

Doris Duke Action Response Team (DDART): A Fellow-generated interdisciplinary, action-oriented project

JUNE 21, 2018

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The Issue

As part of the Doris Duke Fellowship experience, all fellows participate in small group project as a means of learning how to work collaboratively across disciplines. Our group of Cohort Six fellows worked together to provide on-demand, digestible research to meet the needs of stakeholders in Los Angeles County seeking to implement universal home visiting in one of the largest jurisdictions in the country. In the spirit of the fellowship, we aimed to use our skills to support efforts to promote child and family well-being in a concrete way.

Andi Eastman, a Cohort Six fellow, conducts research with the Children's Data Network, which works with Los Angeles (LA) County's Office of Child Protection. In September 2016, leadership of the LA office was looking for researchers to conduct the background research needed to develop a proposal to fund countywide universal home visiting. Our small group decided that we would be those researchers and we named ourselves the Doris Duke Rapid Response Team (DDART). This was a great opportunity for us to support home visiting prevention programs and promote child and family well-being in an applied way.

What We Did

Initially the Office of Child Protection tasked us with investigating sustainable sources of funding for home visiting programs. Specifically, we researched how states used Medicaid waivers to fund home visiting programs and interviewed individuals in Colorado, South Carolina, and Vermont. We also identified which home visiting programs were offered in all 50 states (e.g., Healthy Families America, Nurse Family Partnership, Early Head Start) and what funding mechanisms were used to run these programs. On June 30, 2017 the Office of Child Protection used these data to share an operational road map for expanding access to home visitation within the county.

Next, in September 2017, DDART was tasked with identifying home visiting programs in the United States that were funded by probation departments. In a memo to the Office of Child Protection, we detailed research suggesting that home visiting programs are associated with reduced recidivism for parents with a history of criminal justice involvement, identified jurisdictions with home visiting programs funded by probation, and outlined LA County Probation's current family support/youth diversion program offerings.

The Office of Child Protection and Board of Supervisors are continuing efforts to expand home visiting programs in the state using the background research we conducted. DDART has remained engaged by attending monthly Home Visiting Strategic Planning meetings.

What We Learned

I. Research-Policy Partnerships

Our collaborative relationship with LA County was successful because of our mutual motivations, as well as our transition through the phases/processes of effective research-policy partnerships as outlined by Mirzoev and colleagues (2012). Both LA County and DDART had motivations characteristic of those engaged in successful collaborations, including "broadening the range of choices in defining the problems, better interpretation of research findings, and greater practical use of research findings" (Mirzoev et al., 2012, p. 2). We also effectively communicated the terms and structure of our partnership, delivered quality outputs, and gracefully signaled the end of our fellowship responsibilities (Mirzoev et al., 2012). The positive relationship we developed with LA County creates an environment for future collaboration.

II. Flexibility

This work demanded a flexible approach. We needed to be responsive to changing agency timelines and needs, as well as our own academic obligations. We devised an agreement where those who had more availability and capacity to work on the group project took on the more time-intensive tasks for the first project, and then roles switched for subsequent tasks. This approach prevented us from being overwhelmed when new tasks were assigned and for each member to feel safe to share when they had less time to devote to the small group, but knew they would have the opportunity to contribute later on.

Further, while we initially sought to find common research interests to develop a project, we did not get stuck there. Even our initial project was more aligned with one of our group member's research interests and experiences, but we recognized that each of us could contribute and find portions of any project that would interest us. We trusted that each of us was committed to our group, the fellowship, and creating something meaningful for the child maltreatment prevention community. This allowed us to take on a project that was outside of the content area for most group members.

III. Impact

The research support we provided to LA County was mutually beneficial. As fellows, we strengthened skills in working with community partners, translating research, and writing memos that would be consumed by multiple audiences with varying educational backgrounds. Additionally, stakeholders in LA County were excited to draw on the expertise of individuals more immersed in the literature and with experience conducting state- and nation-wide research.

One member of the LA County team noted: "It was fabulous to have highly-skilled researchers like [DDART] assisting us in gathering key information to inform our system-building and advocacy in Los Angeles." The LA stakeholders reported that the projects our small group completed for them "helped to establish a vision for what opportunities Los Angeles may consider" in regards to collaboration between probation departments and home visiting.

Additionally, the LA team noted that our outputs were "incredibly helpful in advocating locally for system changes." Andi will continue working with many of these LA County stakeholders during her post-doctoral fellowship next year, and the rest of DDART have been invited to work as research consultants in the future.

Closing Reflections

In our first small group get-together at the first Doris Duke meeting, a theme emerged that framed the entirety of our two-year collaboration. As we were discussing our interests and discovering potential overlap in those content areas, the discussion turned to the challenges of graduate school and academia. We began lamenting how research so often becomes self-serving, and how easy it is to get caught up in conducting research and publishing articles solely for the sake of personal success in a competitive field. One of us mused about what research

might look like if it wasn't self-serving. Our work as a small group, as DDART, provided the answer.

Despite our different areas of study, expertise, and skills, we all agreed that we each wanted to think outside of our own careers and do something truly impactful. Perhaps there doesn't always have to be a publication, or presentation, or a gold star at the end of a project. Perhaps, instead, it's enough just to do research for the good of the people it originally intended to benefit. Maybe by conducting research for this purpose alone, a group of individuals could join together and remind themselves why they entered into this work in the first place.

The Doris Duke Fellowship allowed us time to do this. By forming our small group and giving us the direction to find an interest and project to sustain us, we were able to seize an opportunity that allowed us to meet the goals of that initial conversation. What we were able to do, as a team of researchers, was to serve. The most important outcome from our time as DDART was the realization that we should, and could, make time for service. And collaboration and service would sustain us, much longer than any publication ever could.

Reference

Mirzoev, T., Omar, M., Green, A., Bird, P., Lund, C., Ofori-Atta, A., & Doku, V. (2012). Policy partnerships- experiences of the Mental Health and Poverty Project in Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 10(1), 30.