

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2011-12 Investment Process Assessment - Perspectives from Volunteers, Agency Partners & UWMA

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Compiled By
Ginneh P. Baugh
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BACKGROUND

For United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta (UWMA) “the Investment Process” refers to the annual grant-making process for the Community Impact Fund. Prior to 2009 the existing funding model was characterized as being rigid, driven by entitlement and inefficient because of the numerous volunteer committees making investment decisions.

In order to address these challenges and make progress towards the goals, in February 2011, the UWMA Board of Directors approved a new investment model that provides the flexibility to strategically invest United Way dollars and leverage other resources across the 13-county region to achieve the planned results in Education, Health, Income, and Homelessness by 2014. This model brought three significant strategic changes to the Investment Process:

- Enhanced funding criteria – a new assessment tool utilized a new descriptive format for ratings and included criteria that also assessed agency capacity and capacity to measure outcomes
- Zero-based funding decisions - funding history was not a factor in decision making (no entitlement)
- Focus Area review of programs - meant shifting to a regional investment volunteer structure organized around four focus areas from a long-standing structure of 17 investment committees (4 regional and 13 local, where regional was defined as programs serving two or more counties)

The timeline for the process was also affected and resulted in shortening timelines for several components of the process and delaying the overall start and completion of the process.

METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING the FY2011-12 INVESTMENT PROCESS

In keeping with United Way’s commitment to excellence and continuous improvement, the Community Investment Committee (a sub-committee of the Community Engagement Council) commissioned this assessment of the FY2011-12 Impact Fund Investment Process.

Target Groups/Stakeholders for this assessment were:

- Investment volunteers
- Independent Reviewers
- FY2011-2012 grantees
- UWMA staff
- Defunded agencies

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Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were utilized in this Stakeholders assessment:

- Quantitative – A unique survey was designed for each of the stakeholder groups and administered online. Over 160 total responses were received, including 22 from agencies that did not receive a Community Impact Fund grant.
- Qualitative - Focus Groups facilitated by staff and volunteers provided the majority of comments included in this report. 5 focus groups were facilitated by the UWMA Managing Director. Additionally, UWMA Regional Directors and Board members conducted individual or small group listening sessions to gather feedback about the process.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Findings from the assessment of the FY2011-12 Investment Process quantified many of the informal comments that have been shared throughout the process about challenges and provided an opportunity to better understand the sources or primary causes for the frustration.

The challenges identified through the assessment were overwhelmingly attributed to the breadth and depth of change that all stakeholders experienced. Nonetheless, the findings also showed that, overall, stakeholders had a positive experience this past year and understood the purpose of the changes even if they did not agree with the end result.

IMPACT OF CHANGING MULTIPLE FACTORS AT ONCE

The significance of the changes implemented for the FY2011-12 Investment Process model and the resulting change in the volunteer structure cannot be underestimated. One observer commented that ‘there were so many changes that no matter how much time to adjust or communication provided people could not have been fully prepared.’ Because it is unlikely that the next investment process will undergo such significant changes it is almost certain that by comparison it will be less controversial, more familiar, and generally seen as more positive.

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STAKEHOLDERS EXPERIENCED A VARIETY OF CHALLENGES

Volunteers, agency partners and UWMA staff mentioned both common and differing challenges with the process. Highlights by stakeholder group:

- Volunteers: Although most volunteers had a positive experience in training, they also felt unprepared for the site visit or the wrap up funding discussion. Volunteers were discouraged by lack of funding available and subjective passions that dominated the wrap up. In addition, frustrations associated with transitioning from the local to regional volunteer structure emerged in the individual and small group listening sessions.
- Agency partners: Agency partner challenges were best characterized by a feeling that the end result (grant awards) did not reflect the effort that went into the process. Staff agreed both through the survey and focus groups that lack of clarity within UWMA caused confusion and jeopardized their credibility in the community.
- Staff: Staff continues to be concerned that volunteers are not familiar enough with what constitutes a quality program when they make their assessments. There were also many comments about lack of communication and inconsistency in messages.

OVERALL POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

The majority of volunteers want to continue their involvement; agency partners are committed to the objectives of increasing competition within the Investment Process and applauded the new assessment tool and changes in the site visit agenda. And staff thought that many of the changes, such as regional review and the new assessment tool were positive steps in promoting competition and consistency in the review process.

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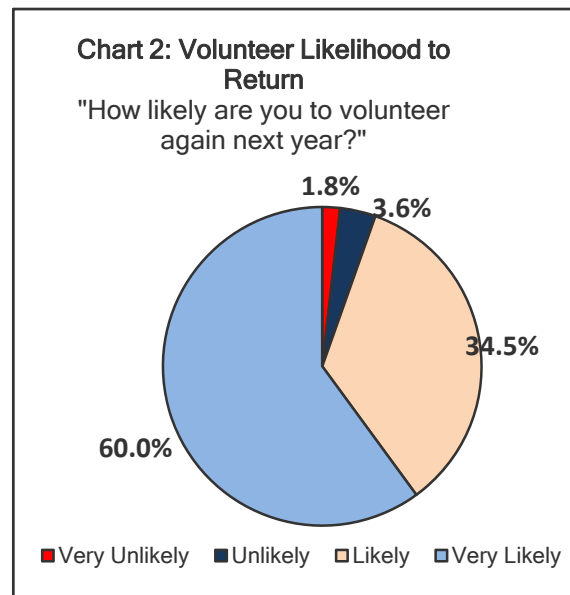
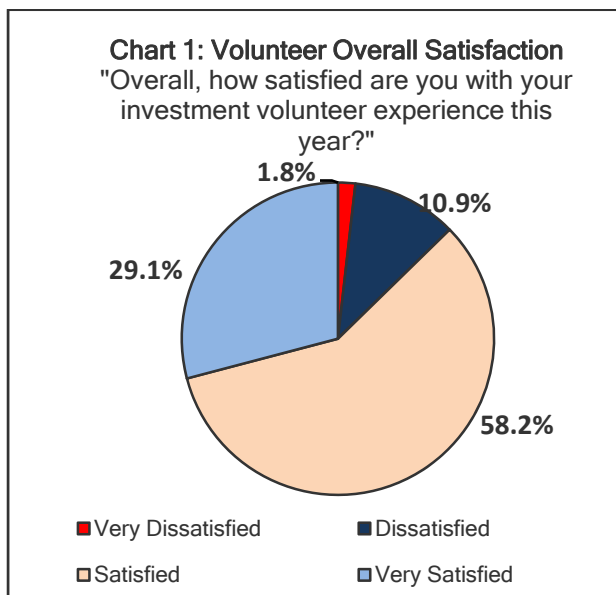
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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS BY KEY COMPONENT

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative data showed that in each area of the process there were positive attributes that should be applauded as well as areas for improvement moving forward.

OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Survey results showed that 87.3% of volunteers responded that they were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ with their experience as an investment volunteer (Chart 1). Willingness to return is another indicator about commitment and positive experience. Chart 2 shows that 94% of volunteers surveyed said they were very likely or likely to participate next year.



The overall positive experience of volunteers is mirrored by agency partners. The survey results and the focus group data would suggest that partners understood the substance and rationale for the changes that were made. Comments from agency partners echo the quantitative data:

- “We understand and agree with the new competitive process for community investments...”
- “We think the volunteers we saw this year were generally better prepared for the site visit...”

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TRAINING

The experience with training varied by stakeholder group and was most effective in preparing volunteers to review the application. New volunteers expressed frustration over the attention given to “convincing past volunteers of the changes.” Both veteran and new volunteers agreed that the training did not fully prepare them for the deliberation that occurred at the wrap up. UWMA staff felt that training was not sufficient in preparing volunteers to assess quality. Inconsistency between trainings was the biggest frustration for agency partners.

THE APPLICATION (and ODM where applicable)

More than half (56.8%) of volunteers responded the grant application as ‘just okay’ or ‘very easy’ to use. The comments from the survey and focus group suggest that for those who found the application difficult the major challenges were the financial questions (8 mentions); wording of questions (6 mentions); outcome measurement expectations (6 mentions) and length of application (5 mentions).

Challenges with the online application system continue to frustrate agency partners and outweigh positive comments about having more space overall to provide information, both data and narratives, about their programs. The most frequently mentioned challenges that Agency Partner mentioned during the focus groups: the ODM (25 mentions), alignment between program and focus area (8 mentions) and need for more time to adjust to changes (7 mentions). Below are a few specific comments from agency partners:

- “Within ODM, it was great that it allowed you to give an explanation [about] why you need to change your target number.”
- “[ODM] needs to allow agencies to save at multiple stages of [completing the application.] TIMING OUT is problematic.”
- “Very complicated. Archaic. There are better systems out there”

SITE VISITS

The revised agenda and outcome-focused discussion at site visits were received very positively by volunteers and most agency partners. More than 30 people listed the site visit as the part of the process that worked best. By contrast scheduling site visits is a task that must be met with more attention and efficiency in the year ahead.

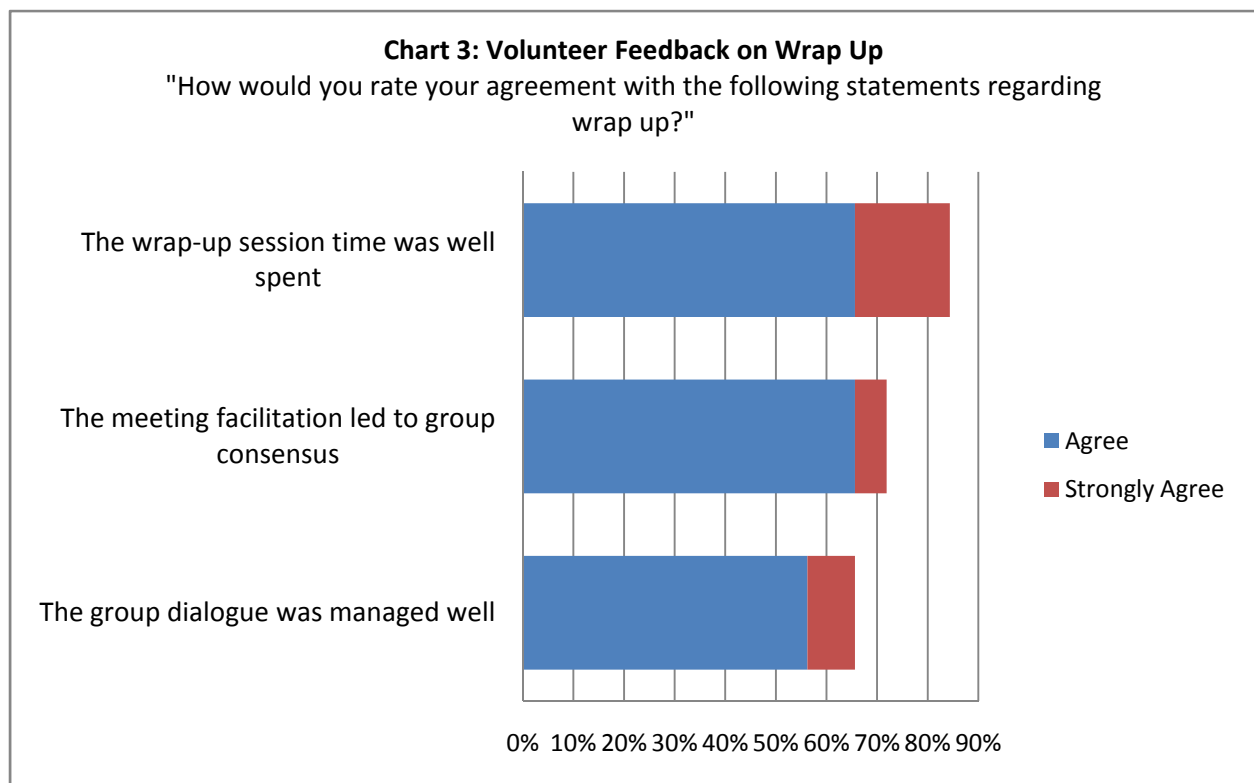
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WRAP UP PROCESS

As shown in Chart 3, more than 80% of volunteers thought the wrap up time was well spent. Also, volunteers consistently found the new assessment tool helpful in decision-making. Compared to the overall experience, only 66% of volunteers agreed that the discussion was well managed.

Among those that were displeased, the most frequently mentioned challenge was that discussions at the wrap up are often dominated by passions that are hard to quantify. Adjectives used by several volunteers to describe wrap-up included “very intense” and “very painful.”



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RECOMMENDATIONS

OVERALL EXPERIENCE

- Finalize priorities for the upcoming investment cycle earlier than last year. Ensure that these priorities are highlighted and followed through on at each stage (i.e. if performance is a priority define it, find evidence of it, reward it, communicate how to improve it.)

TRAINING

- For Volunteer training: dedicate more attention to the Wrap Up - ground rules, practice the assessment tool- establish norms and rationales among staff and utilize them in training volunteers and agencies.

THE APPLICATION (and ODM where applicable)

- Develop a “graduated or tiered” application that progressively increases in length and complexity based on the funding level. Streamline application questions to ensure more direct alignment with the assessment tool and information that is needed for wrap up discussions.
- Ensure simpler and more direct alignment between RFP guidelines/application and online application system.

SITE VISITS

- Develop and implement an aggressive strategy to recruit more volunteers; implement more strategies for training to ensure that site visit volunteers are familiar with content/subject matter and process (the protocols and objectives) and include methods for assessing knowledge/preparedness (currently scattered responsibilities across organization).

WRAP UP PROCESS (FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS)

- Design and implement strategies that integrate quantifiable and anecdotal /subjective aspects of the review process.