

The California Wellness Foundation

Grantmaking for a Healthier California

Reflections

On TCWF's Violence
Prevention Initiative



The California Wellness Foundation

In the late 1980s, both the Centers for Disease Control and the Surgeon General issued alarming reports indicating that violence had become a serious public health problem in the United States. By the time The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) was established in 1992, gun violence had become the number-one killer of California youth. This frightening reality prompted the Foundation to launch the Violence Prevention Initiative (VPI) — a 10-year, \$60 million comprehensive grantmaking program dedicated to preventing violence against youth through a range of statewide prevention efforts.

Through components ranging from research, policy advocacy, leadership development and community action programs, the VPI grantees became the catalysts of a multifaceted statewide movement to prevent violence against youth. This led to many local and statewide policy changes and also developed grassroots leadership and capacity within at-risk communities to prevent violence against youth.

By the time the VPI ended, the number of youth killed by gun violence was about half that of what it was when we launched the Initiative. While it is difficult to measure precisely to what extent the reduction was due to the work of the VPI grantees and to what extent it was due to the other organizations and individuals who had joined the growing violence prevention movement, the compelling fact remains that thousands of young Californians were saved from gun violence during the life of the Initiative.

This issue of Reflections was researched and written by Fern Tiger Associates. It provides the context for the work done through the VPI and shares research and historical perspectives gained through interviews with both those who worked on the Initiative, as well as with current and former elected and nonelected state officials and national leaders in violence prevention. We found its wide-angle look at the VPI to be quite useful in assessing the Initiative's impacts and its implications for our future grantmaking.

We hope this document will be useful to those interested in preventing violence against youth — especially other foundation and public-sector funders who are considering grantmaking related to violence prevention. We encourage your comments and feedback.

Gary L. Yates, President and CEO
The California Wellness Foundation

Reflections on TCWF's Violence Prevention Initiative

by Fern Tiger Associates

On April 29, 1992, tensions resulting from racism, class, poverty, drug and gang warfare, and police corruption brought a literal conflagration to the streets of South Central Los Angeles. It would eventually leave 53 people dead and 2,300 injured, and cost the city an estimated \$1 billion. Sparked by the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating of Rodney King, an African-American whose ordeal after a traffic violation had been videotaped for the world to see, the raging unrest in Los Angeles shattered the Golden State's false façade of progress in an ongoing battle with violence and highlighted an undercurrent of racial and economic tension that had gone ignored for too long.

Throughout California in the early and mid-1990s, a climate of divisiveness and retribution reigned, as both crime rates and poverty climbed. Politicians clamored for tougher law enforcement and longer prison sentences, but failed to make a connection between escalating crime and the state's loss of three-quarters of a million jobs in a span of just a few years. While unemployment and poverty rates skyrocketed and public spending on social programs declined, Californians' sense of safety was damaged, and many turned to scapegoating. White residents, while slowly becoming a minority population (in a state which today has no majority ethnic group), continued to make up about 80 percent of voters. From Proposition 187 (an anti-immigration law billed as the "Save our State" law) to "Three Strikes, You're Out" sentencing, it appeared that anxieties were being played out at the polls resulting in harsh new laws targeting immigrants, low-income people, and youth.

California needed to grow an anti-violence movement that could show that the epidemic of violence was not inevitable, that could reverse and prevent the spread of violence, and that could instill hope for a safer, better future for youth. This movement would recognize the important role communities play in preventing violence and would invest in the potential of youth as standard bearers of change, rather than seeing them as victims or perpetrators trapped in an endless cycle of destruction.

This effort would acknowledge the public health implications of the easy availability of guns and alcohol and of the paucity of funds for youth services — and would view these as controllable environmental factors that could be addressed, in order to prevent violence before it occurred. Above all, this approach would help save thousands of young lives from the epidemic of violence in communities throughout California.

BALANCING THE PUSH FOR PUNISHMENT

The Foundation viewed violence as a public health problem rather than an issue solely for law enforcement and the courts.

In 1992, when The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) was created, it embarked on a multimillion dollar, decade-long effort to build just such a movement to prevent violence against youth. For direction, it looked toward a new source: the public health field, where a growing number of researchers and practitioners had begun viewing violence as a public health problem rather than an issue solely for law enforcement and the courts. Gun violence had become the leading cause of death for young people in California, and proponents of the public health model believed this could only be changed by studying related behavioral and environmental risk factors. Doing so would allow appropriate prevention and intervention strategies to be developed.

The Foundation's concern about the loss of young lives and the belief that deaths could be prevented, prompted it to commit \$60 million over 10 years to the Violence Prevention Initiative (VPI). Unlike many previous efforts in violence prevention, the premise of the VPI was that the strategies it employed had to be comprehensive and multidisciplinary and, most importantly, they had to be driven by people in communities where young people were dying and being arrested in rising numbers every day.

Through support for four specific components — community action programs (CAPs), policy advocacy, research, and leadership development — the VPI created the state's, and perhaps the nation's, first true youth violence prevention constituency.

MOVING THE NEEDLE

The Violence Prevention Initiative was not just a grantmaking structure; it provided spiritual nurturing, solidarity, and strong support for the work of grantees.

Despite the alarming growth of violence against youth, those working to prevent it were on a lonely frontier. Neither government nor private funders saw youth violence prevention programs as priorities, and thus, the prospects for mobilizing action or understanding the potential for new approaches to address the problem were slim. Nevertheless, rising injury and death rates among youth prompted many communities to begin looking for alternatives to the criminal justice approach. In California counties as diverse as Los Angeles and Contra Costa, public health departments were at the center of innovative violence prevention coalitions. The California Wellness Foundation, with the mission to improve the health and well-being of Californians, was then in the process of shaping its own grantmaking strategy and decided to fund a series of five major initiatives. After considering various alternatives, the Foundation's leadership chose preventing violence against youth as the focus of its first initiative, both

because of the urgency of the issue and the potential for new, prevention-oriented strategies. “Violence was one of the more serious problems in California and it was not getting a lot of attention in terms of dealing with the underlying determinants, including the social environment that breeds it and the economic environment that sustains it,” said Jonathan Fielding, Los Angeles County’s public health officer and a Foundation board member at the time.

Also influencing the Board’s decision was a 1992 publication from the Centers for Disease Control, “The Prevention of Youth Violence: a Framework for Community Action.” Using the framework as a guide, the Foundation developed an initiative grantmaking structure with four integrated components: community action, policy, leadership, and research.

For the community action component the Foundation initially funded 18 organizations, “CAPs,” to form collaboratives and to explore the potential for reducing violence against youth through health promotion programs; to attempt to influence local policy; and to support statewide advocacy efforts.

As part of the policy component, the Foundation established the Pacific Center for Violence Prevention to design strategies and to coordinate grantees’ efforts toward achieving three policy goals (which were developed by the Foundation’s leadership): increased restrictions on access to handguns; increased public support for youth violence prevention programs; and reduced access to alcohol, which was believed to be a significant contributor to violence against youth. In addition to funding the Pacific Center, the Foundation also supported the policy work of other grantees with a multimillion dollar, statewide public education campaign.

The leadership program sought to build grassroots, local capacity by supporting a corps of community fellows each year, who were working at the neighborhood level to reduce violence against youth. Additionally, fellowships were provided to public health and medical practitioners and researchers focusing on youth violence prevention at universities, hospitals, and health agencies around the state. And the Foundation annually awarded the California Peace Prize, a “no-strings-attached” grant, to acknowledge the work of three individuals whose efforts to prevent violence against youth demanded attention. The Prize recognized these unsung heroes and raised the visibility of youth violence prevention issues.

For the research component, the Foundation funded scientifically driven studies of community-level risk factors contributing to violence against youth. The priorities of the research component were closely tied to the VPI’s policy work. The Foundation also funded educational efforts to influence the way violence is portrayed in commercial entertainment and in the news media. In addition to these four components, the Foundation funded a comprehensive evaluation of the entire Initiative.

The VPI represented the first major attempt to bring cohesion to the youth violence prevention field. Rubén Lizardo, an activist and 1999 California Peace Prize winner, remembers being amazed that a foundation wanted to focus on systemic issues that communities deeply affected by violence

felt were not being addressed by law enforcement measures. “The VPI was the first time we felt we could be honest about our strategies,” Lizardo said. The VPI also brought together people and organizations new to the field, including researcher María Alaniz, then at Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, who had struggled to find funding for her research on environmental influences on alcohol

consumption in Latino communities and its links to youth violence. “Finally, here was a foundation that saw the real issues and was willing to fund research to find out more about them,” said Alaniz.

Before the VPI grantees could begin promoting prevention in communities and changing policies, they needed to find their own common ground. This was a challenging first step. The public health language was unfamiliar to many VPI grantees, especially community-based organizations, who found it strange and sometimes objectionable to use terms like “host” and “agent” to describe real people committing or becoming victims of violence. Other terms used to describe strategies under consideration, such as media advocacy, multisector collaboration, and community empowerment, were interpreted differently by different grantees.

The VPI provided the first opportunity for many grantees, particularly those living and working in communities deeply affected by violence, to more effectively express their communities’ needs. “Ten years ago, I didn’t have the ability to articulate what it means to do youth violence prevention work,” said Bernardo Rosa of Community Wellness Partnership in Pomona, one of the CAP grantees.

Grantees connected with one another at an annual two-day conference and celebration of their work — the first regularly scheduled, foundation-driven forum dedicated solely to youth violence prevention. The conference was a safe place to share experiences. In that sense, the Violence Prevention Initiative was not just a grantmaking structure; it provided spiritual nurturing, solidarity, and strong support for the work of grantees. The tone of each annual conference was set by Ray Gatchalian. The Oakland fire captain and peace activist encouraged the Foundation to acknowledge the spiritual basis of youth violence prevention work, saying, “If you can show another way of being in the world, and say there are other things to do with your pain, you can bring hope to young people who are suffering.”

On a concrete level, the VPI exposed grantees to the idea that they were part of a larger movement. Before the VPI, communication among California’s gun safety advocacy groups was rare, according to Barrie Becker, former executive director of Legal Community Against Violence, a VPI grantee. That changed once the Pacific Center for Violence Prevention began hosting monthly firearms strategy meetings. “Our projects were very complementary so there was a lot of good synergy,” said Becker. Youth, too, formed a caucus so they could present a united voice for young people.

For Anita Barnes of La Familia Counseling Center in Sacramento, one of the CAPs funded by the Foundation, participation in the Initiative represented a first opportunity to be part of something big. “It’s great when you can say you are part of a statewide movement,” Barnes said.

Arturo Ybarra, who in his spare time had been organizing residents in Watts around issues of

interethnic violence, utilized his community fellowship to launch the first Latino nonprofit in his neighborhood, the Watts Century Latino Organization, with help from many of the people he met through the VPI. His organization has leveraged its support from the Foundation to obtain other private and public funds for the work it does in Watts, including partnering with local African-American groups to prevent interethnic violence.

While many grantees began to feel they were part of a larger youth violence prevention movement, cross-disciplinary collaboration — among researchers, community-based grantees, and advocates — wasn't always easy. This experience mirrored the difficulty that many CAPs had in their own communities as they attempted to develop collaboratives involving schools, local governments, and others to address violence against youth. Some CAPs, like La Familia, developed broad-based collaboratives that continue to function today. But others, like Asian Resources, found that language barriers and cultural norms hampered attempts to create a local collaborative focused on youth violence prevention. Despite the challenges, the CAPs grew more savvy about partnering to create a common agenda for youth.

Given the diversity of VPI grantees (community leaders, researchers, and policy professionals) philosophical divisions due to differences in class, race, educational background, and experience had to be overcome. These divisions were apparent when the policy issues were prioritized. Some CAP representatives felt that gun control was not as important to reducing youth violence as job creation, quality education, and family support. The Pacific Center, which led the strategy development process of the VPI policy agenda, wanted to focus on “winnable” local issues such as banning the cheap “Saturday Night Special” guns often used to commit crimes. The Center believed this would enable advocates to build a track record and credibility to advocate for changes in state policy. “Banning Saturday Night Specials was simply one of the things that could be done that would build political strength for the Initiative,” said Andrew McGuire, director of the Pacific Center.

Gun control advocates, most notably the Pacific Center and Legal Community Against Violence (LCAV), assisted community organizers and elected officials to pass city and county ordinances restricting gun sales, licensing, and manufacturing. In Pomona, Community Wellness Partnership was successful in pressing not only for a ban on Saturday Night Specials but also in helping ban gun shows at the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds. Throughout the 1990s, local organizing efforts eventually led to expanding restrictions on firearms in more than 300 cities and counties.

In addition to developing legal strategies, VPI grantees packaged information in ways that caught the attention of both policymakers and the public. In 1995, VPI research grantee Dr. Garen Wintemute published a monograph, “Ring of Fire,” highlighting the disproportionate role of Saturday Night Specials in violent crime. Wintemute's research — the subject of numerous reports around the country — was used to show policymakers that concrete steps could and should be taken to limit the ease with which weapons get into the hands of young people. The VPI's public education

campaign, produced by Bay Area-based public affairs firm Martin & Glantz, used stark, factual terms in paid advertisements — “Handguns are the number one killer of children” and “There are eight times more gun dealers than McDonald’s in California” — to tell how violence was affecting youth. This resonated with lawmakers and the general public. High profile events, such as video and press conferences and town hall meetings featuring state and national legislators, added weight to the campaign, as did a database containing the names of more than 10,000 “opinion leaders” around the state to whom high-quality, eye-catching materials were sent on a regular basis. As a result, the campaign’s sound bites were picked up by policymakers, including many who had not traditionally been aligned with gun control forces.

The Pacific Center and other VPI grantees took the local momentum on firearms to the state level. They were helped by a shift in the composition of the state legislature in the mid-1990s, when the effects of a 1990 term-limits law began to be felt. Local elected officials who had supported gun ordinances in their communities — many of whom were ethnic minorities and women — moved up to the state legislature. Advocates’ efforts were amply rewarded in 1999 when the state legislature passed a package of six bills, including a ban on Saturday Night Specials. The bills were signed into law by Governor Gray Davis, putting California at the forefront of the gun control movement.

Because the effort to change the firearms policy was so consuming, VPI grantees largely postponed work on increasing state resources for youth violence prevention until the second five years of the Initiative. But the goal of obtaining more resources for youth turned out to be more challenging than firearms in that there was less local effort to build on.

One of the goals of the VPI’s “Resources for Youth” campaign was the creation of a state-level youth violence prevention authority to coordinate government planning and programs. But VPI advocates were unable to convince legislators that prevention programs deserved this level of attention. Another effort, a Senate bill to create a program modeled on the VPI within the state Department of Health Services (DHS), never made it out of committee. Still, there were important victories. In 2000, the Schiff-Cardenas Crime Prevention Act was passed, providing the most significant appropriation for youth violence prevention in California’s history — more than \$120 million per year. “The Foundation stayed with this issue for so long that it enabled youth violence prevention advocates to find opportunities that weren’t there in the short term,” said David Steinhart, a juvenile justice advocate with Commonweal, a VPI grantee, who crafted an unbreakable formula that tied together funds for youth violence prevention and for law enforcement.

Another VPI grantee, Barrios Unidos of Santa Cruz, worked with a local coalition to advocate for community-based youth violence prevention programs; in 1997, their state assemblyperson successfully promoted a bill that set aside \$3 million per year for such programs. In addition, the After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships and Proposition 49 (the Schwarzenegger Initiative) provided more funds for youth programs.

The VPI policy program also supported the development of new research tools for future policymaking, such as the Linked Homicide Database, which DHS created by combining data from homicide reports with data from death reports. The first such database in the nation, it “allows us to analyze complex policy questions that we couldn’t even think about before, particularly those that revolve around the relationship between murderers and their victims and the circumstances surrounding homicides,” said Dr. Alex Kelter, director of the Epidemiology and Prevention for Injury Control Branch at DHS.

VPI grantees also worked to change the portrayal of violence in both the news and entertainment media. Mediascope, a Los Angeles nonprofit, was funded to encourage more responsible portrayals of youth violence in the entertainment industry, but found film schools reluctant to incorporate the public health approach to violence in their classes. Thus, Mediascope published a book on ethics in entertainment that was appropriate for film school curricula. Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG), a media advocacy organization, produced compelling reports on the lack of context provided in most media coverage of violence. BMSG also developed a handbook and training for journalists on violence and was invited to lead workshops at some of the state’s most prominent newspapers. But while some journalists were receptive, the media’s traditional approach to covering violence as a criminal justice issue remains entrenched and there is still a great need for continuing education among media professionals.

As the ‘90s came to a close, youth violence declined significantly, but researchers have so far been unable to determine exactly why. The growth in jobs, a tough Three Strikes law (passed in 1994), increased funding for after-school programs, and the Violence Prevention Initiative are all likely contributors. The VPI taught the Foundation key lessons about the value of sustaining funding over ten years to build up a fragmented and nascent field; of building a multidisciplinary network among grantees to allow for collaboration; of emphasizing participatory planning, where both experts in the subject and those affected by it could develop shared goals; and of supporting public education campaigns to encourage government understanding of complicated problems.

Perhaps above all, the VPI succeeded in demonstrating that by using significant resources to focus on one issue, the needle could be moved — perhaps not all the way to prevention, but at least part of the way. Fundamental social change — which is what the Foundation sought in the long run — occurs incrementally over many years, so the real impact of the VPI on individuals and communities is likely to be seen in years to come. Thus, the VPI is perhaps best understood as a critical first step in changing society’s understanding of violence against youth, so that we no longer accept it as an inevitable fact of life.

CROSSING THE DIVIDE

While a well planned initiative held the promise of a coherent, consistent, and comprehensive approach to grantmaking, it also presented challenges.

With the VPI, The California Wellness Foundation provided a new model in grantmaking: funding across disciplines, providing decade-long grants, convening a diverse group of grantees to create partnerships, and supporting advocacy through local and statewide action, public education, and media. The Foundation was innovative and focused, funding not only organizations, but also grassroots

organizers and peacemakers. Above all, the Foundation is credited with addressing an identified need previously overlooked by nearly all private foundations and with understanding how it could leverage its resources by taking a risk that few funders had been willing to explore.

Despite mounting data and anecdotal evidence from grantees about the toll violence was taking on youth and communities, established foundations had not acted in any significant way to address the issue. In 1990, less than 2 percent of all grant dollars nationally was destined toward violence prevention programs of all kinds. What's more, only a tiny fraction of that two percent was awarded for primary prevention — efforts to address the risk of violence to the entire population — a key element in the public health approach. Many philanthropists perceived youth violence, from gangs to school shootings, as such a complex problem that only government could have an impact. From the foundation perspective, explained Gwen Foster, program officer at The California Endowment, “It's hard to feel as if your work is making a difference on this issue because violence never goes away.” But government's solutions focused on incarceration, while funding for innovative approaches to both controlling violence and preventing its spread remained insignificant.

Given this situation, The California Wellness Foundation's investment of \$60 million over ten years had the potential to change the funding picture significantly. “The Foundation marketed the issue and brought together other foundations to support it,” said Deane Calhoun, a 1995 VPI Peace Prize winner and executive director of Youth Alive in Oakland.

By venturing into policy advocacy, the Foundation had to ensure that its stance on public policy issues and its support for policy research and analysis fit the terms of IRS laws that restrict foundations from lobbying for specific legislation. While the Foundation was willing to provide resources and muscle toward ensuring that the messages of the VPI public education campaign were heard throughout the state and beyond, this was also likely to invite greater scrutiny of the Foundation's position, particularly in relation to gun control.

But the Foundation assessed the risks it faced and persevered. In California in the 1990s, where handguns were fast becoming the number one killer of youth and an average of 22,000 juveniles were arrested for violent felonies every year, there was an urgent need for bold steps. “We'd always known that you can't address youth violence just by providing services and intervention; you also have to deal with policies and systemic issues, but we were limited in what we could do alone,” said

Anita Barnes of La Familia Counseling Center.

In embarking on the Initiative, the Foundation provided hope to violence prevention advocates that foundations could and would play a key role in funding alternatives to conventional criminal justice approaches. And according to many observers, the Foundation has succeeded in this regard. “Today, violence is accepted by foundations as a public health issue, and that’s due to the work of The [California] Wellness Foundation,” said Father Greg Boyle, executive director of Jobs For a Future in Los Angeles and a California Peace Prize recipient in 2000.

Placing violence prevention funding within an initiative structure proved to be both an advantage and a challenge of the decade-long investment. The initiative format seemed logical in that the youth violence prevention field was still young and lacked a core of visible, established organizations; this meant that the Foundation could play a useful role as a nexus. “The VPI required an initiative structure because there wasn’t much on the ground,” said the Foundation’s president and CEO, Gary Yates. Many believe that the Initiative’s structure gave voice to a movement. “There was a sense of many people working together on this issue,” said Larry Cohen, a member of the VPI advisory committee and executive director of Prevention Institute. Linda Wong of Community Development Technologies Center agreed: “The value of an initiative is that it makes you realize that you can’t reduce violence without affecting other parts of the system.”

While a well-planned initiative held the promise of a coherent, consistent, and comprehensive approach to grantmaking, it also presented challenges. The level of grantee buy-in varied greatly; there was disagreement about policy objectives and some community-based grantees felt that the Foundation’s use of quantitative evaluation tools to assess outcomes was unfair. That the community collaboration model was driven by the Foundation’s mandate rather than by practitioners in the field bothered some grantees. Father Greg Boyle said that while the Initiative’s structure provided momentum for policy change, it sometimes felt “disconnected” at the local level because “it came from on high, rather than being born from below.”

The Foundation hoped to bring about change in the philanthropic world, and began working early on to build alliances with other funders. To expand the number of CAPs, the Foundation invited other foundations to become part of the VPI through co-funding partnerships. The pitch wasn’t easy, as some foundations viewed both the public health approach to violence prevention and the length of the VPI as unorthodox. “It’s hard for foundations to commit and stay committed to a single issue for a long time,” said Dorothy Meehan, vice president of Sierra Health Foundation. Nevertheless, eight foundations eventually joined with TCWF, enabling the VPI to support almost twice as many CAPs than were initially planned.

Co-funding brought resources, but also challenges. Some of the co-funded CAPs had to provide progress reports to two funders, and “it was sometimes confusing to have all these cooks in the kitchen,” said former VPI program officer Michael Balaoing. For varying reasons, only two of the

original co-funders remained with the VPI for the full 10 years of the Initiative. But many co-funders say that the VPI fundamentally changed how they look at youth violence. “The VPI enabled me to see that the public health model can be applied in a powerful way to the issue of violence,” said Gwen Foster.

The VPI was also a trailblazer in supporting policy change, demonstrating how foundations could support advocacy through research, public education, media, and strategy development. For Alliance Healthcare Foundation, the VPI was “liberating,” according to its president Ruth Riedel, because “we were able to show our board that advocacy really works.” When elected officials began adopting the VPI’s public health terminology, it provided powerful evidence of the effectiveness of VPI-style advocacy to the Alliance Healthcare Foundation’s board. Alliance Healthcare Foundation has since launched two of its own advocacy projects, using many of the strategic tactics employed in the VPI campaigns.

The Foundation shared its experiences nationally, most notably with the National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention, a consortium of funders seeking opportunities to support the field. A close relationship developed between the Funding Collaborative and TCWE, which was a founding member and whose staff played a consistent leadership role on the Collaborative’s board. This interchange was a key influence on the Funding Collaborative, according to executive director Linda Bowen. “I was very impressed with the VPI as a model because of the focus on community engagement and pushing for policy change at the community level,” she said. The VPI model of convening people and organizations from a variety of disciplines to address violence against youth had a strong influence on the Funding Collaborative’s efforts.

At times, the size of the VPI investment in youth violence prevention created the perception in the foundation world that the issue of youth violence was “covered.” During the 10 years of the VPI, “there was little a foundation could do in violence prevention in California that would not be seen as [The California] Wellness [Foundation],” Larry Cohen said.

Today many funders view violence prevention as part of a larger set of “youth development” or “community building” goals. And although some supporters of youth violence prevention say the reluctance of foundations to use the term “violence prevention” to describe their grantmaking downplays the significance of the issue, there still is no single accepted definition of violence prevention among philanthropists. On a more concrete level, the steep drop in the value of stock portfolios after 2000 has prompted many foundations to focus their reduced grantmaking on issues they view as more fundamental than youth violence, such as shoring up health services ravaged by cuts in public spending. The foundation world may need a reminder of the key lessons demonstrated by the VPI: violence against youth is an urgent public health issue; it *can* be prevented; and foundations *can* play a role in reducing the likelihood that youth fall prey to violence.

While the VPI encountered challenges along the way, these often provided critical learning about designing initiatives with flexibility, planning sufficiently to maintain co-funder relations, and pursuing evaluation with an openness to qualitative analysis. The VPI also showed that one funder’s willingness to break new ground could spark action elsewhere in the philanthropic world and help change perceptions; that multiyear grants could encourage organizations to be effective in tackling pressing issues; that grants to individuals could develop leadership in a fledgling field; and that, without actual lobbying, foundations could use their funding and prestige to draw attention to public policy needs.

ELUSIVE EVIDENCE

Without the data, model policies, messages, and grassroots connections provided for them by VPI grantees, legislators would not have been so proactive in moving a gun control agenda forward.

Once the decision to invest in a 10-year initiative to prevent violence against youth was made, a natural question ensued: How would the Foundation know if the VPI had an impact? In 1993, the answer was to examine each of the four Initiative components as well as their relationship to one another.

The evaluation as envisioned by the Foundation was extremely complex, and finding one institution in California that could evaluate the many activities funded by the VPI proved difficult. As a result, the Foundation brought three teams together: the Injury Prevention Center at Johns Hopkins University was to evaluate the policy and research programs and manage and coordinate the evaluation; the Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention would evaluate the CAPs; and RAND would evaluate the leadership development program and analyze criminal justice data from the CAP communities. This arrangement was akin to a forced marriage, but it was one the Foundation felt was necessary since each institution brought particular expertise to the project. About two years into the evaluation, this forced marriage ended in divorce and Johns Hopkins left because of differences over how best to measure VPI-related outcomes. At the request of the Foundation, RAND agreed to add to its scope the evaluation of the policy and research programs (begun by Hopkins), while Stanford continued to evaluate the CAPs.

In seeking to prove the value of its investment, the Foundation hoped that evaluators would be able to show a causal relationship between the work of the VPI grantees and a reduction in violence against youth. This was particularly true in the case of the CAPs, where the evaluators attempted to determine, using quantitative methods, the impacts of the work of those organizations. As it turned out, the evaluation “tried to quantitatively measure an area that was still being defined, where indicators and clear objectives were still being developed,” according to Dr. Mark Rosenberg, director of The Task Force for Child Survival and Development and former director of the CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

Developing outcome measures for the CAPs was a major task since there was considerable

variation in program structure, design and outreach. The evaluation team had to take into account different definitions of “community” in determining each CAP’s “focal area” (from which evaluation data would actually be collected). Asian Resources, for example, viewed its service area not geographically, but in terms of the Southeast Asian immigrant community, which was spread throughout the Sacramento metropolitan area.

Many CAPs viewed the evaluation as an attempt to “grade” their performance and felt that the evaluators represented the elite, academic world far removed from the reality of the communities being studied and the problem of violence against youth. Many observers say the CAPs never fully accepted the evaluation in the format designed by Stanford and RAND. The Stanford team made site visits, helping to raise its credibility among some CAPs, but most remained unconvinced of the evaluation’s fairness, “I don’t think the evaluators ever really understood what we feel,” said Bernardo Rosa.

The evaluators also encountered serious limitations with the data. For example, the FBI’s violent crime statistics that RAND was using to determine impacts on youth violence were not available for all of the CAP focal areas (only citywide statistics are reported) and did not provide adequate information about the age of those involved in violent crimes. But while this was disappointing, said RAND’s Peter Greenwood, the more significant problem was that the CAPs process and outcome goals were linked to direct service delivery and not explicitly to reducing violence.

Accomplishments such as engaging and involving youth and building collaboratives in local communities, unfortunately, were not likely to be captured by the quantitative methods being used by the evaluators. People Reaching Out in Riverside, a key player on the city’s youth advisory council, developed a strong partnership with the school district, but this was not reflected in the evaluation. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems the Foundation, CAP grantees, and others might have been better served by an evaluation that measured progress toward interim goals, such as the creation of constituencies for whom youth violence prevention is a priority or focusing on the reduction of risk factors for violence. “I was very proud of what the CAPs were doing in terms of working with schools, law enforcement, community workers, and youth. But they didn’t get credit for it,” said Loretta Middleton, a youth services director in San Diego schools and a member of the VPI advisory committee.

Because several favorable trends converged in the early 1990s to put significant momentum behind the VPI policy goals — particularly those related to firearms — it was somewhat difficult to delineate the VPI’s role in bringing about both statewide and local policy change to reduce violence against youth. While these extenuating circumstances ultimately benefited the VPI agenda, they also demonstrated the importance of providing sustained funding to enable advocates to take advantage of political opportunities.

By the end of the first five years of the Initiative, numerous cities and counties in California had either passed or were considering firearms-related ordinances, including “junk” gun bans, dealer restrictions, and other measures. The Pacific Center and other VPI policy grantees, such as Legal

Community Against Violence and Charles and Mary Leigh Blek of the Million Mom March of Orange County, clearly contributed to these successes. Yet in the evaluation, while RAND credited the Pacific Center with developing key policy strategies on firearms, it would only say that the Pacific Center's work had a "modest" effect on getting gun control measures passed into law. And although the evaluators recognized that the Pacific Center's gun control efforts may have been a crucial first step toward reducing violence against youth, they stopped short of attributing California's steep declines in youth firearms violence during the 1990s to the Foundation-funded strategies. According to the evaluators, it was simply too difficult to control for extenuating factors such as the booming economy and the Three Strikes law — which put many more violent offenders behind bars — to reach any definitive conclusions about the impact of the VPI.

But others saw it differently and observers within and beyond California consistently credit the Foundation and the VPI with playing a major role in putting California at the forefront of states severely limiting access to firearms. They say that without the data, model policies, messages, and grassroots connections provided for them by VPI grantees, legislators would not have been so proactive in moving a gun control agenda forward. "California's always been very pro-gun, yet there has been a significant change in attitudes and norms here in recent years," said Larry Cohen. "That's an outcome, in part, of the VPI work." To a certain extent, the willingness to fund grantees working for policy change has to be accompanied by an understanding that it is not always easy to see exactly how things happened. Unlike service provision, advocates' efforts to change policy can be stalled for years, only to get a jump-start when an unforeseeable event spurs legislators to action.

Demonstrating the impacts of the Foundation-funded research on policy was challenging when so many external factors couldn't be controlled. The intent of the Foundation was to fund research on the factors contributing to violence against youth in order to influence policy debates. According to the RAND evaluation, that happened in several cases: Jim Mosher's work on a model alcohol policy control act; Maria Alaniz's studies of the relationships between advertising, alcohol, and violence in Latino communities; Susan Sorenson's work on the role of guns in youth violence; and Garen Wintemute's report, "Ring of Fire."

Although initially some community fellows expressed the same suspicion of the evaluation process that the CAPs did, the fellows were able to demonstrate to the evaluators their accomplishments in the community, as well as "a strong commitment to mentoring youth" and how their association with the VPI increased their access to resources and to policymakers, according to RAND's assessment.

The academic fellowship program was intended to attract medical and public health scholars, particularly women and ethnic minorities, to the field of injury control and violence prevention, while the community fellowships were designed to enable community-based youth violence prevention practitioners to expand their work. The evaluators described the academic fellows program as effective in reaching the Foundation's goal of increasing the number of "professional, trained health workers committed to violence prevention."

Despite many unanswered questions, the evaluation was valuable in many unintended ways —

helping to shape subsequent evaluation processes both at TCWF and at other foundations. It also served as a reminder of the limits of scientific methodology for examining complex social issues. “Hardly anything that happens in the arena of public policy is ever evaluated, and there’s no reason to hold violence prevention programs to a higher standard,” said Alex Kelter of the California Department of Health Services.

Before moving into the second five years, however, the Foundation wanted to have a better understanding of how the VPI grantees perceived their own challenges and accomplishments than what the evaluation provided. Thus, it funded a four-month qualitative assessment of the VPI by Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) in 1997. The Foundation did not take up the VPI evaluation again until late 2001, when it awarded grants for retrospective qualitative evaluations of the VPI components to Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, Leadership Learning Community, and Portland State University’s School of Community Health.

The Foundation learned critical lessons surrounding the importance of strategic and appropriate goal-setting in planning for evaluation; the need for clarity in communications with grantees regarding evaluation purposes; the importance of evaluator legitimacy in the eyes of those being appraised; the significance of outside expectations that evaluation results be disseminated; and the complexities of ensuring comprehensive, culturally relevant evaluation for a multifaceted initiative.

CONCLUSION

The VPI built support for a movement that — advocates attest — has saved young lives in California.

Given California’s size, diversity, and the number of other challenges the state has been facing over the past decade, the Violence Prevention Initiative could not be expected to completely turn the tide in favor of prevention. But in funding the VPI, the Foundation challenged California to take a fresh look at a worsening problem and in doing so, it created the possibility that the status quo might be changed. Although the VPI may not have worked in all the ways the Foundation hoped it might, in retrospect, it is clear that the Initiative produced real and tangible results for individuals, for organizations, for communities, and for California.

From prompting the adoption of some of the toughest gun control laws in the nation to contributing to a greater acceptance of funding for youth programs, the VPI helped to change California’s views on violence. It brought a fledgling youth violence prevention field into maturity and allowed it to coalesce and grow, fostering a tide of incremental change first in cities and counties, and then statewide. The VPI legitimized prevention activities for policymakers, researchers, foundations, and voters, shaping a public dialogue that now includes prevention as part of the solution. Above all, the VPI built support for a movement that — advocates attest — has saved young lives in California, and could be a model nationwide.

Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) — founded in 1978 — is an Oakland-based firm focused on improving the nonprofit sector through advocacy documentation, organizational effectiveness, research and public policy, and strategic outreach and communications. For more than 25 years, the multidisciplinary staff has been dedicated to communicating the impact of public policy on communities — while simultaneously helping communities understand how they can shape policy — to developing creative solutions to strategically address organizational challenges; and to demonstrating to organizations and their communities how successful projects and programs can be shared with other communities. The firm’s history is filled with award-winning projects that have influenced the direction of scores of organizations — helping them grow and mature, while encouraging them to think about issues that they should address to bring about long-term social change. Working locally, statewide, and nationally, FTA’s clients include a range of start-up and experienced nonprofits, community organizations, foundations, select corporate clients, state and local governments, and public agencies.