

**Capturing the Experience of the Kansas Legislative Health Academy:**

**A Reflective Story on a Unique Program for Legislators Involving the Kansas Health Institute, the Kansas Leadership Center and the Kansas Health Foundation**

**By Chris Green**

## **Executive Summary: Creating an Innovative Program for Legislators**

When it launched in November 2009, the Kansas Legislative Health Academy represented a unique educational and training opportunity. The nine legislators who gathered at a south-central Kansas retreat lodge would be participating in an ambitious effort to increase their capacity to advance complex health policy in the state of Kansas.

For Kansas legislators, formulating health policy represents a daunting challenge. Vast in scope and systemic by nature, health policy means making decisions that are inherently difficult and value-laden. But the state's lawmakers only serve in their policy making on only a part-time basis -- most intensively during the annual 90-day legislative session that begins in January. They receive considerable information from special-interest groups and their highly regarded, non-partisan Legislative Research Department provides information about all of state government, not just health policy.

While a number of programs targeted specifically at legislators exist throughout the country, most of them focused solely on leadership. The Kansas Legislative Health Academy's goals would be broader and more ambitious. Not only would it focus on a single content area -- health policy -- but its curriculum would equip lawmakers with new skills and tools to more effectively deal with that topic in three distinct but interconnected curricular focus areas -- civic leadership, ethics and systems.

Funded with a \$329,261 multi-year grant from the Kansas Health Foundation, the Academy sought to develop, by 2012, a group of 10 to 15 legislators with the familiarity, shared vision and skills to advance complex health policy in the state of Kansas and provide an ethical framework for health policy development and a systems approach to

health policy. Over the course of a two-year pilot, 23 Kansas legislators of both parties, representing the ideological spectrum in the Legislature, would participate in the program. By the spring of 2012, 20 of them would graduate and earn a certificate for attending an intensive retreat and at least two of the program's three follow-up sessions.

The Kansas Health Institute -- in collaboration with its founder, the Foundation, and its sister organization, the Kansas Leadership Center -- spearheaded the effort to develop, design and implement the Academy. Since being established by the Foundation in 1995, KHI has sought to be a resource of "timely, relevant and objective" information for state policymakers. As part of its efforts, it has long recognized the key role that relationships play in ensuring the effective transfer of complicated health policy information and knowledge, President and CEO Dr. Robert F. St. Peter said.

The idea for launching an Academy first emerged out of discussions that began sometime around 2008 between KHI, KHF and the KLC about working together on a project. KHI already routinely conducted seminars for legislators on a wide spectrum of health policy research and issues. But the organization knew that even more intensive engagement could help it develop stronger relationships with legislators and improve their abilities to use information to assist their decision making.

KHI realized the need to better equip lawmakers with the skills and analytical frameworks to truly utilize information and advance complex health policy in Kansas. St. Peter said the idea of an "Academy" where lawmakers could receive health policy information -- but also form stronger relationships with each other and learn about key subjects such as leadership, ethics and systems -- began to take shape. As discussions continued, St. Peter said, the Academy emerged as an effort that could be led by KHI

and funded by the Foundation, with KLC also contributing to the educational and training portion of the effort.

From the Foundation's perspective, funding of the Academy would allow legislators to develop a deeper understanding of complicated health issues and place a greater value on health and their role in influencing it. It was also hoped that the Academy would further cement KHI's role in being a crucial information provider to health policymakers by giving lawmakers a better understanding of KHI's purpose and increase the value they placed in the information that KHI produces. The Academy would also provide a space for legislators to build personal relationships and camaraderie that could result in healthier, more civil and more productive conversations taking place in the Statehouse.

These objectives fit within the Foundation's focus areas of "providing health data and information to policymakers," the primary mission of KHI, and "building civic leadership," the primary mission of the KLC. The direct stakeholders being served by the grant would be the legislators who attended, particularly those lawmakers who were generally well-established and influential in the Legislature on matters of health policy. However, it was hoped that the reach of the project would positively affect other legislators, health system stakeholders and, ultimately, produce benefit to the health of all Kansans.

The \$322,911 awarded to KHI for the Academy covered direct costs of the program, including consultant contracts, travel and meeting expenses and per diem/travel expenses for legislators. KHI also invested its own internal resources in the project, in the form of in-kind financial support which totaled nearly \$700,000 through

the end of 2011. The Kansas Leadership Center also provided in-kind support in the form of staff time.

In the months preceding the launch of the Academy, KHI staff worked closely with legislators to think carefully about how to structure and best achieve the goals of the program. The effort included listening sessions, individual interviews and group meetings with lawmakers. KHI staff also collaborated with a key lawmaker to connect with those in high-ranking positions in the Legislature. They won the endorsement of “leaders” in the Legislature and checked to ensure that their program would remain in compliance with the state’s ethics and open meetings laws, as well as federal tax regulations.

Being successful at leading the creation of the Academy, though, would require KHI staff to stretch beyond areas where they had already proven their competency. The organization would also need to enlist the help of partners and outside consultants to provide the full scope of learning opportunities needed to create a dynamic experience for lawmakers. Being a health policy institute, KHI could not do all that was necessary to facilitate the Academy learning experience on its own.

The Kansas Leadership Center, with its vision of being a center for excellence for leadership development, became a natural fit for being the lead entity for delivering civic leadership training to legislators in the Academy. The leadership content in the Academy would be built around the KLC’s Theory of Civic Leadership and its Principles and Competencies of Civic Leadership. The Academy would also enlist the services of experts in ethics and systems, who would join a Design Team of staff and faculty

charged with rigorously planning and executing the project, while also allowing themselves the flexibility to adapt as the program unfolded.

The lawmakers who attended the Academy would be investing approximately nine days -- including seven nights away from home and approximately 60 hours of training time -- into the experience. The first cohort of the Academy included four Democrats and five Republicans attending a retreat and three follow-up sessions over the course of a year. A second cohort of eight lawmakers attended a retreat in December 2010. That group included seven Republicans and one Democrat.

After the second cohort's retreat, Academy organizers made the decision to recruit a second group of lawmakers to the program. They had lost one participant from that group because she had been appointed to a cabinet post in state government. Adding additional members to the cohort would allow the spectrum of ideological viewpoints in the Legislature to be represented in the Academy.

This second group of lawmakers in year two of the Academy attended a boot camp/retreat in June 2011. Two Democrats and four Republicans joined the group at that time for sessions that began on a Tuesday afternoon and ended Thursday around noon. The two groups were then joined together for the program's second gathering. Following a session dedicated to civic leadership in August, the Academy concluded with a final session in November where lawmakers were recognized for graduating from the Academy.

All-in-all, the organizers of the Academy considered the project to be successful, challenging and rewarding. Several factors facilitated the project's implementation including KHI's strong reputation, the high relevance of health policy issues at the time

of the Academy, the “safe space” created for participants to talk openly about the challenges they faced and the willingness of legislators to interact and engage authentically. Contributing to the Academy’s relevance was the fact that the program’s proceedings unfolded against the backdrop of significant developments with implications for state policymakers, including the debate over and passage of the federal Affordable Care Act and Medicaid reform proposals in Kansas.

The ambitious scope of the project created both opportunities and challenges. Design Team members put significant amounts of work and effort into developing the curriculum. Organizers continually made adjustments, specifically concentrating on increasing the integration of the program’s curricular focus areas with the second cohort.

The integrated approach of delivering content benefitted participants, organizers said. But scheduling times for the Academy’s staff and faculty -- who were spread out across Kansas and the country -- to collaborate proved to be an ongoing challenge. Scheduling for legislators could also be difficult, too, because they had so many demands on their time.

The level of time commitment made the program a rewarding experience for lawmakers but it also prevented some individuals from participating. The fact that Academy recruited its second cohort during an election year also proved to be a barrier for recruiting, since so much of the focus of legislators was on elections at that point in time. Turnover in the Legislature created another barrier, since a handful of potential participants were not able to attend the Academy because they had resigned or were not re-elected to their positions.

During the course of the Academy, lawmakers provided overwhelmingly positive feedback about their experiences to organizers of the Academy, who utilized evaluation tools to monitor their progress on meeting short-term outcomes. By or beyond the end of year two of the Academy, organizers wanted to see that the legislators' shift in approach would begin to solidify and that they would begin to articulate the systems and ethical frameworks that they were incorporating into their decision-making. It was also desired to see legislators utilizing their leadership tools in the advancement of health policy and that the group of legislators would be solidifying into a unit "that can effectively resolve complicated issues even with varying backgrounds and value systems."

For this story, this writer contacted all 23 participants in the Kansas Legislative Health Academy to discuss their Academy experience in deeper detail. Seventeen participants were interviewed during in-person conversations that ranged from approximately 10 minutes to a half-hour.

The participants who allotted their time for interviews generally had very positive reflections on the Academy and most saw great value in what they had learned. All mentioned that they had gained something from the Academy -- in the form of new or enhanced skills, tools or knowledge -- that they used or planned to use in their work as legislators. Nearly all described in detail something they were doing or attempting to do differently in their work as legislators as a result of the experience.

During these interviews, legislators described the various ways in which they were attempting to apply what they had learned about health policy, civic leadership, systems and ethics into their work. Some lawmakers reported how they were applying



what they had learned during the 2012 session of the Kansas Legislature. One legislator explained how he used what he had learned during the Academy in a broad-based effort to improve the economy and health of the region of the state in which he lives.

Participants did not report enjoying all aspects of the Academy equally and had specific individual preferences as to what they valued most or were attempting to apply. However, they also offered few critical comments. Some did indicate that the program might have benefitted from having additional ideological diversity, although both parties and liberal, moderate and conservative viewpoints were all represented to some extent in the Academy.

In total, they tended to consider the Academy a unique and deeply rewarding experience. They were particularly pleased to be able to foster relationships with other lawmakers across chamber, partisan and ideological dividing lines and have frank conversations about the challenges they faced and their differing beliefs and values.

Participants in the Academy, as well the organizers of the event, can point to several examples that illustrate the differences the Academy has made in how lawmakers behave or how the Legislature conducts its business. Some participants have even observed changes within the Legislature in the aftermath of the Academy, including an “increased capacity for positive interaction” among lawmakers involved in the program.

However, this dynamic has not been universally recognized among participants, several of whom have yet to see evidence of much change in the landscape under the dome. But other participants were more optimistic about the potential for change as a

result of the Academy. Several expressed their desire to see additional activities for Academy alumni and new cohorts of lawmakers going through the program.

Furthermore, the comments of legislators suggest that the Academy has only served to enhance KHI's prestige among legislators. Those interviewed commonly expressed having a much greater appreciation or familiarity with KHI than before they attended the Academy. One potential indicator of the connections fostered by the Academy is that KHI was called on by Academy alumni to testify seven times on health issues during the 2011 session and interim committees that year. KHI reports continuing to have more opportunities to testify during the 2012 Legislature.

Over the course of the grant period, the Kansas Legislative Health Academy has changed the way that KHI endeavors to interact with legislators, St. Peter said. The Academy has "cemented the value that we can see in the interactions and the learning that takes place vs. putting something out by email or on paper," he said.

The relationships built up with lawmakers over the course of the Academy has allowed KHI to be even more effective at providing timely, relevant and objective information to legislators. One of the major gains as a result of the Academy is "the ability now to go in to have short conversations with people," St. Peter said.

Specifics about the future of the Kansas Legislative Health Academy will need to be worked out in the months ahead. With a basic curriculum in place and tested with two cohorts, Academy organizers believe that recruiting new classes of legislators in the future to attend an Academy would be a worthwhile venture. While it is likely that there might need to be adjustments to conduct future iterations of the Academy, these

activities would be consistent with the spirit of the original endeavor, organizers indicated.

In the meantime, remaining grants funds are being used to host informal discussions during the session and two overnight events for Academy alumni during the summer and fall of 2012. It is envisioned that these events will be designed in a manner similar to the Academy itself, but will likely be smaller in scale and scope. Regardless of how KHI chooses to engage legislators in the future, St. Peter said that the organization's efforts will continue, informed by what it learned from the Academy project.