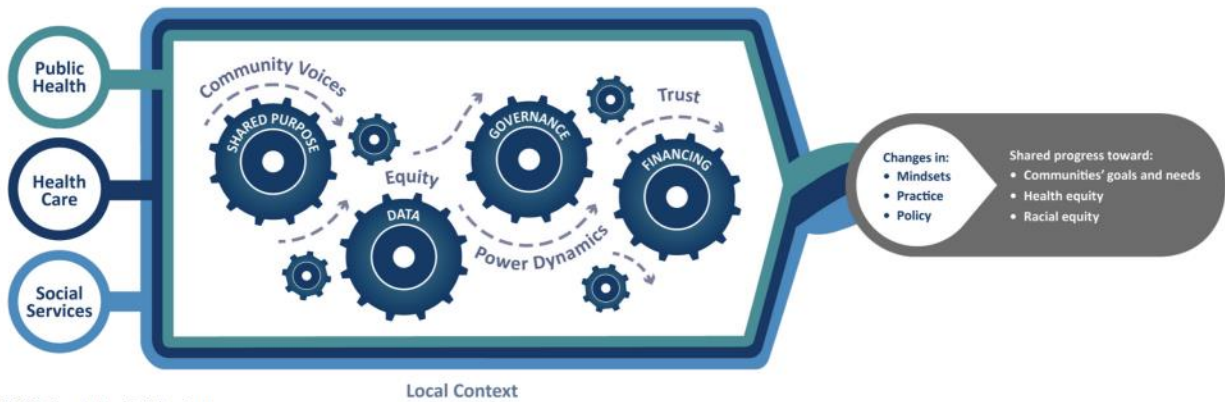


Community and Partner Engagement

Community and partner engagement, the process of working collaboratively through and with groups or individuals united by a shared interest or situation, can be a powerful tool for driving and sustaining cross-sector public health initiatives. As illustrated in the [Framework for Aligning Sectors](#) (Figure 1), community voice is an important adaptive factor supporting collaborative cross-sector partnerships for improving health in a community. True community engagement pushes lead agencies to seek out, value, and uplift the often overlooked and underappreciated experience and expertise in their communities. This can take many forms – ranging from collaboration and participation to true co-creation.

Figure 1. [A Framework for Aligning Sectors](#)



Source: Georgia Health Policy Center. (2021). *Developing the framework for aligning sectors*. Retrieved from <https://ghpc.qsu.edu/developing-the-framework-for-aligning-sectors/>. Used by permission, Georgia Health Policy Center, Georgia State University.

This topical brief highlights community and partner engagement efforts of the [Cross-sector Innovation Initiative](#) (CSII), a three-year endeavor to identify and support public health, healthcare, social services, and community organizations striving to build stronger, sustainable connections and systems that can more effectively address the needs of communities and ultimately improve health equity. The CSII grantees recognize the value and importance of community engagement for their work and are making intentional efforts to support and grow community and partner engagement. While the specific challenges encountered and approaches taken by each collaborative vary, some common challenges and areas of focus are diverse membership and participation, elevating community voice, and continuously building trust.

Key Points:

- Creating welcoming spaces – by using preferred language or responding to community member concerns – is important to ensure community members can fully participate and contribute to the collaborative work. Techniques from the [Collaborative Trust Scale](#) and the [Collective Impact Model](#) may offer useful approaches.
- Financially compensating community members for their contributions recognizes their expertise, demonstrates commitment to their participation, and ensures their voice is heard in the collaborative.
- Failure to deliver on promises collaboratives have made to community members can dissolve trust quickly.

This issue brief is the third of a four-part series on Building Sustainable Collaborations. Select a link to see the other briefs in the series: [Addressing Health Equity and Population Health](#), [Aligning Partnerships Across Sectors](#), and [Solving Complex Problems through Innovation](#).

Diverse Membership and Participation

While not sufficient on its own, including broad and diverse perspectives within the collaborative is a prerequisite for consistent and authentic community engagement. Two broad approaches – changes to collaborative membership and creating welcoming spaces for community members – have been utilized by grantees to support diverse membership and participation in their work.

Broadening Membership

Broadening membership is one of the first ways collaboratives and community organizations have increased opportunities for community voice to be heard, by engaging directly with peer-elected community leaders as well as with organizations that represent specific community populations.

In one community, community perspective is built into the governance structure, which includes an 80-member board and a 15-member executive committee, comprised of peer-elected residents. The work of this group is also informed by a resident-led advisory community which gathers and shares stories from residents themselves. Another grantee convenes a community voices council among Medicaid recipients and brings that lived-experience perspective back to the full collaborative. This collaborative also invited recipients of their anti-racism and criminal justice behavioral health grants to be collaborative members, thereby welcoming new voices and organizational partnerships representing groups such as justice advocates and youth mentors.

Creating Welcoming Spaces

Simply being able to attend the collaborative meetings, while a necessary component of community engagement, does not ensure an environment in which community voices can be truly heard. To address this challenge, collaboratives have worked to make their meeting environments welcoming and open to all perspectives.

To set the stage for a welcoming and cooperative space, one grantee begins each meeting with a group model building session, guided by previously agreed upon partnership rules, prior to starting the dialogue. This approach is widely used to build the capacity of practitioners to think in a systems way and requires successfully managing multiple roles, including starting a session, facilitating an exercise, and documenting the process. In multiple communities, being intentional about the safety of the space to discuss sensitive topics is crucial to enabling authentic engagement. To be felt and believed, however, collaboratives must keep their word. For one grantee, when concerns were raised by a community member, the collaborative worked quickly to meaningfully address the concerns – visibly demonstrating their commitment to the community member’s opinion and contributions. Other communities are changing meeting times, intentionally working to accommodate community members by meeting at times they can attend. Finally, some collaboratives are working to create welcoming spaces and interactions outside of the walls of the meetings, by using preferred language during interactions with community members and by hosting informal and consistent meal-time conversations in community locations such as picnic tables and coffee shops.

Elevating Community Voice

In addition to including more diverse voices in cross-sector collaborations, some collaboratives are working to elevate community voices by shifting power, responsibility, and authority and by financially investing in community participation. While shifting decision-making power and financial resources can be difficult, doing so is a visible and sustainable mechanism for supporting authentic community voice.

Positions of Leadership and Influence

Leadership can take many forms. Placing community members with lived experience in defined positions of power, authority, and recognition is one vehicle. Grantees have community members lead meetings, guide community conversations, contribute to identifying goals, and make decisions regarding funding.

In one community, partnerships were formed to apply for grant funding to shift power to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) women in the community. While the grant application was not successful, the partnerships and commitment by all involved has continued. Another grantee had community members and local small organizations review and select mini grant recipients – and followed through on their decisions. One collaborative has financed a training at a local university for a community member to become an active change agent within their partnership and community. Finally, one grantee has worked to elevate non-collaborative community-led efforts by supporting a community-based partner in starting their own organization.

Financially Supporting Community Engagement

In addition to carving out and substantiating positions of leadership for community members, grantees are “putting their money where their mouth is” by financially investing in community engagement and community voice. Multiple grantees have begun financially compensating community members who join meetings, serve as experts, and share their stories. By doing so, the collaboratives are recognizing these community members as experts. Similarly, one grantee invites mini-grant recipients to present on their work to the executive committee, further demonstrating how much the “professional” organizations recognize that community members should have ownership and financial backing to address community needs. In one community, collaboratives have begun awarding mini-grant funding to community organizations and individuals, thereby allowing the community members to identify problems and solutions for their own community.

Continuously Building Trust

At the root of successful and authentic community engagement, no matter what form or structure it takes, is a foundation of mutual trust. Trust, unlike a formal agreement or memorandum of understanding, cannot be formed in a day – it takes intentional effort and work over time.

Grantees frame their trust building efforts as an extension of their priorities – that community voice and community-driven priorities are key goals that run through all their work. When approaching communities, grantees emphasize the importance of being authentic and leaving assumptions, titles, and organizational priorities at the door. Connecting and working collaboratively with trusted leaders in specific communities can facilitate and guide the new relationships. Embedded in grantees approach to building and sustaining trust is a recognition that trust between organizations and partners is based on trust between individuals representing those organizations. Some grantees work to ensure this level of trust by seeking out and connecting with individuals, not their institution or organization, sometimes by

simply inviting people to share a meal together and having a conversation outside of an institutional setting.

As the initial spark or interaction begins to develop into a partnership, transparency and consistent communication are vital. Coming to the partnership as your authentic self is vital – as one grantee put it: “Communities know fake. They know when you are real, they know when you are genuine, but they really realize when you are fake... that’s the quickest way to get tossed out and never invited back.” One-off activities or failure to deliver on promises can erode trust quickly, particularly when the parent organization or governmental group is not seen as trustworthy. Early agreements on governance structure and core values can lay an important foundation. Continuous communication, transparent meetings, and common agendas are some specific approaches collaboratives have begun using to foster trust. Ultimately, there are no shortcuts to building trust – grantees must humbly show up, be sincere, and keep their word.

Conclusion

Intentional effort is needed, and is being done, to increase community and partner engagement and elevate community voice and power. While each collaborative works within the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts of their community, the value of community engagement in cross-sector collaborations is widely recognized and some common themes are emerging about how that engagement can be maximized.

Cross-sector Innovation Initiative

The [Center for Sharing Public Health Services](#) (CSPHS) and the [Public Health National Center for Innovations](#) (PHNCI) are co-leading the [Cross-sector Innovation Initiative](#) (CSII), which is comprised of [ten cross-sector projects](#) working toward specific population health goals through systems alignment efforts. To learn more about this initiative, visit www.phnci.org/cross-sector/csii.