

CASE STUDY: ORGANIZE

NEW ROUTES TO COMMUNITY HEALTH/ ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION AND BENTON FOUNDATION

The story begins in 1996, when the Benton Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation got together to create Sound Partners in Community Health. Robert Wood Johnson’s communications department funded the initiative, while Benton managed it. Benton brought considerable expertise in media and communications to the project, said Benton’s program liaison Karen Menichelli, and “wanted to learn about the use of community media.” For ten years, Sound Partners projects in cities around the country enabled community organizations to collaborate with public broadcasters to raise awareness of health issues. “In the early days, it was little more than public service announcements, with aggressive outreach,” explained Menichelli. “Over time, it became much more tune-in kinds of programming — talk shows, telenovelas [Spanish-language soap operas], and so on.”

As the program’s end approached, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation expressed an interest in extending the project, but with a twist. Focus groups had revealed that immigrants craved health information to help them thrive in their new communities. Mainstream media weren’t meeting their needs, culturally or linguistically. And so, Sound Partners morphed into New Routes to Community Health, this time funded through RWJF’s vulnerable populations program. A national program office, with a small staff and support from design and technical consultants, was established to manage the initiative and regrant funds to collaboratives around the country. In 2007, eight sites were awarded three years of funding and technical assistance, including webinars, grantee conferences, and more. At each site, media is being created by and for immigrants on health issues that participants themselves identify as important. The goal is to build authentic community leadership and collaboration, resulting in healthier, more informed and empowered immigrant communities.

New Routes learned from its previous incarnation in several important ways. Instead of just focusing on public broadcasting, said Menichelli, “We wanted to open it up to the whole range of media that’s burgeoning now locally. The web, digital storytelling, community radio, commercial and in-language media that are popping up all around the country.” She added that it was important for there to be “authentic partnerships of equals — that it wasn’t just media determining the content too early, and it wasn’t nonprofits and health groups purely in it for some PR.” Each project included an immigrant

organization to link to the target communities, a media organization to provide an outlet and technical expertise, and a high-capacity community organization to act as managing partner. The intent was to form new partnerships that would outlast the funding and demonstrate the value of working together.

“When people say community media, they often mean the local news. But for this project, community media means participatory media,” said Menichelli. In Chicago’s “Salud” program, Latino youth are trained in media production, create stage and radio productions on community health issues, and get audiences involved in discussion. In the Twin Cities, a collaboration called “Egal Shidad” — composed of a Somali community organization, a health organization, a community radio station, and a video network — has produced an hour-long television program on mental health issues among Somali immigrants, featuring a trickster character from Somali folklore. The initiative is using a “participatory research” model to evaluate outcomes, with each site defining its own objectives and indicators. In Chicago, for example, a sign of success was that participating youth from the 2008 “Salud” production assumed leadership roles for the 2009 season.

RWJF and Benton are interested in slightly different but overlapping evaluative measures. Benton, because of its concern with media, is looking at elements of the program model that foster leadership and collaboration and could be applied to other issues. “We asked the sites to look at evaluation not as a strict scientific process, but as what impact they’re having on two levels — leadership development and community building,” Menichelli explained. RWJF is more interested in the impact of social factors, such as employment or violence, on health. They agree, however, that it’s as important to measure process as it is to measure outcomes. “That’s how you get community buy-in,” said Beth Mastin, who directs the national office. “New Routes is really a meta-communications project — a communications project to cultivate other communications projects, one that allows immigrants to start taking leadership in defining health care issues in their community and working toward solving some of those concerns, using media as a tool.”

Videos and other media produced by New Routes partnerships are available at www.newroutes.org.