RPG Regional Partnership Grants

Technical Assistance Briefs: A Three-Part Series

Practice-Level Strategies to Create Systems-Level Change: Relationships

Regional Partnership Grants act as a catalyst for systems change. This three-part series covers key elements of sustaining change: relationships, resources, and results. *Relationships formed across systems are crucial to securing the required resources to achieve better results.* Achieving and sustaining change that improves outcomes for families requires a combination of these three elements and an understanding of how they intersect.

> Systems change is a permanent shift in doing business that relies on **relationships** across systems—and within the community—to secure needed **resources** to achieve better **results** for all children, parents, family members, and the family as a whole.

This brief:

▶ Discusses the importance of relationships as an essential component of sustaining systems-level change

▶ Highlights the elements of successful partnerships and cross-systems collaboration

▶ Offers implementation strategies and considerations—such as shared mission and goals, information sharing, and clarifying roles and responsibilities—necessary to create systems change

▶ Provides examples of RPG lessons and strategies for strengthening partnerships and cross-systems collaboration to improve outcomes for children, parents, and their families

Relationships
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Resources
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Results

Introduction and Overview

Meeting the needs of children, parents, and their families affected by substance use disorders (SUDs) and involved with the child welfare system is difficult work; no single system is equipped to solve the multiple challenges families face. Strong and effective collaboration among child welfare, substance use and mental health disorder treatment, courts, and other systems is necessary to deliver needed services and supports to children, parents, and family members; increase parental skill development; and improve family functioning outcomes.

While examples of bringing systems together to develop joint policies and procedures do exist, they often serve only a fraction of the intended population. Growing these projects to scale and sustaining them require a deeper level of collaboration that fundamentally changes how systems work together and share resources.

Elements of Effective Relationships Needed for Systems Change

This is Bigger Than Any Of Us

It's a common refrain among professionals. Why? Relationships keep collaboratives working together effectively. Children's, parents', and family members' needs remain incredible varied, and providing help in an individualized and responsive manner is crucial. Identifying the right people and agencies serves as an essential first step to building an effective and sustainable program. The collaborative can identify partners that include individuals, agencies, and organizations that are representative of the population of focus and can assist in meeting their needs. Typical partners for RPGs and similar initiatives are state and local child welfare agencies, substance use and mental health disorder treatment providers, the courts, children's developmental services providers, health care providers, and community leaders. Other partners, such as schools, early childhood programs, housing agencies, or community-based organizations may join depending on the population of focus and services offered. Staff can determine who should be "at the table" at the start of the project and routinely revisit over time. An effective sustainability plan starts when the planning phase for any project begins.

Collaboration is a process with multiple stages. While these various systems may have previously worked together by sharing information and even formalizing their relationships through memoranda of understanding, more is needed to strengthen the partnership and achieve sustainable systemic change. Ongoing cross-training and staff development opportunities across systems can help. These occur at all levels—from agency directors to management and supervisors to frontline staff—enabling partners to develop a deeper, shared understanding of each system's mission, policies and procedures, and desired outcomes, as well as potential barriers to collaboration.

Variety of Perspectives

Supporting comprehensive, family-centered services requires a collaborative group to look beyond the primary systems involved (child welfare, substance use and mental health disorder treatment, and courts in some instances) and identify who is missing. Based largely on the service needs of the intended population, this process will necessitate the development of new partnerships with other community agencies and providers. For example, this could mean adding partners from public health, maternal and child health, housing, and transportation, as well as community leaders.

Identifying missing partners is not exclusive to engaging with new agencies. Consider who is not participating from existing agencies. Having cross-cutting agency involvement from the director level to frontline staff is vital to success and sustainability. Agency directors and administrators provide the top-down commitment and investment necessary to collaborate initially, while also bringing an ongoing focus on sustainability. Managers, supervisors, and frontline staff are responsible for implementing policies and procedures, so their involvement is especially important to achieve the collaborative's goals and objectives.

Trust Across Sectors

Trust is central to the therapeutic relationship clinicians develop with their clients. It is also a necessary ingredient that holds multi-systemic partnerships and collaboratives together. Developing trust across the involved organizations requires time and a

commitment at all levels. Staff are encouraged to recognize the importance of participating in a collaborative effort to improve outcomes for children, parents, family members, and families as a whole.

A lack of trust can lead to group members blocking collective progress; therefore, establishing clear expectations and processes for resolving disputes are crucial. Even when systems have historically worked together, cultivating and supporting a trusting relationship can be difficult due to confusion or conflict related to goals, competing priorities, staff turnover, and other contextual factors outside their control.

For example, consider if and how shifting to virtual meetings has affected professional relationships. It is critical that collaboratives pay constant attention to their partnerships over time to maintain and sustain them. This could mean developing an onboarding protocol for new members of the collaborative, revisiting and examining shared values, and assessing the capacity to continue the collaborative work.

Shared Goals, Data, and Priorities

Strong relationships are defined in part by having shared goals that help avoid duplication of services; they can also reduce costs by realigning existing resources to better meet the needs of children, parents, and family members. Successful regional partnerships and other similar collaboratives have cooperative working relationships to effectively track families' involvement across systems and monitor the partnership's progress. This means routinely examining current practices to ensure they are supporting the shared goals and outcome data for children, parents, and families related to the larger system, and revisiting definitions of progress and success when new partners join the collaborative.

Sharing data between systems is another way to measure the strength of collaboration; however, it can be challenging for many reasons. Common barriers to sharing data between systems include the fear of appearing ineffective to peers and the public, having the data used against the organization, and limitations created by confidentiality laws and mandates. Collaboratives that take time to build relationships among members can move away from issues of institutional mistrust, and toward those that sustain shared goals and priorities focusing on improved outcomes for children, parents, and families.

Lessons from the Field

One Round 4 recipient created a formal communication structure that begins with a trip to meet with partners individually; it includes regular regional partner meetings where each partner gets a chance to share information about their agency so others can learn more.

Time, Patience, and Effort

Professional collaborative relationships require patience, time, and work to develop, maintain, sustain, and grow. That's why they often focus on the day-to-day operations of the program while losing sight of the bigger picture. Caseload size, staff turnover, and budget cuts can place increased demands on an agency's time and attention. These tend to pull the collaborative away from its shared goals, and instead lead team members to focus on managing other issues. Partners can consistently engage each other to reconfirm commitments to the shared mission and goals of the collaborative.

Strategies and Considerations

Partners actively develop and strengthen their relationships using key strategies. These processes are essential to effective project implementation, sustainability planning, and ultimately, long-term systems change. Strong relationships are the foundation for the rest of the work of any partnership, and like any relationship, collaboratives can encounter bumps in the road. The key to overcoming differences is keeping the families at the center of the collaboration.

Brief 1: Relationships

1. Formal Governance Structure

The collaborative is responsible for setting policy, overcoming barriers, attending to sustainability, and monitoring outcomes—all with a focus on systems change. Governance structure provides a formal process for partners to perform these actions. It should be based on agreed-upon processes, protocols, roles, and responsibilities that ensure consensus-based decision-making and effective information sharing across systems. It provides a venue for productive collaboration and shared leadership driven by strong relationships built on trust and commitment over time.

One successful model is the three-tiered multi-system governance structure that includes an oversight/executive committee, a steering committee, and a core team or workgroups. As with partnerships in general, it is important to make sure the right people and agencies are involved in the various committees and at each level of governance. It is also important to make sure family members have a voice throughout the governance structure. It is important that committee and team membership reflect the community they serve, and encompass a broad range of knowledge, experience, and authority.

The oversight/executive committee includes senior leadership from each partner agency with the ability to direct and devote staff time and resources to the project. The steering committee consists of middle managers who can not only implement programs, but also make policy and fiscal changes across program areas. The core team (or workgroups) involves on-the-ground staff who work directly with families and implement project interventions, providing an important perspective.

2. Shared Mission, Vision, and Goals

One early step in developing collaborative relationships is to identify and resolve any tensions due to differences of opinion about the overall mission and priorities among the partners. Each partner agency likely has goals related to their work that differ from the other partners. Differences in perceptions and values may include who they see as the primary client. Child welfare workers may primarily focus on the safety of the child, while treatment professionals may prioritize the parent's recovery.

Other differences can include how to define success. Working together to develop a shared mission and vision for the project is crucial. Cohesive, unified, and family-centered approaches based on mutual mission, goals, principles or working relationships, and cross-system outcomes to be achieved are key to a successful collaboration. The Collaborative Values Inventory (CVI) helps identify differences in values and conflicts among partners as well as areas of agreement that can drive the collaborative's success. Some RPGs have used the CVI early in their work to reveal underlying issues and identify challenges.

3. Understanding Roles and Responsibilities

All members of the collaborative clearly understand their respective roles and responsibilities to operate effectively as a team. These may evolve as the project expands or changes its scope (the breadth and type of services delivered) and scale (the number of clients). Clarity about roles becomes even more important when changes in staff or leadership occur. The collaborative benefits from having a new staff orientation process in place to assure the relationships remain strong.

4. Commitment at All Levels

Core systems and community partners contribute time and resources to sustain the project and create systems change; they also agree on its importance. The strength of the relationship among partners contributes to the widespread commitment crucial at all levels. Agency directors and executive leadership make collaboration a priority. Management, supervisors, and frontline staff have staff time allocated to collaboration, resources, and information to promote interagency coordination in service delivery and interactions with families. All partners assess their operation policies and procedures to assure access to services and supports, and positive outcomes for all families.

5. Communication Protocols and Information Sharing

Collaborating partners benefit from having a communication protocol and data-sharing agreement describing what information will be shared and with whom. The documents are reviewed and updated regularly. Having a clearly defined information-sharing process can help institutionalize practice and lead to long-term systems level change.

Lessons from the Field

A recipient developed a formal communication plan that includes details on the governance structure, reporting processes, and information flow between partners.

6. Shared Outcomes with Accountability

By design, RPG provides an opportunity to test innovations, practices, and evidence-informed approaches to improve outcomes for children, parents, and families. Data collection and reporting on outcomes are critical to understanding the challenges families face while also measuring the success and effectiveness of interventions and the approach used in the project. Not all ideas, innovations, or practices result in desired outcomes.

A data dashboard can identify priorities and measure progress. By reviewing data reports and action plans, the oversight or steering committee can hold the project and its partners accountable, while helping the collaborative identify which aspects of the project to sustain. (More information on reviewing data collection, reporting, and how to use results can be found in the RPG TA Brief 3: Results).

7. Identifying Champions

Helping a project move from "keeping a project funded" to "changing the system to produce better outcomes for families" requires strong and consistent "champions." They can hold any job title or role, come from external partners, and even have a critical eye. A champion's primary function is to inform, influence, and inspire widespread progress, while cultivating broad-based community support. It is important to identify project champions and routinely determine if new champions exist. Champions are valued and recognized as essential assets to the project.

Lessons from the Field

One recipient developed and implemented a comprehensive outreach plan to educate partners that creatively revised outreach and marketing efforts to reach rural communities.

8. Stages of Collaboration

The collaboration process strives to change state and local policies; establish new ways of doing business; and improve outcomes for children, parents, and families. A project may start by sharing information and having joint projects, but through building trust and working together, the partners can ideally change the rules and systems to benefit families. Changing the rules involves having shared data systems, shared case plans, and universal protocols. Systems change denotes permanent changes, like new services for families involved with child welfare or new communication protocols that produce better results for those not limited to the RPG. Moving through the stages of collaboration is not always linear, but it remains important to assess current progress and next steps.

Brief 1: Relationships

> ## What stage of collaboration are we in?
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> ▶ How do we know?
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> ▶ What are the objective indicators?
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> ▶ What steps do we need to take to move forward?

Resources

The NCSACW website provides practice and policy publications, webinars, videos, online trainings, state examples, and additional online resources on topics related to achieving systems change.

Sustainability Planning for Regional Partnerships: This RPG technical assistance (TA) brief presents detailed steps grantees can take to begin sustainability planning of their grant projects. The brief provides a set of questions to begin planning, mobilizing community resources, and conducting early partner engagement.

Sustainability Planning Toolkit: The Sustainability Planning Toolkit provides collaboratives, organizations, and programs with the tools needed for planning and implementing a sustainability approach for innovative projects.

Tools

RPGs have used these tools to help develop, strengthen, or formalize their relationships with partners:

▶ Collaborative Values Inventory: an anonymous 46-item questionnaire to assess the prevalence of shared ideas and values across groups of professional disciplines

▶ Program and Systems Walkthrough: a structured process designed to identify effective practices as well as barriers that contribute to achieving desired outcomes for infants and their families across the various helping systems

▶ Data Dashboard: an ongoing update summarizing shared goals, jointly established baselines, and current results

▶ Collaborative Capacity Instrument: a self-assessment tool designed to elicit intra- and interagency discussion about prioritizing programs and policy plans

▶ Memoranda of Understanding: agreements to help clarify roles and responsibilities; updating these when new partners join (and annually to reflect changes to practice and policy) is crucial

For more information about these tools and resources, visit National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare.