

MAKING ALIGNING WORK: NATIONAL EXPERTS REFLECT ON PURPOSE, DATA, FINANCING, AND GOVERNANCE

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Aligning Systems for Health: Health Care + Public Health + Social Services, sponsored 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 second brief focuses on themes around the core components of aligned systems identified in the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change — purpose, data, financing, and governance.



PURPOSE

How It Starts

Aligning examples cited in expert interviews point to several common external factors serving as initiators of alignment efforts, including overcoming a significant challenge (e.g., cost, efficiency, inequity, making a bigger difference or longer-term impact), a philosophical or historical value (e.g., service to a vulnerable population), external or internal nudge (e.g., funder, legislation), vision of a new leader, or sustainability concerns.

Supporting Alignment

Aligned systems use a shared purpose to reach across the boundaries of their existing organizations to do something bigger together. Experts report this shared purpose can trigger a new way of thinking rather than a transactional approach. This shared purpose, in turn, can become part of a bigger vision, although some examples caution the opposite, that what started with great intentionality actually became more organic and reactionary to environmental factors over time.

Lessons From Practice

- While aligning systems can achieve more than any one organization or sector can achieve individually, going too big in purpose can make it hard to achieve success.
- There is a tendency to focus on urgent services and vital conditions as opposed to true upstream conditions.
- Strong leaders and trusted partners are factors enabling successful alignment, but leadership change can mire progress.

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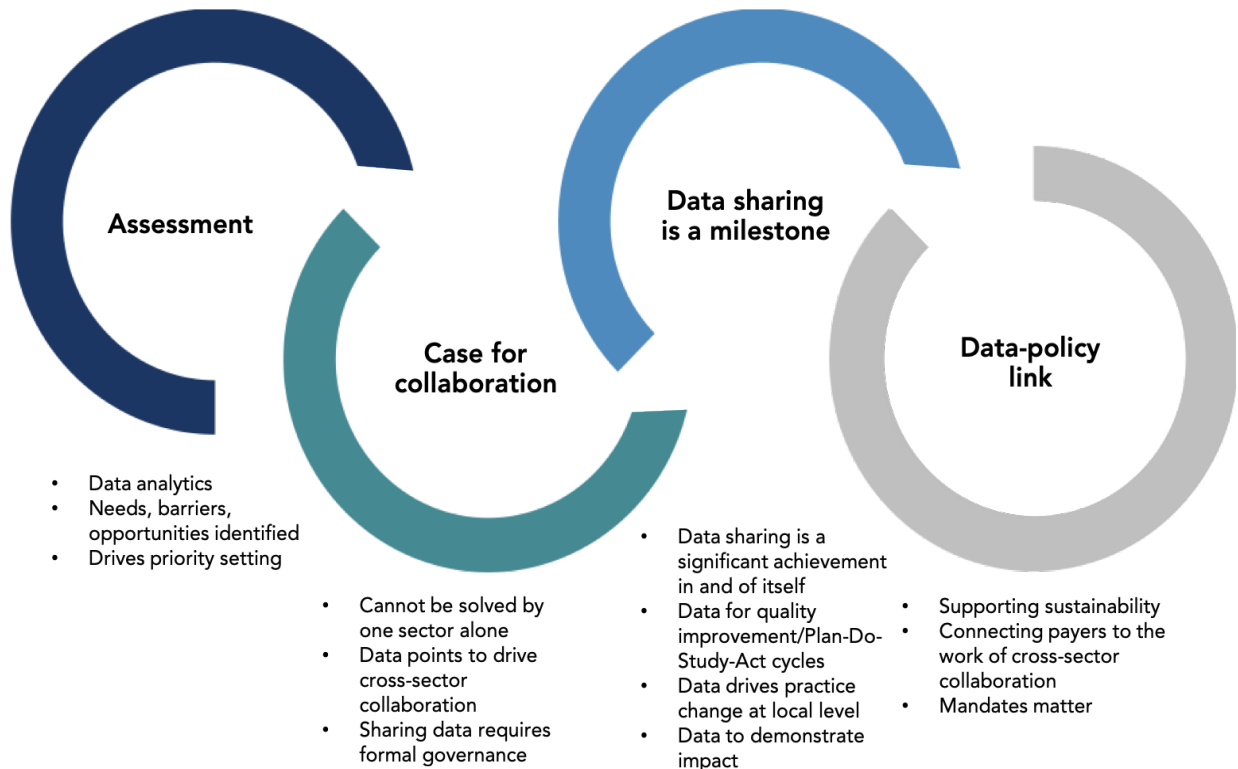


- Vision and purpose are not always fully shared when the partners are unequal in power, size, or resources. Further, a shared purpose is not the sum of each stakeholders' vision.
- Don't rush the process of obtaining buy-in if the goal is to build alignment that will last. Go at a pace the partnership will allow.



DATA AND MEASUREMENT

While data is a freestanding, core component of aligned systems, it is inextricably linked to other elements. Data is a driver of collaboration steering nearly all aspects of aligned systems, particularly purpose and governance.



Note: While data is used by successful collaboratives for all of these purposes, it is not necessarily a linear progression.

Interviews revealed patterns of how data is used:

- **Assessment** — Data helps identify and build understanding of needs and opportunities and can focus priority-setting.
- **Making the Case for Collaboration** — This shared understanding brings people together with data, making the case for collaboration but also driving the need for more formal governance to direct data-sharing among collaborative entities.
- **Data Sharing is a Milestone** — Data-sharing and shared measurement is a significant milestone of achievement for aligning systems, as it requires substantial time, capacity, and resources across organizations. Data informs quality improvement, Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles, and practice change at the local level. It also demonstrates impact, which can inform financing and sustainability planning.
- **Highlighting the Value Proposition** — Data provides a way to communicate progress and share learning with payers and policymakers regarding the process of aligning systems, which can inform policy decisions.

Lessons From Practice

Data-sharing is complex. The challenges, resources, and time required to implement data-sharing and adopt a shared measurement system should not be underestimated. Privacy concerns and organizational barriers pose the greatest real-life challenges, even among well-intentioned collaborative partners.

Interviewees suggest that top-down requirements and mandates may facilitate data-sharing, while trust among partners is required for implementation progress and ongoing use. This trust can be enabled by good stewardship practices and engaging with local sites and front-line staff early in the process and often to ensure data is accessible, relevant, and usable for all stakeholders.



FINANCING

To study how aligned systems approach sustainable financing, we applied a three-part framework of sources, uses, and structure. As might be expected, examples of sources of collaboratives' financing vary substantially (e.g., Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services demonstration programs, grants, service reimbursement, and taxes) as does its use. However, interviewed experts could not identify a single example of on-the-ground aligning efforts that achieved truly sustainable financing, nor could they cite examples where cross-sector partnerships were having meaningful conversations about the structures necessary to support sustainable financing. This could reflect the lack of maturity of examined aligning efforts.

Lessons From Practice

While also a freestanding component of aligned systems, financing is also significantly intertwined with data and governance. Additionally, financing is multifaceted and multidimensional. Even within a local or regional aligning effort, what is possible for one stakeholder may differ greatly from what is possible for another partner. Given this variance even within a local context and the seeming lack of maturity of collaboratives to advance discussion on sustainable financing, there are few local examples to draw specific, applicable learnings from, which may hamper transmission of learnings to emerging alignment efforts.

Based on years of experience working with collaboratives around the nation, the Georgia Health Policy Center and the interviewees believe that shared understanding and trust remain foundational elements necessary to address sustainable financing and stewardship. These foundational steps have been missing in a number of alignment projects.



GOVERNANCE

Several governance models were cited in the expert interviews.

- Multisector steering committees were the most common model cited.
- Charismatic leaders, while less of a formal structure, were often cited.
- Interviewees expressed disappointment that top-down governance shaped by a funder, legislation, or regulation had failed to create an all-play, inclusive structure where community voice is engaged at the table. Often, social service representatives, rather than those with lived experience, are present in governance groups. Community representatives tend to be used more in an advisory capacity rather than fully engaged in codesign.

Lessons From Practice

- One model may not be appropriate over time. As needs change and alignment matures, shifting governance structures may be beneficial.
- As urgency wains, governance may become more loose.

- There is importance in having a charismatic leader or somebody who knows how to work the system, but the downside of heavy reliance on a single personality is apparent during leadership transitions, which could stall the momentum.
- One clear structure that best facilitates decision-making across multiple sectors has yet to be identified.

INSIGHTS FOR ALIGNING

- While there are four independent components in the alignment theory of change, there is a complex entwining of these four core elements, particularly data, finance, and governance.
- There is a lack of collective knowledge and meaningful, on-the-ground conversation around sustainable financing and governance structures, which may be attributable to the current stage of maturation of such efforts.
- Variance in resources, organizational capacity, and governance among collaborative partners may slow alignment progress.
- There is a tension between authentic, organic, inclusive, ground-up development of collaborations that align across systems and the jump-start that comes from systemic policy change that creates incentives or conditions that accelerate alignment.
- Given the unique, local context for financing, infrastructure, and leadership, questions remain about the replicability of specific alignment efforts, and caution is urged about promoting or dictating a prespecified structure.
- Despite enthusiasm for cross-sector alignment, particularly on the part of funders, systematic investment in infrastructure support for alignment is lacking, and significant time and resources will be required to advance such efforts.

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