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# **The Plain Talk Planning Year: Mobilizing Communities to Change**

A Report Prepared for  
The Annie E. Casey  
Foundation

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study of the Plain Talk planning year was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which developed the Plain Talk initiative.

In addition to the authors, several members of the P/PV research staff contributed to this report. Mary Achatz conducted the initial fieldwork and laid the groundwork for the planning-year study. Annick Barker provided valuable assistance in protocol development, data collection and analysis, and report writing. Danista Hunte and Julie Rainbow also assisted in data collection.

We would like to thank our P/PV colleagues for their helpful critiques of the manuscript: Gary Walker, Mary Achatz, Amy Jordan, Don Rojas, Natalie Jaffe and Jean Grossman. Michael Callaghan copy edited the draft, and Audrey Walmsley and Maxine Sherman processed it for production. Carol Eresian proofed the final document. We thank them for their support and assistance.

This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of the six Plain Talk sites. We wish to thank the members of the Plain Talk planning teams for talking with us about their experiences, perceptions and hopes for Plain Talk. In particular, we wish to thank the community residents on the planning teams for sharing with us the depth of their concern for the youth in their communities and their commitment to Plain Talk.

We are especially grateful to the project managers and Plain Talk staff in each of the sites: Annika Warren, Petrice Sams-Abiodun, Marta Flores, Beto Escamilla, Rosalie Behning, Tom Slattery, Lisa Corbin and Cheryl Boykins. Their cooperation and assistance were instrumental to this study, and they gave generously of their time throughout the year despite their demanding schedules. Their openness and candor about the issues they faced during the planning year provided us with invaluable insights into the challenges that underlie efforts to launch a genuine community-based effort. We wish them continued success as they move into the implementation phase.

## FOREWORD

In 1993 The Annie E. Casey Foundation made a substantial commitment to the goal of reducing adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease by investing in the design and development of our Plain Talk Initiative. Plain Talk seeks to address these problems among a community's youth by organizing and mobilizing community residents to change the attitudes and practices of adults, teenagers and service providers in ways that directly support wider use of contraception and protection. The Foundation developed Plain Talk after a long and thoughtful process that drew from various sources--the accumulating experiences of funders, current research, our own work with communities, conversations with young people, and the lessons we'd learned through our prior work in comprehensive change efforts to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children and families.

These lessons and experiences told us that the critical goal of reducing teen pregnancy and disease required a rethinking of traditional approaches. They told us that we needed to go beyond prepackaged curricula, standardized messages and single-strand strategies; that we must pursue a direction that reflects the Foundation's basic principles.

Specifically:

Because we believe it is critical to address the needs of adolescents in the context of their families and communities, Plain Talk builds upon and nurtures strong relationships between youth and the other important adults in their lives--particularly adults in their own family.

Because we believe that collaboration is a powerful tool for effective reform, Plain Talk requires that community residents work in conjunction with representatives of public and private agencies to craft the initiative's messages and activities.

Because we believe that community residents should have the opportunity, authority and resources to make their own decisions, Plain Talk mobilizes community residents, together with community-based organizations, to develop their own multiyear strategy for implementing the initiative.

Because we believe that communities should base their decisions about programs and policies on real data about real kids and real services, each site began the initiative by conducting its own community survey, designed to gather information about local beliefs, attitudes and knowledge about adolescent sexual behaviors, and the provision and accessibility of community services in the area of pregnancy and disease prevention.

These principles undergird each of The Annie E. Casey Foundation's system change initiatives, whether the focus is mental health, family foster care, community development, job creation, education or juvenile justice.

To capture the dynamics of these principles in the context of an evaluation is a difficult proposition, but one that is essential if we are to learn from the efforts of communities struggling with social change on behalf of children and families. We believe that Public/Private Ventures, through its multifaceted evaluation design that integrates information from surveys, community health statistics and ethnographic research, offers an approach that will help us better understand what happened as a result of the Plain Talk initiative, why it happened and how it occurred.

Plain Talk is now almost two years old, with sites having completed a year of planning and an initial year of implementation. We feel quite positive that this report captures the flavor of the initiative's planning year. We agree with Public/Private Ventures' conclusion, based on independent data collection and analysis, that the Plain Talk sites are mobilizing their communities and show promise for carrying the initiative forward. Clearly it is early in the implementation process, but we are optimistic that these modest achievements bode well for the future of the initiative.

Everyone involved in Plain Talk--the communities, Public/Private Ventures and The Annie E. Casey Foundation--hopes that readers of this report will come to better understand the intent and progress of the initiative. We all welcome your comments, observations and questions.

Tony Cipollone  
Associate Director  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The past several decades have produced powerful evidence that social programs focused on reducing specific problems of individuals are not effective over the long term in either changing individual lives or improving the community conditions that helped shape the problems. Policymakers and intervention designers are therefore moving toward initiatives that attempt to improve the lives of individuals by reshaping key social elements in their communities. This usually involves a shift from reliance on strategies designed and operated by "experts" toward reliance on approaches that involve local residents and organizations.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Plain Talk initiative takes such an approach. It seeks to address the problems of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease among a community's youth by organizing and mobilizing community residents to change the attitudes and practices of adults, teenagers and service providers in ways that directly support wider use of contraception.

The Plain Talk approach has three critical, underlying principles: (1) community residents are the primary stakeholders in changing community behavior and, as such, must play a critical role in the decision-making process; (2) there must be strong consensus among the residents about what changes are necessary; and (3) communities must have access to, or the means to obtain, reliable information about the problems and practices they are trying to address. Plain Talk's attempt to create a new balance of power among community residents and social service institutions, and its consensus-building approach to community involvement are highly innovative. The project's design challenges many of the traditional precepts on which social service initiatives have been developed and structured.

The six Plain Talk communities' experiences in implementing these principles during their initial planning year were documented by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), the project's evaluator. P/PV's report describes the sites and their planning processes, and documents key issues that arose during implementation of the Plain Talk principles.

P/PV found that during the planning year, the six communities made substantial progress toward realization of the principles. They attracted to their planning teams representatives of public and community agencies, health care providers and clergy. In short, community residents were central to shaping the Plain Talk message and implementation strategy. Each site's process of developing consensus around Plain Talk's message varied, of course, largely depending on its residents' attitudes toward teenage sexuality and behavior. At the end of the planning year, only one site had been unable to move forward.

Finally, the "mapping" of each community's attitudes, behavior and services by means of formal surveys--one of the key activities required by the Casey Foundation--proved effective not only as a means of building reliable information about the community, but also as a device for involving residents in deliberations and decision-making.

The following sections of this summary provide a brief overview of the sites, what Plain Talk asked them to do, and the major events in the Plain Talk planning process, and discusses the three critical principles' implementation and their implications for community change initiatives in general.

## THE PLAIN TALK COMMUNITIES AND THEIR AGENDA

The six Plain Talk sites are neighborhoods in Atlanta, Hartford, Indianapolis, New Orleans, San Diego and Seattle. The proportion of poor people in these neighborhoods ranges from 25 percent in Seattle to 86 percent in New Orleans. Two sites comprise low-income housing developments. Two sites are predominantly African American, two are mainly white (with substantial non-white minorities), one is mainly Latino, and one is half African American and half Latino.

In each site, the lead agency hired a project manager and proceeded to oversee accomplishment of the milestones and tasks set out by the Casey Foundation to guide the planning year: convene a core group of community residents, service providers, clergy and agency staff; conduct a comprehensive assessment of community needs and resources (referred to as community mapping); formulate goals and develop a Plain Talk message; begin to build community awareness and support; and plan a strategy to be implemented over the succeeding three years. The Foundation stipulated a timeline for the accomplishment of these tasks and provided extensive technical assistance and training workshops to the community residents involved.

At the end of one year of planning, four of the sites had their implementation plans approved; for another site, the planning year was extended. The sixth site, Indianapolis, continued to struggle with difficulties that threatened its continued participation in the project. (Indeed, subsequent to the planning year, this site was dropped from the demonstration.)

## THE PLANNING TEAMS' TASKS

Involving Service Providers, Clergy and Other Professionals. The six sites encountered no significant difficulty recruiting representatives from a full range of traditional service providers. In some sites, local politicians and other public figures became involved as well. Sites were also able to engage local health care providers willing to work with the planning groups to find ways of improving services to youth.

A few sites were able to win the active involvement of prominent clergy, many of whom responded primarily out of concern about AIDS. In other sites, church leaders were more reluctant to support Plain Talk; in one site, church-affiliated individuals associated with the lead agency were so opposed to Plain Talk's acceptance that many teenagers are sexually active that the agency ultimately withdrew from the project.

Involving Community Residents. All the sites succeeded in recruiting a core group of residents to the planning teams and involving them in significant roles during the planning process. However, two of the three sites with diverse ethnic groups had difficulty involving representatives of all groups, and involving males proved to be a challenge in all but one site.

Residents were recruited through the personal and professional contacts of agency representatives and the project manager, through residents' outreach to other residents, and through Plain Talk events. Weekly or hourly stipends were used as an incentive. Relying on a housing development's tenant association as a source of participants paid off only if the association was cohesive and had high status in the larger community.

Securing male involvement was problematic. Frequently, men are not nominal lessees of public housing units where they reside, and are therefore not members of the tenants' associations that, in two sites, were the initial source of residents for the planning teams. And in most sites, males had more pressing needs for employment and also tended to regard teen sexuality as an issue best handled by women. Two of the sites were able to overcome these barriers through intensive outreach and by connecting potential male team members with employment and health services.

Bringing in members of different ethnic groups was the greatest challenge. One of the three ethnically diverse sites addressed the issue early in the process--by hiring a diverse staff and doing very aggressive outreach--and achieved broad representation on its planning team. In two sites, representation of all groups was not achieved during the planning year. The sources of their difficulty included language barriers, a dissonance between Plain Talk's message and cultural norms and beliefs, and a history of distrust between groups. The project staffs in these sites are continuing to pursue involvement of all groups.

The process of achieving consensus on the Plain Talk message was relatively smooth in four sites: two comprise relatively homogeneous populations whose attitudes toward teenage sexuality are consonant with those of Plain Talk. Two others comprise heterogeneous populations whose diversity of views was not represented on the planning teams; if these sites eventually succeed in involving all segments of the community, the consensus-building process will likely recommence.

A fifth site is entirely Latino and its key residents favor abstinence before marriage; however, consensus on the Plain Talk goal was eventually achieved. In the sixth site, the planning group achieved consensus, but several members of the lead agency's board held strongly conservative religious views that precipitated the agency's withdrawal from the project and, subsequently, the site's removal from Plain Talk altogether.

Promoting Resident Leadership. In all sites except New Orleans (where resident leadership has been developed over many years), the first months of the planning year were controlled largely by agency representatives. But as the year progressed, community residents played increasingly important roles either as the numerically dominant force on the planning team

(four sites) or as members of a separate resident-dominated planning team that gradually took over project leadership (two sites).

In most sites, residents initially had no experience working as partners with professionals from public or nonprofit agencies, and lacked the confidence to exercise active leadership. Project managers used a variety of strategies to promote the development of skills and confidence within the group so that the residents could interact on a more equal basis with the agency representatives. These strategies included:

- Training workshops (in communication and group process skills, leadership, etc.), provided by the Casey Foundation, to increase the residents' skills in working in groups and blending consensus-building with timely and effective decision-making;
- Continuous mentoring, guidance and encouragement; and
- Establishment of separate teams of residents in which they learned management techniques, developed confidence and gradually assumed project leadership.

Using Information-Gathering to Propel the Process. One of Plain Talk's major early tasks was community mapping. Residents were employed to conduct: (1) a formal survey of community youth and adults, querying them on their attitudes and behaviors with regard to teen sexuality, contraceptive use, and communication among them on these issues; and (2) site visits to and interviews with providers of health services and retail outlets with regard to the availability of services and contraceptive devices.

This community-based information and data collection activity served several purposes. First, training residents to collect the data proved a good tool for recruiting and involving them in the planning process. It provided a highly engaging learning experience that increased residents' understanding of their community and confirmed, strengthened or--in at least one site--helped to create community acceptance of the urgent need to deal with their teenagers' risk behaviors realistically.

In addition, the detailed survey results made it possible for planning teams to tailor their implementation plans to meet the varying needs of specific groups. Finally, disseminating the results throughout the community provided the teams with experience that will help them disseminate the Plain Talk message itself during the project's implementation phase.

## LESSONS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE INITIATIVES

Plain Talk is in its very early stages, and therefore can support only preliminary insights into the model and the broader approach it represents. It is also unique, and can only support modest generalizations at this stage. Nonetheless, it seems to P/PV that it is important to begin trying to draw out such generalizations at the early stages if Plain Talk is to be a useful guide to other community involvement and mobilization initiatives. These early considerations will also help to define more carefully some of the key issues that will warrant close examination over the ensuing years of Plain Talk's implementation.



## Community Residents As Stakeholders and Decision-Makers

In general, the attempt to involve community residents in significant roles in planning the Plain Talk initiative was successful. (Incorporating diverse ethnic groups did prove to be difficult in the most "mixed" sites, as is discussed in the next section.) All Plain Talk sites established a cohesive core group of residents who played a major role in shaping the Plain Talk message, and in deciding on a general implementation strategy.

Achieving this required creativity, flexibility, training and skilled direction from a project manager. For example, involving both male and female adults, and teen residents, demanded both creativity on the part of the lead agencies and project directors, and the flexibility to address barriers to resident involvement, such as housing authority rules, stipends to cover travel and child care, and in one case, getting access to health services and employment that participants needed.

But involving residents as decision-makers has highlighted important structural, training and process issues that are likely to emerge in any community involvement initiative. In most of the communities, for example, residents were inexperienced in working as equals with--or as leaders of--professional representatives from public or nonprofit service agencies, and were often reluctant to take on active leadership roles until structural changes were made to facilitate such action. The alignment of the relationship between residents and agency professionals continues to evolve at the six sites, and warrants further attention to learn how the transformation in the power balance between residents and professionals is most effectively achieved.

In addition, many residents lacked the skills necessary to any effort that requires working in groups, seeking consensus and making timely decisions. In some sites, residents had prior experience in such work and participated in the process more easily. In other sites, training workshops increased their skills. In all the sites, ongoing mentoring, guidance and leadership by skilled project managers seemed critical.

The Plain Talk sites have, for the most part, avoided one of the pitfalls experienced by other resident-driven initiatives--becoming so enmeshed in the process of forming a group that concrete progress toward the goals of the initiative is significantly impeded. This appeared to be primarily due to the fact that the Casey model is activity-oriented, with a timeline built around concrete milestones and tasks. This approach helped prevent communities from getting bogged down in process and personalities. The first-year milestones gave residents opportunities to be involved in concrete activities, and thus created both opportunities for developing residents' leadership and a way to channel their enthusiasm and need to "do something" right away.

As the Plain Talk initiative continues, the opportunity exists to learn a great deal about how shifts in power relations affect the continuing commitment and effectiveness of agency representatives and other community professionals; about the type and kind of training and skill-

building needed as residents become increasingly active planners and decision-makers; and about the need for and utility of outside assistance over time in making decisions about technical assistance and training, and the shaping and monitoring of activities and milestones.

### Community Consensus As a Mechanism of Change

For communities to effect change, some degree of consensus is required about both the problems and their solutions. Even in an initiative like Plain Talk, where the problem is clearly defined (teen pregnancy and STDs) and a basic solution has been identified (increased use of contraception among sexually active teens), achieving consensus within the planning teams has been a challenge. Undoubtedly, this will also be true in the broader community.

Fostering a sense of shared values and goals among both the residents and the community agencies has required ongoing dialogue and discussion, and careful attention to linking the goals of the initiative to the values held by the communities' dominant groups and individuals. This has proved to be most challenging in sites where segments of the population hold values at odds with the initiative's goal.

This difficulty points to a lesson valuable for all community-based efforts: while residents of impoverished communities share economic problems, they are by no means socially or culturally monolithic. These neighborhoods face the same tensions over diverse values as more affluent communities. As a result, significant effort is required to ensure that all critical segments of the community are involved in the decision-making process, and can at least understand the rationale behind the initiative's goals and activities. It may not be possible to achieve consensus on some sensitive topics in all communities involved in a change effort; ultimately, this reality might limit the initiative's potential effectiveness.

As Plain Talk moves into implementation, there will be continuing opportunities to learn how to achieve consensus among culturally diverse groups (and whether it can be achieved), and to examine the involvement in and effect on the consensus-building process by the value-shapers in the community (e.g., clergy, the media, community leaders, etc.).

### Community Access to Information

There is increasing recognition that for community residents to be active participants in solving community social problems, they must have access to or the ability to collect credible information about the prevailing conditions, behaviors and attitudes that are targets of change. In this regard, the Plain Talk initiative is an exemplar of how information can act as both an instrument of resident empowerment and involvement, and as a tool for social change.

While resident-based information-gathering proved an invaluable part of the planning year, it also holds lessons about the special techniques and additional resources necessary to carry it out. Because of the technical nature of systematic data collection, analysis and interpretation, and the inexperience in these activities of most community members--professionals as well as

residents--this strategy required a significant amount of training and technical assistance. The Foundation hired a research firm to work with communities in choosing the tools and formulating plans for data collection, overseeing the data collection and conducting the necessary data analyses. This was a time- and labor-intensive effort, requiring special approaches and a focus on community relations that are unusual for survey efforts. However, given the multiple utility of this community mapping effort, other community involvement and mobilization initiatives would be well-advised to devote the time and resources necessary to these activities. As Plain Talk continues into implementation, an important issue to follow will be how the sites and the Foundation devise further strategies to meet the continuing need for credible information to use in the monitoring of progress.

In sum, the Plain Talk communities took on an enormous challenge during their first year, and made significant progress toward achieving their goals. Five of the six sites met all the objectives of the planning year and moved on to implementation. It appears from the initial year's experience that Plain Talk is a promising example of the community involvement/mobilization approach, both in terms of its accomplishments and its usefulness as a vehicle for learning.

