possible impact.

Recommendations for Future Action

Achieving the client-centered, effective, efficient, and publicly supported framework of human service delivery envisioned in this Initiative is clearly a long-term endeavor. It will require resources, sustained effort, and the support of a broad group of stakeholders in order to be successful. The following are some practical, actionable steps that can be taken in Howard County to move ever closer to this framework.

Access to Services

- Periodically assess and address **barriers and obstacles to access** of services. Such assessments are helpful at the agency level as well as at the system level.
- Continue to support the Capacity Building Initiative’s working group effort to develop a **universal application** to make it easier for individuals to access available services.
- Identify **one central “point of information”** as the go-to source for Howard County services. Provide resources for its operation as well as incentives to organizations to regularly update information on program availability, eligibility, etc. so referrals are more effective. This information point could be made available/accessible in multiple locations.
- Support programs that expand **language accessibility** in individual agencies and across multiple organizations.
- Review **public transportation routes** and resources and identify areas for improvement in meeting needs of low-income residents. Develop/expand small-scale transportation programs such as ride-share, shared vans, etc.
- Replicate the successful **North Laurel-Savage Multiservice Center model** to other areas of the County in which residents have limited access to services.
- Continue to support the Initiative’s working group efforts to create a **joint marketing effort** that promotes the services available in the County.

Quality of Services

- Periodically assess and address the **quality and effectiveness of existing services**. Agency leaders may have impressions that “all is well” while those served may have a very different experience. Funders can have an impact by supporting program evaluation and design that includes input from individuals served.
- Support efforts to enhance **customer service, cultural competency, and disability awareness** to improve the quality of service delivery.
- Support nonprofit efforts to develop **joint staff training** on cross-cutting topics such as introduction of new staff to the human service sector, cultural competency, disability awareness, etc.
- Support initiatives to meet the **diverse needs of foreign-born residents**. Most organizations and even government agencies do not have the capacity to hire the bilingual staff they need to serve diverse populations. Sharing staff and contractual resources can help fill that gap.

Holistic and Coordinated

- Expand use of ServicePoint, Howard County’s **Homeless Management Information System**, to include a wider range of service providers and move to an “open” system. This would enable agencies to know what other services a client is receiving, and enhance the integration of service delivery.

Mix of Services to Meet Client Needs

- Conduct periodic needs assessments to determine if programs are appropriate to **changing circumstances and demographics** in the community, and address identified gaps in services.
- Begin to increase resources to existing organizations to expand **prevention and self-sufficiency** programs. This could lead to longer-term cost savings by helping people help themselves.
- Continue to provide **funding for crisis services** and expand where possible. Long waiting lists are preventing many who need services from receiving them, and sometimes only partial services are available. The impact of the economic downturn will mean that Howard County will need to continue and even increase its support for crisis services for the immediate future.
- Conduct detailed reviews of **key crisis service areas** such as eviction prevention, rental assistance and energy assistance to identify ways to make the process more efficient and client-centered.

Effectiveness and Efficiency

- Promote greater emphasis on **outcome measurement**. Again, funders can have an impact by including outcome measures in their reporting requirements.
- Build on strong foundation of community connections to establish deeper levels of **collaboration**. Facilitate dialogue among organizations with similar missions, or that serve similar populations, to explore specific areas of collaboration. Help coordinate collaborative activities by developing agendas and sending reminders/follow-ups to make it easier for organizations to find the time to follow-through. Finally, provide funding for well-developed collaborative projects that can help achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness through economies of scale.
- Provide targeted, coordinated **capacity-building opportunities** for organizations that exhibit a readiness to invest in their own development. This may include centralized activities such as convened training and networking events, research, or community engagement (such as the HSMP process), as well as individualized approaches such as consulting, coaching, and mentoring.
- Continue to pursue collaborative approaches to **back-office support** to enable economies of scale in areas such as human resources, finance, and information technology.
- Identify shared priorities among the **local funding community** and coordinate support for organizational capacity building and support stronger systems of service delivery. The research does caution that funders should not be the sole initiators of collaboration, as that can lead to shallow relationships that may ultimately fail. However, funders can help get collaboration started by presenting opportunities for organizations to convene and learn together. And, funders can support collaborations that grow out of genuine relationships between organizations based on clear sets of needs and goals.
- Seek other **funding sources** (e.g. BRAC, Stimulus, etc.) to support systemic improvements in human service delivery.
- Provide ongoing support to maintain the **connections among participating organizations** and perhaps bring in others to support cross-pollination of ideas. Consider repeating the Initiative with a new cohort of participants that focus on other HSMP priorities. Encourage connections and convene human service providers and the faith community.

Public Support for Human Services

- Continue and support the Initiative's working group effort to raise **public awareness** about the needs in Howard County and opportunities to donate or volunteer.
- Support initiatives that foster **public support for investments** in human services, such as health, housing, transportation and other services needed to meet the needs of

low-income and foreign-born residents. This may include an annual “State of the Community” report, public service announcements, and other campaign activities.

- Utilize existing governmental, nonprofit and private communication channels to **highlight communities in need** and how to help.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Howard County is an affluent community with a high level of resources. Still, the needs are growing, especially for low-income and foreign-born residents. In response to these growing needs, the Department of Citizen Services created this Capacity Building Initiative to explore new ways of delivering services more broadly, more effectively and more efficiently.

This Initiative focused on four major areas of concern: access, quality, coordination of service delivery, and organizational capacity. It identified shared community values, user-friendly access to services, and collaboration as core elements of effective service delivery. The client-centered focus that is emerging from this project provides a valuable framework for meeting the needs of individuals and families in the County.

Actionable strategies to improve access, quality, effectiveness, and efficiency have been highlighted. The most evident area for strengthening the network of services is helping organizations work together more collaboratively. Howard County’s history of collegial relationships makes it fertile ground for deep and broad collaborations. This Initiative laid critical groundwork for even stronger collaborations to better serve the community for the long-term, but continued leadership and resources are needed.

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It is important for all involved in human services to see themselves as part of a *system* and not just as individual actors. At the same time, capacity building support for individual organizations is equally critical to ensure that they are able to achieve high impact with available resources. Ongoing support for the initiatives identified through this project—in the form of facilitation, coordination and funding—will help ensure these efforts have an opportunity to bear fruit.

With strong support from County Executive Ken Ulman and other elected officials, Howard County is investing in human services as a critical part of its vision for the future of Howard County. Through the HSMP, this Capacity Building Initiative and a range of other efforts, Howard County is forging a new path to achieve a highly effective human service delivery system that values and maintains the client at its center.

About the Howard County Department of Citizen Services

The Department of Citizen Services serves as the human service agency for Howard County government, focusing on the lives of children, youth and their families, persons with disabilities, consumers with complaints about businesses, individuals in crisis, and older adults. Citizen Services works closely with the nonprofit sector in Howard County to support its mission of enhancing the quality of life for all residents by ensuring that Howard County has a comprehensive system of human services that is accessible, responsive, and effective. It also administers County government's funding to local nonprofit human services providers. For more information about the Department, go to www.howardcountymd.gov/CitizenServices/.

About the Project Consultants

Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations

Maryland Nonprofits' mission is to strengthen and support nonprofits' ability to serve the public, while promoting the highest standards of ethics and accountability in nonprofit governance and management. For more information: www.marylandnonprofits.org.

Mosaica: The Center for Nonprofit Development and Pluralism

Mosaica is a values-based multicultural nonprofit organization that helps nonprofit organizations through training, individual consultation, and evaluation. For more information: www.mosaica.org.

This report can be downloaded from:
www.howardcountymd.gov/CitizenServices/

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This report is available in alternative formats.