

WHEN GOVERNMENT GETS IT RIGHT: HOW A STRATEGIC VISIONING PROCESS ALIGNED NESTED GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS TO CHAMPION LOCAL RELEVANCE AND DETERMINATION

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Abstract

This theme issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* addresses government/civic partnerships. Do government services always orient toward hierarchies of domination? Our answer is a resounding no. This article offers as evidence the actions of one government funder that removed hierarchical barriers, working in partnership with diverse grantees to envision a program that prioritizes community relevance and participation. Even as our article revolves around a strategic visioning event, it is a culmination of a government funder living out its guiding principles of mutual respect, joint problem solving, and valuing diversity, as well as the values, experiences, and collaborative spirit that diverse grantees brought. Our collective stories offer a clear example of how a partnership-based government program can engage and promote the strengths, needs, and priorities of the community not only because it is the appropriate and respectful approach, but also because it leads to stronger program results.

Keywords: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education; SNAP-Ed; Strategic Visioning; cross-government partnerships; Tribal partnerships

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BACKGROUND

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) is a federally funded grant program promoting evidence-based nutrition education and obesity prevention interventions directed at persons eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides administrative oversight and determines national policies and procedures for SNAP-Ed (Chipman, n.d.). With a vision statement of “No Americans should have to go hungry” (U. S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2020), FNS works to end hunger and obesity, administering 15 federal nutrition assistance programs including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), SNAP, and school meals. FNS works with state and Tribal governments, whose members in turn work with public, private, and non-profit partners to increase food security and reduce hunger by providing children and economically disadvantaged people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education (U. S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2020). State agencies responsible for administering SNAP receive funding to conduct nutrition education/obesity prevention in their states. These agencies in turn contract with public and private organizations such as public health departments, land-grant universities, food banks, Tribal Nations, and non-profits to deliver SNAP-Ed.

The bi-partisan Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), with policies aimed at ensuring that every American child has access to healthy foods and balanced, nutritious meals, also included supports for the SNAP nutrition education program (U. S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2014). The HHFKA transformed SNAP-Ed from a nutrition education grants program to a nutrition education and obesity prevention grants program. In response to HHFKA’s call for obesity prevention, FNS developed guidelines for a more balanced approach to include comprehensive multi-level interventions (individual education combined with changes to the settings that

can promote individuals' ability to make healthy choices) and to use community and public health approaches to promote policy, systems, and environmental changes. The HHFKA also provided multi-year funding for SNAP-Ed (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011), a critical advantage for implementing comprehensive interventions.

Recently published research shows the importance of the HHFKA legislation for children living in poverty (Kenney et al., 2020). Researchers used a time series analysis to explore obesity trends of over 173,000 youth at three points in time prior to and three points in time after passage of the legislation. While the authors found no significant relationship between the legislation and childhood obesity trends overall, the risk of obesity for children in poverty decreased significantly each year after the act's passage. Obesity prevalence would have been 47 percent higher in 2018 without HHFKA (Kenney et al., 2020).

The FNS guidelines in response to HHFKA are the contexts for state agencies' efforts to transform SNAP-Ed in practice to include changes in policies, systems and environments using public health approaches. What follows is Minnesota's story about how government can partner with diverse grantees to effectively address seemingly intractable problems like childhood obesity, food insecurity, and food access. The complexities of working within nested federal, state, and Tribal governments is amplified in Minnesota, where seven sovereign Tribal Nations, an Indian Tribal Organization, and a land-grant university must work together as grantees for one state SNAP-Ed program.

MINNESOTA SNAP-ED STORY

While this article highlights a strategic visioning process, our work of building relationships and trust was ongoing. For example, partly in response to shifting guidance

for SNAP-Ed programs, in 2015 the Minnesota Department of Human Services (MN DHS) restructured how it administered the SNAP-Ed program by adding two full-time staff, enabling the Department to put its partnership-based values into practice. As the state agency for SNAP-Ed, MN DHS strengthened its focus on providing support and training/technical assistance to SNAP-Ed grantees, and functioned as a network convener in addition to ensuring baseline compliance with program requirements. MN DHS also treats SNAP-Ed grantees as solely qualified to perform the work - eliminating the requirement of competitive requests for proposals. Reducing competition for limited resources has been an important component of trust building. Additionally, in 2017, MN DHS began contracting directly with each Tribal Nation, rather than treating them as subcontractors of a pass-through entity. This re-structure allowed the Tribal grantees to set and direct their own collaboration and communication with the University of Minnesota Extension (hereafter called Extension) and with MN DHS.

In essence, MN DHS established a baseline level of trust by taking a stance of listening to the grantees rather than simply telling them what to do. The strategic visioning and planning process elevated trust and relationships not just with MN DHS but across diverse grantees as well. When MN DHS brought the grantees together, they encouraged everyone to attend with equal ownership of the process. In the invitation, they reiterated the message that together, we will create a ten-year vision for Minnesota SNAP-Ed that both aligns with FNS guidance and addresses grantees' community priorities and programming strengths. The result is a statewide vision that values co-learning and mutual benefit, with a commitment to incorporating community/cultural theories of change, participant voice, and community engagement.

The remainder of the article shares stories from the authors' three perspectives: the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Tribal Nations, and Extension. Representatives from each entity share their own stories, using their voices. Together, the stories offer unique and collective experiences of the visioning process, and

demonstrate how the vision directly affected grantees by giving them guidance and discretion to more effectively address health and well-being for SNAP-eligible families and the communities in which they live.

Minnesota Department of Human Services

The Department of Human Services Economic Opportunity and Nutrition Assistance Division operates under five guiding principles in an effort to form meaningful and constructive partnerships. The five principles are: Mutual Respect, Open Communication, Joint Problem Solving, Valuing Diversity, and an Ethical Code of Conduct. Of these five, the three that we believe had the most significant impact on the visioning project were Mutual Respect, Joint Problem Solving, and Valuing Diversity. These guiding principles informed our strategic planning as well as how we selected the consultant who would facilitate the visioning process. An historical adherence to these principles formed the groundwork to make this visioning process possible.

In working together with mutual respect, we recognize and value the unique knowledge, abilities, and independence of each grantees' staff members, and of each person served by that entity. MN DHS is committed to treating all persons with equity, and we maintained credibility by matching actions with words. We believe we can arrive at the best solution to any situation collectively, through a joint approach to problem solving. We aim to promote an environment in which MN DHS and our partners will be open to change and can work together in exploring options and developing mutually agreeable solutions, within the parameters set by legislation.

As an ally in state government, MN DHS is responsible for supporting the diverse cultures, perspectives, and abilities of people living in poverty. MN DHS supports the value of all forms of diversity as community and individual assets, and ensures that we portray this diversity of people in our work and daily decision-making. Driven both by values and by statute, MN's SNAP-Ed program and grantee structure is uniquely

organized; the state holds individual contracts with nine grantees: a land-grant university extension program, seven sovereign Tribal Nations, and an Indian Tribal Organization.

Our home base, the Economic Assistance and Employment Supports Division of programs within MN DHS recognizes the sovereign status of the Tribal Nations by establishing a government-to-government relationship with each Tribe, as directed by Governor Walz's Executive Order 19-24 (2019). In 2017, the State of Minnesota changed the way it contracts with the Tribes for the SNAP-Ed program to contracting directly with Tribal Nations (Why Treaties Matter, 2020). Prior to this redesign, Tribes operated as sub-grantees of an umbrella Indian Tribal Organization and had limited self-determination about program design and finances. Now, Tribes design their own SNAP-Ed plans, setting the direction of work that develops from the inside out. With these rich and unique community-based initiatives, Tribal SNAP-Ed programs not only contribute directly to the overarching statewide goals; they also lay the platform for locally driven health outcomes.

To us, the most critical task of the visioning process was identifying how to foster communication and facilitate networking among all grantees - unifying work across the grantees to become one Minnesota SNAP-Ed program. The journey to a mutually beneficial government-to-government relationship offered lessons that were foundational to our partnership approach. When there is a strong, shared sense of purpose, greater connections are possible across individual grantee outcomes and we can begin to work toward collective impacts.

American Indians on and off Tribal lands in Minnesota are underserved by mainstream programs including SNAP-Ed, due to a lack of culturally relevant services and mistrust of policies of the past and present. With our partnership with Tribes and American Indian agencies, there has been an increase in culturally relevant SNAP-Ed programs for

American Indians. The Tribes and American Indian agencies often hire community members who are representative of the American Indian culture and know the life realities of those served. As a result, they are able to identify the gaps in services, fill those needs, and build on community strengths.

To meet the challenge of building a single state program, we took our learnings from our direct collaboration with Tribal Nations. With these learnings, and guided by the five core principles, we convened a joint meeting to create a shared vision that would be meaningful and impactful for diverse grantees. The Department staff attempted to live out our values in building the logistics for the gathering. Among other approaches, we followed internal procurement policies to select a consultant, provided significant background information up front, and made clear that the Department's partnership approach must be woven into the successful bidder's proposal. The request for proposal described the state funder's goals, operating principles, history and nature of the project, and priorities around equity and partnership. The proposed work plan recognized these values and helped take the process even further with regard to collaboration, planning across positions, and efforts to foster ownership of the project.

The final plan with the contractor called for significant work beyond a traditional/typical strategic planning session. The work included forming a planning team that served as process stewards. This team included representatives from all grantees - not only the funder. The planning team met virtually and through email several times before the in-person network-wide strategic planning session to gather stakeholder feedback, centralize pre-existing needs assessments done by individual grantees, refine the project scope/work plan, and guide the contractor's planning of the in-person workshop agenda. This preparation and engagement laid the stage for the in-person workshop; when the network and funder gathered in person for two days, there was already considerable buy-in and partnership from the grantees. Those on the

planning team were able to engage their colleagues and create momentum leading into the in-person workshop.

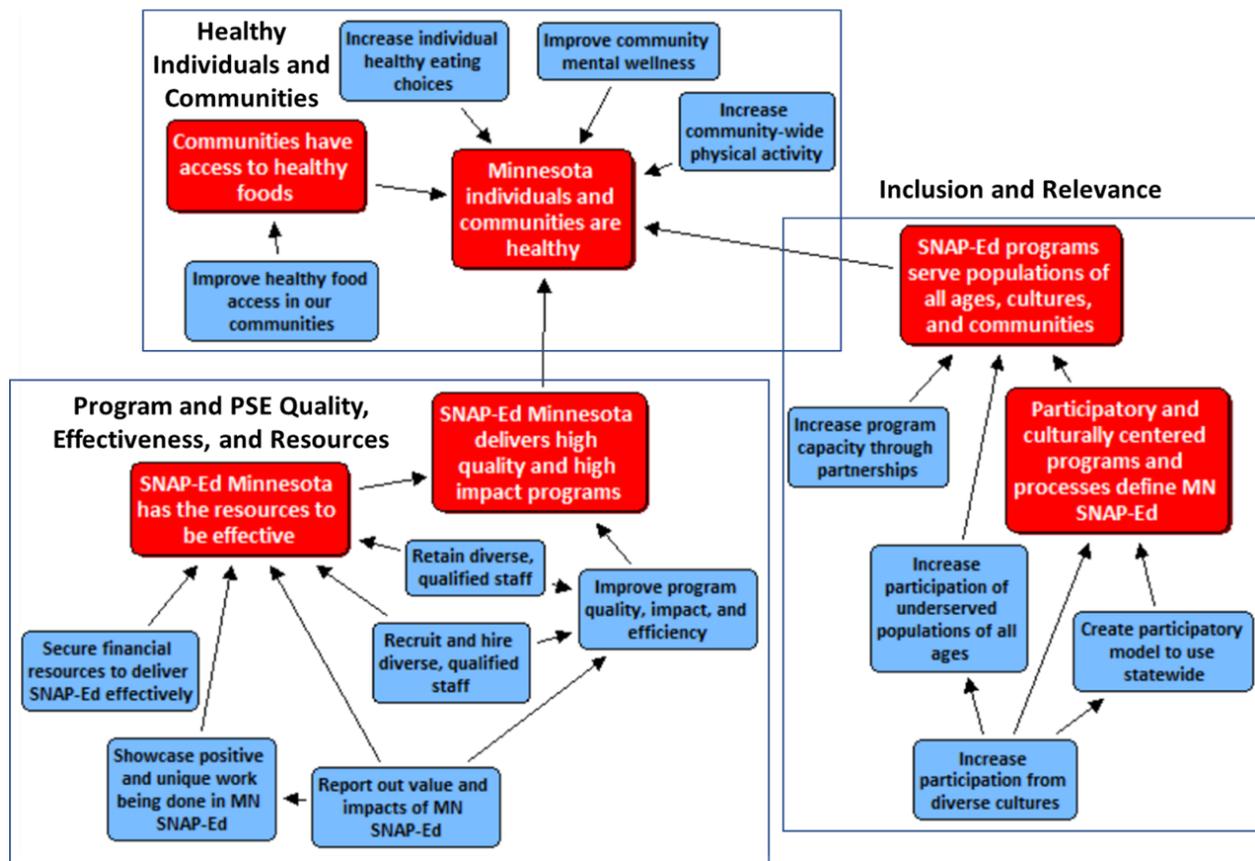
We took location and logistics of the gathering into consideration. The gathering was in a central location chosen by the grantees after being presented with several options. The location and logistics fostered ease of participation, engagement, and opportunity for dynamic partnership. Each grantee was allocated funding for travel and cost of attending. Because this project's success depended on collective intelligence and participation, it was critical that all were invited to attend and all who wanted to attend were able. Holding a space for this gathering that placed proper value on different types of contributions and acknowledgement of those contributions invited participants to establish stronger foundations in building relationships and flexibility in finding the shared goals.

The first moments of the visioning process set the tone for the two days. The gathering began with a grounding exercise for everyone to start from the same place: all were invited to stand in a circle and participate in smudging, to cleanse the air. Smudging (burning sage, cedar or sweet grass) is common in the American Indian culture.

The consultant facilitated a strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats (SWOT) analysis (Community Tool Box, 2020), and led the team through goal/strategy mapping including drawing causal connections and refining language for goals and key strategies. The goal mapping exercise called on the whole group to participate - to refine, combine, and create new ideas that the whole group then came to consensus around. After the in-person workshop, the consultant formalized the goals (See Figure 1) and worked with the funder and the planning team to share the draft strategic plan, making changes based on network-wide feedback.

Figure 1.

Summary Visual of MN SNAP-Ed 10-year vision



The Tribal Nations

For us, the visioning work and the resulting document meant everything, because for the first time, what we do made sense. The way SNAP-Ed was talked about before didn't live and breathe in our minds. After visioning, we saw ourselves and our work plans reflected in SNAP-Ed. The visioning document was more functional for our everyday work and made our work present.

A ripple effect of bringing our work to light and being able to see our work in the statewide vision helped the University and the Tribes become a team. It brought clarity around what we are as a program; the fact that we can share the same vision and talk

the same language about our shared program meant a lot. The visioning process made us feel like we are together in this important work. As a result, we feel less alone in our work. Some of us work at the “end of the road” or “in the woods” and often feel alone in our work. But living out our work through this document makes us feel that we are not sitting out in our places alone trying to do this work. We are one and we are a statewide program.

The visioning work also helped us to expand our programs to other groups and collaborate with partners we hadn’t worked with before. In part due to the inclusion goals in the vision document of increased SNAP-Ed participation across all ages, we have expanded to working with different groups. For example, we may have only worked with school age children in the past, but as part of our new work plan, we began to work with more adults and elders. In another instance, because of the added importance of community mental wellness in our vision, we collaborated with another program area at Extension that addressed family resiliency. Through that partnership, we discussed good things to bring to our Tribes and learned together about adverse childhood experiences, historical trauma, and healing, which has not only been good to bring to the program but has been healing for us. It feels so good to be in such a collaboration.

One of the biggest reasons why the visioning worked was that even though we had about 30 people in the room, it didn’t feel like we had government people there. Our DHS partners were present and even participated in some of the discussions, but they never said, “That’s not allowable” or “That can’t be done.” In fact, most of the time they stayed back and didn’t intrude. It felt like only the people who actually implement the program were in the room and got to develop our plan. We were able to talk about how we understand our work - how we want to set a vision for our work. We can’t say enough how big of a difference it made that the people who actually do the work got to set the ten-year vision. They gave us the freedom to make sense of our work.

While the visioning process was frustrating at times, we didn't appreciate the strategies used for facilitation until after we left the meeting and had a chance to review the document and see our work reflected. During the process, the facilitators kept mixing groups up, changing who we were talking with, so we were forced to see the issues in new ways and didn't get stuck thinking the same things. The facilitator was really hard on us. But it was one of the most fabulous things to watch because by the end, what they did was very important - they got us to connect as one team with a shared vision that reflects all our work.

In the end, the visioning document highlights what we care about most in our work. The community must be involved in determining what happens in SNAP-Ed, since it is a program that is meant for the community. The community needs to be part of the whole process, because this important work cannot be done by just one person. Because partners are required for our program to be successful and flourish, community people should be asked for their interest in projects we want to work on together. We know being involved in the community helps to build trust and get people to support and participate in a program. Doing community work is what we love about our work. We know we can do meaningful SNAP-Ed work when people see us as members of their community. This is how we get joy from our SNAP-Ed work. We feel that the vision we built together reflects this need for us to show up in the community and to build trusting relationships.

Everyone does these five-year plans and then you put the plan on the shelf and go back to your work. But with this strategic visioning, we really did come up with a vision for all of us, and we did it together. The product is WELL worth the effort. The plan will serve our purpose well into the future, as it reflects what our communities need as well as our work.

University of Minnesota Extension

Prior to the two-day visioning meeting, Extension had completed a six-month planning process to identify priority issues to address in the upcoming three-year SNAP-Ed plan. Our process was rigorous and iterative, and included exploration of statewide health data as well as programmatic data from the previous three years. Additionally, a representative group of staff on the strategic planning committee conducted interviews with partners, former participants, and nearly all of the approximately 75 staff connected to Extension SNAP-Ed programs throughout the state. This process identified critical content areas we needed to address besides healthy eating and physical activity. The issues important to Minnesotans that emerged through the strategic planning process included mental wellness, food access, the role of men and fathers in promoting family/community health, and the intersection of nutrition and health care.

Prior to the two-day visioning meeting, DHS asked all grantees to submit topic areas of interest to address through our collective three-year plan. When we arrived at the visioning meeting, all grantees' content areas were displayed on the wall without identifying who submitted the topics. That was the first realization of the commonality across all grantees. The worry that it would be hard to identify common topics for our ten-year vision quickly dissipated. There was a feeling of solidarity just seeing the list - we have so much in common!

We first focused on the “what” in terms of the goals we will work toward over the next ten years. We came to agreement on the impact areas of food access, physical activity, healthy eating, and mental wellness. The inclusion of mental wellness was new for all grantees. The other impact areas have been core in the SNAP-Ed grant guidance, but we collectively acknowledged that work in mental wellness is critical to addressing obesity and promoting health in low-resourced communities.

With the “what” in place, the next step was to discuss the processes important for “how” to accomplish our collective work. Our Tribal partners provided the leadership for this important aspect of the ten-year vision. The Tribal grantees emphasized the importance of authentic community engagement in program implementation - a practice utilized in all aspects of effective work that happens across Tribal Nations. Through examples shared by our Tribal partners, the “how” became equally important to the “what” in the vision. The model builds on increasing the participation of and relevance for diverse cultures; practices and solutions driven by people who are the most negatively affected by the status quo or change actions; and working with cross-sector, community partners and members to take action that supports co-learning and co-benefit.

Beyond the “what” and the “how”, the vision also impelled grantees to explore more deeply “who” delivers SNAP-Ed. The vision acknowledges the direct connection among recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse staff to accomplishing the vision. Extension staff left the visioning meeting with a feeling that all grantees were “in this together,” as well as a realization that to live out the vision for successfully implementing MN SNAP-Ed, we needed to catch up to our Tribal Nations partners.

Being embedded in a land-grant university, we are accustomed to addressing new content or impact areas. We recognize that the work ahead of us is to identify the best ways to live out the “how” of the vision. While we are acquainted with participatory processes and community-engaged work, we have not worked at the level and depth that the vision document calls for: collective action, with consistent processes and models statewide. And even as FNS directed SNAP-Ed to include more comprehensive multi-level interventions and the use of community and public health approaches with focus on policies, systems, and environmental change, the core grant requirement of utilizing evidence-based strategies remains. The task was to identify evidence-based models that best operationalize the core processes of the vision, including increased

participation from diverse communities, cultural responsiveness, community engagement, and meaningful ways for SNAP-eligible members to give voice to solutions and community-based actions.

Due to its inherent values of local determination, community engagement, and learn by doing actions, Place-Based Approaches (PBA) is a framework Extension chose to live out the “how” of the vision. PBA is built on the evidence that local lived experience knowledge is fundamental to understanding a problem or issue, and that workable solutions are those driven by the people who are the most negatively affected by the status quo and the consequences of the change actions (Berry, 1981; Juarez & Associates and Harder+Company, 2011). Thus, PBA values building local expertise, utilizing local assets and resources, and developing local capacity to continuously implement learn-by-doing actions to sustain the change or respond to the evolving nature of the issue in the community.

Another relevant PBA best practice aligned with our SNAP-Ed vision is reliance on a local place-based organizing body or cross-sector group that can champion changes over time. These local members include those who have roles in formal subsystems critical to supporting the change actions and yet work outside their system to be part of a “network of actors” to explore innovative solutions (Young et al., 2010).

PBA allows communities to work on complex issues over time, with shifting actors depending on needed actions and the ability to respond to the evolving nature of the issues. Because of these inherent values, PBA has been used around the world to address difficult-to-solve, complex issues, including obesity and health disparities (Centre for Community Child Health, 2011; Dupre et al., 2016); child abuse and social exclusion (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2015); and food insecurity and Indigenous food sovereignty (Loring & Duffy, 2011; Sonnino et al., 2016).

In addition to pivoting our work to incorporate PBA through SNAP-Ed, the visioning also pushed us to consider how we evaluate our work. Beyond “counting” our efforts and effects, our tribal partners urged us to consider the importance of storytelling and other qualitative ways of understanding our impacts. Our plan of work reflects this shift through understanding processes as outcomes, utilizing methods such as ripple effect mapping, photo-voice methods, digital and narrative storytelling, and journey mapping. Additionally, we have made a concerted effort to recruit, hire, and retain Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) staff and supervisors throughout the state.

SUMMARY

An article about partnerships, relationships, and trust can often look and feel somewhat esoteric, belying the long-term resource investments, constant vigilance, and sweat - equity it actually takes to do the work effectively. Which is precisely why government agencies and funders, working with limited resources, are reluctant to take on such a risk. But our collective stories of a partnership built through MN SNAP-Ed echo groundbreaking work by Lisbeth Schorr, who has been educating policymakers and practitioners about effective community-based programs for 60 years. Schorr notes that to break cycles of disadvantage, community engagement practices with risk of less certain outcomes, but with potentials for more meaningful impacts, are risks worth taking (Schorr, 2012).

Our collective stories offer a clear example of how a partnership-based government program can engage and promote the strengths, needs, and priorities of the community not only because it is the appropriate and respectful approach, but also because it leads to stronger program results. What seemed like an unrealistic, idealistic vision at the outset of the project - one in which the funder attempted to remove hierarchical barriers and work in partnership with grantees - proved, though imperfect, to result in a multi-year strategic plan that is embraced by all partners as a living document.

The process relied on a foundation of years of the funder working to live out its Guiding Principles, grantees who were willing to engage in this partnership, and a consultant who demanded hard work. The process further unified our group and motivated staff to continue investing in program growth and partnership. MN DHS asked grantees to be vulnerable in this planning process - to take risks and assert what they knew was the truth of how to do SNAP-Ed in their communities. For this process to work, MN DHS also needed to support their grantees and take a risk, promoting our statewide values and plan to the federal funder (USDA), for whom this approach is not standard.

Our statewide plan is informed by the expertise of Tribal Nation grantees and individual communities served by SNAP-Ed. Valuing culturally appropriate and community-driven programs is not only the right thing to do, but as Schorr notes in her groundbreaking book, *Within our Reach: Breaking Cycles of Disadvantage* (Schorr & Schorr, 1988), it is the most effective approach to achieving program impacts. Energy and engagement are raised when program design is rooted in culture and community. The beauty of the strategic planning and partnership process described in this article is that, together, the group not only made space for and elevated program administrators' energy and engagement, but also designed a program framework for the next ten years that will elevate community and program participants' energy, engagement, and participation.

We understand that maintaining the momentum and attending to changing program contexts will take intention and constant reflection and learning. By no means have we figured out the magic bullet for partnership building. Cross-grantee teams and DHS partners have met regularly to explore program strategies, discuss pivots during COVID-19, and implementing racially/socially just programming, ensuring that our vision is a living document. Simultaneously, we need to be accountable for the processes of the strategic plan and for achieving outcomes and impacts of the grant. The outcomes and processes identified in the strategic plan are tracked using a combination of a SNAP-Ed specific framework (The Evaluation Framework), and qualitative and quantitative tools

identified and/or developed by individual grantees. We track programmatic and outcome data through robust program and evaluation data systems but have incorporated such qualitative methods as storytelling, ripple effect mapping, and project journey mapping to identify effective processes and to explore our ability to live out the vision we developed for MN SNAP-Ed.

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