



CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT AND THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The GHPC COVID Collection

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM RESEARCH ON CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT?

The COVID crisis has both underscored and created a host of problems affecting population health and health equity. To respond to this crisis, we need new, powerful ways of thinking about, and dealing with, emerging problems as well as the problems we had before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responding to an already-troubled health system, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently proposed a series of ideas for developing robust, systemswide cross-sector alignment. These ideas, outlined in the [Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change](#), have significant implications for our response to the COVID crisis. At its core is the idea that collaboratives will be more successful if they move toward cross-sector alignment, which involves building sustainable structures across organizations and sectors in the areas of shared purpose, governance, finance, and data. These structures can help improve community well-being and health equity, especially when combined with urgency, capacity, and community empowerment.

This brief draws on the Georgia Health Policy Center's ongoing research into factors supporting cross-sector alignment and presents findings relevant to the response to the COVID crisis. We present challenges and response opportunities related to several key elements of the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change: sectors, shared purpose, governance, finance, data, community voice, equity, capacity, and urgency.

SECTORS

A key idea in the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change is that health care, public health, and social services must all work together in order to improve population health and health equity. Currently, much of the attention devoted to the COVID response is focused on the health care and public health sectors. The public health sector is primarily responsible for tracing and testing for the disease, and the health care sector is treating infected individuals. However, the role of social services is discussed less often.

Aligning organizations already face challenges in balancing representation between sectors. With the focus largely on health care and public health, critical health-related social service needs may go unmet during the COVID crisis.

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Opportunities for Supporting Cross-Sector Alignment

Organizations that are flexible in collaborating with nontraditional partners have an avenue for exploring more creative responses to population needs.² In the case of the COVID crisis, health care and public health agencies have new reasons to collaborate with social service organizations since social service organizations are better positioned to address important health-related community needs that have grown more intense during the pandemic (e.g., food insecurity, housing instability, and domestic violence). Overlooking these needs during a pandemic may result in new population health issues in addition to those caused directly by the virus itself. For example, more households may be experiencing food insecurity due to lost income or decreased access to school meals. Loss of income may also result in housing instability, and physical distancing measures may result in a rise in domestic violence cases. Remaining attentive to health-related social service needs can help prevent the COVID crisis from becoming worse than it already is.

SHARED PURPOSE



Collaborative COVID response efforts are likely to be affected by the fact that different sectors often have their own focus, goals, and outcome measures.³ Differences between the values of practitioners in different sectors may also affect their ability to respond together.⁴⁻⁶ Such differences, if not reconciled, can inhibit an effective response to the current crisis, especially where the concerns of a one sector are marginalized relative to the concerns of another.

In the case of the current crisis, there is an extraordinary and immediate need to address the physical health challenges faced by individuals with COVID-19. However, an effective response to the current crisis will also have to address mental health and social problems developing in this crisis since these factors will have a significant impact on population health more generally. As an example, the looming economic recession is likely to affect social determinants of health across the population, reducing the socioeconomic status of large portions of the population. This could become a significant problem for many reasons but for population health in particular, since socioeconomic status is closely linked to health status.⁷ Without a sense of shared purpose across sectors, the COVID response may be too narrowly focused.

Opportunities for Supporting Cross-Sector Alignment

Early development of shared purpose helps build consensus on the most effective interventions across sectors.⁸⁻¹⁰ In response to the COVID crisis, aligning organizations should consider coming to agreement around shared outcomes sought in the coming months and years.

Shared purpose is important not only for setting long-term goals but also has immediate practical implications. For example, developing shared outcomes early may help organizations identify gaps in their data-collection activities.¹¹ Agreement on shared purpose may also help collaboratives prepare to respond to issues more quickly as the crisis unfolds. An example in the current crisis would be preparing for rising unemployment.

GOVERNANCE



Effective governance is an important factor for cross-sector alignment, and collaboratives that already have effective governance structures and effective leadership are at an

advantage when quickly responding to a crisis. When caught without effective governance, it can take substantial time and effort to identify and establish effective governance structures and leadership.^{1, 12-13}

Opportunities for Supporting Cross-Sector Alignment

When there is a need for immediate response efforts, such as in the case of the current epidemic, aligning organizations can employ strategies that bypass more time-consuming arrangements that are less valuable in the context of escalating crises. For the COVID crisis, where attention is already devoted to many of the key problems and where there is already some level of volunteerism, avoiding complex legal arrangements may speed up initiatives.¹⁴ Collaboratives may consider striking a balance between formal and informal arrangements.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

FINANCING



An important step in effectively responding to the COVID crisis will be securing funding. Organizations in all sectors face funding challenges, and the COVID crisis is likely to create new problems. For example, many resources are now being dedicated to the treatment of COVID-19, and while resource allocation is not zero-sum, the attention devoted to acute care centers in hospitals may create challenges for other areas of health care or exacerbate already-existing problems with funding shortages for social service organizations.¹⁸

Opportunities for Supporting Cross-Sector Alignment

While resources are being shifted, aligning organizations should consider sources of funding and funding mechanisms for responding to the crisis broadly and inclusively of social services. There are many potential funding mechanisms to consider, for example blending and braiding of funds, where different sources of funds are mixed together to varying degrees and dedicated to a shared objective. Blended funding may be a particularly useful mechanism during the emerging crisis because these funds are not divided into strands with earmarks and therefore tend to be more flexible.¹⁹

DATA



During the COVID crisis, data has been, and will continue to be, critical for tracing, testing for, and combatting SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. However, integrating information systems across sectors has historically been challenging.²⁰⁻²⁵ Data-sharing problems have significant implications for the current crisis. For example, health care data on COVID-19 cases is critical for the testing and tracing activities being conducted by public health organizations. As another example, public health organizations could also benefit from information on social determinants of health that affect COVID-19 risk factors, and such information is often held by public health and social service organizations.

A major challenge is that building collaborative data infrastructure often takes time and can be highly resource intensive.²⁶ Organizations without resources to invest in data systems may be limited in their ability to respond to the COVID crisis. Community-based organizations (CBOs) historically work with fewer resources to begin with and may lack the technical expertise and systems to establish, process, and analyze relevant COVID data. This will disproportionately affect response efforts for disadvantaged populations that primarily rely on CBOs for services.

Opportunities for Supporting Cross-Sector Alignment

Efforts to track and trace the virus can be supported by existing data-sharing infrastructure that facilitates necessary information exchanges. Aligning organizations can also support efforts to broaden data access by providing technical assistance to their constituent organizations.²⁷ Government involvement can also potentially improve efforts to share data, since governments can often mandate the collection and provision of useful data.²⁸ For longer-term needs, governments and other organizations can set standards to facilitate interoperability.²⁹⁻³⁰

COMMUNITY VOICE



Prioritizing community concerns throughout aligning efforts can help identify COVID response priorities. However, factors such as current physical distancing restrictions may be preventing community members' voices from being heard in the response effort. Interactions with government leaders in particular are now more limited, and such interactions were already limited before the pandemic.³¹

Opportunities for Supporting Cross-Sector Alignment

Without face-to-face meetings and events, including community voice in COVID response efforts will require creative thinking. CBOs can be well-connected to their communities and understand their needs,³²⁻³³ so while involving community members directly is preferable, community voice can still be included in response efforts to some degree by engaging CBOs as a proxy for individuals in the community. The use of remote communication technology could also help in engaging community members. However, it will be important to account for inequities in access to internet services and computers, which negatively affect many under-resourced communities.

EQUITY



The COVID crisis has worsened many already-existing inequities. For example, African-American people are dying from COVID-19 in disproportionate numbers.³⁴ This is likely related to disproportionate access to health care, where communities of color tend to have more limited access. Front-line workers with relatively low incomes have also been put at greater risk to keep essential services running. Many of these workers are paid minimum wage for this risky work, resulting in compounded exposure to inequities. Yet a comprehensive approach to equity has been limited by uncoordinated policies.³⁵

Opportunities for Supporting Cross-Sector Alignment

The pandemic highlights a need to rethink our approach to inequity. Collaboratively improving access to services is one way to reduce inequity.³⁶ The inclusion of community voice at all stages of alignment is also important for addressing inequities, and organizations can improve their crisis response by building relationships with communities and introducing an equity focus into their work.³⁷

CAPACITY AND URGENCY



Capacity and urgency are key concepts in the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change. An organization's capacity affects its ability to join others in developing shared purpose, governance, financing, and data. It can also affect how well an organization

is able to incorporate community voice and equity into its work or, in the case of the current crisis, a response to the pandemic.



The COVID crisis will have a lasting impact on organizational capacity. For example, there will be a decrease in employees for many organizations. Likewise, there will be changes in funding for many other organizations. Yet the COVID crisis only highlights the need for additional capacity.

The sense of urgency around the COVID crisis will be important for developing the capacity to align across sectors. Historically, pandemics have induced new partnerships.³⁸ For existing partnerships, the work often became more collaborative and was sustained beyond pandemic response efforts.³⁸ These lessons should be considered for their implications for the current crisis, since aligning organizations are likely to have a significant advantage in their crisis response.

CONCLUSION

The Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change is a rich source of ideas for responding to the COVID crisis. The pandemic has exacerbated already-existing cracks in our health care, public health, and social service systems. Aligning organizations are often well-positioned to address these cracks, and now is a good time to consider how robust cross-sector alignment may help address many of the issues we now face.

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