

Extension workshop helps counties communicate their contributions to the common good

By Laura Kalambokidis and Ryan Pesch

County government service providers can readily provide evidence of their programs' value to direct participants, but public programs also create public value when they induce participants to act in ways that benefit the rest of the community—contributing to the “common good.” For example, a parenting education program benefits the participating family, but also benefits others in the community when the participants' improved parenting skills decrease the need for social services. While participants who directly benefit from county programs are a source of crucial political support, communicating programs' public value can be the key to shoring up support from the rest of the population. Moreover, fiscal pressures and expanding mandates mean that the need to document the impact and value of county programs has never been greater.

To address these needs, about ninety county commissioners, non-profit staff, and county staff

this month gathered in three locations around Minnesota—Moorhead, Rochester, and Glencoe—to attend workshops on “Communicating the Public Value of Public Programs.” Developed and led by Extension Economist Laura Kalambokidis and sponsored by University of Minnesota Extension and Winona County, the workshops used the basics of public sector economics to help participants draft their own messages about their programs' public value.

The first part of each two-hour workshop was devoted to learning how public programs fill needs that private providers might not address. In filling those needs, public programs benefit the greater community, thereby creating public value. Working in small groups, participants then identified many ways that their programs create public value. For example, one group reported that a water resources education program helps upstream landowners understand the consequences of their actions on sedimentation, water quality, and flooding in downstream communities. Another group reported on a veterans program that helps veterans obtain their entitled medical benefits, reducing those veterans' need to seek medical services from the state or county. The final workshop exercise guided groups toward drafting a short, effective reply to that skeptical taxpayer or policymaker who asks, “Why should tax dollars go towards this program?” The messages used a simple structure to enumerate the benefits a stakeholder and others in the community will ultimately reap from the program. In many cases, groups received feedback on their draft public value messages from others in the workshop.

Some workshop participants may use their draft public value messages immediately as “elevator speeches” to solicit support from valued stakeholders.



Others may put additional work into the messages, incorporating input from colleagues and substantiating the claims embedded in the messages. More well-developed messages can then be incorporated into marketing materials, grant applications, and business plans. Finally, the process of documenting programs' public value can serve as a framework for counties to identify funding priorities.

The “Communicating the Public Value of Public Programs” workshop is about delivering a crucial message to valued stakeholders. But, more than that, it is about ensuring that public sector programs are doing what they are truly meant to do: contributing to the common good. ■

The “Communicating the Value of Public Programs” workshop is available for delivery in your department or county through Extension’s Community Economics Program, which has nine Extension Educators across the state. To learn more about how you can bring a workshop to your organization, visit www.extension.umn.edu/publicfinance/ and contact your region’s Extension Educator. Otherwise contact Ryan Pesch at the Fergus Falls Regional Center for more information at 888-241-0843.