

## Cross-sector Innovation Initiative

### Conducting Equity<sup>1</sup> Assessments

An important place for organizations to begin in their work to address racial inequities and health disparities is to focus on ensuring that their policies and practices are designed to advance equity. The same is true for cross-sector collaboratives dedicated to advancing equity; they, too, must look “inside” and determine whether the requisite knowledge, skills, policies, and practices for success in this area are present. This is where health equity assessments come in. Equity assessment tools are designed to identify factors for success and provide a baseline for developing strategies to make needed improvements.

Advancing health equity is at the heart of the [Cross-Sector Innovation Initiative](#) (CSII), and its ten grantees are undertaking various initiatives to align public health, healthcare, social services, and community organization efforts to improve population health outcomes by advancing health equity. This blog is based on the experiences of three grantees that have conducted equity self-assessments: Cuyahoga County through Case Western Reserve University and the Cuyahoga County Board of Health (OH), the Chatham County Public Health Department (NC), and the Health Improvement Collaborative of Southeastern Connecticut through Ledge Light Health District (CT). Additionally, the Spokane Collaborative through Better Health Together (WA) along with Cuyahoga County shared their experiences using tools to assess how their collaborative is functioning or conducted a social network analysis to understand connectivity. These assessments bolster equity efforts by assessing effectiveness of the collaborative.

### Building Trust & Selecting a Tool

Collaboratives are ready to embark on equity assessments only after a foundational level of trust has been established among the partners. Trust is essential to engaging in candid discussions about what type of assessment tool to use, what the results reflect, and how best to move forward. If you do not have authentic trust in your collaborative, begin by developing and implementing a plan to build it. Building trust does not happen quickly and must be a genuine and authentic effort. While trust strengthening is an ongoing process, it also takes time to initially build authentic relationships – one grantee noted it took a couple of years for this to occur.

Once there is a foundational level of trust, it is time to select a tool. Key questions to guide partners in identifying the best tool for their purposes include the following:

- **What are our goals?** For example:
  - Understanding the readiness of individuals to address equity.
  - Understanding the readiness of each collaborative partner’s organization.
  - Understanding the readiness of the collaborative as a whole.
  - Are we trying to create a baseline of knowledge, or perspectives or programmatic understanding? This may help dictate the type of assessment used (e.g., pre-test or self-assessment; mapping collaboration).
- **How will we use the results?** For example:
  - A single organization may wish to assess its policies and practices and thus use the results to spur needed changes in its operations.
  - On the other hand, a collaborative may wish to assess the members’ knowledge and skills and use an assessment as a “pre-test” for educational efforts.
  - Providing assurances to participants about how the results will not be used can also be important. Agreements to not share data that is specific to a person or organization can help people feel safe in honestly completing assessments or pretests.

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<sup>1</sup> **Equity assessment** is meant to encompass tools that address health equity and/or racial equity. **Health Equity** means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their optimal health regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. Advancing health equity is a process of addressing limited access to economic resources, education, housing, etc. When focusing specifically on racial equity in health, advancing health equity means dismantling the systemic racism that underlies differences in the opportunity to be healthy.

- **What is the assessment process?** For example:
  - Some assessments are designed to be administered in person (e.g., in focus groups) and others are completed via a survey.
  - An assessment may be administered once (point-in-time) or recurring to track change over time. Select a cadence appropriate to the goals and how results will be used.
  - Providing process guidance to people using the assessment is strongly recommended. For example, should a person complete the assessment on their own or with a group?
  - Consider if an external facilitator for the assessment may support increased participation and completion.
- **What perspectives will be represented?** For example:
  - It is useful to have multiple people in large organizations complete the assessment or pretest. Often there are different perspectives about the existence of and effectiveness of equity strategies. Capturing and acknowledging these viewpoints supports organizations in making authentic progress.
  - Ask community members to complete the assessment (and should be engaged in co-creating solutions and implementation) as those who are directly impacted by the work the collaborative is hoping to impact.
  - Recognize that specific questions may need to be tailored depending upon the respondents, e.g., senior leadership, front line staff, etc.

Some resources for self-assessments are below and can readily be adapted, if needed, to meet your specific needs. You may even decide to develop your own tool to meet the specific needs of your collaborative.

Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative – [Organizational Self-Assessment for Addressing Health Inequities Toolkit](#)

City of Hamilton – [Achieving the Vision of an Inclusive Peel Region: A Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Organizational Self-Assessment Tool](#)

Chatham County Public Health Department – [EMBRACe Organizational Equity Assessment](#)

Coalition of Communities of Color – [Tool for Organizational Self-Assessment Related to Racial Equity](#)

Lambton Public Health – [Building Organizational Capacity for Health Equity Action: A Framework and Assessment Tool for Public Health](#)

Nathan S. Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research Center for the Study of Issues in Public Mental Health – [Cultural Competency Assessment Scale](#)

Portland State University – [Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Questionnaire](#)

Barbour, I. (2020). *Health Equity Pretest for the Health Improvement Collaborative of Southeast Connecticut*. Available by request from [isabelle@isabellebarbour.com](mailto:isabelle@isabellebarbour.com).

In addition to equity-focused self-assessments, other tools, like the [Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory](#) or the [Collaborative Trust Scale](#), can support reflection and improvement efforts for cross-sector collaborations. This can be an important tool to enhance how the collaborative works together to advance equity. Finally, regardless of the tool used, consider how to elicit both understanding across topics (close-ended questions) and comments and feedback through open-ended questions.

## Planning and Implementing the Assessment and Sharing Results

As with any group effort, it is important for a member of the collaborative to serve as the lead. The lead is responsible for leading discussions about the plan to conduct the assessment and ensuring that the plans for conducting the assessment stay on track, results are analyzed, and strategies are developed to address the results.

In addition, collaboratives should come to consensus around who will complete the assessment and understand what level of engagement is needed to meet goals. It could be each member in the collaborative responds for themselves; one individual answers on behalf of the partner organization; or multiple people in each organization participate in the assessment. If each individual in the collaborative will complete the assessment, consider dedicating time at a collaborative meeting to do this.

Before the assessment is launched, decide who will be responsible for analysis, how aggregate and disaggregate results will be shared, and consider what additional steps may be needed to meet your goals for the assessment. When the results are shared, take care to avoid spotlighting a single organization's responses. Creating space during collaborative meetings to discuss results and elaborate on various responses will help ensure that everyone understands the context. These discussions also are an opportunity to further build rapport and trust among collaborative members.

## Taking Action

Once the assessment has been administered, it is time for the collaborative to co-create actionable strategies that address the results. Examples of next steps include the following:

- Host focus groups with staff in each organization to share the results and discuss recommendations.
- Have one-to-one conversations with collaborative members to determine if progress is being made and to problem-solve any challenges.
- Revisit frameworks and workplans to reflect the new learnings and findings.
- Apply findings and recommendations to organizational and/or collaborative policies, practices, programs.
- Plan to use equity assessments as a mechanism to institutionalize accountability towards equity. This can be accomplished by monitoring the implementation of the improvement plan and repeating the assessment at regular intervals to track changes and make refinements, if needed, to advance equity.
- Discuss how to ensure that the work of the collaborative will be sustained. The assessment process is likely to generate a great deal of momentum, and this can be leveraged to develop sustainability plans.
- Have resources and technical assistance ready and available to organizations as they plan/implement next steps.

Has your organization implemented an equity assessment? Interested in using some of the tools or strategies outlined above? We would love to hear from you! Please email [info@phnci.org](mailto:info@phnci.org).

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## Cross-sector Innovation Initiative Overview

With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Center for Sharing Public Health Services and the Public Health National Center for Innovations are co-leading the Cross-sector Innovation Initiative, a joint effort that aims to understand and support innovative multi-sector partnerships between public health, healthcare, and social services that ultimately transform practice towards working in alignment to improve population health, wellbeing, and equity for all.