

MAKING ALIGNING WORK: NATIONAL EXPERTS REFLECT ON SYSTEMIC RACISM AND CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT

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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 themes emerging from initial conversations around how cross-sector alignment might address systemic racism.

A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

Given the rapidity with which systemic racism has become a part of the national public dialogue, individuals are in different states of readiness to discuss systemic racism and their roles at the individual, organizational, and system levels. These conversations are difficult and are further hampered by a lack of shared understanding and agreement around the nuances of language. Recognizing that both systemic and structural racism describe how racism is normalized as part of historical and ongoing policy and practice within society and organizations, we choose to use the term systemic racism as it acknowledges racism is present in all systems, including those that are the focus of Aligning Systems for Health.

SYSTEMS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCE THE CHALLENGE

There is acknowledgment among all 10 interviewees that systemic racism exists even in organizations and systems that are working hard to enhance community well-being. While sentiment among interviewees varies from hopeful — that there is currently a new opportunity to solve a longstanding problem — to frustration that developing a more inclusive process still may not translate to change — some common themes emerged.

Racism is present in processes, policies, and practices at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. There is some concern that a focus on structural manifestations of racism allows individuals to avoid self-examination, instead focusing on seemingly more distant institutions.

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Even the systems and organizations participating in local and regional cross-sector alignment efforts are not immune from these dynamics. All three sectors involved in Aligning Systems for Health — health care, public health, and social services — have vulnerabilities, as do other partnering sectors, like education, criminal justice, and housing.

Aligning Across Sectors May Help Address Systemic Racism: The process of aligning across sectors may help create pathways for different conversations, new perspectives, better listening, and a way to challenge the status quo. The Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change may be helpful in guiding this action, particularly in realigning investment in organizational capacity, governance, and thinking differently about community voice.

WHAT ABOUT SYSTEMIC RACISM MAKES CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT HARD?

Systemic racism may challenge efforts to develop trusting relationships across partners and to build the lasting structures needed to align across sectors and ultimately improve health equity. Trust is foundational to both building cross-sector alignment and addressing systemic racism.

There Is No Recipe: Where to start can be daunting. How do we prioritize — Which conversation? Which policy? Do we have the right people and pieces in place?

Real Change Takes Time: While sensitive organizations and funders push for language change, real, meaningful change takes time. Will the momentum be sustained beyond the current sense of urgency? Are the decision-makers listening? This also involves fundamental questions about leadership and trust.

Addressing Systemic Racism Is Emotionally Challenging: Addressing systemic racism is not something that can be compartmentalized as it touches all facets of life, not just work. Individuals are struggling to understand their role in the status quo and in the work ahead — Are they complicit or a change agent? Some individuals who understand this is the right thing to do currently feel as if they are “living in a state of perpetually walking on eggshells.”

No Single Organization or System Can Fix This: It has to be clear to everybody that change is needed, and people and organizations need the right language, skills, and tools to participate in these conversations. Yet, not all are at the same level of readiness to participate. Substantial trust and collaboration across sectors is needed to foster new conversations and new ways of thinking to challenge the status quo. Traditionally, the status quo has given certain groups disproportionate privilege and power. It is difficult to change a system or systems, and it may require shifts in baseline parity among partners before that next level of change can happen.

KEY MESSAGES

“Racism is present in processes, policies, and practices at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels.”

“This work is hard, but it has to be done.”

No single organization or system can fix this.

Aligning across sectors may help address systemic racism: The process of aligning across sectors may help create pathways for different conversations, new perspectives, better listening, and a way to challenge the status quo.

There is a tension between the social window that is opening and how long it takes to make real progress.

CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT MAY BE USEFUL TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC RACISM

Factors Affecting Urgency: There must be a balance between urgency and intentionality. The current feeling of chaos is not good for building long-term solutions. Sustainable and impactful solutions require accountability, intentionality, and follow-through. Yet, the pressure exists to take advantage of the existing window of opportunity. A balance is needed.

Factors Affecting Internal Capacity: Individual organizations who seek to play a role in dismantling systemic racism are starting within their own institutions. Interviewees reflect that workforce development, funding decision-making, data-sharing capacity, and a leadership assessment are good places to start.

Core Elements of Aligned Systems: The core elements of aligned systems are influenced by local context, yet there is a certain dynamism across the four elements. Interviewees acknowledge that amongst organizations working to establish these core areas, systemic racism can be addressed within each one:

- Shared purpose must be reflective of community voice and community-identified needs.
- Data is reflective of power and control, and a digital divide does exist across sectors.
- Resources are long recognized as a rate-limiting factor toward building aligned communities, but well-resourced organizations often are the ones with the capacity to perpetually win additional funding, further perpetuating power imbalances.
- Governance is often reflective of who currently holds power. Rebuilding aligned governance around true power sharing and as an accountability mechanism could be a positive example of how aligned systems can address systemic racism.

Factors Affecting Success: Softer elements, too, play a big role in developing aligned systems and in addressing systemic racism:

- Trust as an endpoint requires trustworthiness as a starting point. Where trust is longstanding, people and organizations may be able to delve deeper and quicker into these difficult conversations.
- Community engagement must be genuine — not merely a seat at the table, but a true partner with shared power. The additional challenge is that in the COVID-19 era there are competing priorities, including the meeting of basic economic and health needs.
- A strong, visible backbone organization is important to carry out this work.
- Having the right mindset is central to participating in challenging conversations, reflecting deeply, and re-envisioning communities. Fundamental to this mindset is recognizing that the experience of others counts.

RESOURCES SUGGESTED BY INTERVIEWEES

[A framework for community power building by the Neighborhood Funders Group](#)

[Building Equity and Community Accountability into Pandemic Response and Recovery by the Funders Forum on Accountable Health](#)

[Have nonprofit and philanthropy become the “white moderate” that Dr. King warned us about? By Vu Le](#)

[RWJF article on power building in communities](#)

[Public input is desired for a Johns Hopkins proposal for hospital contributions to community health and equity to be included in hospital rankings.](#)

[CEO Blueprint for Racial Equity by Ruha Benjamin](#)

[Race After Technology](#)

[Wendy Ellis speaks on structural racism and policy](#)

[Equity in the Center](#)

[The Groundwater Report provides base definitions](#)

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