



## ALASKA CLEARINGHOUSE

DENALI COMMISSION • ALASKA FEDERAL EXECUTIVE ASSOCIATION • THE ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
• RASMUSON FOUNDATION • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

December 30, 2009

Dear Partners and Friends,

As the majority of funding opportunities provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) are coming to a close, it is time for us to also close the Alaska Clearinghouse. The Alaska Clearinghouse was created in February 2009 to provide a one-stop shop for information regarding the ARRA as it pertained to Alaska.

We are pleased to report that the Alaska Clearinghouse was a success. Over the past 9 months the Clearinghouse received over 500 phone calls from individuals, organizations and communities across the state, hundreds of e-mails, and reached out to several dozen communities and organizations through social media, mass mailers and well-attended presentations. Our Twitter feed had over 200 followers and our e-mail list-serve had another 300. There were over 150 user accounts registered on the Clearinghouse website, and to date the site received over 2,000 hits. The Clearinghouse website became so popular that in less than a month after coming online it made the top ten links in a Google search of “ARRA Alaska”.

Attached you will find a detailed final report on the Alaska Clearinghouse which provides further information on the project background, results, and lessons learned from this collaborative interagency project. We believe the coordination and collaboration of resources provided by private, state and federal agencies demonstrated an important model for similar efforts in the future.

On behalf of the Clearinghouse team, thank you for recognizing the excellent effort in making the stimulus funds available.

Sincerely,

Krag Johnsen,  
Denali Commission

Larry Persily,  
The Alaska State Legislature

Colleen Bickford,  
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Diane Kaplan,  
Rasmuson Foundation



## **ALASKA CLEARINGHOUSE**

**Denali Commission • Alaska State Legislature •  
Alaska Federal Executive Association •  
Rasmuson Foundation •  
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban  
Development**

## **FINAL REPORT**

## **SUMMARY**

The Alaska Clearinghouse (Clearinghouse) was created in April, 2009 as a collaborative effort by the Alaska State Legislature, Denali Commission, Rasmuson Foundation, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Federal Executive Association. The Clearinghouse was created as a one-stop shop for information regarding the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) as it pertained to Alaska. Clearinghouse staff spent nine months gathering, sorting, organizing and distributing masses of information to share with individuals and organizations throughout Alaska. This report is the final summary of the Alaska Clearinghouse's activities as well as an analysis of the efficacy of the use of a multi-organizational collaborative model to address statewide issues in an effective manner.

A variety of valuable lessons came out of the Clearinghouse experience. The most important of which is that multi-organizational coalitions can succeed and offer a way to provide necessary services to Alaskans while sharing the cost with multiple budgets. To get the most out of a project like this in the future, it is important to follow a few simple guidelines in the beginning to ensure the project runs smoothly:

- A clear management structure is the key to the success of a project of this nature. In a multi-agency cooperative effort, it is important to acknowledge the differences in the management structures and project priorities for each organization.
- Working under centralized management with clear objectives ensures that the staff works efficiently toward a common goal.
- It's helpful for the project to have its infrastructure, action plan, administrative issues and staff duties as detailed as possible before assigning staff.

It is also important to note that the Clearinghouse generated a variety of products that can outlive the Clearinghouse to be used as templates for other projects in the future, such as the Clearinghouse database. Not only does the database include a record of all of the calls received and funding opportunities that were available through ARRA, but it was also automated to cross reference the two lists to match projects with potential funding opportunities based on eligibility restrictions and key words.

The Clearinghouse served a vital role in identifying, facilitating and tracking ARRA funding in Alaska over the nine months it was operational. Hundreds of Alaska organizations received tangible benefits from their dealings with the Clearinghouse and through our community outreach. The Clearinghouse served as a resource for businesses, non-profit organizations, local governments, legislators and reporters across Alaska. The project was successful in melding disparate organizations into a single project to better inform and assist Alaska organizations in understanding ARRA and applying for funding opportunities.

## **BACKGROUND**

Congress approved the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 in response to the worldwide economic crisis. The idea behind the ARRA was to infuse the American economy with nearly \$800 billion in order to create jobs and stabilize the national economy. To that end, federal agencies would receive billions of dollars of funding for a variety of new and existing programs to distribute on either a formula, discretionary or competitive basis.

The media frenzy that accompanied the passage of the ARRA in February 2009 led to a number of misconceptions and fears regarding the use, disbursement and tracking of ARRA funds. Individuals and organizations across the country were frantically trying to find a reliable source of information for ARRA related questions and Alaskans were no exception.

Legislators were flooded with calls from constituents trying to find out more information on ARRA funds: who was eligible, when would the funds be available, how complex were the applications, and where did one apply? Legislators realized that trying to answer these questions individually was next to impossible, and that a centralized and dedicated solution was necessary.

The solution was the creation of the Alaska Clearinghouse, a publically available resource for Alaskans looking for information on anything related to ARRA. The Clearinghouse was created through a multi-organizational collaboration of state government, non-profit and federal agencies. The Alaska State Legislature, Denali Commission, Rasmuson Foundation, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Federal Executive Association of Alaska joined together to assist Alaskans with their ARRA questions.

Initially the Legislature, Denali Commission, Rasmuson Foundation and HUD each contributed a staff member to the Clearinghouse. The Denali Commission also provided an intern and office space to the effort. As the grant application deadlines passed and the number of public inquiries decreased, the Clearinghouse staff was reduced to two - the Alaska State Legislature and Denali Commission staff - to reflect the changing nature of the workload.

## **OVERVIEW**

Initially, the Clearinghouse focused on tracking and distributing information strictly on ARRA-funded competitive grants; this was the area with the broadest interest and need for information and assistance. As the Clearinghouse progressed, it quickly became apparent that a broader scope was necessary to address the information and assistance requests that were flooding the office. Limiting the focus to competitive grants didn't address the needs of the dozens of municipalities that contacted the staff, as well as numerous businesses and tribal organizations.

The staff expanded its research scope to include ARRA tax incentives, loan programs, bonding authority, application information, news, informational briefings and more. The Clearinghouse developed a variety of information tracking and distribution systems to facilitate and organize the large amount of data that was being collected and analyzed. Application assistance and FAQs regarding common difficulties encountered by Alaskan organizations during the application process were also developed and were successful in ensuring that organizations were able to apply for a number of funds they might otherwise not have requested.

As the disbursement of ARRA funds progressed, the changing nature of the needs of organizations in Alaska also dictated changes in the role of the Clearinghouse. Initially, most of the Clearinghouse efforts went towards educating the large number of individuals and organizations on what funding was available, and to whom. Confusion ensued during the first few days after the passage of ARRA to which staff received numerous calls from homeowners looking for ARRA funds to fix their porch, individuals interested in grants to start small businesses and communities interested in funds for parks, trails and sports facilities. Most of these projects were not eligible for ARRA funds.

To assist in educating the public on what was and was not eligible for ARRA funding as well as to provide advanced notice on upcoming opportunities and the steps necessary to apply for those funds, the Clearinghouse engaged in an aggressive informational campaign. Staff members were sent to major events across the state and the Clearinghouse hosted several informational briefings telephonically and in the Denali Commission offices. Several PowerPoint presentations were developed and distributed across the state and to legislative offices to ensure that relevant ARRA information was distributed statewide.

As time went on and more information was released to the public, a better understanding of ARRA emerged. The Clearinghouse began to see a transition from general ARRA-related calls to requests asking for information on specific grants, tax incentives and loans. This required a more detailed analysis of the program specifics and an understanding of which particular projects were eligible for funding. Clearinghouse staff needed to read and analyze hundreds of 30 + page funding notices in order to understand the eligibility limitations and funding available in each one.

The Clearinghouse was quickly inundated with calls asking for assistance in matching up existing projects with potential ARRA programs. Due to the large number of programs funded through ARRA, manually going through all of them and looking for matches was extremely time consuming. It wasn't long before the staff was spending most of its time on these types of requests, to the detriment of other projects. Generally, matching up a single project with the available funding opportunities took anywhere from several days to several weeks, depending on the complexity of the project and the type of organization that was applying for the funds.

To solve this problem, Clearinghouse staff created a relational Microsoft Access database to collect information on all of the projects proposed by organizations and individuals that had contacted the Clearinghouse, as well as all information available on the various ARRA-funded programs. An automated query matched projects with appropriate programs and generated a report for the caller detailing the opportunities available and listing contact information, program deadlines and, when available, a link to or copy of the application paperwork. The implementation of this database was integral to the Clearinghouse's ability to get necessary information to the people who needed it in a timely manner.

The creation of the database allowed staff to quickly search through and match the hundreds of funding opportunities to Alaska projects, organizations and individuals. Decreasing the time it took to search for appropriate funding from days or weeks to a matter of minutes or hours allowed Clearinghouse staff to work through a huge data bottleneck for various organizations. Time between funding announcements and funding deadlines was extremely short in most cases and could have resulted in some organizations not receiving the necessary information in a timely fashion to allow them to apply for funds. After the implementation of the database, the call backlogs were eliminated and staff was now free to pursue other projects that would benefit Alaskans.

After the call log process was streamlined, staff focused on providing better, more easily understood information to the public in a timely manner. This was an important step in efforts to educate the public on the realities of ARRA. By providing the basic information in a variety of easy-to-use formats staff could reduce the number of calls asking for basic information and focus on those calls that needed extra attention. To facilitate that, several projects were developed and maintained over the course of the Clearinghouse's life:

- A spreadsheet was created that contained a color-coded list of all active grants with links to the grant Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA). This was updated weekly and distributed to a variety of sources.
- Interactive maps with the location of all of the organizations and individuals that had contacted the Clearinghouse were created and posted online in order to allow organizations to locate similar projects in their region in order to combine applications.
- A website was created that served as an easily accessible informational resource as well as a forum for asking questions and finding contractors and grant writers.
- A map was created containing the location of all ARRA funded projects in Alaska. This map provided the only comprehensive, publically available visual representation of the funds flowing into Alaska.

- Twitter feeds, mailing lists, a bi-monthly report, results reports and legislative updates were generated to provide informational summaries.
- FAQs on popular topics were created and posted online as well as distributed at meetings and conventions
- Research was done on roadblocks in the application process and regional specific problems experienced by organizations and communities in Alaska that had applied for funds through ARRA. Lists of the most frequent issues were compiled and forwarded to federal contacts and Alaska’s congressional delegation so that they could inform federal department heads to make the process more efficient and simple.
- A comprehensive list of ARRA-related articles was collected and posted on the website which were generated from a variety of sources including Google alerts, federal agency reports and updates, local media web pages, federal contacts, state contacts and dozens of ARRA related meetings and conferences. Thousands of articles and reports were scrutinized and relevant content was added to the news list and the Clearinghouse website.

All of these resources resulted in the Clearinghouse being recognized as the main source for ARRA-related information in Alaska. The Clearinghouse was featured in a variety of articles in-state and national media, and received a number of e-mails and phone calls from media outlets, individuals, consultants, tribal organizations, and communities expressing gratitude for this easy-to-use resource, the responsive staff and the comprehensive information.

## **RESULTS**

The Clearinghouse received over 500 phone calls from individuals, organizations and communities across the state, hundreds of e-mails, and reached out to several dozen communities and organizations through social media, mass mailers and well-attended presentations. The Clearinghouse Twitter feed had over 200 followers and the e-mail list serve had another 300. There were over 150 user accounts registered on the Clearinghouse website, and to date the site received over 2,000 hits. The Clearinghouse website became so popular that in less than a month after coming online it made the top ten links in a Google search of “ARRA Alaska”.

Since the Clearinghouse served as an informational resource and not an actual distributor of funds, it is difficult to quantify success in terms of dollars brought into Alaska, or projects successfully funded due to Clearinghouse assistance. While many of the Alaska projects that received ARRA funding did use Clearinghouse services during the course of their research and application process, the Clearinghouse would not presume to claim credit for the success they enjoyed due to their hard work and diligence. Rather, staff believes that a good measure of success or failure is to be found in whether or not people used Clearinghouse services, whether

they continued to do so over time, and what kinds of feedback staff received over the course of existence.

On a governmental level, the Clearinghouse became the go-to resource for state and federal legislative offices. These offices routinely sent constituents with ARRA-related questions to the Clearinghouse for answers. Staff responded to dozens of information requests from the legislature and joined federal congressional staffers in presenting ARRA-related material at conventions and briefings across Alaska. Several state agencies praised the Clearinghouse's efforts in providing ARRA-related resources to Alaskans.

The Clearinghouse staff also received a number of positive e-mails and calls of thanks for the diligent work on behalf of individuals, non-profits, tribal entities and businesses. Staff frequently received comments of gratitude from users for having someone take the time to explain the federal grant process, look over the available programs and talk them through why they were or were not eligible for funding. Staff assistance in locating good federal contacts and application documentation was also a popular service.

A quick look at the call log in the Clearinghouse database shows that many of the organizations and individuals contacted staff on multiple occasions on a variety of issues. This is perhaps the most compelling proof of the effectiveness and popularity of the Clearinghouse program. Repeat visitors and users of Clearinghouse resources proved good indication of strong customer satisfaction.

Not all Clearinghouse achievements are intangible. Over the course of the projects life span, the Clearinghouse generated a number of products and resources that can be used for future projects. The Clearinghouse also generated a number of reports and databases that contain information not found anywhere else. The Clearinghouse served as a testing ground for the efficacy of multi-organizational projects. By looking at what worked, and what could use improvement in the Clearinghouse model, policy makers can craft a more effective cooperative project model for the next time such a project is needed.

The Clearinghouse staff believes that the response from those who used our services, coupled with the important research and information collected, shows that the Clearinghouse was not just a successful experiment in inter-organizational cooperation but also a valuable tool for Alaska organizations looking to locate and secure ARRA funding for their projects

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Numerous valuable lessons came out of the Clearinghouse experience. The most important of which is that multi-organizational coalitions can succeed and offer a way to provide necessary services to Alaskans while sharing the costs with multiple budgets. This cooperative model offers the state the opportunity to involve other agencies that may be in related fields, or are pursuing similar programs, reducing duplicative work and providing a one-stop shop for Alaskans. The net effect is a broader experience and knowledge base brought to users at a reduced cost to the state and other organizers.

While the Clearinghouse was a success for those involved, there are a few organizational and administrative lessons learned that should be considered in any future models. The lessons are broad enough to apply to a variety of situations where a similar model is used.

A clear, concise outline of the project's goals and the desired outcome and deliverables from the respective organizations involved would be invaluable for the staff assigned to the project. When multiple organizations are gathered under one project umbrella, it's inevitable that there will be different views on what the work should focus on, what the outcomes should be, and what the limitations should be. Outlining parameters from the start can identify and address any potential conflicts between the various partners' expectations as well as ensuring that every member has a clear understanding of what the project will entail.

Additionally, a clear management structure is key to the success of a project of this nature. In a multi-agency cooperative effort, it is important to acknowledge the differences in the management structures and project priorities for each organization. Potential conflicts should be identified early and a strategy for realigning project goals should be developed so that there are few surprises or setbacks. Any organization-specific limitations or guidelines should be examined up front to determine the potential impact on the project and, if necessary, ways to mitigate that impact.

Working under centralized management with clear objectives ensures that the staff works efficiently toward a common goal. Centralized management allows the operation to work in a unified manner instead of as a collection of individual agents. The strength of a project like this lies in the melding of the skills and knowledge bases of the various organizations into a more effective whole.

Unless there are tangible benefits of having a specific organization serve as the "face" of the project, it is important that the project be given a discrete identity from the constituent organizations. This will allow the project to earn recognition for its triumphs and shoulder the blame for its shortcomings. Project autonomy also ensures that the project can stay true to its own missions and measures.

Lastly, it is critical that the project have its infrastructure, action plan, administrative responsibilities and staff duties laid out and defined in a manner as detailed as possible before assigning staff. Trying to address the initial kinks inherent in any multi-organizational projects while also trying to determine what the project is supposed to be doing and how it is supposed to achieve those goals is extremely difficult. It is more efficient to have a framework in place at the start that can be modified as the nature of the projects becomes clearer. Databases, websites, reports, letterhead, logos, informational sources, social media accounts, should, as much as is possible, be in place as soon as practicable.

Considering the number of organizations involved in the Clearinghouse, the uniqueness of the project, the broad range of information and resources needed to complete the project and the number of staff involved, it is remarkable and a testament to those involved that the growing pains the Clearinghouse had were minor in comparison to the quality and quantity of work that the staff produced. The project was a successful melding of different organizations with a variety of sometimes conflicting views on the role of the Clearinghouse. In the end, this is a prime example of a collaborative project that worked and can be used as a template for future projects of a similar nature.

### **Conclusions**

The Alaska Clearinghouse collaborative project was a success, not only in terms of the services provided to Alaska organizations and local governments, but also a success as an experimental collaboration. The Clearinghouse model can serve as a working template for future inter-organizational collaborations between the legislature and other entities.

The benefits of a collaborative association like the Clearinghouse make it an ideal method for dealing with large-scale, complex, fast moving projects. The distribution of the cost over multiple agencies results in a better budgetary bottom line for all members of the project. The inclusion of a broad variety of organizations in the project ensures a large knowledge base and skill set perfect for quick adaptation to changing conditions and missions.

Although the Clearinghouse has closed down the tools created for this particular effort, it is clear these tools could be useful in the years ahead for numerous different projects. The Alaska State Legislature now has a fully functional, customizable website that can either be maintained under its current guise, or repurposed in the future for other projects. Additionally, the legislature now owns a complex, professionally designed relational Access database that not only contains a wealth of information and records, but one that can also be repurposed to other uses quite easily. The amount of documentation that was recorded on the processes and data gathering techniques will be useful if another project of a similar nature is created in the future.

The Clearinghouse served a vital role in identifying, facilitating and tracking ARRA funding in Alaska over the nine months it was operational. Hundreds of Alaskans received tangible benefits from their dealings with the Clearinghouse and through Clearinghouse community outreach. The Clearinghouse served as a resource for businesses, non-profit organizations, local governments, legislators and reporters across Alaska.

Through the Clearinghouse, hundreds of grant recommendations, funding opportunities, loan program and tax incentive notifications and grant application FAQs were distributed. Through an aggressive and comprehensive information distribution campaign the Clearinghouse was often the first organization in the state to notify subscribers of breaking news, new funding opportunities, funding awards, and other important information. The Alaska Clearinghouse cooperative project was and is a successful venture.

**APPENDIX A**

The following lists data created throughout the Clearinghouse project. If you have any questions or would like to inquire about receiving any of the following data, please contact Ms. Adison Smith at 907-271-1640 or [asmith@denali.gov](mailto:asmith@denali.gov).

**Bimonthly Reports**

**Legislative Reports**

**Success Stories**

**Maps**

**Call Log**

**Excel Sheet**

**Individual Reports**

**Calendar**

**Database**

**Website**

**FAQs**

**How Tos**

**PowerPoint Presentations**