

Executive Summary

The William D. Ruckelshaus Center considers evaluation an important aspect of public policy work, and as such has been developing its own post-project evaluation methodology. In 2016, the Center piloted its methodology in an evaluation of the Walla Walla Water Management Initiative. In December of 2017, the Center contracted a student consulting team from the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy and Governance to apply this methodology to one of its completed collaborative governance projects. A key purpose was to continue developing and refining the Center's evaluation methodology, while also evaluating the project to identify outcomes, impacts, process improvements and best practices. The student consulting team and Center identified the *Nurse Staffing Steering Committee*, a collaborative process the Center worked on from 2007-2011, as an appropriate project to evaluate.

Background

For nearly two decades, hospitals and nurses unions have contested each other on issues related to minimum nurse staffing ratios, mandatory overtime, and meal and rest breaks. Beginning in 2007, after years of failed attempts to pass legislation on these issues, leaders in Washington state representing both health care organizations and nurses unions agreed to seek resolution through a new, collaborative forum. With the assistance of the Ruckelshaus Center, this arrangement was formalized in a February 2008 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), forming what would become the Nurse Staffing Steering Committee (NSSC).

In March of 2008, the NSSC's first achievement was the Governor's signing of Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 3123 (E2SHB), a bill jointly drafted by the parties. In addition to recognizing the NSSC, E2SHB 3123 mandated the formation of local hospital-based nurse staffing committees (NSCs) and supported the NSSC's contract with the Center to provide neutral and independent facilitation services. Meeting nearly monthly from 2008 to 2011, the NSSC's primary goals were to assist with the implementation of hospital NSCs, to promote evidence-based practices on nurse staffing and patient safety, and to issue joint policy recommendations to the state legislature. The NSSC enlisted the Ruckelshaus Center to coordinate its meetings, facilitate discussions, and leverage institutional networks and university expertise.

Nearly a decade since it began facilitating meetings for the NSSC the Ruckelshaus Center requested a qualitative evaluation of the Nurse Staffing Project. In applying the Center's evaluation methodology to the Nurse Staffing Project, this report aims to investigate: (1) the successes and challenges that arose during the NSSC process; (2) the successes and challenges that the Center encountered during the facilitation of the NSSC; and (3) lessons learned from the

Nurse Staffing Project for improving the Ruckelshaus Center's services. The report also includes recommendations for future Ruckelshaus Center project evaluations. With the assistance of Center staff and faculty advisors from Washington State University (WSU) and the University of Washington (UW), the student consulting team conducted a total of 20 interviews with individuals involved in the Nurse Staffing project to prepare this report. Interview data was supplemented with document-based information as available.

Findings

Regarding the **successes and challenges that arose during the NSSC process**, some key, cross-cutting themes emerged from the consulting team's conversations with interviewees:

Successes

- *The initial Memorandum of Agreement and Nurse Staffing Committee legislation* were mentioned as key outputs and successes of the NSSC by nearly all respondents. Interviewees described the importance of how the MOA and accompanying legislation, E2SHB 3123, helped to establish a statewide system for approaching nurse staffing issues where one did not previously exist.
- A majority of participants discussed the development of positive *professional relationships among NSSC participants* as another important success of the NSSC process. While some interviewees indicated that committee members had a level of trust and respect for each other prior to the NSSC, a handful of individuals suggested that the NSSC process helped to grow these feelings of trust and respect even further.
- Over half of all interviewees cited the *alternative venue to the legislature and courts* that the NSSC helped establish as an important success of the group. Even if collaborating through the NSSC was not the only alternative to advocating before the legislature or courts, participants from all sides identified the importance of working outside of venues where parties had grown "exasperated" from extended conflict and little progress.
- Several interviewees mentioned the *joint fact-finding* efforts of the NSSC as notable successes. While most interviewees argued that the joint fact-finding exercises did not alter policy positions in significant ways, they viewed building a common information base as useful for defining the problem and establishing facts.
- A key success of the NSSC was in laying the *groundwork for continued collaboration*. In May of 2017, the Governor signed House Bill 1714 (HB), which aims to improve nurse staffing processes established in E2SHB 3123. Interviewees discussed how they used a collaborative model inspired by the NSSC to help develop and pass HB 1714.

Challenges

- Nearly every interviewee cited *differences in perspectives* as a central challenge to the NSSC process. Participants described how members often had similar goals but diverging ancillary

interests, which led to disagreements. For some participants, these divergent perspectives created fatigue and a sense of fatalism about the process.

- Many participants also identified *turnover in NSSC participants and Ruckelshaus Center staff* as another key challenge. Interviewees said that the turnover of facilitators and of a key committee member sapped the group's momentum and stalled progress.
- *Organizational buy-in*, or the lack thereof, was described as another challenge to the NSSC process. Many interviewees noted that towards the end of the process, questions were raised about whether WSHA members would follow through on NSSC agreements. Without the guarantee of organizational buy-in, some participants grew skeptical of the NSSC process.
- After receiving funding from the legislature in their inaugural year, NSSC members relied on self-funding efforts to sustain the group's work through 2011. While nearly half of all interviewees acknowledged the *funding inadequacy* as another challenge, most agreed that finances were not the primary reason the NSSC stopped formally meeting.

Areas where less success was achieved

- *Meal and rest breaks* were mentioned as an area where the NSSC failed to reach a desired outcome. Although it was not a part of the NSSC's original mandate, an advisory committee convened in January of 2011 to try and produce joint legislation on this issue. Despite reaching what had seemed to be a near-consensus, for a variety of reasons the NSSC was not able to introduce a policy recommendation on meal and rest breaks to the legislature.
- The *implementation of NSCs* was another area where interviewees felt more progress could have been made. In their view, although the creation of NSCs had been a notable success, they did not function as intended. The lack of success in this realm is one reason why the parties worked to pass HB 1714 in 2017.
- *Sustained organizational change in perspectives and positions*. This was a final area where interviewees felt the NSSC could have been more successful. Although many interviewees said that the NSSC process strengthened *personal* relationships, they acknowledged that relationships between *organizations* remained largely unchanged.

Regarding the **successes and challenges that the Center encountered in facilitating the NSSC**, a number of themes emerged from our conversations with interviewees:

- *Discussion facilitation and conflict mediation* services provided by the Center were by far the most memorable aspect of the Center's involvement in this project for most participants. Many participants noted the importance of having a neutral facilitator and often spoke highly of the facilitators' ability to mediate conflict. Although the Ruckelshaus Center certainly contributed services beyond facilitation, in many cases interviewees viewed these contributions as managed or mediated by the facilitators.
- Approximately half of the interviewees discussed *neutrality*. All but two of these interviewees characterized the Center and its facilitators as neutral. The perceived neutrality of the Center and its facilitators was important to both keeping the parties focused on their

shared interests and providing cover for people across the political spectrum to support the NSSC process.

- Interviewees also discussed *the Ruckelshaus Center name*, which in their view lent the process “credibility,” “authenticity,” and “prestige.” For both NSSC participants and the legislature, the Center’s presence signaled mutual buy-in to the process. Some interviewees expressed disappointment that the Center did not leverage its name more at the outset to generate greater organizational buy-in.
- Approximately half of the interviewees mentioned Center-led *research and fact-finding* efforts. Most found that the nurse staffing research findings commissioned by the Center were useful for establishing a shared information base but did not alter policy positions. Interviewees recalled the Center’s later effort to survey the progress of statewide NSC implementation as a challenging process that produced disappointing results.
- Interviewees described the Center’s *operations management* and logistical support as critical to the process’ sustainability. Without the Center playing the key role of convener, the NSSC may not have met as regularly, as often, or as long—if at all.
- *Group exercises* led by the Center toward the end of the NSSC process were mentioned by only two interviewees. Some interviewees expressed that there were opportunities for the Center to more proactively engage in the process.

Lessons learned for the Ruckelshaus Center’s services include:

- Knowledge of collaborative processes and subject matter expertise can both be helpful to facilitators. The Center could consider using co-facilitators in future projects that, together, possess both types of expertise.
- According to some interviewees, the Center could have leveraged its reputation to secure greater buy-in from hospital association members at the beginning of this process. Going forward, the Center should be attuned to the level of organizational buy-in: is the collaboration occurring between organizations, or only between organizational representatives?
- There may be opportunities for the Center to improve its fact-finding process. One interviewee said the Center could do more to set expectations for the parties before engaging a researcher. Specifically, parties without research methodology expertise should expect to work with researchers around project goals, but to leave methodological details largely to the research team. Others said the Center could do more to educate parties about Institutional Review Board protocols, issues around participant confidentiality, and productive ways to work with researchers.

Lessons for future evaluation efforts

The Ruckelshaus Center is in the early stages of an effort to systematically evaluate its past projects. This report is the second such evaluation. The first, entitled *Revisiting Many Waters: An*

Evaluation of the Walla Walla Water Management Initiative authored by UW graduate student, Trevor Robinson, piloted the evaluative approach that the Ruckelshaus Center has developed. The present report uses the same approach to qualitative evaluation, which combines document review with semi-structured interview data gathered from participants and close observers.

We agree with the author of the pilot study that the qualitative, semi-structured interview format was useful for gathering detailed and nuanced information from interviewees, and that leaving definitions of success up to interviewees captured a wider range of impacts than may have been considered if there was an attempt to predetermine these. The team also found a similar benefit from working with the Center's staff and university faculty advisors, although we think that earlier, more intensive help in identifying guiding literature and in developing a more specific research design would have helped the project. We agree with the pilot study's author that this was a very valuable professional development experience for graduate students. Continuing to contract with graduate student project evaluators may be a sustainable approach to evaluation for the Center that is also complementary to its mission.

Overall, we found that though the research team structure and methodology were helpful, the focus and design of the previous evaluation were limited in their effectiveness in evaluating the NSSC due to significant differences in the project from the initial pilot. Because the NSSC is no longer active, external parties were not involved in setting the purpose of the evaluation (as they were in the pilot). Further, the Center had a narrower, and therefore more precise, role in the pilot. These differences meant that our findings are limited in their applicability to external parties, and that instead of testing the effectiveness of specific Ruckelshaus Center activities we engaged in a broader exploration of activities and outcomes.

We believe that the Center and NSSC participants will draw helpful insights from the summary of the document review and interview data in this report. There is significant opportunity in the Center's evaluation methodology to take these insights further through exploring particular aspects of the Center's practice or elements of collaborative governance as established by current literature. Moving forward, we recommend that the Center and future evaluation teams carefully attend to the prior project evaluation author Robinson's guiding feedback:

"While the broad components of the [Ruckelshaus Center's] evaluation framework can be replicated to other efforts, the Center will need to carefully match its specific evaluation questions and methods to the context, timing, and needs of each new evaluation project. It will also be important for the Center to consider what it will do with the evaluation results at the conclusion of the effort."

- Trevor Robinson, *Revisiting Many Waters: An Evaluation of the Walla Walla Water Management Initiative*, December 2016, p. 8