

### **Public Health and Hospitals: Lessons Learned from Partnerships in a Changing Health Care Environment**

#### **Take Away Points**

The success of community health partnerships depends on the extent to which they incorporate certain characteristics, including:

- Vision, mission, and goals that key constituencies understand and strongly support
- High level of trust among the partners
- Highly qualified and dedicated leadership
- Solid metrics for measuring performance
- Strong commitment to continuous evaluation and improvement.

#### **The Issue**

Recent changes in health policy, such as passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), increase focus and efforts on improving current or establishing new community health partnerships to better integrate public health and patient care—emphasizing population health. However, establishing and maintaining any type of partnership model can be inherently difficult. Little research provides guidance on how to develop and sustain truly effective collaborations between hospitals (and their parent systems) and community or public health constituents and resources.

#### Source

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#### **Study Methods and Design**

Researchers first undertook a thorough review of the literature and identified eight fundamental characteristics of successful partnerships.

- 1) Vision, Mission, And Values
- 2) Partners
- 3) Goals and Objectives
- 4) Organizational Structure
- 5) Leadership
- 6) Partnership Operations
- 7) Program Success and Sustainability
- 8) Performance Evaluation and Improvement

The researchers then sought standing collaborative partnerships that met the following inclusion criteria: 1) at least two year duration, 2) hospital and public health department membership, and 3) focused on improving community health. With the help of major hospital, medical, and public health associations such as the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, the American Hospital Association, and the National Association of City and County Health Officials, partnerships that met the above criteria were invited to participate in the study via an electronic nomination form. The study team collected 157 partnership nominations for study participation, and then evaluated them against the eight fundamental characteristics of successful collaborations and selected twelve sites across eleven

states regarded as the most successful and diverse for two-day intensive site visits. Site visits were conducted between April and June 2014. During the visit, researchers examined the partnerships' creation, membership and organization, mission, goals, and objectives, funding support, and metrics for performance monitoring.

### Key Findings and Limitations

- The partnerships studied all involved leadership by a public health department or a hospital (health system) or both, along with other community-based service providers, city and county government units, school systems, and other educational institutions. Kaiser Foundation Hospitals and Health Plan was the only partnership in which a health plan had a leadership role.
- Three types of conditions spurred leadership action to start coalitions: (1) charismatic leader, (2) health crisis that came to the attention of the community, and (3) leadership ability to obtain grant-funding that incentivized collaborative initiatives to address documented community health issues.
- A long-standing relationship and trust among major players in partnerships was key to success.
- Although leadership was essential to establishing the partnerships, sustainability occurred with a servant-leader approach where leaders shared power and put the needs of others first.
- Successful partnerships were found to include a clear mission statement focusing on improving the health of the community, with an ongoing review of the mission statement.
- Partnerships tended to be financially unstable due to a lack of long-term resource commitment.
- Partnerships often lacked recognition in their larger local communities and more could be done to raise visibility.
- To enable objective, evidence-based evaluation of a partnership's progress in achieving its mission and to fulfill its accountability to key stakeholders, partnership leaders must specify the community health measures they want to address, the particular objectives and targets they intend to achieve, and the metrics and tools they will use to track and measure progress.
- **Limitations:** The study investigators defined the core characteristics of successful partnerships and used those criteria to determine which collaborations were successful and should be included in the study. However, other criteria for success may also apply in this setting. Second, the study included a limited number of successful partnerships. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to the many other partnerships around the country, both formal and informal, involving hospitals and public health departments.

*“Although many major businesses supported their staff involvement in partnerships, the businesses themselves were not principal partners, which was surprising because businesses stand to benefit from improved community health and reduced sick time.”*

### Final Thoughts

- Successful community health partnerships should include broad membership (hospitals, public health agencies, government entities, school systems, etc.) to address patient care and social determinants of health. There are inherent challenges in establishing and maintaining such large collaborations, however, at the foundation of all successful partnerships in this investigation was a trusting, long-standing relationship between the major partners.
- The full report of this study, including eight core characteristics of successful partnerships and eleven evidence-based recommendations to guide efforts toward building successful community partnerships is available at:  
[http://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=hsm\\_book](http://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=hsm_book)