

Becoming a Community-Centered Board

Hospital and health system boards face an array of complex challenges in their continual quest to meet the critical health needs of their communities. Too often, board members become so consumed with the organizational issues and challenges that they lose sight of the need to consistently and forcefully connect in meaningful ways with their communities.

With ongoing scrutiny of the “community benefit” provided by health care organizations, boards have a unique opportunity to ensure that their organizations consistently engage in meaningful ways with a broad range of community stakeholders. Although a lack of trust in America’s health care system in some areas may be primarily attributed to wrongdoing by a few organizations, the problem is compounded by a lack of effective action and community engagement.

Hospital and health system boards of trustees must not ignore this growing community trust challenge. Most Americans don’t understand how hospitals are organized and managed, while even fewer still understand and appreciate the many challenging forces that are impacting local hospitals, health systems and health care organizations today. Instead, they tend to rely on personal experiences and the opinions and beliefs of the media, friends and associates to shape their viewpoints about their local health care.

Trustees should actively engage their organizations in meaningful community partnerships, lead the design of community health improvement initiatives, and engage in community dialogues that promote the hospital or health system’s efforts and demonstrate the

organization’s genuine interest in the health care needs and challenges of the community.

The Business Case for Community Health Initiatives

Strengthening community relationships and implementing initiatives to improve the community’s health is the right thing to do for patients, families and communities. In addition to helping hospitals and health systems fulfill their community-focused missions and visions, community health initiatives provide several significant business-strengthening benefits, including:

- Credibility and leverage in representation and advocacy.
- The potential to increase market share.
- Development of allies to address common challenges.
- Building new partnership opportunities.
- Foundation fundraising.
- Strengthened support and public trust for health care organizations and their efforts.

- Increased awareness of hospital and health system challenges and understanding of the organization's commitment to addressing community needs.
- Strengthened employee morale and sense of purpose.
- Preservation of organizations' not-for-profit tax-exempt status as the community benefit provided by hospitals and health systems becomes clear and measurable.

The Need for Board Leadership and Involvement

Hospital and health system board members are trusted leaders in their communities. Trustees also have a unique and powerful role as key communicators of the benefit provided by their

organization. Because they are volunteers, they are viewed as unbiased, impartial protectors and stewards of the hospital or health system's cherished mission, values and vision.

Using Community Connections to Build Community Health and Strengthen Public Trust

Hospitals and health systems impact their community in many dimensions, giving leaders and trustees a unique opportunity to connect with and influence a variety of stakeholders. Potential stakeholders hospitals should consider partnering with include patients and families, advocacy groups, churches, schools, health policymakers, physicians, hospital employees and volunteers, the media, insurers, lenders and the general public.

Testing Community Centeredness

The following statements include key components of a community-centered health care organization. How would your board respond?

- We have clearly defined our community.
- Our mission describes our commitment to the community and is used to evaluate key decisions facing the hospital or health system.
- We promote and support specific initiatives whose sole purpose is improving community health.
- We assess various stakeholders' needs and interests when developing goals and strategies.
- We regularly discuss community health improvement challenges and barriers.
- We meet regularly with community partners to assess and discuss our progress in meeting community needs.
- We have formal working relationships with organizations that share our community health improvement mission and vision, and that leverage our services and resources for maximum benefit.
- We regularly assess the value and impact of our joint community health improvement efforts.
- We communicate our efforts and results widely in our community in the form of a community benefit report.
- CEO performance objectives include a focus on improving community health.

Building Effective Community Connections

Potential stakeholders hospitals and health systems should consider partnering with include patients, families, schools, advocacy groups, businesses, churches, health policymakers, physicians, public health and social service agencies, insurers, government officials and the general public. Steps that hospitals and health systems can take to reinforce effective community connections will vary based on the populations, cultures and uniqueness of each community, but generally include:

- **Define the “community” (or communities)** the hospital or health system serves, creating a focus for the community health improvement initiatives.
- **Develop genuine partnerships** with other community health care providers, government agencies and organizations that can bring diverse resources to the table.
- **Develop a shared and collaborative community health mission**, values, vision and plan, including specific goals and measurable outcomes to track success.
- **Create a “culture of community commitment”** throughout the organization, with the hospital’s and health system’s leaders setting the tone for the medical staff and employees.
- **Conduct routine assessments of the community’s health status**, using the first assessment as a baseline by which to track progress and the success of community health initiatives.
- **Develop community health status indicators** and routinely report them widely to all key stakeholders, including individuals in the local communities. Highlight areas of success as well as areas in need of improvement.
- **Consider creating a board committee** to oversee community health partnerships, assess resource needs, and address barriers to progress—a step that helps to demonstrate board commitment to community accountability.
- **Hold local and/or regional CEOs accountable** for achieving community health improvement objectives by developing specific, measurable outcomes that are mutually agreed upon with each CEO.
- **Continuously integrate new initiatives** for community health assessments with existing ones.
- **Build and sustain the concept of board responsibility** for community assessment, involvement and improvement, including an emphasis on community health at board meetings and in the board’s regular board self-assessment process.
- **Develop a communications and public relations program** that enhances the organization’s transparency, builds community understanding of health care needs and challenges.
- **Develop and enhance technology-based programs** that leverage the tools, access and influence of social media.

Ensuring Collaborative Community Governance

Collaborating in meaningful ways with key community influencers and stakeholders is no easy task. Every partnership will be different, as each organization has its own structure, strategies to address local challenges, and individual agendas and goals. In addition, partnerships often lack a formal structure and may not have formal authority for making final decisions.

Health care leaders can be the catalyst for developing successful community-based partnerships by ensuring a focus on shared goals and objectives and creating a mutually agreed-upon process for the group's meetings and decision-making approaches. When establishing community-based partnerships, boards should consider the following principles:

- Engage a wide spectrum of the community as partners for improving community health;
- Identify and invest in existing community assets rather than creating new assets;
- Be willing to let go of control;
- Be transparent, open and inclusive; and
- Be accountable through ongoing measurement, reporting and action plans for improvement.

Identifying, Evaluating and Including Partners. Although partnership potential varies greatly from community to community, the guidelines for determining the most appropriate stakeholders remain the same. When developing partnerships, hospital leaders should consider whether the prospective partner:

- Can commit to the partnership's vision and goals;
- Brings something unique and valuable to the table;

- Is willing to commit meaningful resources;
- Fits existing "zones of collaboration" or creates new ones; and
- Is truly interested in advancing community health.

The Result of Collaborative Community Governance. Successful community partnerships are formed with a shared vision and coordinated, sustainable solutions to improve community health. The shared efforts and resources translate to a better use of limited resources, ensuring that the right care, service, test or treatment is provided in the right place and at the right time.

Effective partnerships also result in improved understanding and trust between the hospital and the community as a whole and an expanded pool of powerful advocates for local and regional health needs. In addition, collaboration to improve the community's health sends a powerful message to the community about the hospital or health system's commitment to providing community benefit and improving the overall health of local citizens, resulting in increased local support for the hospital.

Avenues for Building Community Centeredness

In addition to building and sustaining partnerships, there are a variety of avenues by which hospital and health system trustees and leaders can gain a greater understanding of the community's health care needs and challenges, increase awareness of existing programs, seek feedback and ideas for new initiatives, and build trust and promote the hospital's image. These include:

- Community surveys;

- Focus groups with key stakeholders;
- Task forces with hospital leaders, employees and key stakeholders;
- Conducting a community needs assessment;
- Advertising and promotion of the hospital's services and community benefit initiatives;
- Presentations throughout the community;
- Interviews with patients, key stakeholders, and the community-at-large; and
- Healthy community initiatives.

The “bottom line” value of being a community-centered organization is that the community will better understand the challenges the organization is facing, the hospital's efforts to address the challenges, and the barriers to success.

Making Community Centeredness Happen at Your Organization

Hospital and health system boards can take steps now to become community-centered boards. Key action steps include:

- Ensuring that the board has a clear, consensus-driven understanding of community health issues and needs;
- Conducting an annual or semi-annual community health needs assessment;
- Establishing a process for eliciting community input and viewpoints;
- Ensuring that board policies support community engagement and involvement programs;
- Monitoring and evaluating the hospital or health system's progress in meeting its community service goals;
- Ensuring that board composition represents a broad spectrum of community perspectives;
- Staying continuously aware of the extent of the community's health care needs; and
- Engaging in community-centered thinking and actions at every board meeting.

Community Centeredness: Questions to Consider

- What is the state of public trust in your hospital or health system?
- Do people in your community see your organization as being community-centered?
- Can you describe your community partnerships and their value and results?
- What does community accountability mean to you? How do you define and measure it?
- What are you doing to ensure that the entire organization embraces community accountability?
- What strategies do you use to engage the community in the hospital's long-range planning?
- What information about hospital or health system performance do you report to your community?
- What approaches do you use to advocate in your community and to legislators?
- What is the individual community and political advocacy role of every trustee?

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