

# OFFICE HOURS REPORT

## BENTON, LINCOLN & LINN COUNTIES

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Collaboration barriers include funding, manpower, and administrative capacity.<sup>[1]</sup>
2. Organizations struggle to recruit staff and fill open positions of all types.<sup>[2]</sup>
3. Grants would benefit from onboarding training and simplified reporting systems.<sup>[3]</sup>
4. Grants favor new, innovative programs over ongoing, effective, and proven programs.<sup>[4]</sup>
5. Small organizations are disadvantaged by current grant methods.<sup>[5]</sup>
6. Benton, Lincoln & Linn County organizations are interested in meeting with OHA.<sup>[6]</sup>

### OFFICE HOURS

OPAL hosted a virtual Office Hours session on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Seven grantees from Benton, Lincoln, and Linn Counties were invited to attend (see accompanying Summary Report for full list of invitees). The session lasted one hour, and four organizations attended. This report summarizes the findings from grantee partners during that session.

### ATTENDEE(S)

[Creating Housing Coalition](#) (Linn County)

[Crossroads Communities](#) (Linn County & Statewide)

[Jackson Street Services](#) (Benton County)

[North End Senior Solutions](#) (Lincoln County)

### BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

1. **[Collaboration barriers could be overcome through resources and assistance.](#)** Collaboration is already happening between organizations in Benton, Lincoln, and Linn Counties. Yet, limitations to funding, manpower, and administrative capacity remain as barriers to stronger collaboration.
  - 1.1. Collaboration takes resources, which the already-strained organizations lack. These resource limitations include funding because it's difficult to help groups gather and progress without cash. Lack of manpower and administrative capacity also limit the number of programs a group can run. Most nonprofits are understaffed and already stretched thin, which cuts into their capacity to collaborate.
  - 1.2. Organizations expressed a need for a resource or tool that would help them be more aware of other partners and resources available to them. Sometimes, needs come through their doors, yet they do not have awareness of who might be able to help. North End Senior Solutions expressed a desire for "a resource just to help us resource."

- 1.3. However, strengthening collaboration does not require creating new systems. Organizations stress that there are already a lot of existing coalitions, teams meetings, and needs assessments. The solution could be strengthening existing tools and building on these foundations.
  - 1.3.1. Groups recommend that OHA take a stronger role in leveraging existing coalitions with a membership of providers, bringing in smaller providers, and moving towards a solution.
2. **Organizations face challenges recruiting qualified staff to fill open positions.** Benton, Lincoln, and Linn County organizations have all struggled to find qualified staff for many roles.
  - 2.1. When an organization cannot fill an open position, current staff must take on tasks beyond their own role, effectively taking on the role of 2 (or sometimes even 5) staff members. Covering the day-to-day functions of the organization, in addition to their own tasks, takes away time that experienced staff may otherwise be building collaborative capacity.
    - 2.1.1. Crossroads Coalition has had a regional director position open for a long time yet have been unable to find someone. North End Senior Solutions and Jackson Street Services have similarly been looking for staff with administrative and bookkeeping skills yet have been unable to fill their positions.
  - 2.2. Creating Housing Coalition faced a challenge when a State grant they received required them to learn the data entry system, HMIS. Fortunately, they found success partnering with Easterseals to lend senior volunteers to assist with HMIS data entry. This partnership has been an advantage when they have not been able to find people to fill open roles.
    - 2.2.1. Therefore, challenges in finding and recruiting qualified staff can be a barrier to collaboration. Yet, securing a partnership can be helpful in filling gaps in staffing capacity and expertise.
  - 2.3. The increased costs of services and staffing often requires organizations to offer more than they can afford to recruit new staff. It seems unfair that staff that was hired two years ago for \$16 an hour, and organization has scrimped to bring the wage up to \$16.50, yet the organization now needs to hire new staff at \$17 an hour just to get people in the door. The sudden increases in cost have increased more quickly than funding, creating challenges for recruiting and retaining staff.
3. **Grants and funding opportunities should include onboarding and training for all.** In recent years, OHA has adopted a wide variety of mechanisms and processes for reporting, which has led to confusion, especially among smaller nonprofits.
  - 3.1. OHA's wide variety of grant reporting mechanisms is difficult to navigate or understand. An organization that has been a part of 5 different OHA grants counted a total of up to 7 different reporting mechanisms altogether. Reporting systems have even switched during the grant period, further complicating the reporting process.
  - 3.2. Frequent changes to reporting mechanisms creates a knowledge barrier for smaller nonprofits who do not have experience in navigating the systems, nor the manpower to spend time learning system after system.
  - 3.3. Grantees recommend hosting a collective onboarding meeting for all grantees of each grant. This meeting will frontload education and provide a single opportunity to train everyone about the

process for the grant. Even though some people may consider this hand holding, Crossroads Communities says, “having that little extra bit of support might make a huge difference for nonprofits that aren’t familiar with the process.”

3.3.1. Grant recipient onboarding meetings will strengthen equity and inclusion to reach smaller groups that might not otherwise apply. In addition to giving smaller nonprofits a chance to learn the systems, onboarding meetings will also give grantees a chance to meet each other, collaborate, and strengthen connections.

3.3.2. Teaching people the right reporting methods from the beginning will save time and effort for both the grantees and OHA. If OHA has struggled with grantees submitting reports late, this preliminary onboarding could address this issue by improving common understanding and establishing expectations.

4. **Funding streams should provide more sustainable funds to support ongoing projects.** Currently, many funding streams from OHA are limited to funding brand new programs, and there’s a lack of support for programs already in operation.
  - 4.1. OHA prioritizes funding for new projects, which often develop into great programs. However, funding commonly dries up for these great programs after they have been established. This leads to nonprofits constantly needing to come up with new and innovative programs to be able to maintain the staff that they have nurtured and cultivated.
  - 4.2. OHA’s tendency to fund new programs is also a barrier for organizations who need ongoing funds to support programs already in operation. Being able to get repeat or continued funding is almost an impossible task, the organizations expressed. Exclusively funding new programs doesn’t support existing programs to mature and become more established in the community. Programs need time to become well-known and trusted within the community.
  - 4.3. Organizations express that they would appreciate more ‘keep-up-the-good-work’ funding to recognize the groups already doing great work in their communities.
  - 4.4. At the state level, organizations would like to see more assessment of the efficacy of programs that they fund. Once the effectiveness of programs has been assessed, the State should provide actual funding so that the programs can continue.

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*“OHA is really good about funding great ideas... But when a program turns out that it’s working fantastically, there’s no funding for it, because it’s no longer new.”*

– Crossroads Communities

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5. **Re-assess current grant funding methods to make sure small organizations are not disadvantaged.** Benton, Lincoln and Linn County organizations described the current high requirements for reporting, tracking, and upfront funding, which all disadvantage smaller grantees. Smaller organizations need lower requirements and higher support than their peers.

- 5.1. In general, lowering grant reporting requirements would be helpful in all cases. When grants want to know the outcome for every dollar spent, it becomes challenging for organizations to keep up with the specifics. Reporting requirements must be realistic for the organization's capacity.
  - 5.1.1. If grant funding was set up as contracts instead, it would shift the focus to results rather than tracking every dollar. Tracking deliverables (i.e., how many people are served) would be more useful than tracking every penny spent. The contract methods could include monthly or quarterly check-ins and could cap administrative funds a certain percentage (e.g., 10%).
  - 5.1.2. Another recommendation is for grants to allow organizations to focus on their own strengths and determine what outcomes are realistic for them. Organizations recommend allowing all grant applicants to write their own action plan and define the outcomes they will commit to report on, if awarded.
  - 5.1.3. Specifically, organizations emphasized that reimbursement grants do not work. Smaller organizations who cannot afford the upfront costs are disadvantaged, leading to a model that favors larger agencies. Monthly distributions would be a preferable model compared to retroactive funding.
- 5.2. Small organizations would also benefit from **capacity building support and funds** from OHA. Benton, Lincoln, and Linn County organizations expressed a desire for more state support with capacity building and program policies. When organizations want to develop their capacity, receiving some support is a huge benefit. Support with organizational restructuring would be helpful, for example to expand from a nonprofit board to also bring in administrative staff. Direct program assistance in developing policies would likewise be helpful for organizations looking to expand into new areas, such as constructing affordable housing.
  - 5.2.1. Organizations also expressed that capacity building funds would be useful. Capacity building funds would help organizations learn new programs (like HMIS), hire a new employee, or purchase equipment. These funds should be general use and not have the same level of restriction attached.
- 5.3. The final recommendation was for OHA to develop a tool that organizations could use to find funding resources that they would qualify for. This tool could help organizations navigate all available funding – including large and small, federal, state, and local opportunities. This funding resource could look like a searchable database with tags for different types of funding. It could also include direct support from OHA, and summaries of grant offerings.
  - 5.3.1. Such a resource would benefit smaller organizations especially, who often do not have the manpower to search for funding opportunities. Instead, this resource would bring funding awareness to them.

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*“Grants that allow us to say, ‘this is what we’re good at. This is what we’re doing. These are the outcomes we can offer you.’ That really lets organizations shine.”*

– Jackson Street Services

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6. [Regional partners are open to future engagement with OHA.](#) Benton, Lincoln, and Linn County providers express an interest in partnering with OHA for future meetings and engagement.
  - 6.1. Grantees favor hybrid meetings, because they provide the opportunity to meet face to face while also allowing people not able to travel to join the meeting. However, hybrid meetings must have adequate technology and balance in-person and remote attendees to be effective.
  - 6.2. If OHA is looking for a partner to co-host a meeting, Crossroads Community has volunteered to provide the space for the meeting.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. [Provide resources and support to encourage inter-organization collaboration.](#)
  - 1.1. Target the barriers of funding, manpower, and administrative capacity which limit collaboration.
  - 1.2. Create a resource or tool that can increase organizations' awareness of other groups for potential collaboration.
  - 1.3. OHA should leverage existing coalitions to increase participation and collaboration, rather than creating additional groups.
2. [Provide workforce support and funding to help organizations recruit and retain staff.](#)
  - 2.1. Support organizations to develop partnership that can fill the expertise and manpower gaps in their workforce.
  - 2.2. Ensure that providers can offer sufficient wages to recruit staff, and that these wages do not outpace those of long-term employees.
3. [Grants should include onboarding training for all awardees to educate about the grant requirements and teach the reporting systems.](#)
  - 3.1. Settle on one standard grant reporting mechanism and avoid making changes to the system.
4. [Expand grant opportunities for new projects to include sustainable funding for ongoing programs.](#)
  - 4.1. Offer 'keep-up-the-good-work' funding to recognize groups already doing great work in their communities.
  - 4.2. State-level assessment of program efficacy, with more funding available for effective programs.
5. [Make grants more equitable for smaller nonprofits.](#)
  - 5.1. Lower the grant reporting requirements, move to a contract system based on deliverables, and allow organizations to determine their own deliverables based on their strengths.
  - 5.2. Offer capacity building support and funding for small organizations.
  - 5.3. Develop a tool that organizations can use to navigate and find grants and funding resources.
6. [Engage the organizations of Benton, Lincoln and Linn Counties through hybrid meetings.](#)