

Factors that Contribute to a Successful Service and Resource Sharing Arrangement

Introduction

Public health departments face a number of challenges that impact their ability to protect the health of the communities they serve, including limited budgets and personnel resources. Resource-sharing is beneficial for health departments that believe by working with partners – pooling resources, sharing staff, expertise, funds, and programs – across their organizational boundaries – they can accomplish more than they could do alone. Health departments have found ways to leverage partnerships with other government health departments, health centers, community-based organizations, and others through sharing arrangements to expand the reach of services available to the community.

Based on the experience of a number of health departments, several factors that can increase the likelihood that sharing arrangements will be successful have been identified. They are categorized as prerequisites, facilitating factors and project characteristics.

Prerequisites

The following factors should be in place before partners start to work on a sharing arrangement. If any are missing, **we recommend that partners spend some time addressing them before engaging in further planning.**

Clarify Your Objectives

All participants, including key stakeholders and those impacted need to consider or explicitly state their expectations for the sharing arrangement and agree about what it is intended to accomplish. In addition to understanding the mutual benefits of an arrangement, equally important is understanding what is “off the table”. Once objectives are discussed and confirmed, it is important to review them often with all partners to verify that they remain valid. Failure to reach an agreement on the objectives of the sharing arrangement and to periodically verify its current validity may lead to misunderstandings and complications during implementation.

Balanced Approach

Improved effectiveness (i.e., enhanced quality of existing services or increased capacity) and increased efficiency (i.e., maximizing the value of each dollar invested) do not have to be mutually exclusive. The most successful sharing arrangements strive to achieve the best results with the amount of money available. An excessive, unbalanced focus on only effectiveness or efficiency is likely to compromise the other element. In this context, it is also important to look at effectiveness and efficiency through an equity lens, to make sure that the sharing arrangement takes into consideration the impact on all subgroups of the population and promotes equity in the access to and delivery of public health services.



Build Trust

Trust at all levels of the organizations involved (including top executive leadership) is essential in all sharing arrangements. It is important to recognize and acknowledge that historical inequities impact power dynamics, which in turn impact trust. And yet, partners must be confident that all involved will make honest, good-faith efforts to achieve the agreed-upon goals. A successful outcome is dependent, in part, on the behavior and reliability of everyone involved. Trust is built slowly but can be lost swiftly. It is important, therefore, to consider the existing trust level between the organizations and stakeholders involved when determining the feasibility of a sharing arrangement. The Collaborative Trust Scale a tool to measure the existing trust level among partner organizations, can be [found online](#).

Facilitating Factors

There are three key factors that can facilitate successful sharing arrangements. While the presence of these factors can be leveraged to help ensure a smooth planning and implementation process, their absence does not mean the arrangement will fail.

Success in Prior Collaborations

Partners that have successfully worked together in the past may find it easier to work together on new sharing arrangements. It often takes time for group members to trust each other and to learn how to be productive when working together. If there is anxiety among partners about the initiative, pointing out success in prior collaborations can help to diffuse it. Prior collaborations can also be an important source of lessons learned that can be applied to a current effort, which can be helpful when surfacing and addressing barriers to progress. The [Assessment Tool for Public Health Existing CJS Arrangements: Detailed Survey](#) and [Abbreviated Survey](#) can help capture prior collaborations.

Sense of Shared Identity

A sense of shared identity, when present, can be a powerful foundation for sharing arrangements.

That shared identity can take the form of a regional identity (if partners in different jurisdictions like counties or municipalities have a history of previous sharing arrangements) or similar population or community characteristics (such as being rural communities or coming from similar cultures). Partners with a sense of shared identity are more likely to express sentiments like “We’re all in this together” and “We need to help each other out.”

Positive Interpersonal Relationships

Positive interpersonal relationships, especially among those negotiating the terms of the sharing agreement, can help to facilitate a sharing arrangement. People who like each other and have a positive working history together are more likely to work well together in a new initiative. They also may be more willing to compromise to craft an arrangement that is mutually beneficial to all. It is important to involve staff who are known for having good “people skills” and are likely to get along with their counterparts from other organizations in all phases of the sharing arrangement.

Project Characteristics

The following project characteristics can help a sharing arrangement succeed. Partners should ensure that these elements are addressed in the project plan and implementation.

Senior Level Support

Sharing arrangements have important implications for the partner organizations in terms of staff, programmatic activities, and overall operations. Therefore, it is imperative that all partners’ executives and governing boards demonstrate strong support for these initiatives. They should clearly express that the sharing arrangement is a priority and that they expect everyone in the organization to work toward its success.



Strong Project Management Skills

Sharing arrangements may involve complex projects with lots of moving parts. The people on the planning team often have full-time duties, in addition to their work to develop a shared service or function. Staying organized and on track can present challenges, especially when several organizations are working together. A strong project management plan is essential to assure that all the planned activities are implemented successfully and smoothly, and that all participants understand their role and expectations.

Strong Change Management Plans

Sharing arrangements always involve change, which can come in many forms and affect both the organizations as a whole as well as the individuals directly involved in planning and implementation. For example, policies and procedures can change as can reporting structures and staff responsibilities. As a result, staff may have concerns, and sometimes anxiety, when anticipating what lies ahead. Deliberately tending to change and its effect on staff and stakeholders is the essence of change management, and it requires good communication and meaningful engagement of all employees, partners, and stakeholders.

Effective Communication

Communication plays a vital role in any undertaking when multiple partners are involved, especially those involving change. Good communication is necessary both among the partners directly involved in the sharing arrangement and with other stakeholders affected by it, including the public. Instituting a well-developed communications plan that includes plans for, and progress of, the sharing arrangement (addressing both internal and external communication) is highly recommended. This plan should specify who the target audiences are, what messages should be delivered to them, which organization(s) or individual(s) are responsible for communicating about the initiative, and specific strategies to ensure that messages are crafted and delivered in a culturally competent manner.

Conclusion

Partners engaged in establishing a sharing arrangement should start by leveraging pre-requisite factors that are present and, taking the time needed to cultivate factors that are lacking. They should take into account important facilitating factors such as highlighting successes in prior collaborations, working with partners who may share a regional identity, and including people (especially those who are negotiating) who have positive interpersonal relationships. Finally, a successful sharing arrangement is marked by several characteristics, including senior-level support, strong project management skills, strong change management plans and effective communication.

