



# DEEPER DIVE INTO ADVOCACY:

A CASE STUDY ON A SERVICE PROVIDER'S BOLD SHIFT TO SOCIAL ACTION



Building Movement Project

# BACKGROUND

In June 2016, the **Family Economic Security Partnership (FESP)** engaged the **Building Movement Project (BMP)** to facilitate a pilot project with one FESP member agency to assess that organization's capacity to integrate policy advocacy into their current service provision. SparkPoint Contra Costa, with the support of its Steering Committee and partner agencies, volunteered to engage in this "deeper dive" and to develop a plan for future action.

**The Family Economic Security Partnership** is a 45- member public, private and nonprofit coalition dedicated to increasing income and building the assets of low-income families and individuals living in Contra Costa County, California. FESP promotes a dual approach to long-term change by acknowledging the significance of direct service provision, as well as increasing awareness of the root causes of poverty and the importance of policy/advocacy to focus on the structural and systemic changes needed to end poverty.

**The Building Movement Project** works nationally to strengthen the role of nonprofit organizations as sites of democratic practice and social change, providing information, education, and training for service organizations interested in integrating social service and social change. **SparkPoint Centers** are partnership-based one-stop financial education centers offering a full range of services to help low-income families and individuals become financially stable. SparkPoint is a program of **United Way Bay Area** that brings together some of the region's most effective agencies to make a variety of services easily accessible for busy clients.

This case study presents how **SparkPoint Contra Costa**, a direct service organization, built on its strength as an advocate for individuals to begin advocating for policy and larger system issues. The information includes an overview of types of advocacy and tips and tools for other organizations interested in adding social change activities to their daily practice.

## DEEPER DIVE PROJECT GOALS:

- *Increase understanding of the causes of poverty and wealth inequality.*
- *Increase understanding of the interconnection between what direct service agencies do on a daily basis (provide direct services) and the larger system and policy issues that create poverty and the need for direct services.*
- *Increase knowledge of policy advocacy strategies and engagement methods.*
- *Increase the power of constituents to be part of the solution.*
- *Create a learning circle of agencies and/or constituents to foster further learning and policy engagement.*

*“ In this way, service organizations become sites of mobilization and movement building by constituents working in partnership with staff. ”*

# Why Integrate Social Service and Social Change?

FESP agency members and constituents agree that poverty is not inevitable and is a function of policy and systemic/structural choices. While direct service organizations provide important access to housing, food, financial resources, other basic needs and educational opportunities, their advocacy is typically focused on individuals and does not address the economic, racial, health and social disparities or other root causes that create the need for services.

With this awareness, it becomes evident that services alone aren't enough to impact long-term change. This perspective moves organizations to consider how service provision can and must include activities that address the causes of social problems.

Social change activities might include advocacy, voter registration or community organizing. In addition, a key lever of change is constituent engagement, where the people who are beneficiaries of service build their voice and power as individuals and as part of a larger force. In this way, service organizations become sites of mobilization and movement building by constituents working in partnership with staff. While policy advocacy was the focus for the SparkPoint pilot project, the team explored a variety of advocacy activities as well as ways to expand constituent engagement.

## Types of Advocacy

Direct service providers often characterize their work as “advocating for” an individual or family which results in a change in the family’s situation. As the project began its deeper dive into advocacy, the SparkPoint team expanded its definition of advocacy to include program participants:

“Direct engagement with policy makers and elected officials, as well as supporting constituents to have more voice and power over decisions that affect their lives.” Reframing the definition of advocacy made it possible to consider new activities beyond direct service provision. Below is a list of advocacy activities considered in the pilot project survey developed and administered by BMP:

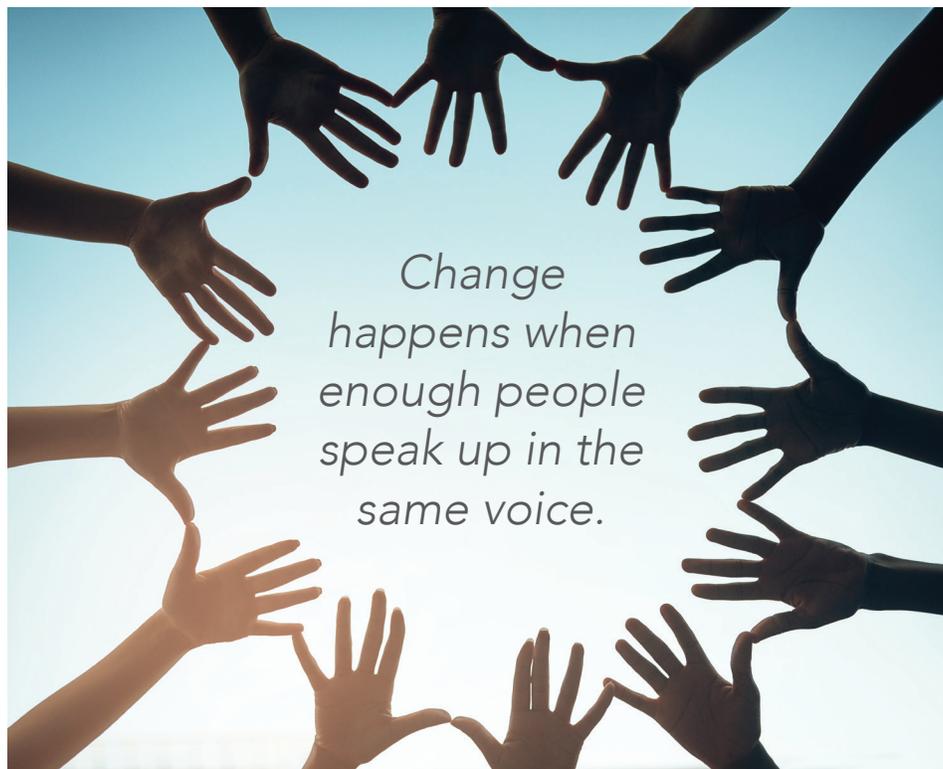
- **Research and analysis:** gather and analyze information on issues and share as appropriate.
- **Community organizing:** supports clients and residents to take action such as letter campaigns to elected officials, participating in demonstrations, making phone calls, neighborhood outreach.
- **Partnering:** identify and collaborate with others to advance a policy agenda or improve conditions for constituents.
- **Messaging:** develop clear, compelling and concise messages that are adapted for an agency’s target audiences.
- **Media relations:** plan media outreach and distribute information online, broadcast and/or print media to increase public awareness and influence public debate.
- **Influencing decision-makers:** build and nurture ongoing working relationships with elected officials and other decision-makers who can influence the agency’s policy agenda.



# The Constituent Role in Advocacy

As an organization moves from providing services and resources to people as “clients” to engaging them as “constituents” it may need to reflect on current practice and consider how clients are currently perceived in the organization. Often, this results in viewing service beneficiaries less as people in need and more as people who have something to contribute to solving larger social problems. It is therefore important to understand the spectrum of constituent engagement activities, the status of current practice and the extent to which the organization has the interest and /or capacity to engage in a specific activity. Below is a list of constituent engagement activities for consideration:

- Creating opportunities for constituents to get information about policy issues.
- Developing structures for constituents to have input into the governance and decisions of the agency.
- Creating opportunities for feedback so that constituents can share opinions about services.
- Encouraging constituents to vote and/or engaging constituents in civic/advocacy issues.
- Involving constituents in advocacy campaigns on policy issues.
- Mobilizing and turning out constituents for rallies and demonstrations.
- Developing constituent leadership.



# CASE STUDY: The Deeper Dive Project

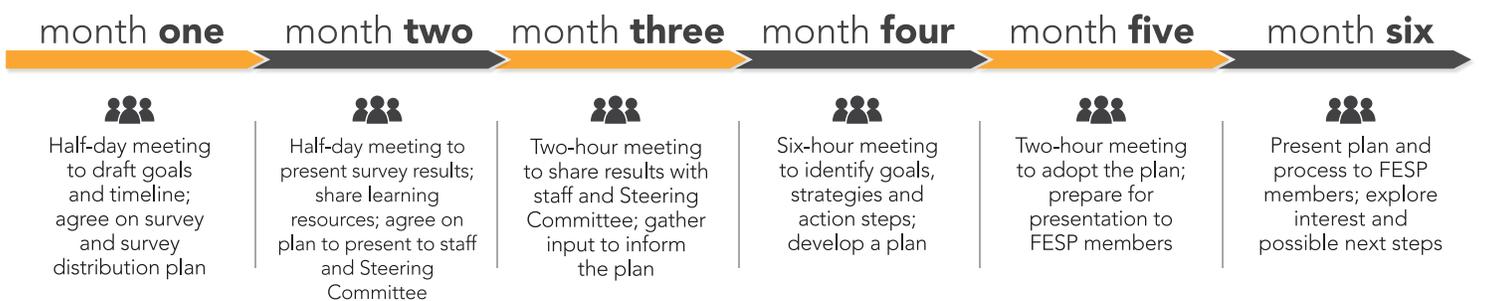
In order to design and facilitate the Deeper Dive project, BMP partnered with a local consultant, Judi Sherman, who has contributed to BMP’s body of work over the last decade. Ms. Sherman provided the process to develop the social action plan and also acted as a liaison to BMP co-director, Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, who contributed to the design and analysis of the survey.

## Planning and Survey Dissemination

Prior to the first meeting in late August 2016, SparkPoint Contra Costa director, Betty Geishirt Cantrell, convened a diverse team that included people from across the organization, partner agencies, Steering Committee and constituents. Fran Biderman, FESP Coordinator, participated in the entire process. The make-up of the team established the beginning of a learning community environment where multiple perspectives are shared in a way to produce new knowledge that is owned by the entire team.

At the first meeting, the team initiated steps to craft a survey based on their understanding of the project’s goals: to assess SparkPoint’s involvement with policy advocacy and develop a social action plan based on the results of the assessment. The survey focused on four main areas: (1) the organization’s structure to promote advocacy, including mission, values, leadership; (2) perceived barriers to conducting advocacy including time, resources, knowledge, agency mission; (3) activities that would best promote advocacy; and (4) opportunities for increasing constituent engagement. The team also agreed on a timeline of activities and clarified the roles for the consultant, staff and leadership. Below is the timeline that the team followed closely:

*“The make-up of the team established the beginning of a learning community environment where multiple perspectives are shared in a way to produce new knowledge that is owned by the entire team.”*



Building Movement Project and the consultant finalized the survey based on the team’s input. The team agreed to send it to the SparkPoint’s partner agency representatives, staff and Steering Committee members. Surveys were collected over eight days with a solid 63% response rate. Ms. Geishirt Cantrell set up a clear timeframe for responses, made follow up calls and sent frequent reminders.

## Survey Results Analysis and Presentation to Stakeholders

The team participated in a half-day meeting to analyze the survey findings with data prepared by BMP. Ms. Sherman presented an overview of the results after which the team worked in small groups to further study the data, ask lingering questions, note any discrepancies and identify common themes. The outcome of the meeting was a deep understanding of the data by the team so that they would “own” it and be able to make decisions on direction. The team presented the data to the Steering Committee and SparkPoint staff, receiving input and feedback that further informed the development of the action plan.

Each team member was responsible for a part of the presentation. Ms. Sherman developed talking points and all practiced their piece to build confidence and ensure teamwork.

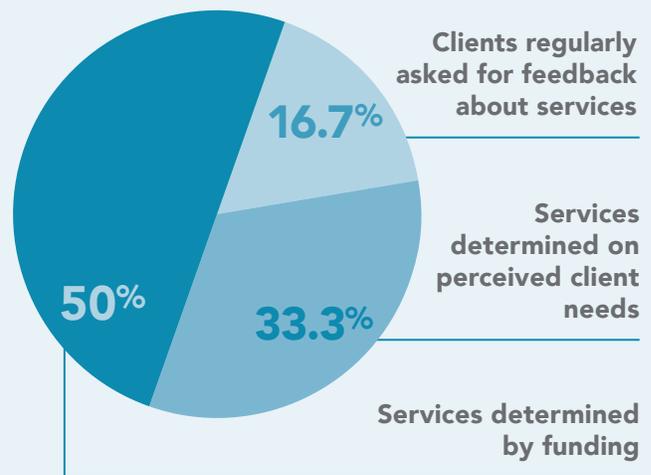
The survey asked several questions about SparkPoint’s advocacy activities. One question asked whether or not advocacy was part of the mission statement. 30% of respondents correctly stated that SparkPoint had no mission statement. Another question asked respondents to define the types of advocacy activities at SparkPoint. A majority said that SparkPoint does not engage in policy advocacy.

A third question asked why SparkPoint has not engaged in advocacy activities. Forty percent stated “I don’t know.” Other responses revealed the belief that “the work was not within the mission” and “staff lack skills and expertise to conduct advocacy.” No one selected responses that indicated fear of losing

### WHAT DID THE QUESTIONS TELL YOU ABOUT SPARKPOINT?

“ I think building up leadership among your participants is important but caution around the old style anti-poverty advocacy wherein participants are used to advocate for agency funding. ”

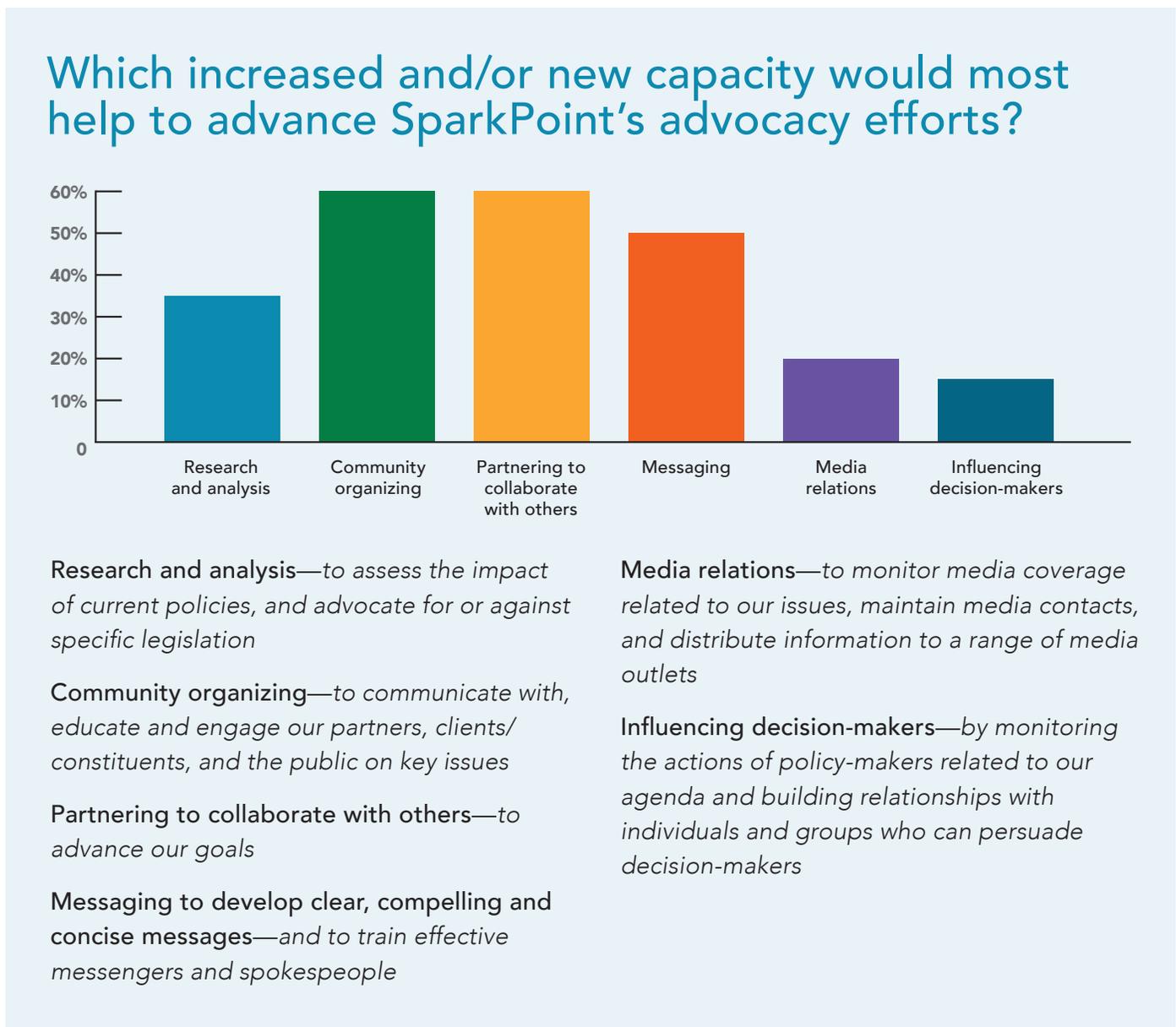
### Engagement of Clients



funding, lack of interest, or concern about impact. This encouraged the team because creating a mission and training staff are within the organization’s capacity to change.

When asked what would most help advance SparkPoint’s advocacy efforts, a majority of respondents stated that community organizing (educating and engaging constituents in relevant issues), partnering with others (a SparkPoint strength), and messaging (training people to develop and deliver clear messages) were important. Over 60% of respondents stated that SparkPoint could increase constituent engagement by sharing information, encouraging voting, identifying client priorities and involving them in campaigns, and leadership development for staff and clients on how to be effective advocates.

At the end of the presentation, Steering Committee and staff members participated in a poll to rank priorities for the action plan and identified seven prospects. With this outcome, the team met again to narrow the list and develop the plan.



# Social Action Plan Development

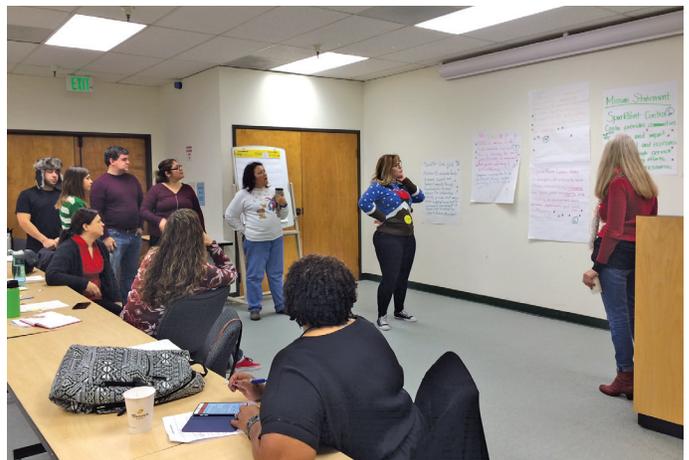
Often, organizations preparing to add advocacy to service provision believe that large-scale change is required to be successful. Through years of research, BMP has learned that small shifts in structure, process or practice can have a bigger impact over time and ensure success along the way. BMP published a series of “5% Shifts”—case studies that demonstrate that simple and achievable shifts do indeed lead to long-term results ([Building Movement Project 5% Shifts](#)). In preparing to develop the social action plan, the SparkPoint team read three case studies about organizations that had made small shifts in areas similar to those identified by the survey results. The team engaged in mutual learning, an opportunity to share perspectives on approaches presented in the 5% Shifts, and discussed how to apply them to SparkPoint and the task before them.

Based on survey results and input from stakeholders, the team agreed upon three areas that would best advance SparkPoint’s advocacy efforts: (1) articulate a clear mission that includes advocacy; (2) develop staff competencies to advocate for systems change; and (3) increase constituent and community engagement. The team worked in three small groups to complete a preliminary plan, each focusing on one of the action areas. Ms. Sherman provided a plan template that teams used as a guide with a focus on the following:

- Goals and impact for the action
- Who needs to be involved
- The current context that needs consideration
- Activities necessary to reach the goal
- Strengths currently in place to build upon, and benchmarks for success.

Each small group presented their draft plan to the entire team, received feedback to enhance the plan and made revisions. Ms. Sherman finalized the plans for the team to adopt and prepare for a presentation to FESP members. Ms. Biderman prepared the PowerPoint for this presentation.

“ Small shifts in structure, process or practice can have a bigger impact over time and ensure success along the way. ”



## Presentation to FESP

On February 1, 2017, the SparkPoint Contra Costa team presented the final result and plans to the FESP membership. It was at this meeting that the request was made to document this case study so that other FESP members might embark on a similar journey. All team members had a part in the presentation, reflecting shared responsibility and accountability to the results. In addition to the project presentation, SparkPoint indicated that steps were already underway to develop a mission statement that reflects SparkPoint's dual approach to service provision and advocacy for social change.



### WHAT DID THE QUESTIONS TELL YOU ABOUT SPARKPOINT?

“ It allowed me to have the opportunity to analyze what we do at Sparkpoint as a whole and not just my individual organization. ”

## IMPACT OF SPARKPOINT'S DEEPER DIVE

Soon after the FESP presentation, a retreat was held for all SparkPoint staff to bring the social action plan to life. In four months, SparkPoint Contra Costa made significant progress in the three areas of its social action plan.

- **Mission statement:** *Staff participated in a process to design a draft mission statement. Representatives from partner agencies, local nonprofits and SparkPoint clients were invited to comment and revisions were made that then went to the Steering Committee for input and the mission was finalized: **We partner with agencies to empower individuals and families to become financially sustainable and advocates for social change.***
- **Staff Development for Advocacy:** *Staff identified specific competencies necessary for success as advocates. Trainings included how to register people to vote and successful public speaking. Staff joined FESP meetings to learn from speakers about a variety of topics and about opportunities from other partners. For example, the Literacy for Every Adult Program (LEAP) has developed a 6-week, 3 hour/week training, "Literacy for Community Advocacy," to help advocates identify legitimate sources of information and how to present this information to clients. The training will culminate with a presentation to FESP.*
- **Empowering clients:** *In the style of a 5% Shift, SparkPoint added a question to its consent form asking which community issues are of most concern to constituents. Constituents are encouraged to "like" SparkPoint's Facebook page to target public education in the areas that are of interest to constituents. And, SparkPoint constituents attended a "listening session" with the local Food Bank prior to organizing a day in Sacramento. Three SparkPoint participants joined the group in training and then spoke to legislators about issues that arose at the listening session.*

"We plan to regularly take stock of where we're at. All of this happened as a result of being part of the Deeper Dive project," said Ms. Geishirt Cantrell. "Now that the organization's mission includes advocacy, we will learn from this early effort to refine and define activities going forward."

### WHAT DID THE QUESTIONS TELL YOU ABOUT SPARKPOINT?

“ That we are very good at services but not at changing the conditions in the community within which clients live and function. ”

# TIPS AND TOOLS

Below is a list of key things to keep in mind when considering a shift in policy advocacy like SparkPoint:

1. Create a learning community that is representative of all stakeholder groups, including staff, leadership, partners, constituents and funders. Ensure that new information is accessible to everyone and all members have an equal voice in understanding and decision-making. Time is set aside so that it does not interfere with members' other responsibilities but complements them. It is helpful to have an outside facilitator so that all members can participate and there is attention to process.
2. The role of the leader is to ensure diverse membership in the action team, to articulate a clear vision and the goals for the group, and to keep the process moving and on track. In SparkPoint's case, Ms. Geishirt Cantrell encouraged the group to self-identify as a "pilot project," which allowed them to experiment with new ideas and take advantage of opportunities as they emerged. She secured a commitment of staff time to enable full participation and acted as a liaison to the Steering Committee, staff and other partners.
3. Organizational readiness to integrate social service and social change can be determined by assessing if the project is aligned with the evolution of the organization. At SparkPoint Contra Costa, staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities and the organizational structure is solid. It is possible to suspend regular staff meetings periodically to focus on social action plan design or training because agency issues can be addressed at other, more informal times. The organizational culture encourages experimentation, taking issues as they arise and avoiding the need for perfection. Ms. Geishirt Cantrell said: "Be mindful and take things as they come."
4. A well-designed survey provides solid information to determine the shape of a social action plan. SparkPoint worked from a survey provided by BMP that asked about the respondent's role in the organization, organizational structure and practice, impetus and barriers to move beyond the status quo, and constituent engagement. Other organizations might want to design a survey that fits with its specific interests and outcomes. Bolder Advocacy publishes tools for free with similar questions, though they may be organized differently. For more information, see [www.bolderadvocacy.org](http://www.bolderadvocacy.org).
5. Continuous reflection on the product, process, learning and relationships provides information for continuous improvement and ensures a balanced approach to the plan. At each meeting, the team provided feedback on what worked and what needed to be changed for the future. This data is critical for anyone to facilitate a group to agreement, attend to the process and ensure maximum participation by all.



# Acknowledgements

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Picture on front page is the Deeper Dive Pilot Project Team.

This paper is available online at:

<http://www.first5coco.org/funded-programs/family-economic-security/>

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SparkPoint is a program of



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