Technical Assistance: A High-Touch, High-Impact Community Engagement Model

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My organization, Prevention Insights at the IU Bloomington School of Public Health, works to address the addictions crisis here in Indiana and nationally. I work closely with clients and communities around the state in my role as a Prevention Insights technical assistance specialist. Technical assistance (TA) is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as "the process of providing targeted support to an organization with a development need or problem, which is typically delivered over an extended period of time" (CDC, 2018). Not to be confused with one-off or as-needed tech support, the Prevention Insights TA model is grounded in long-term relationships. We support prevention organizations with "technical assistance, coaching, and support" from the earliest stages of needs assessment, staff and organizational capacity building, and strategic planning; through the implementation of community-based strategies, evaluation, outcome dissemination, and sustainability planning.

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Prevention Insights TA specialists share our expertise in addiction science, evidence-based strategies, and program fidelity, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and our clients' local efforts. We also build fruitful partnerships with our clients as we follow them over months or years, share resources and opportunities, point out themes and takeaways we observe in their work, and explore possible enhancements together. We challenge them to adopt best practices, provide high-quality programs and services to their communities, and achieve measurable outcomes. We celebrate when our clients write a successful grant proposal, gain the support of a county council member, or experience a breakthrough with that disengaged student in the back of the classroom. And we reflect together on complex issues, from local politics and conflicts with partners to the community tragedies of natural disaster, youth overdose or suicide.

In February, I attended an IU Coaching Conversations training aimed at academic advisors and other student-facing professionals. The training was very relevant to my work as a technical assistance specialist. Like students, our TA clients often come to us—and to Indiana University, which we represent—for answers.

Our primary task is to listen closely, explore their questions deeply, provide space for brainstorming, and assist them in recognizing that they and their stakeholders are the experts in identifying community strengths and determining an approach to planning, decision-making, and implementation suited to their local context.

As a premier institution of higher learning, Indiana University has an obligation to ensure that our work contributes to the public good. Our leadership has demonstrated their commitment to this with the IU 2030 Strategic Plan's Goal 3: Service to Our State and Beyond. IU Prevention Insights' intensive, tailored technical assistance model is a high-touch, high-impact approach to community engagement that could be scaled up elsewhere at IU. High-quality TA service provision by IU experts has the potential to benefit professionals and organizations in any sector.

The Prevention Insights TA model also benefits Indiana University. In reference to IU 2030 Goal 2: Transformative Research and Creativity, TA clients—or their partners—could be enlisted in Community-Based Participatory Research (NRC-RIM, n.d.) to further our understanding of community-based processes and strengthen the evidence basis for specific solutions. Formal research aside, the numerous, long-term community connections built through TA service provision afford an invaluable "bird's-eye view" of real communities.Our Prevention Insights team reflects regularly on trends and common challenges we observe across Indiana, continually adding to our collective wisdom on how communities respond to those challenges, what works, and what doesn't. Ultimately, TA service, like many other forms of service, involves its practitioners in community-engaged learning, and this learning can continually inform and improve IU's service to our state.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention CDC (2018). *Technical Assistance* [Video Presentation]. Part of Professional Development 101: The Basics.

National Resource Center for Refugees, Immigrants, and Migrants NRC-RIM (nd). Using Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). University of Minnesota.

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