

MAKING ALIGNING WORK: AN EARLY LOOK AT COVID-19'S IMPACT ON CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT

June 2020

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.



This series mines the experience of catalysts, researchers, and funders who have been involved with efforts to align the three sectors through quarterly interviews (fall 2019 through spring 2021). These interviews with 10 selected experts are anchored around the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change. Following the structured interviews, participants are invited to a virtual, sense-making teleconference with GHPC researchers to assess the emerging themes across the 10 conversations.

The Making Aligning Work series captures themes, lessons, and trends from the interviews and sense-making sessions. This brief focuses on very early observations about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts communities aligning health care, public health, and social services, with a focus on the components of the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change — internal capacity; urgency; shared purpose, data, financing, and governance; community engagement; and a focus on equity.

THE PANDEMIC IS PROVIDING A STRESS TEST OF CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT.

A stress test measures the strength or stability of a system to handle conditions beyond its normal operating capacity. When such tests are conducted in a simulation, they can be validating or can highlight a system's weaknesses. The COVID-19 pandemic is not a simulation but is serving as a real-time experiment to determine if communities with more elements of cross-sector alignment in place are better positioned for response and recovery and to draw attention to the weakest points.

Interviewees acknowledge it is too early to assess the big picture of the pandemic's long-term impact on how communities with more elements of cross-sector alignment in place are faring compared to those not working toward cross-sector alignment.

Interviewees highlighted the ways that the COVID-19 response can be understood through the lens of the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change. The evidence emerging shows variation even within each component of the Theory of Change.

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



Purpose

- The pandemic has given communities an obvious, urgent reason to unite around a common cause.
- But the pandemic runs the risk of pivoting energy away from core efforts to create a shared sense of purpose around health-related social needs. Ultimately, these needs (e.g., food insecurity, housing instability, and domestic

404.413.0314

ghpc.gsu.edu/project/aligning

aligning@gsu.edu



violence) have grown more intense during the pandemic, so it remains to be seen if the pivot in purpose toward urgent public health and health care needs can be refocused back on supporting broader community needs, possibly in an even more comprehensive fashion.



Governance

- Established, purposeful processes, relationships, and trust are enabling aligned organizations to pivot quickly toward emerging needs.
- Patience may be lacking for existing or emerging governance processes, which may be pushed aside for a quicker response.



Data

- Data-sharing agreements are being fast-tracked in some local and regional initiatives, with previously reticent organizations across the sectors now eager to join.
- Under-resourced organizations may have limited capacity to continue their participation.



Capacity:

- Financial capacity will be strained across all three sectors as a result of the pandemic.
- It remains to be seen if organizations and communities with more elements of cross-sector alignment in place are better positioned to leverage new funding opportunities.
- Do communities with recent past experience with disasters (e.g., hurricanes and wildfires) have greater capacity to activate and mobilize more quickly?



Community Engagement:

- Some organizations and collaboratives shifted quickly to virtual engagement, paying attention to the most effective ways to support virtual community participation (e.g., using the telephone when internet access was limited, providing tablets, and using platforms that were more familiar and accessible to community partners).
- There is concern that meaningful community engagement is falling off with disruptions to regularly scheduled, in-person meetings, competing demands on front-line workers, and disparities in ability to access technology.
- Additionally, if prepandemic community engagement did not already exist, it is difficult to create it in a virtual environment.

INITIAL EVIDENCE IS MIXED ON WHETHER THE PANDEMIC IS ENCOURAGING SECTORS TO WORK TOGETHER.

It seems intuitive to expect that existing relationships are being leveraged to rapidly address emerging pandemic-related needs, although it is too soon to determine the actual outcomes of response coordination or the success in meeting health and social needs.

There are examples nationally that the pandemic is accelerating cooperation between competing organizations, bringing new partners to the table, and re-engaging less-involved partners. Interviewees are hopeful that these examples of expanded relationship-building may lay the groundwork for future aligning efforts, as the interconnectedness of factors affecting health is more visible. However, others note that shifting organizational priorities, resources, and capacity have the potential to hamper participation in core alignment-building efforts.



Health Care

The initial COVID-19 conversation was framed primarily as a health care issue focused on critical care needs for infected individuals and personal protective equipment for front-line workers. This focus on immediate needs placed power and attention with health care and made it harder for discussion around longer-term impact and social needs.



Public Health

There is a feeling of optimism that perhaps this is the moment that the need for population-level health initiatives is understood and the role of public health is more fully appreciated.



Social Services

Interviewees expressed greater concern for the ability of the social services sector to participate in cross-sector alignment efforts after the pandemic. The social services sector is more dispersed and leadership is not as visible at the state and national levels. Yet the need for social services, particularly in light of the pandemic, is accelerating. There is recognition of the challenges of meeting health-related social needs virtually and uncertainty about the financial capacity of social service organizations as communities move beyond the acute phase of the response.

INEQUITIES ARE OF GREAT CONCERN.

The pandemic underscores population-level health inequities in terms of those most infected, critically ill, and dying from coronavirus. However, there are other potential inequities affecting the future of who participates in building aligned systems:

- Imbalances between sectors — Underlying power differentials historically impact cross-sector work. Existing dynamics are mirrored and possibly exacerbated by the pandemic, which reinforces the increased likelihood of spending money on acute conditions rather than on preventive investments.
- Vulnerable populations — Social distancing and remote operations have equity ramifications for the ability to meaningfully engage the voices of community members. Are the voices of essential workers, those with comorbidities, and those unable to access virtual technologies being heard in efforts to design the COVID-19 recovery and aligned infrastructure for the future?

Interviewees see a potential silver lining in the pandemic in that the public has a heightened awareness of equity and that there may be more motivation to address disparities. There is an opportunity to translate this increased understanding of the social determinants of health and their connections to health and public health into enhanced engagement.

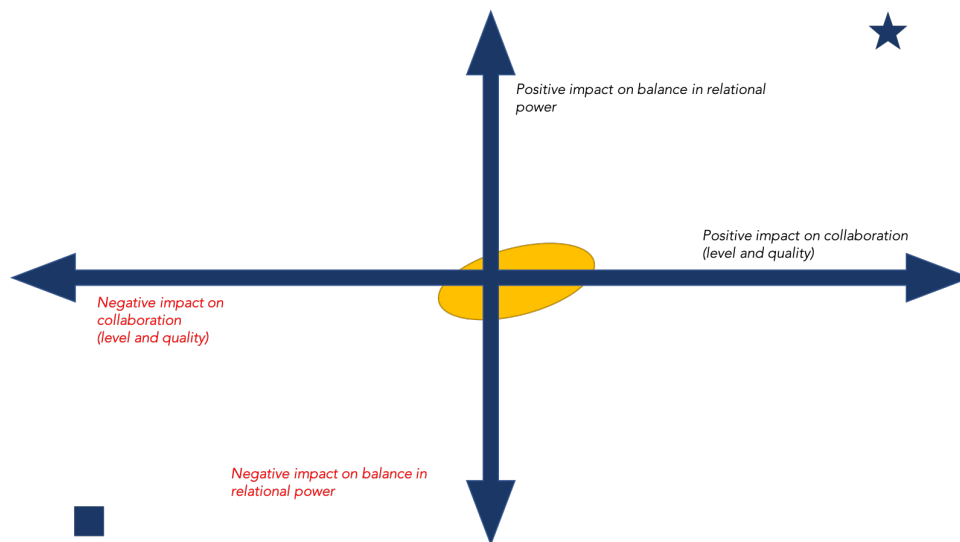
INSIGHTS FOR ALIGNING: LOOKING FORWARD

Unanimously, interviewees agree that it is too soon to tell whether having more elements of cross-sector alignment in place is a protective factor for communities, making clear takeaways for aligning organizations and leaders premature. However, participants were clear in terms of trends to watch.

Shifting Dynamics

Building aligned systems involves more than collaborative planning or a single joint project. It requires fundamentally new ways of thinking and working together across sectors, including the development of core components across sectors (e.g., shared purpose, data, governance, and financing). To realize this in an era of COVID-19, interviewees are attuned to examining evolution of relational power between sectors and engaging in collaborative activities. Shifts in these dynamics may be early measures of the ability to engage in building aligned infrastructure during the COVID-19 recovery phase.

Based on this quarter's interviews, the dynamics of relational power and collaboration remain fairly close to the origin (as indicated by the yellow oval). Experts agree an environment that fosters alignment would be a movement toward the star, whereas movement toward the square would indicate a nonsupportive environment for building aligned systems.



Identifying and Leveraging Opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and represents a profound learning opportunity. Interviewees believe that communities working to develop aligned systems also have an opportunity to more effectively consolidate pandemic-related learnings that would benefit participants across sectors. It is presumed that those with the capacity to participate in building the elements of cross-sector alignment would be the more immediate beneficiaries of these learnings that could inform a response and recovery effort that supports greater health equity and innovation.

Looking Forward

Given the early stage of the pandemic response, Aligning Systems for Health will re-examine how communities and organizations engaged in building elements of cross-sector alignment are faring during the COVID-19 response and recovery. Some specific questions worthy of examination include:

- Does the existence of or striving to address the elements of cross-sector alignment improve response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Are those communities with strong, existing cross-sector collaboratives better positioned to receive funding for response and recovery?
- Many community-level efforts and cross-sector collaboratives are directly or indirectly subsidized through local health care systems, and now the health care sector has serious resource constraints. What are the long-term impacts?
- There is local variation in cross-sector response to the pandemic, and it is likely not uniform in terms of who is leading the response. Does this matter?
- Where health disparities exist for COVID-19 health outcomes, can cross-sector alignment alleviate the causal factors?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the following for their commitment to quarterly interviews as part of the *Making Aligning Work* series.

Peter Eckart

Data Across Sectors for Health

Laura Gottlieb

Social Interventions Research and Evaluation Network

Mark Humowiecki and Kathleen Noonan

National Center for Complex Health and Social Needs

Jeff Levi

Funders Forum on Accountable Health

Glen Mays

Systems for Action

Bobby Milstein

Rethink Health

Melissa Monbouquette

BUILD Health Challenge

Alex Quinn

Health Leads