



EPISODE 1:

Bridging Across Barriers: The Wonder State

[Terry Bearden]

I hate to sound trite, I say it all the time, but put the mission first. Recognize what the mission of the state association is, what the mission of the state CSBG office is, and find the places where those missions converge, because they are related missions, they share many of the same facets, but they're not identical, so we both need to recognize what is it that my organization can bring to the table that will help the network to achieve its overarching mission...how do we help people change lives and build strong communities.

[Narrator]

This is CAPLAWCast, a podcast hosted by Community Action Program Legal Services. And that was Terry Bearden, Executive Director of the Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association. Terry's been in this role since 2019, but she's been with the association for over 17 years in various positions. She's not shy about discussing community action in the state, the association's role in it, and the state CSBG office. Nor is the CSBG Manager at the state office, Beverly Buchanan.

[Beverly Buchanan]

So the first word that comes to mind when I think of the state association is the value of the training that they are able to provide, and the level of community, and I mean community by the fact that we're all in this together, and we're a very large community and so I think that that's a part of what I see when I think about the state association.

[Narrator]

As CSBG Manager for Arkansas since 2014, Beverly thinks a lot about the state association. She's been doing so since 2007 when she was hired to serve as a CSBG grants analyst in the state office. You'll get to know Terry and Beverly in today's episode, Bridging Across Barriers: The Wonder State, as we explore the relationship between the Arkansas association and the state CSBG office. Together these leaders share a commitment to CAAs in the state, and a mutual respect for one another and the diverse roles they play. Roles that, as Terry explains, can converge in interesting ways.

[Terry]

So I like to use the power of Beverly every now and then, because I put together the grant proposal and of course I present it to my board and it's approved, but that doesn't mean that they actually recognize, on a detailed level, just how much engagement I'm going to need from them and their staff members. So occasionally there will be a project, Local Theory of Change Development is one of them, where we had set the expectation that X number of agencies were going to develop local theories of change and I reached out and I was like here is how we propose to do this...crickets...and I reached out again and said, so can you identify a staff member with whom I should communicate as we move forward with working with your agency to develop a local theory of change...one, two comments, and so I was like ok, Beverly says that X number of agencies are to create local theories of change by September 30th of this year, how do you plan to proceed? Ta da, I get the response that I need. So I am not afraid to wield the power of Beverly when it's necessary.

[Narrator]

The mutual respect that the state association and the state CSBG office share now wasn't always a given. Not so long ago, this relationship, like many, went through a rough patch. Terry and Beverly both pointed to the impact that changes in leadership had on the relationship just a few years ago. Here's Terry:

[Terry]

So my immediate predecessor, while she did have some experience in the community action network, she really sought to move the association in a different direction, and to place less emphasis on sustaining that longstanding relationship that we had with our state CSBG office.

[Narrator]

Beverly's take was similar:

[Beverly]

And on the state side, unfortunately we experienced a leadership change around that same time. Both of the people that are immediately above me came into community action around 2014, 2015 at the same time, so we had 3 new people so to speak in leadership roles and again, what Terry said about lack of experience and no reality of the value of the relationship between the state office and the state association made things a little different from what I had experienced in the 7 years prior.

[Narrator]

This different relational approach had real consequences for Beverly and Terry, and more importantly, the Arkansas community action network. Here's Terry:

[Terry]

So when the folks in leadership positions at the state were moving into those roles, the fact that they were not greeted and welcomed and really supported by my predecessor, just changed everything. It changed our communications dynamic.

[Narrator]

This was a significant shift away from what Terry and Beverly had known in prior years. They both credited long-term leaders at the state association and the state office for showing them what a productive state association and state office relationship could look like. The bottleneck in communications led the state office to feel it wasn't getting the information it needed to properly oversee the funding it provided to the association. It had no idea if deliverables were being met. Here's Beverly:

[Beverly]

Well first of all, it was total confusion because at the state office we had been accustomed to working side by side with the state association in all projects, we were at the table for almost everything, and we were included, not just as the funder but as a partner, and all of that changed because there were things that weren't being delivered, leadership at the state office decided that we would change the funding formula so to speak for the state association, and I think that has been, I don't want to use the word detrimental, but it's certainly, it's a shift in what we were seeing prior.

[Narrator]

Ultimately, the executive director of the state association left and Terry stepped into the role. There was mistrust and severed communications, and she knew she had work to do. But she also knew and had worked closely with Beverly in that past, who by that point was CSBG Manager at the state office.

[Terry]

I actually think that that's our saving grace, because we did already know each other very well prior to that change in leadership. In fact, if I can take a little bit of credit, I mentored Beverly through her ROMA certification process, so Beverly and I have always been the two within our organizations who are willing to step out there regionally and nationally and seek to not only learn from our greater community action network but also provide our two cents' worth when it's asked for, and maybe even sometimes when it's not.

[Beverly]

More often than not.

[Terry]

More often than not. And so we were able to move in the same circles and again, collaborate very closely from our positions that we held prior to moving into our current positions.

[Beverly]

Terry and I used to say, whenever we get to be in charge we're going to do this, and we had a vision for where we saw Arkansas and where we saw Arkansas moving toward.

[Narrator]

In 2019, the day had arrived where Terry was in charge of the Arkansas state association and Beverly was CSBG Manager within the state office. They were well-positioned to tap into their experiences throughout the community action network and to build on their existing relationship. But Terry didn't take this for granted. As ACAA's new ED, she quickly took action to rebuild the association's relationship with the state.

[Terry]

When I first assumed the COO and then Executive Director role, the focus of our board and their instructions to me were, let's fix this. Let's repair things. Let's get back to where we used to be. So I very intentionally went about reopening those lines of communications. Admitting where there had been missteps. I cannot tell you how many hours I spent pulling data and training evaluations and putting together reports, revising reports, and just making sure that I could assure the state CSBG office that the work had been being done during the time of my predecessor, the information was just not being provided to them in the way that it had been in the past.

[Narrator]

Despite Terry's efforts to repair the relationship and rewrite the narrative, for some it wasn't fast enough. Getting buy-in from all stakeholders wasn't going to be easy.

[Terry]

Well, and this is probably the low point in my leadership of the association, we actually had an agency leave the association during this time period. There was, I believe, on that agency's leadership's part, a lack of belief that the relationship could be what it once was, and also perhaps a belief that the value of the association had been damaged and our capacity was less than it had been. I still, if they should happen to listen to this podcast, I want you back, please come back. Give me a call. I think from my perspective and I'll be interested to hear what Beverly has to say, I think from my perspective the state CSBG office had a bit of an attitude of, oh yeah, prove it. Prove to us that you are the right place, that you are the right organization for us to make this significant investment in.

[Beverly]

And perhaps Terry that's true because again, the responsibility for the funding rests with the state office. I think we're at a point now where we're still very much concerned about the deliverables, but I think the trust factor has improved greatly, because not only did the ACAA board want the problems to be fixed but here, our leadership wanted it as well, because we wanted to—not just me only—my leadership wanted to ensure that we were working together for the good of the network, so that meant that all of us had to understand our roles and work toward that end.

[Narrator]

Trust takes time. Time and communication, and Beverly and Terry have helped restore that level of trust, in part through continuous communication with each other.

[Terry]

So we have our formal communication channels that we again are very intentional about: establishing the ROMA work group, Beverly leads a monthly CSBG meeting during which she brings forth topics that she needs to have discussions with or present to the network, and those are attended by Executive Directors, program managers, frontline staff, anyone is

welcome to join those conversations with the CSBG office. Our office of community services, both Beverly and her supervisor, who actually leads the ESG program and a couple of other programs, they participate in every ACAAA board meeting, they provide us with updates as do other key state partners, and so we have those formal channels of communication. But Beverly and I specifically also know that at any time, that we need to speak with each other about something or communicate with each other about something, we're just a phone call away, or an email away, and we put each other high on our priority list, we can get lost in our emails, we may get a couple of hundred emails a day, but if I see one from Beverly, I'm at least going to read the first paragraph to determine...

[Beverly]

Whether or not you're going to answer.

[Terry]

Exactly. And how quickly.

[Beverly]

So I agree with that and I think you know we've been texting all morning and I know Terry's tired of me because I've had like 15 different things that I've had to ask her. I always use this analogy when I'm talking about state office and state association, we're like an old married couple, you know we've been together for a long time, 15 years at least for me because that's how long I've been here. We know each other's personality, but we also know that at the end of the day it's not about us. So there are times when we totally don't agree with anything the other one is talking about, but we understand that the children need us to be in agreement.

[Terry]

I love that Beverly brought the children up because that's what was running through my mind as well. And I can provide you with a really good example. So sometimes one parent thinks that it would be fine for the children to take the car out late on Friday night and the other parent is like no they have to be home by 8pm. And so we faced that type of situation when COVID hit and when the CARES Act funding came down, the decision was made that Arkansas community action would maintain the income limit of 125% of federal poverty level which several other states did as well. As a very strong and perhaps overly zealous at times advocate for low-income people, I was not pleased that we were going to have to have the children home by 8pm and take the car keys from them at that time. So I set about pulling together some data and a presentation, I contacted Beverly and her supervisor and her supervisor's supervisor, and of course I was already in communication with my board about all of this, I would not do this without the blessings of my board, I said can we have a conversation about this policy. And they said absolutely. And so we did and I put my argument forth and showed them some pretty nice statistics and PowerPoint slides. And in the end they said thank you very much, we appreciate the value of the data that you've presented to us and the reasons behind our decision are this: we want to make sure that the most vulnerable among us are receiving the bulk of the funding and that we're supporting the most vulnerable Arkansans to the strongest possible level, and so, you know, no, the kids are still going to have to be home at 8pm. And so you know, did I throw a fit and did I threaten to leave the relationship or anything like that? No, because you're not always going to get your way so to speak. Your perspective is not always going to be the one that wins. And so we were able to have further conversations about ok so, since that is going to be the limitation, how do we ensure that agencies are provided with the latitude to expand their menu of services to help people to weather the storm that was brought in by COVID. And so you know, that's just one situation where we put the mission first and it was like, ok our mission truly is to help low-income people and so how do we do that the best way we can.

[Beverly]

And my role in that was to advocate for the increase eligibility but once we came to the conclusion that we would stay with the 125, then my role is to ensure that that's what we do. And fortunately, the beauty of that is the network understood where my heart is, but they also understand what my role is, and the fact that they're some things I have to do based on my role.

[Narrator]

The tension and struggle were real, but they didn't change the focus. Beverly and Terry didn't allow the pieces that were out of their control to distract them from their ultimate goal – finding ways to work together, build trust, and advocate for families with low incomes. That speaks to a deeper bond, an interdependence, between the two organizations. And with all good relationships, it never stops being complicated. Beverly and Terry never lose sight of the fact that they are connected by funding. Funding that is essential to the association's very existence.

[Terry]

The capacity of the state association would be so greatly diminished if we did not receive significant funding through the CSBG discretionary funding that's available. I believe we would be possibly a one-person shop. We definitely would not provide training to literally 500 or 600 CAA staff members every single month, we would not host an annual conference for about 250 participants every year, we would not have a staff available to develop other programs and help to provide funding opportunities for other programs to the agencies, we just would be a completely different organization if not for that significant amount of funding and our impact on the agencies would be so minimized that I myself would question the relevance of the association if we were just a one-person shop.

[Beverly]

There's no way that I could provide all of that necessary training if we didn't have that relationship. So it's a situation where there's a funding relationship but that relationship is built on the fact that together there are things we need to do for the network. Terry gathers information in her role as a trainer, and in my role at the state office I ask directly in the application process what training do you need, of the agencies, every year I ask them what training do you need and how do you plan to fund this. Because it's one thing to need a training but it's totally different how you're going to fund it. And so we started to take that list and compile that with what we'd both seen, me from monitoring and Terry from talking to the agencies, and we compile a top 10, this is what we're going to do this year.

[Terry]

And I like to say that ACAA's outcomes are the state CSBG office's outcomes, because yes, they are deliverables for our funding, but when that annual report is submitted, those outcomes are included in that, the increased capacity of agencies to achieve results is part of the story that Beverly's office is able to tell because of ACAA.

[Narrator]

The funder-grantee relationship between the association and the state office has led to a close alignment in mission and goals for the Arkansas network. Sometimes when CAAs think about a funding source, they think about the funding source enforcing requirements and measuring compliance. Basically, the funding source as an overseer, not a partner. But for Terry and Beverly, both have been able to see beyond the four corners of the funding contract. To see how both organizations are contributing to capacity building and training in the state. And how the other organization is integral to the shared mission of helping individuals and families become self-sufficient.

We've explored many facets of this relationship, but we haven't really addressed the elephant in the room. Beverly is required to monitor Terry and Arkansas's CAAs. The state has to say what's going well and what isn't. That's not easy. For anyone. But Beverly isn't fazed by the inherent disruption to a relationship that monitoring can cause. She's determined to see things a bit differently.

[Beverly]

For monitoring, a lot of times when we say monitoring you think of the state office coming and we're like the IRS or FBI or somebody like that, but I think what I have tried to bring to the table is a whole different aspect, monitoring for me is what we've been doing right here, we've been having this conversation. So I can look through your documents and then I can talk to you and have a conversation and I can learn more from that conversation than actually coming onsite with the warrant to see what you've been doing. And so I've tried to make monitoring as painless as possible. In fact, I would hope that the CAAs would agree that when we monitor it doesn't have that I gotcha kind of feeling. Of course there's compliance and so if there's something out of order then we have to write that up, but then at the same time, we don't have any quality improvement plans in Arkansas, simply because what we do is we provide training prior to all year long, we have technical assistance, we see something pop up during the year either Terry's going to take care of it, I'm going to take care of it, or we're going to take care of it together, but during the monitoring process there's very little that's going to come to light that I don't already know about. Because that's the other thing that we have, not only do I feel I have very good communication with Terry, but at the same time I'm also talking to the CAAs, they have no problem calling me, and calling me multiple times, and we talk about things. So I like to think that monitoring is something that I come along side you and we've found this problem so I'm going to come along side you and help you fix it.

[Terry]

I would agree and I would add that there are a couple of places that the changes and improvements that Beverly mentioned in terms of the monitoring processes are also very evident, those are in our community needs assessment processes. Through quite a few years of steadily working on the community needs assessment process, Beverly has been able to really, we've been able to elevate the comprehensiveness of the community needs assessment processes to the point where now we are actually developing a statewide community needs assessment process. And we will have much more uniformity, much more comprehensiveness, and really be able to talk about not only the needs at the local agency level but then compile all of that data to be able to present a very strong profile of our state. So that, the monitoring, I can remember being monitored back in my early days at my agency, and it really was about you reported helping 156 people get a job, let me see those numbers, ok, good, 156. Now the monitoring like Beverly says it's an ongoing process, it's much deeper, and yet at the end of the day it's not a got you. It's a let's ensure compliance and help you improve outcomes in the future.

[Narrator]

It turns out in Arkansas, monitoring isn't an "us" against "them," but a "we're all in this together." And that makes a big difference in how CAAs respond to the state office.

[Terry]

Yeah I like to pretend that it's because she wields such a heavy axe, but that's not it. It really is about the relationship that Beverly has with the agencies, they respect her, they respect that she is not going to set unrealistic or unreasonable expectations for them, and that if it's something that Beverly needs to have done there's a reason behind it.

[Narrator]

Respect, understanding, communication. Key elements to the relationship in Arkansas between the state association and state CSBG office. This is a relationship that hasn't always worked well. It has evolved and will continue to evolve. Notably, it's one where each partner recognizes the critical role the other plays in supporting community action in the state. It focuses on strengths, not weakness and welcomes differences of opinion and perspective. Perhaps most importantly, it never loses sight of the common mission.

[Beverly]

That's key. What value does the state association have and what value does the state office have? And although you know we look at the CSBG Act and we can clearly see the role of the state office, I think the state office folk have to understand the value of the state association. And that's important in any relationship, you have to value the other person or the other entity, there's so many people in Arkansas that depend on the relationship between the state office and the state association, so it's as I always say, it's bigger than us. It's not even about Beverly and Terry, it's about the people of Arkansas who need what we do.

[Narrator]

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