Community Collaboration

Collaboration allows agencies to provide a seamless continuum of care, meet service gaps in the community, minimize duplication of existing services, and share resources. Furthermore, providers are able to increase the efficiency of their own agency and encourage economical distribution of scarce resources by referring out and/or collaborating with others to provide services.

Clarify Purpose for Collaboration

Create collaboration goals in response to the needs of your target population that are clear, based on measurable outcomes and attainable. Community collaboration can vary in intensity and form depending on your goals. Common goals must be established before moving into the working phase, and it is always best to choose the simplest collaborative activities to achieve your goals.

Common activities include:
- cross-training staff for the purpose of embedding each other’s practices into the other agency
- coordinating intakes and referrals by creating a common referral form, consent for services/disclosure of information form
- creating a referral network
- implementing a shared model, such as a trauma-informed system of care
- developing a new program
- conducting outreach or disseminating information
- organizing community events or conferences
- advocating for policy issues
- conducting a media or marketing campaign
- developing new/blended funding streams, and
- discontinuing duplicative or conflicting approaches

Engage Partners

Once you have identified the goals and potential activities of collaboration, choose partners strategically. Consider all relevant agencies and stakeholders when choosing partners. It is essential that members believe that their participation in the collaboration will benefit their clients beyond the services they are currently providing. Ask yourself the following when you invite partners:
- Do they share the same goals?
- Do they have the required capabilities and resources?
- Do they have credibility in the community?
- Do you have a trusting relationship?

Regardless of the type of collaboration you are engaging in, collaboration requires that partners have a commitment to the same goals; a jointly developed structure; clear roles; a view of consumers as partners; mutual responsibility and accountability; and shared resources, risks, and rewards. Therefore, it is important you can answer the above questions affirmatively.
Create Memoranda of Understanding

Successful collaborations are developed through written agreements, contracts, or memoranda of understanding. A memorandum of understanding (MOU), also known as a charter or operating agreement, lays out the rules that govern the collaboration. It is especially important to decide what the agreements are for leadership and decision-making. See HUD’s Family Unification Program’s MOU. An MOU should include:

- the collaborative mission and purpose
- values and assumptions
- vision, timelines and milestones
- members and membership policies
- the specific roles and contributions of partners
- policies regarding competition, conflicts of interest, financial relationships
- norms for participation, decision-making, communication, and meetings, and
- agreed-upon outcome measures

Include the perspectives, concerns, and ideas of agency administrators, frontline staff, systems representatives, consumers, community leaders and other key stakeholders.

Additional Considerations for a Productive Collaborative

- Design a partnership model that shows how the collaboration impacts the consumer.
- Develop an interagency management team, oversight group, or steering committee that includes a cross-section of members from the organizations so that frontline staff, as well as administrators, are included.
- Use technology (shared documents, groups, and mailing lists) to enhance communication.
- Establish formal and informal communication strategies (such as listservs, quarterly newsletters, or community agency meetings) for conveying updates and necessary information within and outside the group.
- Modify the mission statements of participating organizations to align with the goals of the collaboration.
- Anticipate the challenges that your collaboration may face ahead of time. Common challenges include limited resources, territorial issues, staff turnover and constraints of time and funding.
- Agree on a leader or facilitator who has organizing and interpersonal skills and can carry out the role with fairness.

Conduct Ongoing Evaluation

It is critical that the collaborative partners commit to an evaluation process that delivers regular feedback. Assessment and problem-solving should focus on systemic factors as opposed to individual agency pathology or weaknesses.

- The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory is a free online survey to assess a community collaboration project.
- “The Working Together Benchmarks” developed by the Community Consultant Group, helps partners improve the effectiveness and cohesiveness of their collaboration.
- You may also consider designing your own survey to regularly receive anonymous feedback from participants in the collaborative.
- Solicit client and community feedback on how the collaborative is meeting their needs through surveys and focus groups.

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Get the Word Out!

Disseminate a press release about the launch of the community collaborative. Your press release should include the following:

- background on the development of the collaborative
- purpose and goals of the collaborative
- community needs and target population the collaborative will address, including relevant data
- anticipated benefits
- names of partnering agency, and
- contact information and how people can learn more

*See “Networking and Marketing” getting started document for tips for issuing a press release, as well as other strategies for getting the word out.

Continue to share the results of the collaborative efforts through published articles, data summaries to legislators, social events, thank you letters, and personal accounts of consumers. This will provide partners with a sense of accomplishment, highlight the various agencies, and generate greater support for the collective vision.

Final Thoughts

Overall, collaboration is designed to serve the needs of the community in an efficient, holistic and practical way. This requires partners to be flexible, communicate openly, share resources, and commit to the vision and goals of their efforts. Essentially, the collaborative relationship must mirror the therapeutic relationships that it seeks to create among service recipients. In other words, apply the principles of building a good relationship to developing a collaborative multi-disciplinary team. Successful collaborations can improve the rate of client retention, increase agency visibility and interagency dialogue, provide a continuum of care, and afford an opportunity for agencies to influence policy decisions.
RESOURCES

- A Closer Look: Interagency Collaboration

  http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/pubstext/partnercurr/handout2.2.pdf

- Community Consulting Group
  http://www.ccgpartnership.com

- Four Keys to Collaboration Success
  http://www.fieldstonealliance.org/client/articles/Article-4_Key_Collab_Success.cfm

- How to “Nimble-ize” a Collaboration
  http://www.fieldstonealliance.org/client/tools_you_can_use/07-25-07_nimble_collab.cfm

- Karen Ray Collaboration
  http://www.karenraycollaboration.com/collaboration-explained


- Positioning Public Child Welfare Guidance: Strategic Partnerships
  http://www.ppcwg.org/strategic-partnerships-overview.html

- Six Best Practices for Community Collaboration
  http://www.fieldstonealliance.org/client/tools_you_can_use/09-12-06_complex_collabs.cfm

- The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory
  http://wilderresearch.org/tools/cfi/index.php

- Using technology to improve collaboration