

A State Organizational Patterns and Programs Coordination Survey Project

In the Fall of 2004, The Community Action Association of Pennsylvania (CAAP) with the assistance of NASCSP released “*A State Organizational Patterns and Programs Coordination Survey.*” The report is the result of a grant funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services to CAAP to research the placement of the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) office within state government. CSBG is a federal, anti-poverty block grant that funds the operations of a state-administered network of local agencies, Community Action Agencies (CAAs). In conducting this research, CAAP, with assistance from NASCSP, designed a survey instrument to collect data related to the effectiveness and the location of the CSBG office.

This research attempts to determine whether the location of the office has an impact on the ability of state administrators to form effective working partnerships at the state and local level. Survey responses were collected from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, state associations and a sample of community action agencies (CAAs).

The report analyzes responses to the survey in terms of the location of the state office. Findings indicate that while there is no one ideal locale for a CSBG office within state government, many would prefer to be located in the governor’s office. In actuality there are only a couple states with CSBG offices located within the governor’s office. Therefore it is difficult to report on the effectiveness of placing the CSBG office within that location. This leads to the conclusion that the effectiveness of an office is reliant upon the abilities of the CSBG office staff.

The results also indicate significant national trends regarding budgetary issues, the downsizing of state government, and early retirement. In addition, responses identified the strengths and opportunities for advancement in areas such as collaborating, advocating within state government, advocating to state legislature, advocating with other parties, providing assistance in developing private partnerships, and providing quality training and technical assistance. Findings show that all network partners perceive that there is a strong relationship between CAAs and the state office.

In dealing with the challenges noted above, what does this survey tell us?

FIRST OF ALL, THERE IS NO IDEAL LOCATION FOR A STATE CSBG OFFICE. Nearly all respondents recognized that a location that works in one state may not work in another state, and that the fact that a location is satisfactory today does not mean that a change in state administration or in state office personnel would not make the same location less workable in the future.

THERE IS NO WIDESPREAD INITIATIVE TO MOVE STATE CSBG OFFICES. Although individual respondents suggested some alternative locations that might prove advantageous to the CAA network, few urged that immediate action be taken to move the state office.

A BLOCK GRANT IS A BLOCK GRANT IS A BLOCK GRANT. The strongest comments made in response to survey questions were those made regarding the role of the federal government in

determining the location of state offices. Most respondents were opposed to such a federal role, many were strongly opposed. Any move to increase the federal role in determining the location of state CSBG offices would likely be widely and strongly opposed.

CAAS AND STATE OFFICES SEEM TO SHARE A STRONG, POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP. Many of the comments by CAA staff included praise for state office personnel and indicated a respect for the state offices to function effectively in spite of a lack of resources and/or political constraints. This relationship should be viewed as a strength by the CAA network and should serve as a foundation for future collaborative efforts.

STATE OFFICES ARE BELIEVED TO PROVIDE QUALITY T&TA. Although the survey did not gather specific information about individual training sessions or areas of expertise, state offices received consistently high ratings in this area. Because of this high rating, NASCSP and other partner organizations should further investigate the potential for state offices to provide a platform for quality training and technical assistance.

STATE OFFICES ARE NOT SEEN AS BEING HIGHLY EFFECTIVE IN ASSISTING CAAS TO DEVELOP PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS. State CSBG offices and NASCSP should develop strategies to strengthen state offices in this area. By working in conjunction with CAAs and state associations, NASCSP could develop a “toolkit” of best practices for state offices to use in assisting CAAs to develop partnerships. Such a toolkit could be disseminated to state offices through conferences, workshops, CSBG orientation sessions, etc.

THE RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF A STATE OFFICE IS HIGHLY DEPENDENT ON THE ABILITY OF STATE OFFICE STAFF. Although this may seem to be an overly obvious conclusion to make, it is important to recognize this important factor. Many respondents commented on the critical role played by skilled and experienced state staff in helping CAAs achieve their goals. NASCSP should continue to invest time, energy and other resources into efforts to orient and train state CSBG staff. Given the challenges ahead, such an investment will likely become even more important in the future.

To view the report in full, please visit the NASCSP website at www.nascsp.org and click on the “What’s New” section.