



RESILIENCY RESOLVE RESULTS



FFE Collaboration
Handbook





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Resolve. Resiliency. Results. There is no better way to capture the relationships that formed to become the Families First Edmonton partnership. A meeting in Tim Hortons with a member of a citizen group (i.e., Quality of Life Commission) grew into a partnership involving 16 organizations that worked together over 15 years to create the conditions for improving the lives of families who live in poverty.

This handbook shares the joys and setbacks involved in partnership work and attests to how much we learned from each other. I deeply and sincerely thank the FFE partnership members for their talent, skills, commitment and kindness. And I especially thank them for their courage in identifying the causes of marginalization and mobilizing against systems of inequity. Given our professional lives, this was a risky endeavour. Yet our determination to focus on how our systems create inequity grew deep within us and created the bond that holds us together today.

This handbook is dedicated to all of the members from government, community and university who came together to form the FFE partnership. In particular, it is dedicated to Sanchia Lo, who led our partnership study for 12 years and ensured we learned from our successes, but also from our differences.

I am forever grateful.

Maria



The contributors to this handbook include: Sanchia Lo, along with Daley Laing, Lesley Pullishy, and Katie MacDonald.

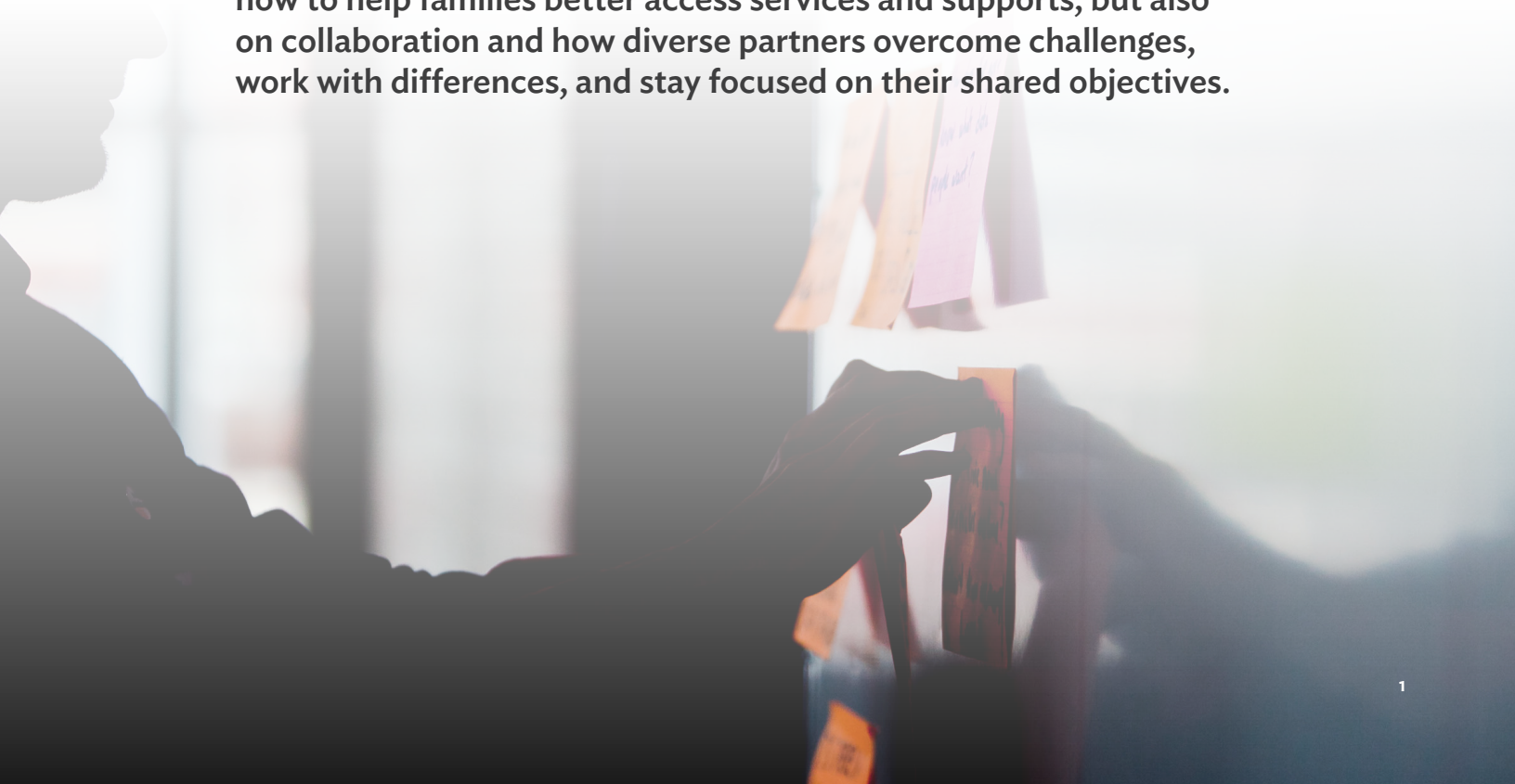
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RESOLVE Partnership Formation

Any large undertaking demands a certain degree of commitment and resolve in order to see ideas transformed into tangible projects or initiatives. Without resolve, nothing is attempted. Families First Edmonton (FFE) is a testament to what resolve can make possible. FFE brought together 16 different partners from the community, government, and university sectors in a ground-breaking research project to explore ways to improve the lives of low-income families. Their resolve and their shared commitment to understanding the realities of low-income families is what drove the creation of the FFE partnership, a partnership that predated and gave rise to the FFE randomized controlled trial project. Over the span of fourteen years (2000 – 2013), the FFE partnership illustrated the importance of resolve in forming and maintaining a successful partnership that was united by a common goal. In the end, FFE would not only offer valuable information on the struggles low-income families face and how to help families better access services and supports, but also on collaboration and how diverse partners overcome challenges, work with differences, and stay focused on their shared objectives.



Developing The Project

Long before the Families First Edmonton (FFE) randomized controlled trial project officially launched in 2005, the FFE partnership began with the goal of finding a way to improve the lives of low-income Alberta families. Many of the original partnership members were brought together by the Alberta Quality of Life Council Commission's 2000 report *Listen to the Children*. The report's eight recommendations inspired a group of individuals, led by the City of Edmonton, with an interest in child poverty to come together and create an action plan. Initial discussions were inspired by a research project in Ontario, led by Dr. Gina Browne, that had shown that providing proactive access to health, recreation, and other supports made a difference in the lives of children from low-income families¹.

Over a five-year project development period (2000 – 2005), the FFE partnership made three critical decisions. The first was to conduct a randomized controlled trial (RCT) project; partners felt that an RCT design would provide more detail and stronger evidence than other project options (e.g., program evaluation). The FFE RCT was designed to examine the comparative effects on families of three service-delivery interventions (described below) as compared to a control group.

Families were randomly assigned to one of four interventions:

Recreation – where families continued to receive the services they were already accessing and FFE workers linked children to recreation activities.

Family Healthy Lifestyles – where families continued to receive the services they were already accessing and FFE workers helped with problem solving and linking them to health and social services, and childcare options.

Comprehensive – where families continued to receive the services they were already accessing and FFE workers linked them to the services mentioned in the first two interventions.

Self-directed – where families continued to receive only the services they were already accessing.

The second decision was that, not only would the research follow an RCT design, but that it would be guided by the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR). In other words, the researchers were not going to go off, collect data, and report back when the results were ready.

Instead, all FFE partners were expected to contribute expertise and share decision-making and ownership of the project. They were expected to recognize and respect individual partners' expertise, experience, and approaches, and work from the principles of equity, participation, and shared power over the research process. For this reason, the selection of partner organizations was of critical importance, as each had to support and be comfortable with the CBPR approach to research. See Forming the Partnership on page 4.

Finally, the third critical decision made by the newly forming FFE partnership was to study themselves. Partners knew that a collaboration of this duration, diversity, and complexity was rare and could offer important insights on what makes partnerships effective. Thus, the FFE Collaboration Project was designed as a parallel research project to the RCT project and was intended to provide a unique perspective on how intersectoral (i.e., community, government, and university) partners can work together to achieve a common goal. Over the course of FFE, partners shared their experiences with researchers by participating in interviews

and completing questionnaires (i.e., the Partnership Self-Assessment Tool), and allowing partnership meetings to be observed and recorded.

It is from these data that this FFE Collaboration handbook was developed. The purpose of this handbook is not to provide a step-by-step guide to forming and managing partnerships, but instead to offer insight into how the FFE partners worked together to build and implement a successful, long-term partnership. The notions of Resolve (during partnership formation), Resiliency (during implementation), and Results (efforts for policy change) guide the contents. The topics addressed, while they tell the overall FFE collaboration story, are meant to be “stand alone” so that the reader can jump to topics of interest and take away the lessons learned without having to read the entire handbook.

Existing research on understanding partnerships is used throughout to help embed the findings in a larger context. Additionally, and essentially, members’ reflections on the partnership process are inserted throughout.

The FFE Collaboration Project, which helped capture the learning and experiences of the FFE partnership, was funded by:

- Canadian Institutes of Health Research,
- Canadian Health Sciences Research Foundation, and
- Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research.

¹ *When the Bough Breaks: Provider-Initiated Comprehensive Care is More Effective and Less Expensive for Sole-Support Parents on Social Assistance.*



Forming the Partnership

The creation and management of partnerships is often described as following distinct phases. The formation phase is one that is common to all partnerships and is the foundation upon which all other aspects of the partnership are based. The time and energy devoted to the formation phase is an investment in the partnership's long-term success.

Partner recruitment is one of the first steps in the formation phase and for FFE, this step, along with securing research and service delivery funding, was one of the most critical phases of the project.

Because the FFE research project was founded on the principle that the issues facing families with low income are rooted in a myriad of social, economic, and political conditions that cross through multiple government departments, social services agencies, and community programs, the partnership had to attend to this diversity and complexity.

With this in mind, the initial partners reached out to their network of community and government contacts to determine if there was a shared interest in being involved in FFE. The response was almost immediately positive and Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE) and the City of Edmonton (COE) agreed to co-lead the project. A request for proposals (RFP) was issued to find the service provider who could coordinate and provide services for each of the four intervention groups. The Families Matter Partnership Initiative (FMPI)—a partnership between the YMCA of Edmonton, Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative, KARA Family Resource Centre, and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society—was chosen as the intervention service delivery provider.

Aside from recruiting organizational partners that had the shared interest in families living with low income, original partnership members also recognized that the project would rely heavily on the interpersonal working relationships among members.

It was critical to have partnership members with different experiences and expertise. While this diversity ended up to be the reason behind many partnership conflicts over the years, it also resulted in much more thorough and appropriate actions based in the reality of low-income families.

However, there also needed to be a “good fit” among partnership members. When partnering takes place between members of organizations of different sizes and cultures, it is of particular importance that an essential chemistry, or a “fit” between partners exists, that their expectations mesh, and they are on the same wavelength (Forrest, 1992). In reflecting on their FFE experience, many partners commented on how important it was that this particular group of people came together, lending support to the significance of “fit”.

Although individual partner representatives varied over the years and partner organizations experienced reorganization, renaming, and/or restructuring, FFE had constant representation from community, government (municipal and provincial), and university sectors. The consistency of this representation was critical to maintaining the CBPR partnership and to the overall success and relevance of the project. In total, FFE involved partners from 16 different organizations throughout its history. Below is the original list of partners; those italicized represent the organizations that maintained membership through the entire tenure of FFE.

- *Alberta Human Resources and Employment (co-lead)*
 - which later became *Alberta Employment and Immigration*
 - which later became *Human Services (to include Children's Services)*
- *City of Edmonton (co-lead)*
- Alberta Children's Services
- Alberta Health and Wellness

- Alberta Mental Health Board
- Capital Health
- Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee
- *Edmonton Community Foundation*
- Edmonton & Area Child and Family Services Authority – Region 6
- *Quality of Life Commission*
- *United Way of the Alberta Capital Region*
- *University of Alberta – Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families*
- *YMCA of Northern Alberta*
- *KARA Family Resource Centre*
- *Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative*
- *Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society*

Despite numerous setbacks during the formation stage, including the unexpected withdrawal of previously secured service delivery intervention funds due to the length of time it was taking to “get started” (e.g., establish the partnership, design the research, and secure all the funds) the partnership continued to move forward. Inspired by their faith in the importance of the work, partners made the strategic decision to launch the project without having secured a full service delivery intervention budget. Partners hoped that it would be easier to secure additional funds once the project had gained some initial progress. It was a gamble that paid off and made it possible for the FFE research project to secure over \$10 million in research and service delivery intervention funding and yield critical insights into the lives of low-income families, as well as the workings of a large, long-term, community-based, intersectoral partnership that is still being used today.

Because the partnership formation phase typically requires not only inviting partnership members, but securing funds and designing the work, this phase may take several years to accomplish. This may be difficult in a context where there is a need to use allotted funds within a particular time frame, demonstrate tangible progress, or produce measurable results.

A partnership’s success often relies on the interpersonal relationships among its members. Members need to be diverse enough so that multiple perspectives can bear on the complex issues needing to be addressed, while similar enough so that there is a “chemistry” or “good fit” among members.



Susan Coward

Executive Director, Office of the City Manager

I had been involved in working to help low-income Edmontonians access recreation programs and services and was invited by the Quality of Life Commission to a meeting about their findings from the Listen to the Children report. I came and sat in on a meeting with a bunch of people around the table that were interested in child poverty issues. Not in a million years did I think that the initial conversation would become what FFE became.

From the start, we had the right people sitting around the table. Who the individuals were that were representing partner organizations was really key. They needed expertise and knowledge, but they also needed to be able to influence the decision makers in their organization. If we were doing it all over again, I think it would be valuable upfront to identify what you need in individuals to move the project forward—not just leave it up to the organization.

I also think it would have been valuable to know more about the methodology the researchers were using. We did discuss some of the challenges, but we didn't spend as much time understanding the research as we did understanding the service delivery. If we'd known more about research and how it works we could have weighed in on it and asked more questions.

FFE taught me that nothing is impossible. It was important to have a view of what we could accomplish. It started small, but as more people joined and we all agreed that things needed to change, it was amazing to see what we could do. It was never easy. It was difficult and messy and hard, but worth it in the end.

Putting Protocols in Place

Once the partners have been identified and recruited, the formation stage of a CBPR partnership also requires that the partners develop and agree on the terms of reference, including vision, mission, goals, objectives, strategies, and other relevant factors. Critical at this stage is the establishment of governance committees and their operating roles and rules (Forrest, 1992; Kreuter, Lezin, & Young, 2000). See *Governing the Project* on page 12 for the governance structure. Paying attention to these protocols enhance the partnership's ability to sustain itself beyond the tenure of any particular leader or key member (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001) and introduction of new members, thereby promoting the continuity of partnership work.

In the case of FFE, which was built on the principles of CBPR, the founding partners developed a project charter that specified the project's vision, mission, and guiding principles.

FFE'S VISION

Stronger families through strengthened service delivery, supportive policies, and sound research.

FFE'S MISSION

To improve the well-being of low-income families and their children through innovative service delivery, applied research, and well-informed public policy.

FFE's unique research approach necessitated developing operating principles and service delivery principles, which included:

Operating Principles

Accountability: That the project has clear roles and responsibilities of the various committees, delineating the work as described in the project charter and research project work plan.

The necessary time should be spent during the formation stage to determine the project's vision and mission and other operating principles and protocols. This creates a foundation that guides all actions and endures any changes in the partnership's membership.

Effective Communication: That communication is clear, information is timely and partners tolerate ambiguity as they implement the research project work plan and work towards solutions.

Trust and Respect: That partners demonstrate respect for each other's unique roles and organization's mandates while promoting a climate of trust, openness, collaboration and support for the project.

Integrity: That partners value the integrity of the research design and support the balance between research and innovative service delivery.

Recognition: That partners celebrate their successes and accomplishments throughout the project.

Service Delivery Principles for the Intervention Groups

Ethical: That partners demonstrate ethical and positive regard for project clients, including being clear about and honouring the boundaries of confidentiality. Information collection is consistent with Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation and the Health Information Act.

Voluntary Participation: That participation by families is voluntary and service delivery approaches support families telling their stories only once.

Practical: That assessment tools are useful for the clients and frontline workers.

Strengths-Focused: That the supports provided to families by Families First Edmonton recognize the strengths within these families.

Integrated Services: That the partners and service providers effectively collaborate to ensure seamless integrated services are provided to families.

Recognizing Leadership

Leadership within the context of CBPR is an often-difficult concept. CBPR is, at its core, about equity, and shared decision-making—things that, on the surface, would appear to be at odds with the entire notion of leadership. At the same time, effective leadership is essential to the successful development and operation of partnerships, particularly those that involve diverse partners with different organizational cultures and experiences.

Although FFE partners paid close attention to achieving equity and shared control throughout the duration of the project, they also recognized that it was critically important for the partnership to have leadership, especially in the formation stage. Within the FFE partnership, individuals that were willing and capable of providing this much-needed leadership naturally emerged. These individuals possessed a leadership style that was both philosophically compatible with CBPR principles and essential to the project's formation. Here is how FFE partners described the FFE leaders.

The FFE Leaders Were:

Credible: At the outset, FFE partners understood the importance of having leaders who were recognized and respected, both personally and professionally, in the community. This brought “instant credibility” to the project and encouraged others who might otherwise have dismissed FFE, to give the project a second look. In many instances it was the leaders' reputation that convinced other partners and funders to become involved.

Trustworthy: It was also imperative that these leaders be trustworthy. Partners had to be comfortable with their guidance and confident that when leaders expressed concern, it was legitimate. As one partner explained, “I know that

they won't yell ‘the sky is falling,’ unless the sky is falling.” Likewise, if leaders offered reassurance on the soundness of certain strategies, partners had to be comfortable that the leaders' advice was pragmatic, yet innovative.

Bold: At the same time, leaders had to be willing to take risks and invest considerable time and energy in a research project that was complex and political. FFE was a significant undertaking, one that would have been daunting for anyone uncomfortable with risk. People in the early stages of their career, or those who had not already built a certain amount of equity in their reputation, would have been unwilling to attach themselves to something with so many unknowns. It also took people with a certain level of authority who could commit resources (e.g., staff and time) required to see the project through to its completion.

Leadership in CBPR is essential. Leaders must not only be credible and trustworthy, they must also be willing to take risks and push people to think and work outside of their comfort zones.



Dr. Laurie Schnirer

Interim Executive Director

Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families

As scientists we are often criticized for telling people how to do things and for being the experts, but in FFE all of the partners brought their own expertise and experience to the table. We had to learn to trust each other and let people do their work without micromanaging every aspect.

We all realized that we needed to put the work into building the relationship early on or we wouldn't make it. And it took time. You'd find yourself going to meeting after meeting, but there are no shortcuts in a project like this—you have to be tenacious and put the effort into it.

FFE gave researchers a window into the world of community and government that we aren't usually privy to. We came away with a new respect for the work that the other partners do, the processes they work in and the challenges they face in their own systems. It gave us a different perspective on what it takes to get things done in government and community settings.

I think it's a testament to the partnership that those relationships have endured. I can still pick up the phone and talk to any of our partners and know that they will be willing to help. We came away from this process with a mutual respect for one another that arose from our commitment to the core values of FFE. The legacy of FFE is that we're still coming together around the table on initiatives relating to poverty.



RESILIENCY Project Implementation

Once a partnership has been formed, the hard work of implementation begins and the need for resiliency comes into play. Resiliency is defined as a “*dynamic process of adjustment, adaptation and formation in response to challenges and demands,*” (Kirmayer, 2011:85). Resiliency allows us to think explicitly and positively about the adversity that CBPR partnerships encounter. This is important because CBPR is, by its very nature, a reflexive practice that requires active engagement with the limits, opportunities, and impacts of the research process. Resiliency is rooted in the ability to adapt to adversity and change as necessary. Unlike sustainability, which is more often associated with maintaining the original state of the partnership to “keep it going,” resiliency speaks to the partnership’s ability to adapt and improve as challenges arise. Indeed, the notion of resiliency captures how CBPR strives to see members of partnerships learn and change as a result of engaging in meaningful, relevant and complex research.

With FFE, the implementation phase required immeasurable time, energy, and dedication from its partners as they worked to recruit families into each intervention and begin collecting data. Countless problems arose that required quick responses. This problem-solving demanded a resiliency and a tenacity that would eventually become synonymous with the FFE project as a whole. Partners learned to navigate both the challenges of CBPR research and the realities of working within a complex partnership. The personal resiliency of the individual partners was critically important, as it allowed them to be adaptive and nimble and that, in turn, allowed the partnership to evolve and transform.

Getting Started

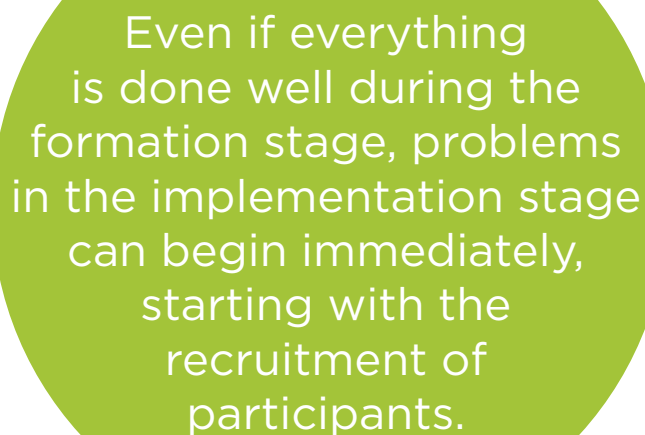
After the project was designed, service providers selected, and initial funding secured, the actual implementation of the FFE research project began. Research into the development and lifecycle of partnerships defines the implementation stage as the *implementation of strategies, programs, and policies designed to achieve the partnership goals* (Butterfoss & Francisco, 2004; Kreuter et al., 2000; Wandersman et al., 1996).

Although many of the partners knew and respected each other's work prior to FFE, this partnership was their first experience in all coming together, as a unique mix of partners, in a CBPR project of unprecedented scope and duration. Consequently, the early implementation stage required a considerable amount of resources and efforts and FFE partners worked hard to define their roles and problem-solve as the project was unfolding.

As an example, one of the first big challenges the FFE research project faced was the recruitment of low-income families. Partners had originally set a goal of recruiting 1,200 families within the first six months. It soon became apparent that it would be difficult to recruit that many families that quickly. To improve recruitment, service providers suggested additional strategies including expanding research assistant hours to offer after-hours recruitment, attending community barbeques, setting up an information booth in a mall— changes that increased contact with families by 50%. A full-time recruitment coordinator position was also seconded by one of the FFE co-leads to help with the recruitment process.

For more information on the recruitment process, please see Schnirer & Stack-Cutler: Recruitment and Engagement of Low Income Populations: Service Provider and Researcher Perspectives.

www.cup.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Recruitment-and-Engagement-of-Low-Income-Populations1.pdf



Even if everything is done well during the formation stage, problems in the implementation stage can begin immediately, starting with the recruitment of participants.

Governing the Project

In order to manage and maximize the effectiveness of a complex CBPR partnership like FFE, it was critical that, during the formation stage, a clearly defined governance structure be created. Such a structure helped all of the partners understand the partnership’s governance process and procedures, and define their roles and participation. So while a governance structure is created during partnership formation, it is included in the implementation section of this handbook as the importance of the governance structure comes into the fore and its effectiveness is tested during implementation.

The Executive Steering Committee was the financial accountability body that consisted of the two co-leads and a senior researcher. This body was ultimately responsible for monitoring funding and expenditures. The Steering Committee was the decision-making body for the service delivery model and the research outcomes, and for securing funding for the project.

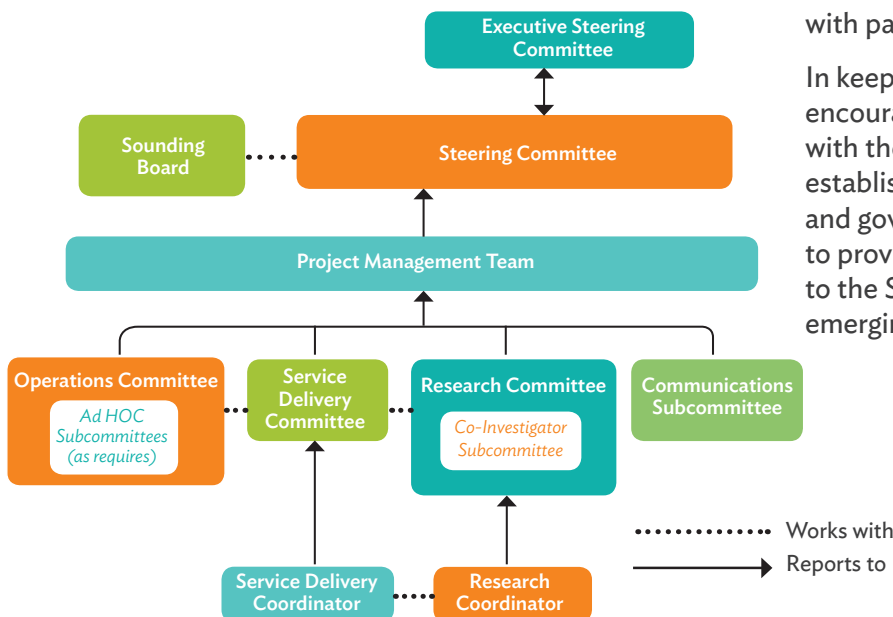
The Project Management Team (PMT) was the vehicle that oversaw and coordinated much of the day-to-day operations for FFE. It employed a full-time project manager, who was responsible for ensuring the PMT followed the project charter, the development and management of the critical path,

A governance structure is always recommended in any project work. However, the importance of such a strong governance structure or “where the buck stops” surfaces when difficult decisions need to be made. It was critical in FFE that while following principles of CBPR (e.g., *shared decision-making*), that accountability for such things as securing funding and determining spending, following research requirements (e.g., *ensuring a large enough sample size*), and working with families (e.g., *ensuring service delivery intervention workers were safe*) be clearly outlined.

budget, and communications plan. Having a dedicated staff person to manage the project allowed the other partners to focus on their area of specialty and provided much-needed administrative support.

The Operations Committee was responsible for the development and monitoring of the plans, schedules, budgets, and deliverables within the guidelines established by the Steering Committee. The Service Delivery Committee was responsible for ensuring the RCT interventions were implemented as planned. The Research Committee was answerable for the design and implementation of the research component. The Communications Subcommittee was accountable for ensuring that project communications were aligned with partner organizations’ communication protocols.

In keeping with the CBPR approach, partners were encouraged to share their comments and suggestions with the broader community. A Sounding Board was established that consisted of eight to 12 community and government members, and invited FFE partners, to provide invaluable analysis, advice, and information to the Steering Committee and helped them address emerging issues and concerns.





Cheryl Whiskeyjack

Executive Director

Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society

I'm okay with the unknown and with having questions and with feeling stuck, because I know that it motivates you to keep moving and try to find a better way. That's something I really learned with FFE, because we hit a lot of walls along the way, and we had to figure out a way to get through them, around them, over them – whatever it took so that families could get what they needed.

With FFE, the administrative piece was really critical. A project like this has so many moving parts, you need someone to take care of coordinating all of those parts. I've been a part of groups where that administrative part isn't managed well and things fall apart. With FFE, it was well run and that let us focus on doing what we needed to do for the project and for families.

I was actually disappointed when things were winding down, because we had built up some real synergy around breaking down silos and getting families better access to services. I actually would have liked more time to see it continue because it felt like we were really onto something.

When the project ended, some of those conversations ended. Fortunately many of the relationships continued and we're still working to help people get the services they need. And I'm optimistic that things are improving. I think we're really working hard as a province to do better and I'd like to think some of that may be because of what we learned in FFE.

Leading through Implementation

In the formation stage of FFE, the partnership struggled with determining how leadership should exist in the context of a CBPR project. As the leaders took FFE into the implementation stage, leadership became collective in nature and collaborative in practice which ensured the project functioned effectively and the partnership remained resilient.

The FFE Leaders:

Campaigned: One of the most important jobs of the leaders, which started in the formation stage but was ramped up in the implementation stage, was to campaign on behalf of the project. They became crusaders who were able to speak to the project's potential and possibility. This action was especially critical when partners experienced difficulties during implementation and needed reassurance to stay-the-course. The leader's faith in the project allowed them to take ownership over it, and to demonstrate its worth to others through their own ongoing commitment. FFE leaders became champions of both the project and of the importance of CBPR—a way of working that required significant adjustments to standard organizational practices, especially during implementation.

Macro-managed: As implementation got underway, FFE's leadership continued to evolve to meet the changing needs of the project. Although leaders continued to champion FFE, they refused to micromanage the various people or elements of the project, and instead focused their time and energy on the big picture. The leaders trusted their staff, allowed space for them to do their work by telling them to “go away, go do it. Let me know when you need me”. Getting out of their staff's way, however, did not mean being removed from or indifferent

about the project. In fact, the FFE leaders were a determined group in their efforts in making sure FFE would be a success. This leadership style helped establish a trust and a confidence that strengthened the resiliency of the collaboration.

Valued the collective: FFE's leaders were unwavering in their commitment to the project and worked behind the scenes to mobilize necessary resources. Partners often commented that there was no ego attached to any of the work, and that leaders ensured the project's successes were recognized as a team effort. As the project gained attention and respect, the leaders made certain the partnership was credited as a whole. At the same time, when criticisms or problems emerged, leaders did not lay blame on particular individuals or organizations but were, as a collective, quick to defend the project and use their influence and connections to resolve anything that threatened or impeded its progress.

Traditional leadership characteristics are still important during the implementation of CBPR projects. However, they should be used as a tool rather than a philosophy and must be adapted to support the collaborative work.



Shannon Marchand

Deputy Minister, Seniors

Alberta Culture and Tourism

At the time of FFE, I was the ADM for Alberta Employment and Immigration, and I became the project's co-lead. I was involved around the margins from the very beginning, but really didn't get involved until the fall of 2008 when implementation was well underway.

I was really struck by the nature and the strength of the partnership. I didn't appreciate how ambitious it was until I was there, and learned about the challenges it had gone through to get to that point. As it moved to implementation and worked to marry up the different objectives and perspectives of the partners, it was an interesting thing to see.

That combination of community partners and academic research and trying to maintain the academic rigour with the community focus, was really frame breaking. There was an inherent challenge in the way the whole project was designed in that gratification was very delayed. In that amount of time, you will have changes in organizations, changes in people, changes in focus and changes of circumstances that make it challenging. That ability to sustain it through all that change speaks to the strength of the partnership and the commitment of the people involved.

Creating meaningful partnerships is hard work and you have to invest in that beyond the actual project. You can't overlook the importance of investing time and resources in developing those relationships, because if you do, you'll never accomplish your other goals and you won't be able to get anywhere.

Enacting Decision-making Power

CBPR is by definition a collaborative approach to research that strives for equity and equal participation amongst all its partners. Yet, while shared power and control are its goals, FFE partners realized early into the project that it was necessary for someone to have the authority to make decisions, resolve disputes, and ensure that the project was moving ahead on schedule. The governance structure was hence developed detailing the lines of authority, with the Steering Committee being the partnership's main decision-making entity.

During the implementation stage, however, there was another group that was quietly—but most certainly—holding decision-making power in the partnership. FFE's Project Management Team (PMT)'s importance in the functioning of the partnership was becoming increasingly evident to its partners. The PMT consisted of a 12-person committee, including a full-time project manager, that consisted of researchers, service delivery providers, and government representatives drawn from the FFE partnership. The PMT met weekly to review the progress and address challenges and emerging issues in order to keep the research project “on track.”

Members of the PMT gained and held decision-making power within the partnership during the implementation stage in three distinct ways:

Power Through Governance

PMT was a formally recognized committee within the FFE governance structure, and with that came a certain level of power that PMT members had in overseeing the research project. It also allowed PMT members to use certain “discretionary resources” to access monies, information, and people. During the implementation phase, the Steering Committee began to assign more formal responsibilities to the

PMT and afforded them decision-making power that streamlined many project processes. As one Steering Committee member explained, “we had confidence in PMT members, which made it (the allocation of power) easy to support.” This shifting of responsibility allowed Steering Committee members to step back, guiding the direction of the project, while giving the PMT the day-to-day authority to move the project forward.

The Steering Committee's faith in the PMT led to its members being invited to Executive Steering and Steering Committee meetings, where they were increasingly involved in the partnership's decision-making process. As the project progressed and as the realities of the research project dictated, PMT members made many decisions during their own weekly meetings.

Power Through Knowledge, Skills, and Action

PMT also gained power within the partnership because of their knowledge of FFE, the skills they demonstrated, and the actions they undertook. The PMT met weekly and was the first landing spot for all problems, issues, progress, and updates related to both the partnership and the research project. In addition to attending Steering Committee meetings, PMT members also attended various other committee meetings so had a broad knowledge and deep insight to what was happening in all aspects of the project. This involvement gave members of the PMT a unique understanding of the “backstories” and context for problems or issues that emerged and allowed them to act quickly and efficiently.

PMT members also had an understanding of both the research design and service delivery intervention components and were able to use that knowledge to make decisions quickly. Most importantly, PMT was a dedicated, hard-working group that got things

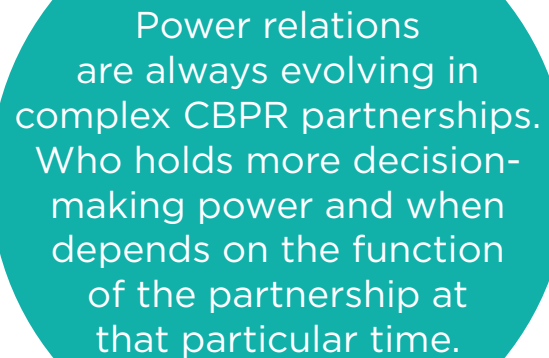
done. The PMT members' effort and efficiency was noted and respected by the other partners, who appreciated how this group "brought discipline [to the partnership] and made deliverables happen."

Power Through Collective Act

Although PMT was comprised of members from different organizations and sectors, each with differing priorities and approaches, they acted as a collective. Even when problems arose within partner organizations, PMT members saw themselves as PMT members first and were committed to finding ways to address issues. As one PMT member recalled, "there was an issue (relating to my organization) that could have put more pressure on me and potentially put me in some awkward positions." Instead, other PMT members reacted by asking "how can we solve this together?"

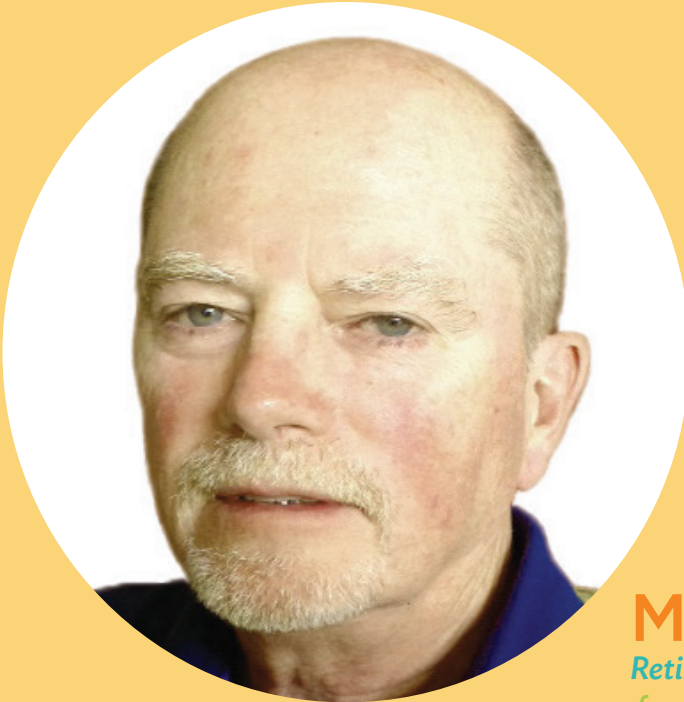
That collective identity carried into the PMT's decision-making as well. As one PMT member explained, "decisions happen as a group and then ownership of those decisions happen as a group. Even though I might not necessarily agree 100% with it, once you've left the table it's our decision and we will support it 100%."

Over the lifespan of FFE, PMT evolved to become a powerful collective that worked tirelessly to advance the goals of project and the potential of the partnership. Described by many partners as the "core" of the partnership, the PMT successfully married the collaborative approach of CBPR with the project's need for direction and decision-making, becoming the partnership's "invisible leaders."



Power relations are always evolving in complex CBPR partnerships. Who holds more decision-making power and when depends on the function of the partnership at that particular time.

Power is not an absolute in CBPR. A group of partners can gain power without any group losing power.



Mic Farrell

Retired

formerly with Alberta Family and Social Services

I was with Alberta Family and Social Services and was really interested in what we would now call evidence-based decision making, which is exactly what FFE was all about. It fit right in with what I was trying to champion within the department.

I was there from the start of FFE and thought the partnership worked amazingly well. The work that was done by key people on the ground was phenomenal and the Project Management Team was really good at resolving issues as they came up and keeping the partners focused on the goal. I spent a long time with the project, then went to a different role with the government. Although I was less directly involved I was still very interested and stayed in contact to see how it was going.

I always say that relationships aren't between agencies, they're between people and with FFE those relationships are amazing. People have gone on to do other projects with other organizations and the relationships have endured. I'm still in contact with many of the partners, including work I'm doing now on the Mayor's Task Force on Poverty. Although I knew some people before FFE, there are people I got to know and respect that I never would have encountered otherwise.

Right upfront it's important to create a really clear road map of what will happen and where it's going to go, how long it's going to go for and when it will end. Projects like this take time and people don't always realize how long the process will be and how much time and effort it will take.

Valuing the Roles of Service Delivery Intervention Workers and Data Collectors

Research projects are, above all, dependent on the quality of the data collected. With CBPR projects like FFE, which involved low-income, often vulnerable families, the usual challenges associated with providing an intervention and collecting data were exacerbated. It was critical that FFE service delivery workers and data collectors be able to effectively engage with families.

Partners realized early on that the roles of intervention workers and data collectors went beyond simply linking families to recreation or gathering survey responses; consequently they set out to establish team practices that would increase engagement and retention of both the families, and the intervention workers and data collectors. Both intervention workers and data collectors were given an orientation to the FFE project—its purpose, goals, and potential impact—which provided valuable context on the importance of their roles. And when new interventionists or data collectors joined the team, their supervisors provided intensive training on the technical aspects of their work (e.g., administering the questionnaires for data collectors).

Both service delivery intervention workers and data collectors had regular debriefings, which provided a chance for them to discuss their experiences, receive support from other team members, and learn from each other. They were also trained to use reflective practices when interacting with families, and strive to be patient and empathetic with families, while adhering to the research protocol. Both worked to accommodate the families' schedules and challenges, booking visits at the times that were most convenient for families. Rescheduling occurred frequently, and both intervention workers and data collectors accepted this as a reality of working with busy and vulnerable families. They never “closed-out” or “discharged” a family. If a family was willing to participate and had to cancel or did not show up, they would always reschedule, regardless of how

much time lapsed (in some cases, up to one year). They helped cook meals, answered the door, and played with younger children, including providing “busy bags” (i.e., colouring books, bubbles) all to make it easier for the parent to participate in the research project. This approach was well received by families, who expressed their sincerest appreciation for the way FFE intervention workers and data collectors worked with them throughout FFE. In the end, their efforts were critically important to the research. Intervention workers and data collectors began working with families in late 2005, and intervention workers worked with families for three years while data collectors completed in-home questionnaires at baseline, six months and then once each year over the same three-year time frame. Although some families had dropped out of the study, a remarkable number—760 families—maintained their involvement for its entirety. This retention rate speaks to the success of both intervention workers and data collectors in engaging with families.

Intervention workers did more than link families to programs and services, and data collectors did more than administer questionnaires—they provided the families' with a kind and direct connection to the project.

Intervention workers and data collectors needed to have the skills and the experience to engage with families and be extremely flexible and responsive to their circumstances and needs.

Families were never “discharged” from the research if they were unable to keep an appointment. They were welcomed and included regardless of their appointment history. This helped families understand that workers and data collectors were invested in their success and committed to helping them remain involved in the project.

Intervention workers and data collectors required numerous opportunities to debrief and share experiences. This played a significant role in retention of individuals in the position.

Coping with Conflict

One of the realities of any partnership is that it brings together people with different experiences, interests, and priorities. In the case of the FFE partnership, these differences were both an advantage and a challenge. The diversity of the experiences of the intersectoral (community, government, and university) partners afforded the project access to a breadth and depth of knowledge and resources that was invaluable in designing and conducting research with low-income families.

Yet this diversity also created serious conflict during the implementation phase. For example, when the intervention began, service provider and researcher partners immediately clashed over the concept of rigour: it became clear that the definition of and requirements of rigour for a randomized controlled trial (RCT) research intervention were at odds with the rigour of service provider practices. Researcher partners were frustrated with service provider partners’ lack of appreciation for the rigour needed for research conclusions to be made, which was often at odds with their usual practice with low-income families. In turn, service provider partners determined the researcher partners to be naïve about how to actually work with low-income families. It required considerable effort for each partner to fully understand and appreciate these differences. After long and unproductive discussions on how to maintain the needed rigour for a RCT, while adhering to best service delivery practices for low-income families, partners were stifled by their differences and needed another way to move forward.

The partnership decided that the most sensible solution was to redevelop the project’s logic model. A logic model outlines what a project is intended to do and the activities that will lead toward the achievement of goals. A logic model also assists partners in sharing ideas, identifying assumptions and values, and building a common language. In working together to redevelop the project model, FFE partners were able to identify and confront

When conflict emerges between partners, it may be helpful, instead of continuing to discuss the issues, to work on a concrete task together (in our case, it was redeveloping the logic model.) In doing so, the discussions can be moved the personal level to the project level. Partners may be able to confront their differences but as equally important, find their commonalities to build camaraderie.

their inherent differences, including backgrounds, disciplines, experience, and values. They also began to identify commonalities and were able to create a new logic model that reflected and respected their differences and maximized their skills and strengths. Although the experience was frustrating and time-consuming, it was also an important exercise that allowed partners to find a common ground to build on and move forward.

These types of situations, where a conflict or disagreement was identified, differences explored, commonalities identified, and solutions developed, were not uncommon throughout the FFE project.

See: Mayan, M., Lo, S., Richter, S., Dastjerdi, M., & Drummond, J. (2016). Community-based research: Ameliorating conflict when community and research practices meet. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Lessons Learned*, Volume 10 (2)

While there was a certain amount of expected conflict among partners from different sectors, it was a bit of a surprise when there was conflict among partners within the same sector. The assumption was that, being from the same sector, partners were from the same “community” and would share similar practices associated in working with low-income families. As the project progressed, this assumption proved to be too simplistic. In reality, even when organizations share a common goal or purpose and are from the same “sector,” or “community”, their culture, approaches, and priorities can be vastly different and often at odds with one another.

A research project conducted near the end of the FFE project explored this issue. *Soul Matching: Challenges in a Partnership Formed Between “Similar” Organizations* (Melendez, Lo, & Mayan, 2010), interviewed participants from two of the FFE partner organizations. Results showed that, contrary to expectations, a history of working together, as

well as overlapping mandates, roles, and services the project actually pushed the organizations apart. Partners who seemed to be completely aligned found themselves at odds on how to fulfill their function within the partnership. Not unlike choosing a life partner, the study concluded that organizations, when choosing a CBPR partner, must know themselves on a deep level, so that they can determine—as best they can—whether they will be able to work well together to reach the relationship or project’s goals.

Similar to choosing a life partner, organizations who want to work together need to spend time considering what organizational characteristics and values are important in their potential partner to be able to work together.



Joan Baker

General Manager
Community and Housing Initiatives
YMCA of Northern Alberta

I saw working with FFE as an opportunity to contribute to the initiative and to learn from it. We were a contributor to the ongoing dialogue of “how are we doing, what are we doing, are there things that need to change and strategically, are we aligned with the big picture?” It was an ongoing feedback loop, and my role was to bring the voice of the service deliverers to the table alongside our three service delivery partners [Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative, KARA Family Resource Centre, and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society].

It was difficult initially, because we were new to research and as much as the researchers were attempting to be community-based, they were still making some assumptions that came from academia. It took time to get to know each other’s language and to learn to trust one another. We also had to learn to manage personalities and figure out how honest we could be in discussing issues. We eventually came to a place where we could just speak our minds and bring our questions to the table and be creative in how we seek solutions. There were many times when we had to realign with one another, ask questions about process and then just get on with it because the work had to be done.

Working with FFE helped us understand so much about the families we serve and about research. We’re doing research now as an organization without fear or trepidation. Community-based research now feels like an opportunity and we understand what it takes to go into it and the wealth of possibility that comes out of it.

Exploring Ethics

Ethical issues were front and centre throughout the duration of the FFE project. From determining the most ethical way to initiate contact with families, to what happens with the data, analysis, and interpretation, ethical considerations guided partnership formation, research design, and persisted through implementation. As intervention workers and data collectors began working with families, situations occurred that required the partnership to question their approach and adjust as necessary. Most often, these ethical issues arose at the juncture between service delivery and research, where families' needs were in conflict with research conditions.

For example, the RCT research design dictated what services to which FFE intervention workers could link families to, no matter what the family's most urgent needs actually were. Consequently, workers in the Recreation intervention could only speak to families about recreation needs and link them to recreation services. If the family was in need of food or childcare, they could only provide the family with information (e.g., a number to call) and not link them directly to those services.

This limitation was incredibly difficult for intervention workers, many of whom were trained as social workers. They struggled with not being able to fully respond to families and felt the length of the intervention was too short to allow them to form relationships with families. While this was difficult for many intervention workers, referring back to the project charter helped them stay focused on what the research would eventually make possible—better, more effective interventions to improve outcomes for low-income families.

When ethical issues arose, the partners used it as an opportunity for reflective practice so members could understand what happened and why. The partnership learned that ethics are ongoing and relational and there is rarely a “right answer.”

Reflective practice, or the ability to reflect on a situation and on how it was handled, is important for ongoing learning. Responses to ethical situations aren't about being right or wrong, but about thinking through various options.

Valuing Differences

Perhaps the most important lesson to emerge from the FFE partnership experience is the importance of respecting and valuing the differences among partners. From the outset, FFE partners recognized the value and necessity of having partners with varied expertise, experience, and approaches for the development and delivery of a complex CBPR project involving low-income families. The differing community, government, and university approaches were key to making the project relevant, relatable, and realistic.

Although differences were respected from the start, partners had to work to overcome the instinct to assign equality—in the form of sameness—to all of the partners. Aiming for equality through sameness in terms of participation and decision-making power, although admirable, overlooks the value that differences bring to a partnership. With FFE, these differences in expertise, experience, and approach sparked discussion and disagreement, embedded in three key differences as outlined below.

Priorities and Approaches

As the partners became more comfortable in working together, they often “pushed” their own and sometimes conflicting priorities and approaches, but knew when to pull back and let others do the same. This “push-pull” dynamic became an accepted, albeit difficult, part of implementing the project. In some instances, it resulted in hurt feelings and exacerbated conflicts as people disagreed on key processes or points. The push-pull between intersectoral partners was often most contentious as researchers worked to ensure the integrity of the research. One partner recalls: “in the very beginning I believe one of the researchers was most frustrated, as she kept saying ‘you’ve got to define the problem,’ and we kept saying, ‘no we’re going to talk about where we want to end up as a result of making things better.’” Over time, partners learned to use the push-pull process to negotiate differences and

expand comfort zones, so that people were able to give attention to their organization’s priorities while ensuring the collective goals were met.

Who Speaks, When and How

Interestingly, one of the most thorny issues experienced by the FFE partnership was regarding communication and simply put, who should speak, when, and how. It was important to understand who had the authority (based on typical hierarchical structures) and the responsibility for speaking on behalf of organizations, and when it was most helpful for those individuals to weigh in on specific aspects of the project. Although the community and government partners had more formal and defined communication processes (both written and verbal), researchers were used to working in a less hierarchical and restricted way. Unfortunately, this often meant that researchers—who contributed equally (not based on seniority), and who are trained to relentlessly ask critical questions and for points of clarification—sometimes came across as judgmental and disrespectful of other partners. As one researcher recalls:

We have been trained to always think, to always poke holes, to always question, to always say “how could this be better.” We learned that sometimes those questions are interpreted as “you haven’t done your job,” or “this document isn’t complete.” What we think of as helpful is viewed as threatening.”

Language and Power

Each of the FFE partners brought their own organization’s language to the partnership. As a result, it was often difficult for partners to interpret what was being communicated. Although some terms such as “RCT” (randomized controlled trial) or “logic model” were simply unfamiliar to some partners, often the language could also be alienating. The use of different language, aside from causing confusion, also marked areas of expertise

Differences should not be considered a problem, but rather a source of strength, resiliency, and potential.

or authority over certain domains, and thus power in those domains. When researchers, for example, spoke about “compromising the integrity of the research” and why following particular steps was “essential to rigour in an RCT,” this was interpreted as elitist by some of the community and government partners. Conversely, the researchers interpreted a condescending attitude from community and government partners when they spoke to the researchers as if they knew nothing about working with communities or low-income families and talked about select activities such as “briefing the Deputy Minister” or “going to Counsel.” The power inherent in language created settings where a community partner, during a discussion about the logic model, said that the researchers were being “really dismissive,” and where a government partner lashed out at the researchers asking: “Do you think you are smarter than us?” As the project progressed, partners began to better understand and appreciate each other’s language and the expertise behind it, but the elitism embedded in certain language lingered.

Conflict does not equal failure. It is an opportunity to learn, be reflexive, and to ensure the relevancy of the project and its findings to all involved.

Who speaks, when, and how, can be a contentious issue for individual partners, and it is important for people to realize how the things they say may be perceived as critical.

The solution to conflict and the response to difference is not sameness. It is being comfortable to talk about differences and engage with them without the attitude that we have to get rid of them.

It’s important to understand each others’ language but also to acknowledge that language has inherent power which can be heard as elitist even if its not meant to be.

Partners should not passively accept differences, but rather commit to maximize the dialogue and debate they create.



Yvonne Chiu

Executive Director

Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative

We wanted to be a part of FFE because we saw it as an important initiative that will link families' realities to policy learning and hopefully illustrate what kind of service delivery model is most needed by low-income families.

When I went into it, I was really hoping to illustrate the cultural brokering practice in relation to service delivery so that for marginalized immigrant or refugee families the worker would ideally be from the community. I learned that the service delivery model is a very rigorous research component where the workers have to stay within the defined model of service delivery.

A partnership like this takes so much energy and the relationship needs to be carefully nurtured. You need to always work on resolving differences and conflict. You have to address the elephant in the room – which is power disparity. When larger entities partner with smaller entities the larger organizations may impose their agenda and smaller organizations feel powerless to object. That's why it's important to address it from the start.

FFE was exploring something that government and community are still trying to do, which is to break down the silos between sectors and the disconnect between community and policy. The close relationship that partners developed has carried on beyond the project—with or without funding we're still committed to revealing the truths about low-income families.

Benefitting from Emotions

Emotions are often considered to be detrimental in a professional setting and people are discouraged from recognizing or displaying them to their colleagues. After all, aren't emotions usually unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unproductive? Although emotions may have traditionally had negative connotations, especially in the work setting, in the context of FFE, emotions were recognized as playing an important role in the partnership's success.

FFE partners reported a range of emotions during the formation and implementation stages. Many of the emotions identified, including "frustration," "anger," "hurt," and "impatience or uneasiness," would be considered negative emotions by most people, in most organizations. But within the context of the FFE partnership, these emotions were considered as indicative of how emotionally invested the partners were in the project and its outcomes. Partners who experienced these types of emotions were the ones who recognized the

importance of and potential impact of the research, and cared deeply about its success. Through this lens, these emotions were considered productive as they helped strengthen the partnership's resiliency and connections among individual partners.

FFE partners indicated that these emotional "resources" were an essential part of building a collective identity, one where they were all "part" of the FFE partnership. When negative emotions emerged, partners learned to recognize and explore them, creating a positive feedback loop that in turn, led to improvements in processes and procedures. At the same time, emotional resources allowed partners to take a personal stance on things that mattered to them, which deepened their personal commitment to the project and the partnership. The ability to use these emotions became an important tool in building the partnership's resiliency.

Positive and negative emotions can indicate how invested people are in the project and its outcome. In particular, emotions that are traditionally considered negative can be harnessed to spur change. Partners can identify their emotions so they recognize how emotions may benefit the partnership's work.

Managing Turnover

Not surprisingly, in a partnership that lasted almost a decade, turnover amongst partner organizations and members, especially those from government, was inevitable. Organizations were restructured, merged, or renamed, and people changed organizations, had their portfolios readjusted, or were promoted. Although much of the strength of the partnership was based on the personal relationships that were built during formation and implementation, turnover was handled with relatively little disruption. This was due, in large part, to the effort that individual outgoing partners made to transition incoming members. Often this was less about sharing specific knowledge or information about the project, and more about conveying their own passion and commitment to the partnership and the project. It was these emotional resources that were most important to helping new members connect with the partnership and its work.

The passion and enthusiasm that departing partners felt for FFE and their emotional investment in its success helped their replacements understand its importance. It also created a sense of responsibility that made incoming representatives want to continue the work and uphold the legacy of what had already been accomplished.

In addition to dealing with expected turnover, it was also not uncommon for FFE partners to experience situations where organizational representatives “stepped back” from their involvement, only to return later. “Stepping back”

An interesting partnership exercise is to ask current partners what they would want their successors to know, if they had to leave the project.

Turnover does not have to be disruptive if incoming members are well prepared by outgoing members, who not only share information about the project, but also their emotional connection and commitment.

was often due to organizational responsibilities that required members to focus their attention elsewhere. In other instances, it was because the project required different knowledge, skills, and experience during its lifecycle. In all cases, it was the members’ strong belief in and commitment to FFE that led them back to the partnership. The “FFE call” simply needed to be answered. What was important throughout this ebb and flow was to keep everyone connected (e.g., emails, updates, coffee, etc.), so that when members did step back in they were up-to-date on what had happened. Maintaining communication also helped maintain their emotional connection to the work and to the partnership.

Partners may need to formally leave the partnership for various reasons. However, if they are emotionally connected to the project, maintaining involvement with them is important so that they can guide from the sidelines or even step back in at a later date.

Understanding the Implementation Dip

The FFE collaboration project utilized the Partnership Self-Assessment to help gauge the partnership's synergy and functioning. The tool helps identify strengths and weaknesses in relation to leadership, efficiency, management, and sufficiency of resources. It also sheds light on the partners' perceptions about the partnership's decision-making process. The findings are helpful for anticipating and managing the "highs" and "lows" of a partnership over time.

The tool, which was administered four times during the project, showed that partners experienced their lowest level of satisfaction during the early implementation phase of the project. This "implementation dip" was not unexpected, and was attributed to many of the challenges that are associated with the implementation phase.

After the formation period, which is often characterized by excitement and anticipation, implementation increases the stresses and pressures put on a partnership. With FFE, the implementation phase also saw significant turnover in partner membership, just as important processes such as recruitment, service delivery intervention, and data collection, began. As a result, additional time and effort from all partners was needed, making an already-demanding research process even more challenging. Fortunately, findings from The Partnership Self-Assessment Tool indicated that this was a temporary dip, and partnership satisfaction scores returned to formation stage levels as the partnership moved into the maintenance stage.

See: Gray, E., Mayan, M., Lo, S., Jhangri, G., & Wilson, D. (2012). A 4-year sequential assessment of the Families First Edmonton partnership: Challenges to synergy in the implementation stage. *Health Promotion Practice*, 13(2), 272-278.

CBPR partnerships need to be resilient. Resiliency is about more than surviving—it's about evolving and transforming to adapt to adversity and challenges. When working in a partnership, it is important to think about and acknowledge the ways individuals and the partnership as a collective have demonstrated resiliency.



RESULTS

Knowledge Translation and Policy Change

Families First Edmonton (FFE) was a revolutionary community-based participatory research project that spanned nine years (2005-2013), attracted millions in funding, and involved 16 different partner organizations. Members from government (provincial and municipal) worked alongside members from the community (citizen groups, not-for-profits, and local funders) and university researchers to investigate what worked, what didn't, and how to make service delivery better and more efficient for low-income families, in practical and sustainable ways.

FFE's long-term goal of improving the lives of families living in poverty inspired intense commitment from its partners and as a consequence, FFE had numerous and weighty results. What is reported here are processes that were put in place and lessons learned on how people— through partnership—can create the conditions for improving the lives of families who live in poverty.



Needing Knowledge Brokers

At the beginning of implementation, the partnership was focused almost exclusively on gathering the much-needed data that were integral to the project. Research design, family recruitment, service delivery interventions, and data collection consumed much of the partnership's time and attention. As the project progressed and initial results were emerging, it became clear that there was both a need and an obligation to begin sharing and using this information with others. This transition from knowledge gathering to knowledge translation was an important one for the partnership, as it saw them shift their focus to sharing and mobilizing knowledge among themselves and others to improve their systems.

Knowledge brokers serve a critical role as intermediaries that help to build rapport and mutual understanding between researchers and target audiences. Effective knowledge brokering requires a diverse skill set, including strong communication skills, and a clear understanding of both policy issues, and research evidence and its application.

Knowledge brokers should be involved throughout a project, through to the end, and should be fully participating members who attend all meetings.

Knowledge brokers are most effective when they have face-to-face contact with target audiences.

Knowledge brokers should have a working understanding of both quantitative and qualitative research, so they can better convey the integrity of the research to outside audiences.

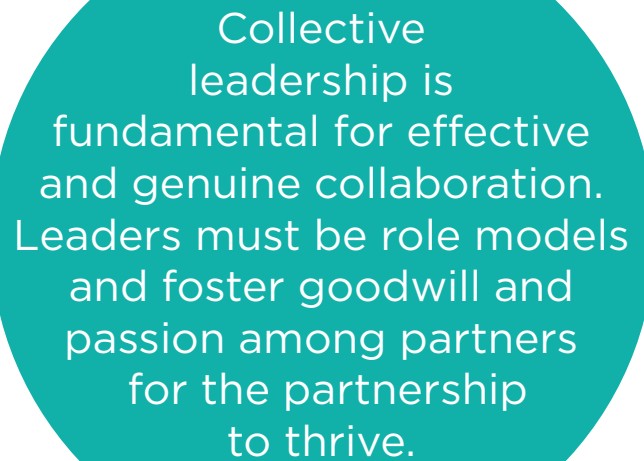
It is important for partnerships to include the position of knowledge broker in their initial human resources planning.

Leading as a Collective

Just like the project and the partnership, FFE's leadership evolved over time. What began with representatives from partner organizations coming together to oversee a promising, but unproven research project, had overtime, become a collective entity. The transformation from organizational representative to FFE champion saw leaders "leave their organization at the door," and develop a group identity that put FFE and its goals, mission, and values first.

Partners were quick to single out the leadership for their commitment to FFE and for debunking some of the misconceptions partners originally had about high-ranking decision-makers would behave. As one partner noted: "this experience completely redefined what an ADM [assistant deputy minister] could be like. I had no idea they could be so idealistic and not be driven by a political agenda."

FFE leaders engendered a great deal of goodwill amongst partners, many of whom had never had the chance to work so closely with this kind of intersectoral group. Partners who might have previously been intimidated by other sectors or groups had the opportunity to build relationships with individuals who shared their passion for improving the lives of low-income families. In becoming champions for FFE, the leaders forged bonds with other organizations and created conditions for policy change that continue to thrive.



Collective leadership is fundamental for effective and genuine collaboration. Leaders must be role models and foster goodwill and passion among partners for the partnership to thrive.

CBPR leadership is a collective entity, rather than an entity led by individuals.



Sanchia Lo

Research Coordinator

FFE Collaboration Research Project

There are a lot of great resources on how to collaborate effectively detailing what to do and what not to do. Unfortunately there is no magic one-size-fits-all formula that will guarantee success for all partnerships. Even within the lifespan of a partnership—like in FFE—the partnership would have to change and evolve. FFE partners learned very early on to expect and embrace uncertainties.

It wasn't always a happy experience—we had a lot of ups and downs, a lot of challenges, and the process was extremely demanding. It took a lot of hard work and sometimes what we had to do to make it work was not pretty. But at the end of the day, we'd all agree it was always a worthy experience.

The momentum that the partners created and sustained by supporting each other really was incredible. Even during the worst of times, they were simply not going to let this partnership fail, not only for themselves and for the families, but for each other.

Collectively, the FFE partners did and continue to make an impact in the lives of many vulnerable families in our society. Along the way the partners not only learned much about the families that they worked with, they also learned about each other, and about themselves, by putting themselves under the microscope. The experience was not always textbook like, but I think what the partners did and what they learned together are textbook worthy.

Creating a Knowledge Translation Product: Voices on Film

Finding creative ways to make research evidence relatable and relevant is a challenge for many researchers. FFE researchers, who worked closely with low-income families during the project, realized that the best way to tell the story of what it meant to live in poverty was to create an opportunity for the families to speak for themselves. *BureaucraZy*, an innovative film project that invited four FFE families to tell their personal stories, was the result. The film evolved from an earlier Photovoice project that saw FFE participants – single mothers – use photos and words to document the realities of living in poverty and what it meant for them and their children. Presentations from the photovoice project were so well received that the researchers and the women who participated could not keep with the demand. The partnership requested the researchers secure funding to make a film to meet the increasing requests for presentations.

Over the course of a year, filmmakers followed four families as they dealt with the realities of living in poverty and navigating the often-confusing system of service and supports. It provided an uncomfortable glimpse into the struggles that low-income families face and the limited choices and options available to them.

In planning and developing the film, FFE researchers faced a number of considerations and issues, including:

Choosing Participants

One of the first and most difficult challenges in producing the film was selecting which families to feature from among all the research participants. Questions about whom to include and which criteria should determine inclusion were hotly debated. Should it be based on who was better on film or whose story was most powerful? Should it include those who were most articulate or those who had devoted more time and effort to attending the presentations leading up to the film project?

Researchers, the film producer, and FFE partners all had different definitions of who would be the “best” participant. In the end, various practical circumstances dictated who could realistically be included within the filming schedule.

Protecting Participants

All of the participants were women parenting on their own and had already endured many hardships and challenges. FFE partners were reticent to send strangers—a male producer and a male director—into their homes, without first ensuring they were familiar and comfortable with the process. Whenever possible, FFE researchers attended the filming, but when scheduling prevented this, the researchers stayed in constant communication with the participants to ensure their comfort.

Representing Participants Accurately

Not surprisingly, many of participants were concerned with how they would come across on film. They were concerned that they would “look bad,” or be portrayed in an unflattering light. Because of this, the women needed to have a lot of trust in the filmmakers in both how they were being portrayed and what was being portrayed. Although FFE partners attempted to give the filmmakers the freedom to do their work, they were also quick to ask filmmakers to soften scenes that might make participants uncomfortable.

Representing Participants Accurately

FFE partners realized from the outset that it would be impossible to adequately capture all of the insights and observations that participants shared during filming within the confines of a 19-minute film. In order to create a cohesive narrative, much of what the participants shared was left out of the final version—a decision that some participants found disappointing.

Ethics

Creating the *BureaucraZy* film, because it did not involve data collection or analysis, did not require an ethics approval from the University of Alberta Ethics Board. This meant that this was the first time FFE partners worked with participants without formal ethical approval. Despite this reality, FFE partners strived to approach the project with respect and discretion, and ensured that participants understood the voluntary nature of participating in the project at all times.

Feedback and Editing

With sixteen partners, four filming participants, a producer, and a director, addressing and incorporating everyone's feedback was a daunting and time-consuming task. Every effort was made to address suggestions and concerns, and the film's discussion guide went through a total of 16 drafts before the FFE researchers overseeing the film had to halt the never-ending editing process. Budget and time constraints made it impossible to allow a similar level of editing by partners to the final film product—a decision that frustrated some of the partners. What time was available in the process was used to allow the participating families to provide input and suggestions.

The film was another example of the complexities of CBPR. Despite efforts to create opportunities for collaboration and equal involvement, the realities of budgets and production schedules prevented all the partners from having their input incorporated into the film. The FFE researchers who were organizing the project had to push to have the project completed on time and on budget, even if it meant that the process was not as collaborative and inclusive as they had hoped.

The film can be found at: <http://www.familiesfirstedmonton.ualberta.ca/use-research-now/collaboration-partnership>

Knowledge translation activities do not require ethics approval from the university, but should still be guided by good ethical practice.

Creating a knowledge translation product is not just a continuation of the research, but is a new project in itself that come with new problems and issues to be resolved (trying to get at who will participate and all of the issues listed).

Knowledge translation activities allow for creative approaches and applications.

Knowledge translation activities are influenced by scheduling and budgetary considerations that complicate the collaborative process.

Driving Policy Change through an Internal-External Dynamic

FFE partners shared their experiences on how to use the research knowledge generated in FFE. This process of moving knowledge to action was initiated by the partners to ensure that interim findings could be used while waiting for final research questions to be answered.

Partners described an important internal-external dynamic necessary to instigate change within government. Researchers, community, and government partners recognized that bureaucracy—the rigid rules and process that restricted their work—made it difficult to initiate change from within government. Partners explained how external pressure (e.g. media, protests, research) could be used to overcome bureaucracy. This external pressure is most effective when informed by internal insight, which includes knowledge of the context and the diplomacy necessary to advance change and new ideas within government. For example, the media as a form of external pressure can draw attention to issues, yet it can also hamper change efforts by aggravating controversy and thus, halting action. On the other hand, the use of certain forms of external pressure (e.g. research findings) when applied diplomatically, in light of political context, can productively create and contribute to change.

These insights about the internal-external dynamic hold important implications for partners working in all sectors. While partners in community and government hold precious knowledge of the context and diplomacy necessary to further change, researchers must contribute their own scientific knowledge as a form of external pressure.

See: Pullishy, L. (2016). Creating and capitalizing on opportunities to reduce poverty: The power and process of integrated knowledge translation (Masters thesis, University of Alberta). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Internal insight from those working within government should inform external pressure efforts—a politically potent combination.

To initiate or further change within government, external pressure must be used to overcome bureaucracy.

Researchers have the potential to be co-opted by a government agenda and must contribute their scientific knowledge, even if it contravenes broader government direction and priorities.

Weathering Difficulties and Pushing for Change Through Relationships

The relationships among FFE partners were critical to research uptake. In particular, partners felt that their relationships would have a greater impact “than a policy change” because of how they offset some of the challenges created by election cycles and contributed to the sustainability of the partnership. This sustainability ensured partnership work could continue to promote the ultimate goal of the partnership—betterment in the lives of families living in poverty.

Relationships offset the turbulence associated with election cycles three ways. First, relationships among partners expedited partnership work within narrow windows of opportunity created by election cycles. Second, relationships among partners improved the partnership’s strategy and position during times of uncertainty, often leading up to or following an election. Third, relationships among partners prompted a culture shift, wherein partners in all sectors gained an improved understanding of different professional spheres, such as research and government processes. This culture shift created more productive dialogue about policy change and research use.

Although partners found election cycles to be disruptive, they also found election cycles could aid in advancing the partnership agenda. For example, partners could ‘piggyback’ their endeavors to initiatives and priorities that were already proposed or underway within a political term. This helped initiatives promoting the health and well being of low-income families gain traction.

See: Pullishy, L. (2016). Creating and capitalizing on opportunities to reduce poverty: The power and process of integrated knowledge translation (Masters thesis, University of Alberta). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

CBPR relationships are not tangential to the change process; they are an investment that can help weather difficulties throughout the project.

CBPR partners can leverage their relationships to make significant advancements within narrow windows of opportunity imposed by election cycles.

The general public must be involved in efforts to advocate for government action to address the root causes of health inequities contributing to poverty.

Hindsight and Insight

Partnerships and Poverty

When the idea for FFE was first conceived, the project's originators knew that finding the right mix of partners would be crucial to its success. They knew that having all three community-government-university sectors represented was essential and that the expertise, experience, and approach they would bring would make the research rigorous, relevant, and real. They also knew that bringing together such a diverse group for a project of this scope and duration was unusual, which is why they agreed from the outset to devote time and resources to tracking the partnership's progress and success.

FFE's long-term goal of improving the lives of families living in poverty inspired intense commitment from its partners. In doing so, the focus of partners was not so much about community organization, community building, or community development, but on mobilizing against systems of inequity. Their focus was not on the marginalized or vulnerable per se, but on the causes of marginalization and inequity.

Partners intense commitment motivated them to work through issues and challenges that might have proved insurmountable for other partnerships. It inspired an emotional connection to the project and the partnership that helped create a collective identity—one that superseded individuals' organizational identity. Most importantly, it united partners in a way that transcended the lifespan of FFE and has carried over into work on new projects and initiatives.

During the project, partners came away with various insights and learning. Yet at its most basic level, FFE taught partners that collaborations are hard. Organizations have different languages, approaches, and processes. Individuals have different priorities and biases. Emotions run high. Feelings get hurt. People get overwhelmed with frustration and exhaustion. The process at times is dictated by many economic and political realities that are out of the control of any partner. It can be tempting to give up and walk away. Yet with FFE, these frustrations were often also the thing that kept people around. Partners found ways to harness their emotions, respect their differences, and push-pull their way through conflicts and disagreements. What emerged from this collaborative process were respectful, reciprocal relationships that have endured and thrived long after the FFE project officially ended.



Cheryl Gagnier

Social Worker
City of Edmonton

We had a lot of ‘storming and forming’ between the research and how service worked in the real world. There was a tension, because research is all about accuracy and rigor, so you can answer “how do you know what you know?” It takes time. On the other hand, with government and community, we’re about expediency and results. It was a constant negotiation and there was compromise involved.

With collaboration, you realize it’s not just about you and it doesn’t have to be done your way all the time. You had to learn to listen. You had to be able to learn as you go, adapt on the spot, switch gears, shift directions and be okay with that. It’s about trusting in the people you work with and them trusting you back.

FFE was way ahead of its time. Now everyone talks about collective impact and common goals and common processes, but when FFE started those ideas were new. FFE really was the essence of collaboration. I think we all miss that synergy and that intellectual challenge that forced you to look beyond your own perspective. A collaboration experience like this changes how you work, how you see the world and how you see yourself.

The idea of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts was really true with FFE. We really lucked out here in the people that came together for this. It was serendipity that the right people came together at the right time in the right way.

GLOSSARY

The term “FFE” refers to both the CBPR project and the CBRP research partnership. Every effort has been made to provide context that will clarify what the term is describing.

FFE Partnership an intersectoral, long-term, community- based research partnership.

FFE Collaboration Project the Collaboration Project was a parallel project to the FFE randomized controlled trial research project. The FFE Collaboration Project and its learning are the subject of this handbook.

FFE Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) Project the FFE RCT project was an RCT project that examined the comparative effects on families of four service-integration approaches.

Intersectoral refers to the community-government-university sectors that came together to form the FFE Partnership.

Community in the context of the FFE Partnership, community refers to various community agencies and organizations, not-for-profit associations, citizen groups, local funders, and other groups with special knowledge or involvement in the broader community.

Government in the context of the FFE Partnership, government refers to provincial and municipal levels of government.

Partner is used interchangeably to either mean an individual member who represents a particular organization or an organization that made up the FFE partnership.

