

# Countywide Cooperation

*In Dakota County, city and county governments had worked together for years, but in 2003, local government leaders thought they could all benefit from more collaboration. Through a methodical approach, they implemented partnerships that have yielded more efficient services while maintaining high quality.*

By Mary Hamann-Roland

**W**ith the energy and foreclosure crises, and a general slow-down in the economy, cities are looking for ways to provide quality services more efficiently. One promising strategy that can yield substantial long-term results is to form partnerships in service delivery with neighboring cities.

Local government leaders in Dakota County realized the potential of such a strategy when they created the Dakota County High Performance Partnerships (HiPP) Project. This initiative allows participating local government entities to look for partnership opportunities on an ongoing basis.

## Taking cooperation further

The county and 12 city governments of Dakota County had a strong history of working together. They had monthly meetings of mayors and managers, and had entered into a variety of joint powers efforts over the years. The HiPP Project built on this foundation. In the fall of 2003, city and county leaders began discussing opportunities for greater collaboration as a means of increasing efficient and effective service delivery. The member cities wanted to explore opportunities for local governments to partner in ways that would improve the quality of services delivered to citizens while also offering those services in a more cost-effective manner.

In January 2004, the Dakota County Board of Commissioners approved the HiPP Project to analyze potential partnerships and identify those with the highest potential for success. The county involvement in HiPP was key to the success of this project. Counties are often

involved in the same service areas and, thus, can be an important financial partner. They also bring experience that can be helpful in discussions and planning.

## Establishing parameters

The first step in the HiPP process was to identify areas in which collaboration might be of interest. Proper framing of the initial discussion was critical. The parties avoided debating the analysis of specific service challenges and, instead, focused on identifying opportunities for providing services in a broader context and building consent and commitment among the stakeholders. The HiPP Steering Committee established the following ground rules to allow the participants to examine all reasonable opportunities:

- Identify three to five partnerships that offer the best opportunities for success. The group was not charged with providing a definitive analysis (e.g., cost/benefit analysis, feasibility study, implementation plan) for the partnership opportunities, but only with providing an assessment of opportunities that could be further evaluated for implementation.
- Focus primarily on those services for which the responsibility and accountability clearly rests with city and county governments, rather than services that were optional or that involved other levels of government.
- Consider any of the various types of formal relationships available to participating local jurisdictions under *Minnesota Statutes*.
- Consider recommendations that establish relationships along a wide spectrum of public sector partnership,

from less intensive to more intensive participation.

- Recommend collaborative service delivery ideas that could serve as models applicable to the majority of local governments operating within Dakota County.

## Gathering information

As participants embarked on the HiPP Project, they realized that it is important to conduct thorough research and think beyond their own borders. The International City/County Management Association is a great asset for providing global research on public policy models. Learning and building from others' successes is often a much faster solution than attempting to invent a solution from scratch.

The HiPP research started with getting input from elected officials, staff, and citizens to determine the partnership areas that would be most applicable and beneficial. They used a variety of tools to do this, including:

- Electronic and printed surveys. About 300 citizens, local government employees, and elected officials provided input and ideas this way.
- A series of workshops and discussions with city and county elected officials and senior administrators.
- A citizen's forum of more than 80 county residents. Participants used electronic voting technology to help the group prioritize partnerships.
- Focus group discussions involving 60 residents to further establish priorities.

This research strategy identified 20 specific opportunities for potential collaboration. (For more about results of research, see the sidebar on page 9.)

## Setting priorities

The next step was to narrow this list of potential partnerships to focus on the highest priorities with the greatest potential to benefit all of the jurisdictions. The HiPP Steering Committee hired a consultant for \$25,000 to facilitate data collection and analysis, conduct a best practices review, and develop a decision model to identify priority opportunities.

The group developed a key decision-making tool, or “scorecard,” against which to rate and rank each of the 20 potential partnerships. This helped local elected officials and senior administrators identify the highest priority initiatives to pursue immediately. The scorecard was predicated on two indicators of effectiveness (magnitude and likelihood of success), each of which incorporates five specific criteria. The indicators and criteria are:

- **Indicator 1.** What is the nature and the magnitude of the potential success? If cost savings are anticipated, for example, how significant are they? If the quality of service is expected to improve, how substantial is the potential improvement? The five criteria of Indicator 1:
  1. **Quality of service.** To what degree will the collaboration result in a significant improvement in the quality and effectiveness of the services provided?
  2. **Cost of service.** To what degree will the partnership result in a positive impact to the cost of the service?
  3. **Inability of individual entities to provide the service alone.** Is there an emerging issue that is regional in scope? Is it impossible or unlikely for any one jurisdiction to be able to cope with such as issue? Do state or federal laws mandate a regional or sub-regional approach?
  4. **Transferability.** Do many different local units of government have the opportunity to benefit from the collaborative service approach?
  5. **Qualitative advantages.** Are there other, “softer” advantages that may result in additional “harder” advantages later on?
- **Indicator 2.** What is the likelihood of achieving success? Is the project easy or difficult to manage? Does the partnership require a large commitment of resources up front? Is the collaboration likely to have the support

of citizens and other stakeholders? How high are the barriers to success? The five criteria of Indicator 2:

1. **Short-term manageability/ease of implementation.** How complex is this effort? How difficult will it be to launch a new, collaborative approach to this service?
2. **Longer-term manageability issues.** What, if any, longer-term management issues are there?
3. **Political feasibility and support—citizens.** What are citizens’ preferences? Is there a reason to believe that citizens will support this particular effort?
4. **Political feasibility and support—government officials and staff.** What are the preferences of local elected officials and employees throughout the ranks of local government? How much support and/or opposition to a given partnership may be reasonably foreseen?
5. **Measurement.** Can the outcomes be accurately measured? How difficult is it to measure results in this area? Will the participants know whether they have been successful?

The 10 criteria were assigned a weight ranging from 2.5 percent to 17.5 percent of the total, and each of the 20 potential partnership opportunities were assigned a letter grade (A through F) on each of the criterion. The weights in the model can be adjusted to reflect local leaders’ assessment of the relative importance of each of the criterion.

## The resulting partnerships

This model allowed local elected officials and senior managers to shrink the 20 potential projects into six highest priority projects for immediate action. It also provided a rationale for the actions taken, which helped to withstand criticism of interest groups, a factor that often has derailed collaborative initiatives in the past.

- The six priority projects were:
- Establish a centralized Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP);
  - Create a law enforcement support center;
  - Share specialized public safety equipment;
  - Establish joint non-felony prosecution services;
  - Combine information technology operations, training, and purchasing; and
  - Jointly purchase employee health care benefits.

The flagship success story of HiPP was the consolidation of the six PSAPs (911 call dispatch centers) in Dakota County into a single Dakota Communications Center. The operating cost of the joint dispatch center is projected to save millions of dollars over the long term, compared with the total annual operating cost for the six individual PSAPs. Additional successful partnerships have been formed involving employee health care, fiber optic networks, pandemic flu planning, and sustainability.

Guided by a steering committee of elected and senior staff officials, HiPP has become a continuing intergovernmental initiative. The boundaries of ordinary government have been erased in areas where controversy had previously prevented agreement. The group continues to explore opportunities identified in the initial study, as well as emerging opportunities. As budget pressures continue to mount, the cities in Dakota County are well positioned to explore cooperative solutions that provide superior services while reducing the cost to its citizens.

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## CITIZENS SUPPORT LOCAL GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

The research done as part of the Dakota County High Performance Partnerships Project revealed that citizens expect local governments to partner and were surprised at the number of autonomous service delivery systems in the county. Citizens expect their local units of government to seek to enhance service delivery while reducing the cost of services. In a survey, citizens were asked whether their local unit of government was doing the right amount of partnering with other local governments to deliver services, should do more partnering, or should do less partnering. Fifty-five percent responded that their local unit of government should do more partnering, while only 7 percent said that their local government should do less.