



# TAPP INTO

## Success Story from Blue Cross Funded Organizations

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### **A Model For Cross Ethnic Collaboration – The STEEP – Statewide Tobacco Education and Engagement Project:**

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#### STEEL – Overview

The Statewide Tobacco Education and Engagement Project (STEEL) is a five-organization collaborative that aims to educate the Cambodian, Hmong, Lao and Vietnamese communities on the health consequences of tobacco use, and empower community members to create smoke free spaces in their homes, community centers, and places of worship.

The STEEL collaborative brings together five mutual assistance associations (MAAs), which are refugee led community-based organizations. They were formed to serve four different Southeast Asian ethnic communities – Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese – but have programs that address the needs broader Asian and refugee communities. The MAAs include:

- Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota (AAHWM)
- Lao Advancement Organization of America (LAO)
- Lao Family Community of Minnesota (Lao Family)
- Vietnamese Minnesotans Association (VMA)
- United Cambodian Association of Minnesota (UCAM)

Over the years, these MAAs have built trust and respect in their communities as service providers and community conveners. Among their programs are English as a Second Language and Citizenship classes, elder and youth programming, afterschool care, and case management. Recognizing the need for a vehicle to address tobacco use in all four communities, the Executive Directors of the organizations decided to form the STEEL collaborative. Led by Yorn Yan, Executive Director of UCAM, the four organizations spent over seven months discussing STEEL's goals, approach, structure and strategy.



### ***Structure***

STEEP's mission is to build the capacity of Southeast Asian communities to be aware of the harmful effects and dangers of tobacco use. The Executive Directors serve as the STEEP advisory board, charting the overall vision for STEEP and providing organizational support for STEEP. Lao Family, as the lead agency serves as the fiscal agent and is responsible for the overall financial management of STEEP. Lao Family provides the primary infrastructure for STEEP and houses the STEEP Project Coordinator, Ellie Watkins. Watkins oversees the entire STEEP collaborative and coordinates the work and training of the Health Educators. While Watkins provides training and coordination of the project, she is also mindful of mutual capacity building and focuses on increasing her cultural competency. AAHWM, LAO, VMA and UCAM each house a full-time Health Educator from their respective communities. Watkins provides overall coordination for the project and trains the Health Educators in mainstream approaches to tobacco control. Watkins was chosen by the Executive Directors of the STEEP member organizations because of her long history in tobacco control education and strong relationships with mainstream tobacco organizations such as the Association for Nonsmokers Rights Minnesota and the Tobacco Law Center. The Executive Directors made a conscious decision to select someone from outside the Southeast Asian community to ensure equity in representation among the STEEP staff.

The Health Educators bring their strong community relationships and expertise in serving their communities. STEEP has built culturally appropriate tools and strategies in tobacco prevention to educate local staffs from businesses, agencies and other organizations. All outreach activities are offered in English and the language of their respective communities, in responding to the specific and unique cultural barriers, challenges and strengths of each community.

TAPP INTO talked with members of STEEP to hear how they were able to build their collaborative and what lessons they gained in working together. This is even more remarkable given the history of conflict in their home countries between the different ethnicities.



## How Is the STEEP Collaboration Effective?

Through its partnerships, the STEEP collaborative has been remarkably effective reaching out to the Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese communities. Every weekend, the Health Educators and volunteers engage businesses, university students and groups, religious leaders and other MAAs in becoming smoke-free. In its first year, STEEP has built an effective team of educators who are linguistically and culturally competent and have reached over 50,000 people at 52 community events.

As a cohesive network of four organizations serving different Southeast Asian communities, STEEP has been successful in gaining support of mainstream organizations. Members of STEEP view it as a multiethnic Southeast Asian group. “Our organizations all have credibility with our communities,” remarked Long Yang, Executive Director of Lao Family. “With STEEP, they (mainstream organizations) see us as bigger than our individual organizations.” The STEEP collaborative now includes Association of Nonsmokers – Minnesota (ANSWR – MN) and the University of Minnesota Department of Family Social Science. Both provide knowledge about the history of tobacco control in Minnesota, as well as technical assistance on documentation of their outreach. Recently, STEEP has built relationships with medical students at Hamline University to enlist them in STEEP’s outreach efforts.

“STEPP people are bridge builders to carry the message from one side of the river to the other. Along with education, they help the community adapt to the system,” said AAHWM Executive Director Ly Vang.

## What Were The Challenges In Building An Effective Collaboration?

### *Bringing the Health Educators together*

A huge challenge for STEEP has bringing together the outreach team and building a cohesive group of Health Educators. The different Southeast Asian ethnic groups have a history of conflict and tension in Southeast Asia. Cultural sharing was key to work effectively as a team. In the first year, the Health Educators spent a great deal of time educating each other on their respective communities – the history of their countries of origin and their communities in Minnesota. Part of their time with Ellie Watkins includes a potluck lunch where each health educator brings homemade food. To build community and understand each other’s culture, the Health Educators have attended each other’s places of worship not in a work capacity but to see each other’s community.

Health Educator, Thomas Yang, of AAHWM states, “The first day I met the other Health Educators, I wasn’t sure if I would be here in a year. Now we work so closely together, that when I was at an event for Cambodian New Year, people mistake me for Cambodian.”

### *Clarity on Finances*

All of the organizations involved recognized that the first year of STEEP was challenging, particularly in coming to a shared understanding of the project’s finances. With five organizations with five separate systems of financial management and reporting, streamlining the finances was a challenge. At first, there was hesitancy to open up their finances and the administration of their own organizations. This raised questions about their individual budget allocations as well as the overall project budget.



“There were three factors in the formation of STEEP – commitment, readiness and awareness.”

**Khao Insixiangmay**  
**LAO Executive Director**

The STEEP leadership addressed this issue by keeping the budgeting and finances of the collaborative as transparent as possible and created a system of developing and monitoring the project budget that was visible to all. STEEP members shared their respective project budgets and created clear guidelines and processes for the individual organizations to follow. Along with a requirement that any changes to the overall STEEP budget required a consensus by the group, any changes to an individual member budget over 10% needed to be approved by the STEEP members as well.

In order to ensure concern over financial issues was addressed regularly, Executive Directors of STEEP member organizations met monthly in the first year and devoted half of every meeting to discussing finances and budget. Additionally, the project accountant submitted reports quarterly and was asked to participate in monthly meetings to answer questions from the Executive Directors. STEEP also credits the TAPP INTO program for providing technical assistance on financial management. Consultant Emil Angelica was able to conduct a training on financial reporting which was key in bringing all the organizations on the same page on financial management.

By the second year of STEEP’s existence, all the organizations reported that they had a clear understanding of the STEEP budget and financial allocations. Additionally, they felt that the process for explaining and sharing their individual budgets increased trust among the organizations.

### **What Are The Keys to Effective Collaboration?**

“There were three factors in the formation of STEEP – commitment, readiness and awareness,” said LAO Executive Director, Khao Insixiangmay.

#### ***Commitment – Preexisting Relationships and Personal History***

The organizations in the collaborative have a long history of working together prior to the formation of STEEP. The STEEP collaborative built on a decade of relationships between the member organizations and their respective staff. Before submitting the proposal and forming STEEP, organizational members discussed the structure, strategy, and approach for doing multi-ethnic tobacco control work. In



fact, the organizations were discussing forming a collaborative to address tobacco use in the Southeast Asian community two years before they submitted the proposal for funding. Rather than being an a forced partnership for funding, STEEP is a natural outgrowth of the existing bonds between its member groups and the recognition of their communities' need to prevent tobacco use.

Walking into the collaboration, the members of STEEP had strong personal and professional relationships. Many organizations had shared office space in their formative years and AAHWM and UCAM continue to do so. All of the organizations had worked on collaborative projects before the formation of STEEP. Those programs included afterschool programs, substance abuse services, and elder programming. Additionally, STEEP Chair and UCAM Executive Director, Yorn Yan, provided training and technical assistance for all of the MAAs as a consultant for the Wilder Foundation. Project Coordinator Ellie Watkins also worked with several members of STEEP in the past as part of her work with ANSWR- MN. All of the STEEP partners recognize that this familiarity was key in working through initial challenges of the first year.



### ***Readiness – Clear Expectations and Equitable Distribution Of Resources***

When STEEP came together, a key piece for sustaining the collaborative was the clear expectations set out for participation. Each organization was given funds to hire a full time Health Educator. Program Coordinator Ellie Watkins set a clear structure for the Health Educators where they spent three days a week with her, training and doing outreach in their respective communities. This intensive time together created strong working relationships among the Health Educators and gave them the time to focus on their community outreach. Watkins said that the dedicated time together was a key factor in the Health Educators' cohesiveness.

STEPP requires active participation from not only the Health Educators and the Program Coordinator, but also from the Executive Directors to guide the project. In the planning of STEEP, the collaborative required that each board member could not miss more than three monthly meetings a year. The Executive Directors also plan their monthly meetings collectively. For year two, the Executive Directors are meeting every other month with a requirement that only two meetings could be missed by an Executive Director.

### ***Awareness – Proactive Problem Solving***

STEPP leadership is proactive about solving tensions and disagreements. “I want the STEEP members to tell me what they don't like,” said Yan, Chair of the STEEP collaborative. As Chair, Yan has leveraged his prior work at the Wilder Foundation when he worked as a consultant with MAAs in Minnesota. Yan has actively reached out to the other Executive Directors to discuss the project's progress and any challenges or frustrations the organizations are experiencing. Along with the regular Executive Director meetings, Yan also organizes one-on-one calls with the other Executive Directors. These calls have led to the resolution of several misunderstandings about STEEP operations, particularly the time allocation for the Health Educators. The STEEP members see Yan as a trusted resource and a person who all organizations can approach with their issues.

Finally, knowing and experiencing the culture of all of the STEEP members is a huge factor in the cohesiveness of the STEEP collaborative. Because their approach is rooted in culturally appropriate outreach and education strategies, STEEP incorporated cultural sharing in all of its activities. For example, at the STEEP launch where it presented its work plan for feedback from community partners included performances from dance troupes affiliated with each of the organizations. The staff from all of the STEEP MAA's participate in each other's cultural celebrations such as New Year's festivals, soccer tournaments, and religious



observances. This has proven to be a two way learning process for all of the STEEP staff as Ellie Watkins brings a wealth of knowledge on the history of tobacco in Minnesota and she is learning from the Health Educators culturally relevant approaches to tobacco control in Southeast Asian communities.

## Conclusions

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Cross cultural collaboration can be a difficult process. The STEEP members all admit to having a challenging first year – creating clear systems of financial accountability, building a strong team of health educators, and developing culturally centered outreach and education programs. Through their first year, STEEP was at 52 events and reached out to tens of thousands of people.

In addition, mainstream tobacco control organizations see STEEP as a cohesive multi-ethnic collaborative, with a collective power that may exceed that of their individual organizations. STEEP has been able to build partnerships with mainstream organizations such as Hamline University's School of Medicine and bring in ANSWR- MN and the University of Minnesota as partners in their work. This is a model that the STEEP collective hopes to take to other issues in addition to tobacco, including mental health and nutrition and physical activity.

What has developed in that first year is an extraordinary commitment on all levels of the organizations to work together and support the collaboration. This came out of a long history of partnership among the organizations and a transparent system of communication.

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*STEPP receives training and technical assistance through the Technical Assistance for Priority Populations to Implement a Norm Change on Tobacco (TAPP INTO) program. The TAPP INTO Program is a comprehensive community-competent technical assistance and training program that supports community organizations working with African, African American, Latino, LGBT, and Southeast Asians in Minnesota. The goal of the TAPP INTO program is to build the capacity of these priority population-serving organizations in Minnesota and their emerging coalitions to implement successful tobacco control programs and policies and eventually reduce tobacco prevalence, exposure to secondhand smoke, and other tobacco disparities. This work is supported by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) as part of a health improvement initiative funded by tobacco settlement dollars that addresses root causes of preventable heart disease and cancer. Blue Cross' prevention efforts with high priority populations include a commitment to build community capacity to work on health promotion efforts.*