Effective Strategic Planning Handout

Strategic planning is a continuous analytic process used to create a focus for activities and resources to achieve specific results, and to develop shared responsibility for achieving those results. The process provides a systematic way for an organization or system to express its vision, describe its values, state or update its mission, identify strengths and weaknesses, and develop and accomplish short- and long-term goals.

At its core, a strategic plan is a road map for getting where you want to be. It assumes you want to go somewhere and get there in a timely fashion while using the fewest resources necessary. While there are many strategic planning models, and no single model or process is the perfect fit for every situation, effective strategic planning processes have common features, and they address the following questions:

- Where are We Now?
- Where Do We Want to Be?
- What Specific Policies, Practices, Programs or Other Activities Will Be Implemented to Get Us There?
- Are We Following Our Designated Road Map and Achieving Our Expected Results?

One of the core features of an effective strategic planning process is its ongoing and cyclical nature. Effective strategic planning is not a linear process; rather, it continuously monitors progress in achieving expected results, and it reexamines problems and needs, internal and external conditions, and the fit and adequacy of solutions on a routine and ongoing basis. Information on implementation progress and problems, and new or emerging conditions, is fed back into the planning process so refinements or adjustments can be made on a regular basis, thereby maximizing the plan’s effectiveness. A sound strategic plan is dynamic rather than static, and two hallmarks of an effective strategic planning process are ongoing learning and continuous quality improvement.

Indeed, an effective strategic planning process uses data and analysis in several important ways. Research, statistical analysis and other background materials are relied upon to help define the current environment from an objective standpoint and to better understand and prioritize problems and needs (i.e., crime problems, system inefficiencies, gaps in services, targets for reforms). An in-depth understanding of problems and needs is essential if cost-effective solutions are to be identified and implemented. Data also are important for monitoring progress in implementing the plan, and to document how well the plan mitigates identified problems and needs. Monitoring implementation in a systematic, data-driven fashion, is critical, as deviations from the plan are likely to occur, and identifying problems before they become intractable so corrective action can be taken is the key to maximizing success. Outcome evaluation to determine the effects of constituent programs and the overall impact of the plan is equally important. Hence, formative and summative evaluation should be a core feature of the plan, and evaluation capacity building investments have to be made when existing capabilities are insufficient for the plan’s assessment needs. Simply put, an effective strategic planning process is data driven, and a strategic plan should always be subject to revision when new information makes doing so appropriate.
At the state level, effective strategic planning means that state agencies work with one another across traditional boundaries and stovepipes, to foster meaningful relationships at the state level, and also with stakeholders at the local level. This helps to make the plan realistic and workable. There is always tension between the comprehensiveness and manageability of a strategic plan — that is, the more a plan must cover, the greater the risk it will lose focus and the more difficult it is to successfully implement\(^2\) — so stakeholder representation, relationships, and collaboration are essential. Moreover, a gap almost always exists between expectation and authority. On the one hand, comprehensive strategic plans must provide a policy and programming blueprint not only for multiple state and local criminal justice agencies, but for other organizations outside of the justice system who nonetheless provide services to criminal justice system clients. The planning process can address these challenges and help mitigate their potential impact by promoting collaboration between state and local agencies and among community members and neighborhood institutions. Through state coordination, multiple and varied organizations and funding streams can be leveraged in a manner that maximizes efficiency and impact.

Strategic planning initiatives require inclusion of stakeholders early in the process. Stakeholders are those who may be affected by or have an effect on an effort, including those who increase the credibility of your efforts; implement the interventions central to the effort; or advocate for changes to institutionalize the effort. They have the information you need, or other important resources for solving the problem. Getting and keeping key stakeholders on board is one of the most important aspects of any project.

Widespread stakeholder representation is needed to build support and commitment to the effort, and because differing perspectives can help identify improved solutions. It also creates connections among diverse groups that might not otherwise interact, thereby increasing the probability the plan will produce desired results. Indeed, turf issues are a significant potential barrier to implementing a strategic plan, particularly when multiple organizations are involved, and stakeholders must be willing to view the system from perspectives other than own. Building the relationships needed to achieve the collaboration needed to make constructive long-term changes in the system is an important element in overcoming territorial issues. All stakeholders must have access to information regarding the planning initiative and believe that the process will either benefit them individually or better the community as a whole. This, like creating an infrastructure to support the planning process, will foster substantive change, as well as the institutionalization of collaboration and other system improvements that transcend the planning process itself.

Involvement of high ranking officials is critical, as strategic plans should be developed by those with the authority and responsibility to carry out the plan and achieve its intended results. Additionally, when high ranking officials, rather than their designees or staff, are directly involved, it sends a signal to the entire stakeholder community of the importance of the planning process. In essence, these high-ranking officials function as a policy team, convened for the purpose of forging a common vision and making strategic decisions based on the best available data and information about problems that will be addresses and solutions that will be put in place across stakeholder agencies or organizations.\(^3\)

Effective leadership is another important component of an effective strategic planning process, particularly when planning involves a system or network involving multiple organizations. Effective strategic planning requires leaders who see the value of collaboration and system-wide perspectives, and are willing to step out of the predefined roles and solitary perspectives that often come from traditional organizational boundaries. It also requires leaders who will devote time and effort to the process and who will use their standing in the system to inspire their peers to actively engage in the planning process and collaborate for the larger good.

Leaders must have competencies in and be able to inspire in others task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors.\(^4\) Task-oriented behaviors are focused on facilitating goal achievement, such as identifying roles and responsibilities, and putting plans into action.\(^5\) Relationship-oriented behaviors place a greater focus on building relationships,
motivating and inspiring others, and addressing adaptive challenges, such as those that emerge with turf issues, changes in traditional roles, and new ways of doing business. **Effective leaders cultivate a collaborative and inclusive culture, establish ground rules, hold stakeholders accountable for their roles and responsibilities in developing in implementing the plan, and value and effectively use data, performance metrics, and other information.**

Successful strategic planning also incorporates capacity building because it facilitates successful implementation of the plan and the institutionalization of system improvements, even when other external forces, such as available resources and political climates, inevitably change. Capacity building in areas such as data development, information sharing, evidence-based programming, evaluation and interdisciplinary collaboration provides a host of benefits, many of which can transcend the planning process through long-term institutionalization. Reaching out to individuals or agencies that have not had a place at the table in traditional justice planning efforts can reap many benefits too; hence, deliberate outreach should be part of the planning process, and state leadership can help ensure that communication channels are created and maintained.

**Strategic Planning within State Administering Agencies (SAAs)**

State Administering Agencies (SAA) have been a locus of statewide criminal justice strategic planning since the mid 1980s under the federal Byrne Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) and its predecessor block grant programs. For more than 30 years, SAAs have been engaged in coordinated and transparent strategic planning that guides the implementation of structural reforms that improve the administration of justice, while saving taxpayer money. With a structure and process that varies by state, SAAs use strategic planning to analyze crime trends, evaluate the priorities of all segments of the criminal justice system, set out a plan for reducing crime and victimization, and guide the use of the grant funds.

Arguably, the most effective strategic planning processes within SAAs have been based upon input from a core planning team that consists of the SAA director and relevant executive staff and a wide range of stakeholders representing all components of the criminal justice system, the behavioral health system, and other important constituency groups. These include: municipal, county and state level law enforcement, including jail administrators; prosecution; public defense; the judiciary, including court clerks; community corrections, including pretrial services, probation and parole; the state prison system; reentry; state- and local-level substance abuse and mental health agencies; the faith community; victim advocates; and even members of the public. Geographic diversity is important so that both urban and rural perspectives and issues are represented. And as mentioned above, the direct involvement of agency directors and high-ranking policy officials rather than designees or staff is critical.

Ad hoc work groups consisting of policy, practice and data experts from across the criminal justice and behavioral health systems can be important assets to the core planning team throughout the strategic planning process. These experts can be important sources of data and other information that can help inform the planning process, and with their expertise and relationships with line-level management and staff, they can be conduits for the implementation of the plan in practical settings. In essence, these work groups function as both an expert source of information and an implementation team for the core members of the strategic planning group.

State Statistical Analysis Centers (SACs) frequently have played a role in supporting the planning process carried out by SAAs through the provision of data and analysis, the translation of scientific research findings for application in policy and practice, and the assessment of strategy and program results. Many SACs are located within an SAA, so their relationships with SAAs coupled with their expertise makes them valuable assets at virtually every stage of the planning process, from needs assessment through evaluation.
Empirical evidence suggests that the statewide strategic planning process embedded within SAAs has made a positive difference in criminal justice systems across the country. In a national evaluation of the Byrne grant program published in 1997, researchers found that strategic planning conducted by SAAs resulted in better use of resources, as well as system improvements in coordination and cooperation. With Executive leadership and support on the part of each state’s Governor, and the involvement of the Governor’s designated Criminal Justice Policy Advisor (CJPA), the strategic planning platform provided by the SAAs arguably will become even more effective.

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1 Adapted from the National Criminal Justice Association, National Criminal Justice Planning Center. http://www.ncjp.org/strategic-planning
3 Center for Effective Public Policy (2006). Getting it Right, Collaborative Problem Solving for Criminal Justice. Center for Effective Public Policy, Silver Spring, MD.
7 The Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program (Byrne JAG) is the nation’s cornerstone crime-fighting program, supporting the federal government’s role in spurring innovation, as well as testing and replicating evidence-based practices in crime control and prevention nationwide.
8 The leadership and staff of state administering agencies (SAAs) are as varied in their makeup and talent mix as the size, shape, weather, geography, and demographics of the states and territories where they are located. Each SAA has unique local legislative requirements, local expectations and ways of doing business.
9 Statistical Analysis Centers (SACs) perform a variety of activities including collecting, analyzing, and distributing criminal justice data, conducting policy-relevant research, and designing and implementing automated information systems. Supported in part by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, SACs play an important role in development of criminal and juvenile justice policy at the state and local levels. Their research provides evidence that policymakers can use to guide their decision-making. By furthering the use of evidence-based practices in their states, SACs promote the effective and efficient administration of criminal and juvenile justice. There are currently SACs in 51 states and territories. http://www.jrsa.org/sac/