

CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION: A HOLISTIC CARE APPROACH

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Why Cross-System Collaboration?

States are challenged with building high quality, cost-effective health care systems to meet the growing needs of individuals amidst an environment of limited funding and resources. As reflected by national health care reform and integration initiatives, states are rapidly recognizing the importance of bridging organizational boundaries to create a more holistic approach to care.

Individuals with complex health care conditions and significant social service support needs are frequently served by multiple, fragmented systems leading to gaps in care, member disengagement, duplication of resources and utilization of more costly services. Additionally, the health care industry is becoming increasingly aware of the role of social determinants on health outcomes and the cost of care. Accordingly, models of care are being expanded to include less traditional agencies and systems that directly impact social determinants, such as criminal justice, child welfare, tribal government authorities, housing authorities and educational/vocational supports.

Partnering across systems and stakeholders expands the available “pool” of resources and allows states to build more cost efficient, unified, highly coordinated systems of care that optimize health outcomes.

National Guidance for Preparing States

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration have led initiatives that can be used by states as a guide to address the issues presented above and build or enhance their cross-system collaboration. One example released in January 2013, *Facilitating Cross-System Collaboration: A Primer on Child Welfare, Alcohol and Other Drug Services, and Courts* (The Primer), outlines an approach that can be applied in any state.

The Primer recommends taking time to understand each entity’s framework (history, mission and goals); target population(s); supporting legislation and funding (local and federal); and structure and organization of services offered (key staff, administration authority and contracted network). This is provided to establish a foundation for achieving their collective and respective goals, leverage their unique expertise and develop the mechanisms for successful coordination.

Action to Achieve Cross-System Collaboration

Cross-system collaboration requires significant dedication and effort from the agencies involved. The following four phases describe key activities necessary to facilitate successful cross-system collaboration, while the diagram visually reflects that this is a fluid improvement cycle designed to support the evolving needs of the population.



Commitment and Planning establishes the structure for the work and the collaboration. A lead agency should be identified for the function of project management to drive the initiative forward. The focus in this phase is to: 1) develop shared goals, guiding principles and objectives; 2) assess current cross-system strengths and needs; 3) Identify strategies and incentives to address barriers and achieve goals; 4) establish respective roles and responsibilities; 5) establish key milestones and monitoring measures; and, 6) establish formal written agreements.

Execution focuses on preparing the system for collaboration. All organizations play a role in this phase. Each entity will: 1) learn and teach about their respective knowledge and systems; 2) modify and streamline processes and workflows; and, 3) update and streamline reporting requirements and monitoring systems.

Evaluation is important to ensure the collaboration is operationalized as envisioned. In this phase, the collaborative will: 1) monitor to ensure key milestones are met; 2) routinely analyze the data and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies; and 3) review other information sources to identify strengths and barriers associated with cross-system collaboration strategies. Based on the results, the collaborative will make adjustments and changes as outlined in the final phase.

Adjust uses the information gleaned from the evaluation to amend or modify strategies and incentives to support continuous improvement. The collaborative should set an expected frequency for the improvement cycle, as well as triggers that would warrant an ad-hoc initiation of the phases.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development and sustainability of cross-system collaboration require time, willingness to understand the similarities and differences across involved entities, investment in shared resources, ongoing evaluation (plan, do, check, adjust) and a targeted focus on achieving a cost-effective and high quality system of care. As a result of designing a coordinated, holistic healthcare approach for individuals with complex needs, states can offer and manage a broader array of services in a more cost-effective manner. Ultimately, this leads to positive health outcomes for individuals to successfully function within the communities in which they live, work, learn and play.