

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report
Becky Spithill 2016-2017
Project: Real Change for Whatcom County

I came to the Community Engagement Fellows program in fall 2016 as a community member interested in gaining traction on a project I began in early 2016. As a former board member of Seattle's [Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project](#), my goal was to establish in Whatcom County the Real Change model of offering low obstacle employment to people who are homeless or low income, providing them with the training and support to work as vendors selling the award winning, weekly street newspaper, *Real Change News*. These members of our community would not only have the ability to earn income, but would be provided with opportunities to participate in advocacy around issues of concern to them. In addition, I hoped we could develop a pipeline for Whatcom County journalism to make its way into *Real Change News*.

Months before I became a Community Engagement Fellow, I was taken aback by Real Change's lack of enthusiasm for this effort, despite my assurances that I would ask them for very little, and certainly, no financial support. The basis for their skepticism was that Real Change had recent failed attempts at establishing vendor opportunities in other locations. These had been labor intensive and even geographically difficult projects.

I concluded that one key to success would be to set aside the "if we build it they will come" approach, and instead find ways for our Real Change to originate from the work of members of this community. That set up the first condition: to make this a project guided by members of our community. With outside assistance, I developed and undertook a structured fact-finding interview that was administered to a variety of community members. The interview solicited opinions about homelessness, the potential for Real Change to make a difference in people's lives, and recommendations for how we could make Real Change for Whatcom County a success. The CEF program was a perfect next step for advancing this project.

Members in my CEF cohort were generous with recommendations about specific WWU and community individuals, departments and organizations that might want to be a part of Real Change. I connected with the Human Services and Journalism departments, resulting in bringing on an intern from each department. Through my attendance at a meeting of the Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness, I became acquainted with a gentleman who was formerly homeless and serving as a peer advocate. He became the advocacy piece of our puzzle. Through a United Way event, I met a representative of the Northwest Youth Services who referred me to their vocational program manager, who agreed to join the Working Committee. Through the Opportunity Council, I was introduced to a woman who is currently homeless and committed to making a difference in the lives of other folks who are homeless.

Concurrent with this work, I drafted a distribution agreement with Real Change and met with vendor services, editorial and the managing directors to review it. At that point, I sensed that Real Change Seattle was no longer resistant to this effort. I believe that my participation in the CEF program conferred a certain legitimacy on this project and helped signal my commitment. In retrospect, their concern about the need for a high level of commitment was warranted. This project has required more of me than I anticipated, but not more than I am prepared to deliver (most days).

The Real Change for Whatcom County Working Committee convened in mid-January. The committee decided to pull together an initial cohort of prospective vendors that would start the third week of March beginning with a trip to the Real Change office for New Vendor Orientation. Throughout the rest of March and to the present, we have brought on four new vendors, two of whom have continued for more than one week.

As a result of CEF and the experience of writing a grant request, the original Real Change for Whatcom County project goal of transformed into an organizational purpose:

The purpose of Real Change for Whatcom County is to undertake projects to establish and sustain the infrastructure in Whatcom County that will allow homeless and low income people to explore Real Change News vendor opportunities as the means to low obstacle employment. In addition, the organization will assist these Whatcom County residents to seize opportunities for empowerment through advocacy.

I think it's a distinction worth noting that the project went from having a goal to having a purpose; a goal is achieved and a purpose is served. The grant proposal was successful, and Whatcom Community Foundation awarded the project the full \$3707, as requested.

I began to redefine success as the process of learning what works and what doesn't. What works seems to be to narrow our focus, at least for the time being, on vendor services – outreach, training and support. At the same time, we have to continue to make connections in the community. Whatcom County has a great deal of liberal largesse, but it tends to be selective and not quite at home with itself when it comes to walking the talk. That's precisely why Real Change is so important, because it brings people who are homeless out of the shadows as members of this community rather than separate from it. It's not necessarily comfortable or easy when opportunities for interaction initially present themselves, so we are having to address various concerns that have roots in classism, stereotyping, infantilizing, and marginalizing of people who are selling the paper. At their most visceral, these reactions are borne of fear. The expectation is that Real Change for Whatcom County can be a part of alleviating the fear.

What hasn't worked, apparently, is my approach to engaging interns and others. Students came and went rather abruptly, sometimes without informing me, so that my only indication was complete absence of response to my emails. I found that particularly odd, especially in the case of an alumna who was assisting with social media and was entirely nonresponsive when I asked for parting guidance on accounts she established for the project. The individual who was assisting with advocacy became overwhelmed with his multiple commitments, as did others. I will follow up with Service Learning staff this summer to discuss approaches to effectively engaging students in the project. I'm also in the process of recruiting for members to serve on a formal board of directors for the organization.

Finally, as a result of my experience as a Community Engagement Fellow and the opportunity to observe other people's experiences with their projects, I have become okay with allowing the direction of the project to evolve. Right now, it is both less than what I envisioned and more. For example, the term "infrastructure" is a pretty lofty word for the little systems we have in place to address logistics, outreach, and other elements of Real Change that I wish were fully realized already. On the other hand, our progress may be slow, but it is steady, and the potential for the project to have a positive effect is real, not only an effect on the lives of people who are homeless in Whatcom County, but an effect on the community as a whole.