

Aligning Partnerships Across Sectors

By working across sectors to advance health equity and population health, partners like public health, healthcare, social services, and community organizations, among others, can systematically build stronger, sustainable connections and systems that can more effectively address the needs of communities. Often, cross-sector collaborative efforts are temporary due to funding constraints or block funding, lack of incentives, and structures that do not lend themselves to more permanent relationships. By implementing systems alignment strategies, collaboratives work towards sustainability and ensure joint efforts are built to last and offer greater impact.

This topical brief highlights sector alignment work of the [Cross-sector Innovation Initiative](#) (CSII), a three-year endeavor to identify and support public health, healthcare, social services, and community organizations striving to build stronger, sustainable connections and systems that can more effectively address the needs of communities and ultimately improve health equity. The brief focuses on work from the CSII grantees' first year (2020), as they strive to align systems for future sustainability.

Key Points:

- Successful examples of systems alignment efforts among collaborative sectors include a shared purpose, data, governance, and financing.
- Public health departments play a vital role in cross-sector collaboration, especially during times of crisis.
- Healthcare, social services, and community partners, among others, also contribute important expertise and support to collaboratives.
- Systems alignment takes effort to make sustainable progress toward improving health and well-being in communities.

This topical brief is the second of a four-part series on Building Sustainable Collaborations. Select a link to see the other briefs in the series: [Addressing Health Equity and Population Health](#), [Community and Partner Engagement](#), and [Solving Complex Problems through Innovation](#).

Aligning Systems

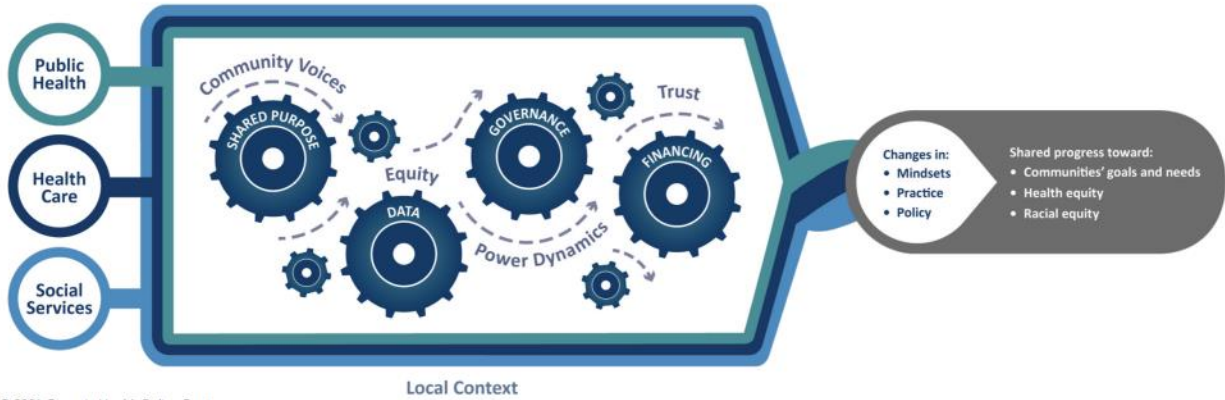
By aligning systems, partnerships can improve how they operate internally and with each other, as well as make sustainable progress toward disproportionately affected populations most at risk of inequities.

Core components of systems alignment (Figure 1) include:

- **Shared purpose.** Honor community voices, strengthen trust, and examine and shift power to share a purpose and a set of priority outcomes.
- **Data.** Create and use a shared data and measurement system.
- **Governance.** Develop a strong governance infrastructure with leadership, appropriate roles, and defined relationships based on community goals and needs.
- **Financing.** Establish sustainable financing with incentives and accountability.

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Figure 1. [A Framework for Aligning Sectors](#)



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Source: Georgia Health Policy Center. (2021). Developing the framework for aligning sectors. Retrieved from <https://ghpc.gsu.edu/developing-the-framework-for-aligning-sectors/>. Used by permission, Georgia Health Policy Center, Georgia State University.

CSII grantees reported progress on and outcomes related to each core component of the Framework for Aligning Sectors, as well as facilitators, barriers, and strategies used to address challenges (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Sector Alignment Work of CSII Grantees

Shared Purpose		
Progress and Outcomes	Facilitators	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developed mission, vision, and values as a collaborative - Strengthened existing partnerships around priorities - Adjusted activities due to increased focus on COVID-19 response and health/racial equity - Enhanced recognition of collaboratives as legitimate leaders in their communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New partners joining collaboratives - Additional funding sources with specific metrics identified - Utilizing the Theory of Change framework as a guide - Partner commitment and engagement to accomplish goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of data that supports activities around priorities - Lack of team, personnel, resources, and leadership engagement - Decisions being made unilaterally instead of as a collaborative - Rise in COVID-19 cases impacts momentum of progress - Virtual environments

Data		
Progress and Outcomes	Facilitators	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finalized performance measures and data measurement plans - Developed and enhanced community data platforms - Collected data from key stakeholders - Analyzed necessary assessment data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Data-focused interns - Technical imagination and creativity - Partner engagement and enthusiasm - Data and legal expertise available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of evaluation expertise - Competing priorities and pandemic response among data staff - HIPAA regulations, different platforms, and inconsistencies in how data are collected - No formal mechanism to measure improved outcomes

Cross-sector Innovation Initiative

Building Sustainable Collaborations Topical Brief Series

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Governance		
Progress and Outcomes	Facilitators	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Built trusting relationships with communities - Relied on established governance charter - Centered on collective decision-making processes - Attended formal community development trainings - Put community voices before organizational preferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ongoing engagement from organizational and community leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of an actual governance system in place - Community response delays - Issues integrating community members into collaboratives - Remote participation

Financing		
Progress and Outcomes	Facilitators	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finalized value proposition with collaborative support - Allocated funding through participatory budgeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contracting departments streamlining processes - Increased funding commitment from partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contracting procedures and rules slow down releasing funds to community members

Role of Public Health Departments in Cross-Sector Collaboration

Public health departments play a vital role in cross-sector collaboration, whether by convening sector partners, leading and informing strategies, providing capacity and organizing support, actively facilitating and participating in discussions, or acting as the fiduciary and managing agent for funding opportunities. For some CSII grantees, health departments lead activities around organizing and facilitating collaborative meetings, tracking work plan changes, contributing to shifts in focus due to current events, and managing administrative tasks associated with maintaining grant contract agreements. By working across sectors to advance population health and equity, health departments are a valuable partner in systems alignment efforts, and these CSII partnerships provide useful models that underscore the challenges and opportunities that health departments face as they work with healthcare, social services, and community organizations to improve population health, well-being, and equity for all.

Public health leaders have provided knowledge, expertise, and resources to collaboratives, as well as raised urgent needs and solicited collaborative solutions from partners. Examples include providing an overall knowledge of public health; specific expertise about chronic diseases, COVID-19 epidemiology, and equity-based response; detailed strategies related to systems and multi-sector activities; and experience with policy. Additionally, public health partners have linked alignment efforts with the evolving intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and national reckoning with racial justice (including leading activities addressing racism as a public health issue). They have also led evaluation efforts and documented final evaluation outcomes.

Role of Other Sectors in Cross-Sector Collaboration

While the goal of the CSII is to support, promote, and disseminate learning about the role of governmental public health departments in aligning efforts, it is important to note the contributions that other sectors and partners have made to CSII collaborations:

- Healthcare partners have contributed to COVID-19 vaccine dissemination and outreach activities; assisted with community engagement efforts; led data sharing, collection, and

analysis; participated in community health assessment processes; and championed equity initiatives.

- Social services partners have provided necessary legal and policy expertise; connected vulnerable populations and community-based organizations with sector partners; supplied resources to communities; helped partners understand social drivers that affect health; and kept the pulse on community needs to enhance engagement.
- Community partners have shared lived experiences to inform activities and address urgent needs of communities; connected residents with appropriate sector partners; and lifted community voices within collaboratives.
- Other sectors have contributed as well. Interfaith organizations have created linkages among communities of faith and spirituality to collaborative partners, and city officials have provided city grant funding to support improvements to outdoor recreation spaces and parks in targeted neighborhoods.

Conclusion

The CSII grantees have accomplished a great deal as they have worked within their collaboratives toward systems alignment. They have used data to create a shared vision and associated outcomes; reviewed and modified priority outcomes; and developed plans for data gathering, sharing, and use. Additionally, CSII grantees have implemented and adjusted collaborative governance structures and procedures to integrate community voice and participation; created long-term sustainability and restructuring plans; and operationalized and advanced appropriate funding models to reflect the collaborative's vision.

Systems alignment takes effort. Public health, healthcare, social services, and community organizations must have the capacity and urgency to improve how they work within their organizations, together, and with community members. By working toward a set of shared priorities based on community goals and needs, and by working to align data, governance, and financing within their partnerships, cross-sector collaboratives will make sustainable progress toward improving health and well-being in their communities.

Cross-sector Innovation Initiative

The [Center for Sharing Public Health Services](#) (CSPHS) and the [Public Health National Center for Innovations](#) (PHNCI) are co-leading the [Cross-sector Innovation Initiative](#) (CSII), which is comprised of [ten cross-sector projects](#) working toward specific population health goals through systems alignment efforts. To learn more about this initiative, visit www.phnci.org/cross-sector/csii.