



CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT AND THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The GHPC COVID Collection

HOW ALIGNMENT CAN AID THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

[Aligning Systems for Health: Health Care + Public Health + Social Services](#), supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and led by the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC), is focused on learning from stakeholders across the nation about effective ways to align these three sectors to better meet the goals and needs of the people and communities they serve.

Successfully addressing the complex challenges that affect community health — such as COVID-19, alongside maternal and infant mortality, food and housing insecurity, and the opioid epidemic — requires health care, public health, and social services to work together. Lasting, cross-sector alignment requires fundamentally new ways of thinking and working together across sectors to build healthier and more equitable communities.

The core components of aligned systems, identified in the [Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change](#), are shared purpose, data, financing, and governance. Emerging anecdotal evidence shows that communities with these core components of cross-sector alignment already in place may be able to quickly apply this way of thinking and working to rapidly arising threats, like COVID-19.

ELEMENTS OF THE CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT THEORY OF CHANGE

Participation of the three sectors
Internal capacity
Urgency
Shared purpose, data, financing, and governance
Community engagement
Focus on equity

Survey and Learnings

This series explores the experience of stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic to uncover new learnings about cross-sector alignment in crisis situations. Themes and trends emerged from a two-question survey GHPC distributed to recipients on the Aligning Systems for Health listserv.* On April 20, 2020, individuals were asked:

- What is the role of aligned systems in navigating the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color, how are collaboratives and partner organizations engaging community members in alignment activities?

The organizational literature recognizes that collaboration activities exist on a continuum that at its broadest extends from overt competition through complete integration. Aligning Systems for Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are focused on how communities can work across sectors to improve health equity. To build

* Additional surveys will be administered from time to time.

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healthier and more equitable communities, these cross-sector efforts must extend beyond even collaboration (defined as “exchanging information for mutual benefit, and altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another to achieve a common purpose”¹).

Aligning Systems for Health recognizes that all too often collaboration occurs around a single project or grant opportunity. In contrast, alignment is one step further on the continuum beyond collaboration and is purposefully built to last. Yet, collaboration often serves as a catch-all term for working together. Aligning Systems for Health is very specific about the components cross-sector alignment entails, and recognizes that survey respondents may not have been precise in their choice of language to reflect the nuanced distinctions between communicating, coordinating, cooperating, collaborating, and aligning.



With this caveat in mind, survey responses point to several common themes that highlight the significance of communication, coordination, and collaboration among systems responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Communication

Communication emerged as an important component of the role of aligned systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information sharing in the forms of data, best practices, resources, and knowledge is essential. Optimal communication efforts require that information be safely shared across sectors and with the public. For example, coordination in messaging not only prompts a more efficient response, but it also stimulates development of trusted relationships (between sectors and with the public) and increases buy-in from the public.

Communicating information about resources (e.g., social services, personal protective equipment, education) with those who need them the most is an important function of coordinated messaging. Respondents note that this can be achieved by collaborating and coordinating with community-based organizations for the dissemination of information and resources to individuals and communities that have needs. Community-based organizations provide a bridge to understanding the needs of communities and their members. Building on pre-established trusted relationships, aligned systems have the ability to communicate resources efficiently and directly with the appropriate stakeholders.

Coordination

Respondents frequently point to coordination as a key role of aligned systems in the COVID-19 response. In this context, coordination refers to each organization maintaining its own operations but altering its activities in some way around a shared purpose and goals.¹ The potential benefits of coordination during the pandemic include timely response, avoidance of duplication of efforts, and optimal use of resources. Establishing communication is a vital step toward achieving coordination. Although sectors work separately, there must be a constant awareness among them of what the others are working on. Coordinated response efforts afford communities reassurance and direction and help ensure that key sectors achieve goals quickly and efficiently.

Collaboration

Aligned systems are critical to a multifaceted response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Individual sectors cannot respond to the crisis alone; current circumstances require a deeply collaborative approach. True collaboration recognizes mutual benefit, with each organization’s success is dependent on

Truly aligned systems provide the opportunity for rapid knowledge sharing, effective resource allocation, and shared measurement systems to monitor needs and progress.

¹ Himmelman, A.T. (2002). Collaboration for a change: Definitions, decision-making models, roles, and collaboration process guide. Accessed at <http://tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Himmelman-Collaboration-for-a-Change.pdf>

the success of others.¹ Many respondents cite the importance of encouraging organizations and sectors to avoid “silos” and to rapidly eliminate silos that currently exist. Avoiding and eliminating silos plays a central role in creating a more robust and efficient response, resulting not only in a reduction in health risks but also in addressing rapidly rising social needs. Truly aligned systems provide the opportunity for rapid knowledge sharing, effective resource allocation, and shared measurement systems to monitor needs and progress.

Aligned Systems

The role of cross-sector alignment in the response to COVID-19 is complex. Respondents describe the importance of paying attention to social determinants of health. With an aligned infrastructure, local and regional systems possess the capacity to address the social and economic effects of COVID-19, specifically around housing and food insecurity resulting from pandemic-related loss of jobs and income. Application of a whole-person approach was cited as a major responsibility of aligned systems. Employing a whole-person approach to health requires collaboratives to connect individuals with services and resources across the continuum, beyond what traditional health care can provide. This approach necessitates an understanding of the various integrated aspects that influence individuals’ and communities’ health and well-being. Through the whole-person approach, aligned systems can identify and address risks experienced by those most vulnerable. Cross-sector collaboration plays an important role in cushioning the impact COVID-19 has on vulnerable populations.

The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19

Respondents were also asked to explain how they see collaboratives and partner organizations engaging community members in alignment activities, given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color. This effort appears to be a developing goal, not yet entirely achieved by aligned systems. Nevertheless, respondents advise that aligned systems should give distinct attention to vulnerable populations most affected by COVID-19. Two modes of achieving this are through data sharing and engagement.

Respondents emphasized the need to use data to expose inequalities experienced by vulnerable groups. Such data would be broken down by categories such as race, age, income, or gender to provide an in-depth look at trends across specific subgroups. The use of this type of data sheds light on the scope of the problem, which allows collaboratives to develop effective solutions. As a result, disaggregated data can help inform how resources are allocated and can be used to educate and respond to vulnerable groups quicker.

Engagement was viewed as both an enabler and barrier to serving communities that are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Respondents indicated a need for increased engagement and outreach in communities of color. This effort can yield better understanding of community needs firsthand. Perhaps in the future, aligned systems could activate existing networks by collaborating with community health workers within collaboratives. Community health workers may be able to serve as a bridge between sectors and communities of color, helping to engage individual community members.

Conclusion

COVID-19 response requires that the health care, public health, and social service sectors communicate, coordinate, collaborate, and, ultimately, align to meet the goals and needs of individuals and communities. It is generally understood that cross-sector alignment that is built to last requires time, trust, and patience. Current circumstances provide a sense of urgency to drive sectors to work together in order to create an equitable response and innovative solutions to complex challenges.

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