



EPISODE 2:

Bridging Across Barriers: The Mother of States

[Abby Hanks]

There's no way that we can provide all of the training that is needed for our agencies and there's no way that Eric's small team could do that either. So we work very closely together just to ensure that we're providing the best possible customer service to our agencies and to help support them to be successful across the state, I mean, we're only as strong as each other.

[Narrator]

This is CAPLAWCast. A podcast hosted by Community Action Program Legal Services. In this episode of our Bridging Across Barriers series, we explore the Mother of States, Virginia, and the state CSBG office and state association relationship there. You just heard Abby Hanks, the CSBG Program Manager for Virginia's Office of Economic Development, mention some key elements that guide the relationship: collaboration; customer service to CAAs; support; collective strength. Strong sentiments, and ones shared by Erik Johnston, the executive director of the Virginia Association of Community Action Partnerships, or VACAP.

[Erik Johnston]

We need each other. And both of our organizations are very responsive to the community action agencies and kind of what their interests are. So we really do also work a lot together, not just on the CSBG resources, which are so critical, but on making sure that all the resources that pair well with it or with partners that could pair well with it, that we work together to help agencies secure those.

[Narrator]

Abby, Erik, and the Director of Virginia's Office of Economic Development, Matt Fitzgerald, who we'll hear from later, will help us understand the interdependent relationship that exists between the state CSBG office, state association, and CAAs in Virginia. Together, we'll see how key approaches, including proactive engagement, customized assistance, and flexibility, have helped Virginia CAAs meet challenges and boost capacity.

Many aspire to get along and work better with one another. But in the Mother of States, collaboration is necessary for a community action network with such diversity to survive. The state CSBG office has 5 staff members. VACAP employs 3 full-time staff along with 3 part-time contractors. These are small teams charged with serving a big state with a diverse array of 31 CAAs. 22 are private nonprofit organizations and 6 are public agencies. An additional 3 are statewide CAAs. Budgets range from 1.5 million to 40 million dollars. Some are located in urban and suburban areas, others extremely rural. And they serve anywhere from one to 10 plus localities.

As you might expect, CAAs here have different needs that the state CSBG office and VACAP serve. To do so, they believe efforts must involve all stakeholders in the network: one another as well as Virginia's CAAs and state government agencies. Here's Erik on how proactive VACAP and the state CSBG office are about building their relationship:

[Erik]

We get together through the RPIC calls. And then sometimes, you know, debrief or chat check in before those and then we both schedule ad hoc as needed with the three of us. But then also, one thing that I think has been so valuable is we've been intentional about scheduling time together in person with all of our teams, right, and like getting to know each other

better, getting to have those one off conversations, and especially if a hot topic pops up, try to schedule a zoom quick to go through things.

[Narrator]

Proactive outreach and regular communication characterize the state office's approach with each CAA as well. Here's Abby.

[Abby]

We are doing every other month meetings with each agency across the state. So we're building that relationship and building that trust to be able to know what issues and concerns are facing an agency in real time. We're meeting with an agency for 30 minutes, 45 minutes, every other month. It's a really great opportunity for us to connect with them to not only hear the issues and challenges they're facing, but also hear the really good work that they're doing in the community. I would say it's one of the most important things that we do as a state office is having those every other month calls with every agency.

[Erik]

They've built a lot of trust ... in terms of being proactive and being at people's board meetings, scheduling meetings out in the regions. And they're known for being not a gotcha kind of agency, but like, let's help. There's the trust that when someone's having a challenge, that they're not afraid to pick up the phone and call us at the State Association and the state office to bring us in.

[Narrator]

The state CSBG office also proactively facilitates relationships at the state level between VACAP, CAAs, and other state agencies when it identifies potential areas where interest and future services may converge. Here's Matt Fitzgerald at the state CSBG office.

[Matt Fitzgerald]

We serve on a number of workgroups and committees with other state agencies, we do a ton of work around presenting at conferences with others. We serve on review teams, basically taking every opportunity we can to talk about the work of community action, so that everybody knows about the possibilities, but also, so that when opportunities are out there, and other state agencies, they think about community action as an avenue for them to get the things done that they want to get done. So it's partially advocacy, it's partially training, partially just being present, you know, especially at the conversation around kind of conferences and things like that.

[Narrator]

While the state CSBG office speaks with its colleagues in state government about community action and potential opportunities for coordination, it also coordinates with VACAP to build those linkages and ensure that it's not just the state CSBG office having those conversations. Erik and Matt explain.

[Erik]

We also have a quarterly call as an association with the commissioner of Department of Social Services. So the commissioner regularly gets updates and we partner and many times, Matt and Abby are in those are helping us get ready for those meetings. And we try to have similar types of meetings with other state agencies' leadership to work through hearing about their priorities and how we can help partner.

[Matt]

Community action is a part of our agency, in the strategic plan in the regular monthly meetings that we have with local departments of social services. Whenever we have something that a state agency or someone in the administration wants to know, VACAP and the network come together to present, they'll go to meetings for us. And like right now workforce is a huge item specifically for this administration, and VACAP and the network have spoken about workforce and make sure that the information about what community action is doing is out there for the administration. So that's how the network helps us to tell that story as well.

[Narrator]

Regular, proactive conversations form the foundation of the relationship between the state CSBG office, VACAP, and Virginia CAAs. While the communications involve consistent and regular outreach and commitment between the stakeholders across the state, the assistance that the state CSBG office provides to CAAs is often individualized. Think about it, in such a diverse network, needs related to training and technical assistance, as well as the state's expectations and feedback on capacity building, aren't often one-size fits all.

[Abby]

Our approach does remain the same, but our support and guidance might differ that we give to those agencies. So you know, an agency that is small with very minimal capacity, they might not get the same best practice information as one of our larger agencies who have a very different staffing situation. So I would say that's how we customize it. We might customize the type of feedback or advice that we give based on the agency's size or location.

We've found that a lot of agencies thrive when they're getting customized training specifically for them, versus a standard webinar that 50 people can join into. What I've heard a lot of is, oh, well, I sat on a webinar, and I learned that but I didn't make the connection to how it connected to my agency until we had this one-on-one conversation about how it could work here at this agency. So I think we've really done a lot over the past two to three years on doing more individualized technical assistance. We've done one on one meetings with all of our Roma implementers, just to learn what challenges they might be having, and how we can best support them. We did 90-minute meetings with every single agency on their community action plans, and we went in depth to their full community action plans, and helped them understand things that they might have not been tracking before that they maybe should have been tracking.

[Narrator]

Ongoing communication leads to better understanding, which helps the state CSBG office and VACAP anticipate challenges. This has been particularly helpful in addressing leadership turnover at VACAP and Virginia CAAs. Indeed, Erik credits his own smooth transition to executive director of VACAP a little over a year ago to this effective communication.

[Erik]

It was invaluable. I mean, Matt and Abby shared so many important details, and just having coffee and learning from them, all the opportunities and challenges and being, you know, frank about that. And then we also work together on the annual training, technical assistance needs assessment and work on that plan, and learning from the network about what they need and talk regularly. Matt and Abby come to VACAP's training and innovations committee meetings, which are where we set our calendar for in person, but also our virtual and collaborative meetings. There's a ton I mean, Matt and Abby see, and I see each other in meetings nearly every day, whether it's with the network or with other partners.

[Matt]

So we developed a manual, basically an introduction manual that goes through a lot of the information you might want to receive as a leader just coming into the network. And it starts with like an introduction letter. And then we sit down and do like an orientation with each ED. And talk about what they can expect from the overall relationship with our office and the network and why we are such important partners. So we kind of weave in the expectation from the very beginning that we will have that relationship with VACAP, that that is, it's important to us that we know that them as members, they're going to participate in that and help VACAP to have that relationship with us.

[Narrator]

Roughly half of the state's CAAs have experienced turnover of their executive director in the last three years. The state CSBG office and VACAP have worked together to provide Virginia CAAs with essential support in this area. New leaders receive a welcoming introduction to the Virginia community action network, as well as an understanding of the partnership between the state office, VACAP, and the CAAs. VACAP and the state office then communicate to identify opportunities for ongoing support of new leaders.

[Matt]

So there was a new ED basically cohort that was created with VACAP and with National Community Action Partnership, to work with those EDs. They met regularly and had these cohort meetings where they talked about all the things that they could expect with other seasoned EDs, there to present with them and talk about challenges they've had at their specific agency. So that specific training coordination happened between us and the state association because we both recognized that that was a need. And the best possible way to meet it was not training by our office or something specific, it was like having the network work together to come up with a solution. And that was led by the Board Chair of VACAP, who is an ED as well, who came up with that idea and, and insisted that was something that was needed.

[Narrator]

The state CSBG office and VACAP collaborate to boost network capacity and train and orient new leaders in the network. Together, they have also collaborated around innovative ways to reach and provide training to CAA staff. According to Abby.

[Abby]

We have a learning management system that is fairly new, we started about two years ago. And that's in collaboration with VACAP as well. So VACAP helps provide the funding for this learning management system. And our office kind of, we do the content for it along with VACAP, you know, all of our trainings that we either VACAP would provide or we would provide, they're able to be recorded, we can record them and store them on our Learning Management site. We also have the ability to add resources to that site as well. So all of our agency's staff, board members can access this Learning Management site to be able to go back and watch different trainings. So we have a needs assessment series, a strategic planning series. So all of these trainings were identified through that joint training and TA survey that we do annually. And VACAP can also provide us with information that they want on there as well. So it's a collaborative effort for that learning management systems.

[Narrator]

An exciting new system that offers CAA staff and boards informed and responsive training and resources to learn from. And another example of the state office and VACAP working together to find different ways to provide CAAs in the state with the best possible information and service, wherever that may lead. A commitment further emphasized by Abby

[Abby]

We've worked with Eric's team, if there's a specific, you know, we're working on a fiscal project right now, if there are specific fiscal questions, we have one about cost allocation. So you know, we might be able to provide the first line of defense per se, but if there's something that's more technical needed, then we'll reach out to a partner. We try as best as we can to provide the support that we can, but you know, we're not experts in all things CSBG. So we definitely have to work outside for some of the specific questions.

[Narrator]

Being proactive and communicative, understanding individual agency needs. These go a long way in growing relationships that help meet challenges faced by community action and grow the network in Virginia. But the network relationships also capitalize on a key, unique feature of CSBG: its inherent flexibility, which allows for creativity in problem solving and service.

[Matt]

One of the things that I think is interesting community action has kind of a phrase of maximum feasible participation. So you want the folks that participate in the program to also be a participant in governance and all the different ways with the, the work in the communities. So I think of terms like maximum feasible deference, which is the program itself intentionally gives flexibility, and it's written in, so that there can be ways that you can work differently. So you have to kind of protect that flexibility in the way that you interpret the program. Because you're not meeting the true intent of the program, if you don't look at that flexibility.

[Narrator]

CSBG is flexible. As a state agency administering CSBG funding and monitoring rules related to it, sometimes the balance can be difficult to strike between flexibility and oversight.

[Matt]

I think you have to factor in that most people in state government, they're used to the traditional grant funding management mindset. So there's a lot of work that has to be done on creating an understanding of what community action is, and what the importance of the network is, and local control and all those things, both at your team level, in our office, generally, our whole agency so that we can present that when we talk out to other folks. One of the things that we look at most is kind of the intent of the program, and what agencies are trying to do. So, you know, there's a whole bunch of specific things in the organizational standards that an agency is supposed to do that we monitor on and check. So some of those things are more important than others in a way. We would give a lot of flexibility to the concept that your needs assessment should include a whole lot of qualitative and quantitative information, we wouldn't sit to, like, assess specifically whether this one thing is, you know, great information or not, it's more like the process was the intent met that you really carried out the work in the way that you're supposed to, with as much possible participation from the clients that you serve. Whether it works or not, is less important to me, you know, we want it to but if you're actually doing the things to try your best to make it work, then that's the kind of flexibility I would say.

[Erik]

I just wanted to add on the flexibility side, the other thing is that we talk in Virginia, the thing that centers us is also the whole family approach, our network has fully gotten behind that outcome based, you know, moving away from program by program, to how much are we in whole impacting breaking the cycle of poverty and walking alongside families about their goals for economic mobility, and have they achieved those.

[Narrator]

In Virginia, VACAP and the state CSBG office focus on collaboration and connection. With one another, with state agencies, with CAAs. Together, this approach provides essential insights that all in the network benefit from, and customized assistance to meet specific challenges across a diverse network. And there's more to come from community action in the Mother of States as it seeks to fulfill the mission of community action.

[Erik]

What I'm excited about is this partnership we have with our state office and our state government, and our localities and community action to say, could we be different? Could we try to re-energize that flame, that community action started in terms of saying that we could work to end poverty? And we could do that through being really aggressive about finding different types of solutions that could really break the cycle of poverty. Our vision is really to keep building and keep building partnerships and not worry about who takes the credit because it's not just community action that's going to work to end poverty, it's going to be us and a lot of other people.

[Narrator]

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