

MAKING ALIGNING WORK:

REFLECTIONS ON 18 MONTHS OF ALIGNING ACROSS SECTORS

March 2021

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 initial intent of the *Making Aligning Work* series was to gather insights from national catalysts about different components of the Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change (now the [Framework for Aligning Across Sectors](#)). Given the triple crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic struggles, and the ongoing effects of systemic racism, conversations with the national catalysts evolved over the past 18 months. This brief captures reflections on the progress made in the field around aligning sectors, the implications of the triple crisis for aligning efforts, and considerations for the future of aligning across sectors.



REFLECTIONS OF THE PAST 18 MONTHS

Aligning across sectors is complex: Aligning across sectors is part of a larger story of systems change and learning how to work across difference — difference by sector, difference by race, and difference by place. Successfully aligning across sectors in a sustainable fashion takes a complex mix of partners who are willing to do their parts to work differently. But it is widely recognized that there is no recipe to follow. It is easy to recognize the needs of people and communities that should be addressed, but how to actually put that into practice and action and move aligning forward is the hard part. Aligning across sectors involves coordinated, adaptive stewardship in a dynamic environment. It is more complicated than the individual core components or adaptive factors would indicate.

The external environment matters: Externally, there is a rapidly evolving environment. The question shifts to how the sectors can jump-start aligning when all necessary components or capacities may not be optimally in place. Can communities scale aligning efforts to meet external circumstances — funding opportunities or emerging community needs — in a way that positions aligning as a built-to-last solution for restructuring in a post-COVID environment?

Relatedly, it is difficult to incent sectors to work together in fundamentally new ways with “just carrots.” A carrot-and-stick policy approach may be needed to make long-term investments in infrastructure and to reflect how important it is to bring these alignment efforts to fruition.

Organizations’ internal commitment is necessary: There are well-documented examples of how turnover of a leader or champion within an organization or project sets back collaborative efforts. Thus, it is critical to build internal organizational culture that fosters and values system change so that inevitable leadership change does not stall progress. The will of an individual or small group needs to become an organizational imperative. When this imperative is built in organizations across sectors, it fosters more widespread acknowledgement of shared goals, and organizations’ work will take on greater congruence, naturally enabling aligning.

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Need can drive aligning across sectors: The saying goes that necessity is the mother of invention. While needs of some communities have been overlooked for generations, the COVID-19 pandemic shined a not-to-be missed spotlight on local needs. Emerging needs, resulting from the pandemic itself, related economic challenges, and the long-festering implications of systemic racism, forced a response. Collaborations emerged out of necessity. What remains to be seen is whether the work can grow and new partners can find innovative ways to sustain collaborative efforts for the long term.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ALIGNING

Collaborative efforts are increasing: Catalysts report a proliferation of collaboratives over the past year, which are viewed as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and its downstream impact. Yet the policy environment did not keep pace with the need for change, creating a situation where aligning efforts are responding to their broader environment but potentially do not have all of the necessary conditions in place to thrive for the long term.

Profound distrust of institutions exists: There is widespread distrust for almost any system right now. The ability of public health agencies and collaboratives to respond to and rebuild from the pandemic is hampered by the public's lack of trust. Aligning Systems for Health recognizes that the voices of community have to be at the forefront of efforts to shift power and align across sectors, but there are real practical questions about how to develop a common language to promote engagement and center transparency and equity in all processes, like data sharing.



Is this a real opportunity for systems change? While the pandemic itself was a once-in-a-century event, it was not itself an isolated event and in fact served as an amplifier for generations of inequities. There is a real tension between loss and the prospect of renewal. The pandemic's disruption of day-to-day life is seen by some as an opportunity to make needed organizational, cultural, and systems change. There is a sense the pandemic can serve as a needed wake-up call leading to appreciation of population health and socioeconomic drivers of health, but it also served to magnify political division in the nation and the feeling that opportunity is not uniformly shared. It remains to be seen if this is a crisis response or a time of renewal and recognition of interdependence.

How will public health emerge? According to the panel, the consequences of decades of underinvestment in public health infrastructure became apparent during the pandemic. Now, the federal government is investing \$7.6 billion to rebuild and modernize public health capacity. Does this investment provide an opportunity for the public health sector to emerge from the pandemic as a potential leader of cross-sector alignment efforts? Possibly. But catalysts also express concern that public health missed an opportunity to demonstrate its true value, as there was often tension between public health officials and elected policymakers. Frustrated, underappreciated, and overworked in the yearlong pandemic, local public health staff are departing.

OBSERVED CHANGES OVER THE LAST YEAR

Funding aligning efforts remains complicated: Developing sustainable financing for aligning has been a challenge both before and during the pandemic. The pandemic created enhanced funding opportunities, especially for public health, that many communities were able to take advantage of. The immediacy of the challenge in many cases necessitated collaboration, but whether these partnerships are built to last and the pitch for cross-sector investment is perceived as valuable remains uncertain.

Multisector collaboratives are embracing bigger goals: Many examples of multisector collaboration still target only a specific population (e.g., early childhood). Catalysts report that in the last few years, leaders of efforts to align sectors are recognizing how to have a larger population-level impact, beyond just, for example, hospital readmissions. More initiatives are being designed to address outcomes not at the individual level, but really at the community level.

Sustaining the urgency created by a crisis: The pandemic created the opportunity for rapidly developed partnerships between the public and private sectors, as well as between nonprofit organizations and government. How can these collaborations be sustained after an emergency response? Will these efforts be sustainable? Will the influx of COVID-related money really change how sectors work together for the long term? The recently passed relief bill will further bring large amounts of money into communities for mental health, public health, and food. The challenge is to deploy the resources in a way that meets urgent needs and also increases capacity for aligning across sectors.

WHAT'S NEXT

Since fall 2020, the Aligning Systems for Health team has focused its resources on beginning to support the field of cross-sector alignment with ways to measure the things that matter to aligning. The goal of the work is to provide the field with tools to measure the concepts within the Framework for Aligning Sectors (for example, measures of shared governance, community voice) as well as how to think about measuring aligning's impact.

The conversations with catalyst organizations over the past 18 months have been incredibly insightful to the development of learning around cross-sector alignment. The team continues to pursue ways to keep this panel engaged in the learning. At the same time, the team is exploring ways to bring community voices into the broader learning around aligning sectors so that learning is enhanced by the input of those who will ultimately benefit from system change.

Previous Insights From the *Making Aligning Work* Series

Context and outcomes: There is a tension between authentic development of collaborations that align across sectors and the jump start that comes from systemic policy change that might create incentives or conditions that accelerate aligning (e.g., systemic investment in the infrastructure to support it).

Core components: The four core components of aligning (shared purpose, data, financing, and governance) that were highlighted in the original Cross-Sector Alignment Theory of Change are actually present in successful aligning initiatives. There is a lack of collective knowledge and conversation around sustainable financing and governance structures to support aligning across sectors.

Adaptive factors: To support aligning across sectors for the long term, there is growing recognition of adaptive factors (trust, community voice, equity, and power dynamics) that help to sustain partnerships. The interdependence of the core components and adaptive factors is complex and multifaceted.

The impact of COVID-19: The biggest question at the outset of the pandemic for Aligning Systems for Health was the desire for evidence for or against the hypothesis that having the components of cross-sector alignment in place would improve readiness for, response to, and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Systemic racism exists: Even in organizations and systems that are working hard to enhance community well-being, inequities exist. Aligning across sectors may help create pathways for different conversations, new perspectives, better listening, and ways to challenge the status quo. The effects of systemic racism can be addressed within each of the core components and adaptive factors associated with aligning.

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