

## CASE EXAMPLE: HOW THE PROCESS TO DECIDE ON USES CAN STRENGTHEN A COLLABORATIVE

NEKProsper! is an Accountable Health Community in Caledonia County and southern Essex County (Northeast Kingdom) in Vermont. NEKProsper! has a vision of a community where everyone is mentally healthy, well housed, financially secure, well nourished, and physically healthy. The collaborative aligns using the principles of collective impact in which cross-sector partners work as Collaborative Action Networks (CANs), each focusing on one of the five NEKProsper! community-level outcomes.

Recognizing the downstream health impacts of financial security, NEKProsper's Financially Secure CAN is striving to raise household income in the region, which ranks as one of Vermont's poorest. NEKProsper! is partnering with Northern Community Investment Corporation, to create the Prosperity Fund, which will expand financing options for businesses that may not have access to more traditional loan capital.

The Georgia Health Policy Center spoke with two NEKProsper! steering committee members, Shawn Tester, CEO of the Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital, and Aaron Krone, business resource manager at Northern Community Investment Corporation.

### What was the original vision for how NEKProsper! could address local needs?

As an Accountable Community for Health, NEKProsper! set out to improve health and well-being for the entire region, and there was widespread recognition that to do so required addressing the social determinants of health. The collaborative underwent a priority-setting process and settled on five community-level outcomes of focus. More recently, NEKProsper! made a commitment to intentionally address health equity by trying to remove systemic barrier to good health, especially poverty.

What strategies and tactics were successful for identifying uses and planning for implementation of the Prosperity Fund? NEKProsper! describes their priority-setting and decision-making processes as collaborative and data-driven, resulting in strong team consensus. The collaborative used Results-Based Accountability to drive the process, but acknowledges other techniques can also be effective. The collaborative credits the following strategies with strengthening NEKProsper! and, ultimately, the anticipated success of the Prosperity Fund.

#### Build nontraditional partnerships

Think outside the box for community stakeholders, advises NEKProsper! The Accountable Community for Health engaged the business community, employers, and banks, in addition to the arts community, schools, government, social services, and justice agencies.

The Prosperity Fund relies on co-branded efforts between NEKProsper! and Northern Community Investment Corporation, enabling the fund to tap into financial resources already held by the community development financial institution (~\$750,000), in addition to state grant dollars from the Vermont Banking and Insurance Commission that will provide additional support services for this special line of loans for startup borrowers and microentrepreneurs under the umbrella of rural development.



### Influence direction, but maintain distinct lanes

While NEKProsper! recognizes the importance of financial stability for boosting community health, it does not see itself as having banking expertise. NEKProsper! members comprise an advisory committee that will help establish guiding principles and policies for the Prosperity Fund, but it will not guide individual loan decisions. For example, a loan for a vape store would not align with NEKProsper's values. The advisory committee will determine social return on investment measures for the overall fund, as well as specific social return measures for loans generally based on type of business and how it contributes to the overall mission and goals of NEKProsper!

### High-touch may yield high-impact

The Banking and Insurance Commission grant will fund staffing for high-touch relationships with Prosperity Fund community borrowers. Quarterly visits and technical assistance will be part of the back-end management of Prosperity Fund loans. This differs from ordinary Community Development Financial Institutional loans, which can sometimes look more like traditional bank loans. Additionally, in partnership with the NEKProsper Advisory Committee, the Northern Community Investment Corporation will conduct more tracking and reporting with these borrowers, including measuring social determinants related to the borrower over the anticipated five-year lifespan of the loan.

The Prosperity Fund anticipates making average loans of \$50,000 with the goal that these microloans and startup loans will ultimately grow jobs in the region. Secondarily, if the smaller loans can revitalize the downtown area, there will be additional economic benefit.

## **What are the lessons for local wellness funds?**

### Establishing cross-sector initiatives, including local wellness funds takes time

Stay the course, even if it is harder and takes longer than anticipated. NEKProsper! admits that getting the Prosperity Fund up and running has taken several years longer than planned, including a pilot, a redesign, and additional fundraising. Yet, stakeholder engagement has remained consistently high, which Tester says, reinforces that the collaborative is focused on the right things, has built trusted relationships among partners, and is poised to make a difference to the community it serves.

### Find common ground

NEKProsper! built consensus around noncontroversial, pretty universally recognized needs (e.g., a thriving economy and health equity) and agreed to work across sectors to develop strategies targeting these issues. Fundamentally, social services, health care, and banking, all recognize the same pervasive regional needs and want the same outcomes, they just might have used different language to describe the vision. NEKProsper! believes finding commonalities as part of the early work together builds a stronger collaborative that can endure.

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