

Just Enhancing Grant Outcomes through TTA

Intro [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice Area presents Just Science.

Intro [00:00:08] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about public health, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In this special release episode, Just Science sat down with Dr. Patty Melton, co-director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Forensics, Training and Technical Assistance Program, also known as forensics TTA, and Paige Presler-Jur, Associate Project Director for state based Awards Training and Technical Assistance Team on the Bureau of Justice Assistance's comprehensive opioid stimulant and substance use program, also referred to as COSSUP and the COSSUP post arrest pretrial defense counsel and courts TTA team to discuss the importance of training and technical assistance. Also referred to as TTA, a component of many federal grant programs that helps grant recipients meet their goals and improve program outcomes. When an agency receives a federal grant, they may be faced with a myriad of challenges, including setting scalable goals, tracking important program metrics, and planning for sustainability. As a result, training and technical assistance is built into many federal grant programs so that experts from a separate organization can provide resources and support grant recipients throughout their period of performance. Listen along as Dr. Melton and Paige describe the strategies that TTA providers use when working with grant recipients. The importance of tailoring TTA to meet the unique needs of a community, and how TTA enhances the impact of important federally funded projects. This episode is funded by RTI International's Justice Practice Area. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive, and may have local responses, or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Nani Grimmer.

Nani Grimmer [00:01:48] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I am your host, Nani Grimmer with the Justice Practice Area at RTI International. Our topic today is focused on training and technical assistance, often referred to as TTA or simply as TA. Training and technical assistance has existed within the government funding programs for some time, providing programs, activities and services to strengthen the ability of grant recipients to improve their performance and outcomes. According to the Federal Program Inventory, an online database managed by the Office of Management and Budget, the United States federal government administers more than 2300 federal assistance programs, all with varying performance measures specific to the program outcome and the administering agency. As expected, the TTA providers charged with the task of creating both educational and actionable resources for their specific programs objectives is just as varied, with the federal assistance accounting for \$3 trillion of federal spending, there's a lot of pressure on funding agencies and their TTA providers to ensure grantee performance outcomes. So what can these funding agencies and TTA providers do to enable success? Today, we are excited to speak with Dr. Patricia Melton and Ms. Paige Presler-Jur to understand the importance and impact a TTA program can have on Federal Assistance Program outcomes. Welcome to the podcast, Patty and Paige.

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:03:06] Glad to be here.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:03:07] Thank you.

Nani Grimmer [00:03:08] All right. To get us started, both of you started your careers in a very different space than training and technical assistance. Patty, I'd like to start with you and hear about how you became focused on TTA.

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:03:19] So it's, I think, a very natural journey for me, but an interesting one. I'm a forensic geneticist by trade, and that's where I spent the majority of my career. When I shifted over into more of a research spectrum, I really recognized that there's this massive gap between taking the information that comes out of research, which is important and informative to national recommendations and best practices, and being able to put that into the practitioner's hands so that they really can implement that information into a way that moves them forward with whatever goals that they may have. This gap is only addressed, in my opinion, by training and technical assistance. So to me, it's super exciting because for me, it's the way that you can move information from the research base into actual policy and practice, and that changes things. That makes sustainable change for agencies and for practitioners. I think it's like a Rosetta Stone, for lack of a better term. It's just very hard when you're on the receiving end, being a practitioner with the day to day responsibilities, that you have to take that information and say, okay, how do I get this into my policy? How do I implement this? What does this even mean? And I think training and technical assistance closes that gap. So it just appeared to me in a very natural way, because I've been very focused on how do I just make things better in the forensics field? What can I do as a former practitioner and as a researcher to help my fellow peers move forward?

Nani Grimmer [00:04:38] Thank you. And Paige also from a completely different background laboratory as well. Can you describe a bit of your journey?

Paige Presler-Jur [00:04:45] Yes, I would say my journey is kind of more about how I found TTA. So I worked in a laboratory for a very long time. And so about ten years ago, I was managing an air quality laboratory and was just really focused on how it was that we worked with the communities about what they were experiencing with their environment over just the data that we were providing them. And I was really lucky at the time to have a mentor, and a director named Dr. Keith Levine, who was also very interested in those same topics. And so we would talk and talk about what is it that the data is telling us in the story. And so through the University Collaboration office at RTI, we started talking to a tribe in eastern North Carolina, and we learned from them about what their challenges were with their environment and how they might be able to build capacity in that space and better understand how they could fix the things that they were experiencing. And so through those conversations, I put in my first grant that was having them as a partner. And since I'm sitting here, I'm guessing you can guess that it was not successful. However, it really lit a spark in me about the fact that I wanted to work with communities, and I wanted to talk to people, and I really wanted to kind of get out of one space and look globally across what challenges communities face. And so Keith helped me really identify some actions that I could take to fix that and change what I was doing. And one of those things was encouraging me to invite the head of the social, statistical and Environmental Sciences department or business unit out to lunch. And that happened to be Tim Gable at the time, who's now RTI's CEO. And he despite the fact that I was not even in his direct line of sight, was gracious because he always is to have lunch and talk to me about all the things that I was doing and what I really wanted to do, which was to have these conversations and work with people. And he said, well that's great because that's called training and technical assistance. And we do that as a core work in SSES. And so through lots of other changes here I am.

Nani Grimmer [00:06:57] Right. Thank you. Both of you have been working in the training and technical assistance space now for several years, discovering all the trials and

tribulations as TTA providers. So, Patty, I'm going to come back to you. What are some of the common challenges faced by TTA providers when they're structuring a TTA program?

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:07:17] I think one of the biggest challenges is recognizing how to make it scalable for the individual grantees, and how to really understand their needs. We need to meet them where they are. We need to set up training and technical assistance, resources, guidance and abilities that really are implementable for them and really address their major concerns. And I think it's interesting to think about the fact that these are people who have full time career jobs and they're very busy, and although they have these types of grants to help them move goals forward, they also are doing a full time job. So you've got to really recognize how do you even get them talking about their needs. You've got to build trust. You've got to build a relationship with those individuals because you're coming into their space offering your assistance, but because you want to tailor it to be very successful for them. You've got to get to know them. And I think that can be a challenge. And I think that looks different. Whether you're looking at a large agency, a small agency, a cultural aspect, like a tribal agency. So you've really got to be sensitive to that, and you've got to think about your plan as far as what you might do with agency one may not work with agency two. So how are you even going to start opening up that bridge and connecting with them?

Nani Grimmer [00:08:23] And, Paige, have you seen any other issues related to the grantees that you work with?

Paige Presler-Jur [00:08:28] I think for us, a lot of the things that we're doing are working with one individual or one group within an agency that applied for the funding. However, that is not how they're going to make their program happen. They then have to work so much across their community or even multiple, you know, like they will apply with three strategies, let's say. And each one of those strategies might be coming out of a different agency within the state or within a local jurisdiction. And so they have to then work across all of those different people to manage how things are going. They might be problems within each one of those strategies that they have to then connect to their TTA provider. And so your two parties point about the relationships, like you're not actually building a relationship with that one person. You're then trying to get those other individuals to also understand that you're there and build a relationship with them. And so it takes a lot of conversations to make that happen. And yet people are really busy and staffing changes. And so then you have to start that process all over again. I will say that, you know, for a while with our client, they started encouraging us to actually take a little bit more of a monitoring perspective. And I thought that for a really long time, not thinking that that was going to be really helpful for those relationships. But I actually see now that it is really beneficial because you maybe are designing your questions with your federal partner that you have and needing in on some of those where the spending is going. And that actually also sometimes helps you identify what those challenges are. And so through that, we've been trying to navigate that space about building the relationships and trying to identify with all the different folks where the problems could be so that you can actually help them. And so that's been something that we've been doing to try to mitigate some of those challenges. And it has been really helpful.

Nani Grimmer [00:10:25] That's some great context in terms of how a grantee might approach their award different from others. And, Patty, are there anything inherent to the grant awards that make the TTA more challenging, such as the time period that a grantee might have to fulfill their award, or just the amount of funding given at any given time?

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:10:45] Absolutely. Funding is a big issue. A grantee may come in with a certain series of goals to which they have funding for, but maybe not to what, the extent that they need. So you're part of your responsibility is going to be helping them understand how their goals need to be scalable, recognizing the time frame. They have a period of performance associated with this funding that they need to meet that might be, say, 24 months, 36 months. Often times, you don't know how long anything is going to take you until you get in there to start doing it. It's can sometimes be really a struggle for agencies who receive this funding realize like, oh my gosh, I'm over a year and a half in and I'm not hardly through my goals. Part of what we do is really working with those agencies and working with those grant recipients to understand that sometimes this is going to take a long time. This is not necessarily a sprint, but rather more like a marathon. So really working with them to understand your goals might be short term, mid-term and long term, and they might not be able to accomplish all of that within a grant reporting cycle. For sometimes funding is not the kicker, right? Sometimes they have enough funding, but certainly not enough capacity or other changes come in. There's a lot of unforeseen changes in general, and as a TTA provider you need to be flexible to address those types of changes. I wish we had a crystal ball. We could see ahead of time what all the changes and needs are going to be, but you're almost living in the moment each time, and that looks different for each grantee, I think.

Nani Grimmer [00:11:59] So both of you have mentioned some level of tailoring, flexibility, nuances associated with the TTA approaches that you each have set up for your individual programs. Are there key differences in how TTA should be offered? Is there a space for a one size fits all approach at all? Paige, I'm going to start with you.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:12:18] So yeah, I think a lot of these programs do start pretty small. And so if the federal government is deciding that there's a new challenge, let's say that could happen. And they really want to focus in right on that. And they maybe have a much smaller program. So they're kicking it off. Let's say with 20 grantees total, I think there is space there for really creating some foundational TA that would be beneficial for those. And then that actually would then help you as the program grows and more grantees come along to enhance that and then get to the point where ultimately you are going to have to have tailored TA. As programs grow, it's highly unlikely that you will have grantees that are performing all the same, and especially in terms of staffing. And so as staffing changes as it does throughout the performance period, you're going to have to possibly backtrack and help somebody re-kick their program off. And so because of that, I think that, yes, if it is extremely small and you are really focused on what is the foundation that is needed to start something, absolutely. You would be able to do a one size fits all approach. But I don't think ultimately that that's where you're going to land because things are just moving too fast in the moment.

Nani Grimmer [00:13:41] And Patty, you had mentioned before the complexity of training and technical assistance and the complexity of grant awards and policy implementation that even got you into this space to begin with. What are the strategies that can be used to address that complexity in the different ways that TTA is approached and delivered?

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:14:00] Well, I'll speak for the strategies are most familiar with and most comfortable with. When I'm looking at a cohort of grantees on a complex project, for example, it's similar to Paige's point, they can all be at very different stages of what they need. I look for themes. Often times there's themes that are common across multiple grantees. I'm not saying all but a handful of grantees. To me, that's a type of TTA along that theme that can be a one size fits all. It's a common question. It's a common concern

or challenge, and it can be addressed at like a foundational level, as Paige mentioned. But certainly when you're dealing with a cohort of grantees that differ in size or jurisdictions, a state versus local government or another particular project I'm thinking of, the grantees themselves are very different disciplines. And so then the tailored approach really comes into your tailoring your strategy across not only disciplines specific, but then within that discipline, local or state level or size may matter. And then within that nuance challenges. So I feel like to me, that's the actually really exciting part about providing TTA is that challenge of that level of customization, but balanced with the fact that you're building out this community of resources that, you know, at some point I'm going to connect across with other grantees. But they're all like snowflakes, right? I mean, your first look at them, oh it is all snowflakes. But then as you look closer, very unique snowflakes emerge.

Nani Grimmer [00:15:18] So Patty, I actually want to dive in a little bit more. You had mentioned specifically working with state and local agencies as grant recipients. Can you just provide a little bit more detail into TTA strategies that you might use when working directly with state, local, or tribal grant recipients?

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:15:35] I'm going to start off by saying that these are grantees underneath the same type of discipline, working on the same type of complex problem. But when you look at the differences between a tribal community, a local agency and a state agency, that's where that customization comes in, because very quickly you recognize unique aspects for each one of those and almost nuance details that you're going to have to address. So again, this kind of goes back to the beginning about getting to know that grantee and really understanding them. If I'm looking at something for a small jurisdiction, I might be tempted to pick it up and plop it right down on a small tribal agency. But I have to recognize that the tribal agency is going to have additional challenges not common to that small. So this isn't again, this is not just about the size of the grantees, but it's also about the uniqueness of each one. And I call it micro environments. I don't know if that's a real term, but I'm going to say it is for this podcast. But in that micro environment is where you need to be so sensitive and honed in on that. And I think that, again, speaks to what Paige mentioned earlier as well, is that trust and relationship, because you're coming in with a level of subject matter expertise, but you're there to help. We don't ever dictate down. We are truly collaborative in our approach of helping.

Nani Grimmer [00:16:47] That's some good insight and I like the term micro environment and we're going to use it. But Paige go ahead.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:16:52] Yeah, I was just going to say too, because it even gets bigger from there. If you're working at a larger intersection, let's say public health and public safety within those local governments, you might actually be working with very different types of entities just because you might be focused on justice involved populations. That doesn't mean that you don't need participation by, say, your public health department or your local emergency services. And so then you're even having to learn different languages. And so you're having to tailor what you're saying to actually make sure that you're building that relationship with someone that, again, they might not even be your grantee, but you're trying to help your grantee actually make those connections. And so you're then having to understand what are the nuances within, city or county or state that changes those relationships and how they work together and how they're talking to each other across very different disciplines, which it just continues to get more and more complex.

Nani Grimmer [00:17:53] Adding into that layer of complexity. Paige, I know you have experience working with not only those other components within the community in terms of services, but also community based organizations and how they might tie in to a grant program that's being operated. Further complicating that micro environment that Patty was just speaking about. Are there specific strategies that you utilize when engaging community based organization?

Paige Presler-Jur [00:18:18] I think you really have to meet them where they are. Especially as community organizations intersect with the justice system, sometimes those relationships have not gone well in the past. And so you then, as a TA provider, have to possibly do a little conflict mitigation. You need to be honest with all parties that that needs to happen, because if they just try to ignore a past issue that, you know, they might operate really well for six months and then something's going to happen. And if you're working in a multidisciplinary team, you're going to have a different conflict that comes up. And if you haven't tried to fix what happened in the past, or at least acknowledge that it happened and try to move on from that, it's just going to stop the multidisciplinary team from meeting. It might happen slowly. People might just stop coming to the meeting. But at that point, there's going to be a large part of your program that's going to end, because those community based organizations are really the largest source of the services that you're going to be able to connect people with. For sure. There are a lot of governmental agencies that are able to embed services, and that's great. However, you have to pull your resources across a community, and funding only go so far. If you're not working well with that community based organization that provides a very specific thing like, say, housing, then the people that you're already trying to help across your community are going to miss out. And so there's a lot in terms of helping to build those relationships, but also in terms of, well, then you also have to look at it from a resources perspective, and you have to make sure that all of your grant requirements have the boxes have been checked and potential invoices are done correctly and all of those things. And so it's double sided. You have the one where you're focused on how do you make the relationship happen. And two, how do you make sure everybody's doing things correctly so that there are no instances where great management goes awry?

Nani Grimmer [00:20:15] So that's a great segue. We've already covered structuring a TTA program and helping grantees set up their program. We're talking about the relationships they need to build in order to have a successful program, and how TTA providers can help tailor their resources. Now, getting into the execution of those grants and how to can help grantees truly understand and even measure and capture the impact of their program. Patty, can you speak a little bit more to that?

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:20:42] I think in general, grantees struggle with capturing the metrics that might be required for their award. So part of what needs to be done as a TTA provider is an educational piece of helping them recognize where would they pull that data from. It is not necessarily intuitive, especially as a practitioner, and also getting them to understand the value of those metrics. But I approach that conversation from two sides. There are the metrics that are needed as a requirement of their award that absolutely must be done. And there's a level of impact measured with that. But I feel like for the grantee, I flip it to something more personable to them. And I say, you know, you've got this grant to do a certain something, a certain goal, and you're going to have measurements for that goal that the awardee in the grant recipient and such are going to track. But what you want to talk to your community about, what do you want to talk to your stakeholders about? What do you want to build off of this work you had a purpose for why you came in for this grant. That's the true impact. How is this moving opinions in your community? How is this

advancing that relationship you're having with these other entities associated with the work that you're doing? That level of impact has a different type of metric. And that's typically not a metric captured for the grant. So the first thing when I started talking about this with grantees is the first thing that happens is I got to do twice as much work. Yes, but it's all about impact. It's all about communicating what you have done and how you're making sustainable change in your community. And that's the types of metrics that I think they get excited about. But you still have to do the other ones as well. So we help with both of those. And I think metrics is kind of a researchy type term that doesn't necessarily resonate well with grantees. So I think as a TTA provider, you've got to look again, going back to what Paige said, that language. And when you start talking about impact even and what goals could be on these metrics, then you start building that bridge.

Nani Grimmer [00:22:25] Both of you have mentioned something related to turnover within the grant recipients. And Patty, you just mentioned sustainability in their program. Paige can you speak a little bit more as to what sustainability means for grant programs and how TTA can help encourage that mindset?

Paige Presler-Jur [00:22:43] It's a huge conversation and related the challenges with staffing, with sustainability, because one of the problems with these grant based funding programs is that you are hiring someone on, quote on quote, soft money. And so if you have not created sustainability to where you can get that job that you then hired actually sustained into the budget of your city or of your agency, then is that person going to stay as they see their period of performance coming to an end? And so thinking about that from the onset, as Patty said, like it is never just about the metrics that are required by your grant. The program that I support, actually the metrics do not in any way, shape or form tell the story of what those programs are doing, and so it's just absolutely imperative that they look at it from a how are you going to be able to keep this program going at the end of your period of performance? And if you love this position, how are you going to make sure that position continues at the end of your period of performance and those data stories and how you're talking to your city council or whoever it is, your stakeholders, whoever it is that would make those decisions, how are you talking to them, and what are you telling them about how things are going? And as TA providers we can put together, we can help with those conversations from the onset. So putting together a toolkit that actually is tailored to what is it that they need, what are the different types of communications that they might want to put out? Who is it that they need to talk to? What are the metrics that are important to that entity, to then work on getting that position secured and then being able to weather if that hasn't happened, so that you can keep going if the staffing changes towards the end because of what happened, so do you try to then figure out how you can make it work within your agency with a person that is part time on that, so that then you're trying to secure only part of a position, but also just making sure that you're focused from the get go on how you are thinking about making sure that the end of the grant is not the end of the program. I'd also highlight that we do encourage grantees to identify an evaluation partner if the award allows for that funding. The smallest relationship that you build, it might be very small. They might just be helping you with your data collection. You know, the TA provider. Helping that evaluation partner can alleviate some of the pressure on you to understand all these things that we're that we're talking about in that moment. I think it's unique to RTI that we do so much evaluation that we are actually really able to speak the correct language to an evaluation partner to really help move that process forward. And that being something that the federal government also can think about in the future, is how do we increase the amount of money that's dedicated to that evaluation partner within these site based awards? How do they make sure that that's actually a requirement from the beginning for the grantee, and then making sure that there's enough funding going to

the evaluation component so that we can do all of these things together and create sustainability built in from the day that the funding arrives.

Nani Grimmer [00:26:05] So we've spoken at length, about to provision to the individual grant recipients, but there's also the other interested party in this relationship, and that is the overarching funding client. And TTA providers, act as the liaison in the bridge between the funding client and those grant recipients. So why is a TTA program so critical to a federal program and the overarching impact of that program?

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:26:32] I hate to bring up sustainability again, but I'm going to mean, the reason why the federal government has these awards available to agencies is to make sustainable change. And for me, sustainability Paige did a great job discussing the nuts and bolts of it in those considerations, but to me it's a legacy. And I think when you have an agency with several champions coming after this grant, because let's face it, that's a team and a team mentality as individuals collectively together, working for a common goal. And when they are, when you create that momentum, to me, that's where sustainability is part of that legacy. So from a client perspective of the funder. So from the federal government perspective, they want to see these recipients take this money and actually move those goals forward in a way that we're not going to slip back and then to continue moving forward because of the things that TTA can do, as Paige mentioned, also embedded, we are that partner with them. They have a full time responsibility to whatever organization that they're doing. They need that assistance. They need that help to navigate all of these minutia goals and steps that slowly build up to this concrete concept of sustainability. And that's where TTA is so important. I wish it were simple. I wish it were something that, oh, you only need a TTA provider for the first six months. You know, kind of like when someone comes and installs a microwave for you, like I installed it. Here's the user manual and here's the buttons, and you're good to go make your popcorn. But it doesn't work that way. Rather, as these grantees move through their program, they just discover more and more challenges. And that's exactly natural when you are trying to address a complex situation. So TTA providers are in it for the long haul. And I think that the federal government needs to recognize the value of TTA providers being there for the long haul, partnering with these grantees.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:28:19] And I would echo all of that and say that a lot of these programs start because at some point, all the way up to Congress, someone has recognized a national problem, a lot of times a national catastrophe that is actually ongoing across communities. And they decide that they're going to appropriate funding to build a program, and that might start small and then get very large. Or it could start large from the very beginning because they've decided to appropriate a lot of funding dictated to that. And so if that overall appropriation of funds is going to be successful, well, we have to have what we need to do to make it successful. And that money starts at Congress, but ultimately gets down to the local level and to that TTA provider. And we are working to make sure that the program happens. And then it all gets back to sustainability, because ultimately, what we would really like to see is the money comes down. We start helping a community. That community then sustains their program, and that allows for the next year's funding to go to a new community who through all of the to provision all of the resources that then get disseminated nationally, say, oh, I have that problem too, and I would like to get some money to actually help me build a program to do that. And so it creates this cycle that allows people that might not have known about the funding initially to also get funding. And for the people that have the funding now to say, you know, what else would also help this other brand new thing that I could do and it just continues to snowball. All those snowflakes come together into a massive snowball that then allows us

to show all the way up to Congress that, yes, the appropriation of those funds did exactly what you wanted to do, and it hit all of your overall goals to address this national catastrophe that you identified. And without the TTA provider, that is not going to happen.

Nani Grimmer [00:30:21] We've packed a lot of information into this episode covering the critical importance of training and technical assistance. We've discussed strategies and considerations to overcoming challenges commonly faced by grant recipients. We've learned that TTA can and should vary in delivery meetings, the specific needs of programs and grantees. Finally, we've learned the importance of recognizing the capacity limitations of a grantee and how TTA can foster an understanding of not only grant management, but program impact and sustainability in the face of change that enables the successful completion of federal assistance goals. Unfortunately, that is all the time we have for today. So thank you Patty and Paige for such an insightful conversation.

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:31:06] Thank you.

Patricia "Patty" Melton [00:31:07] Thank you.

Nani Grimmer [00:31:07] I'd also like to thank you, the listener, for tuning in today. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. For more resources related to justice research and policy, visit rti.org. I'm Nani Grimmer and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Outro [00:31:28] Tune in for upcoming special release episodes and a season on strategies for survivor economic empowerment. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent the consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.