

Elevating Community Partnerships to Make a Lasting Impact

In a value-based health care system, success is defined not only by financial viability but by the organization's ability to fulfill its promised mission to improve the health of its community. Part of the challenge is that health is determined by many disparate factors, such as housing and housing location, employment, income, food, education, access to transportation, family support and more. These are factors outside the control of a single organization, but they impact an individual's access to care.

Individual health care organizations cannot independently do everything that is needed to fulfill their mission commitment to the community. The majority of health care organizations are committed to improving the health and well-being of the communities they serve. While a strong majority agree that population health aligns with their mission, far fewer indicate that they have the financial resources for population health initiatives or programs to address social determinants of health. Furthermore, thinking and operating independently fails to leverage and maximize the opportunities that come with joint efforts and shared resources. These realities are prompting health care organizations to develop partnerships with a wide range of other agencies and hospitals in their communities.

The Principles of Successful Collaboration

The American Hospital Association's Center for Healthcare Governance conducted a Blue Ribbon Panel Study of select Foster G. McGaw

Prize Winners, recognized for their exceptional commitment to improving the health and well-being of the communities they serve. The study's purpose was to examine how these winning organizations work with their community partners to develop community service initiatives and how the partnerships are being governed. Nine common principles of successful collaborative partnerships were identified in the study report *Learnings on Governance from Partnerships that Improve Community Health*:

1. **Partnerships Must be Community-Driven.** Collaborative partnerships for community health are comprised of diverse organizations and individuals passionately striving to address problems common to all. Partnerships and their governance structures require flexibility and will vary to meet the needs, resources and characteristics of each community.
2. **All Stakeholders Must be Meaningfully Engaged.** Plans cannot be made based on what some "think" the community needs. All

community stakeholders must be identified and represented in determining, planning and executing governing priorities. This engagement ensures well-informed, data-driven decisions regarding the purpose, vision, strategies and implementation of the partnership's work, and also ensures interest, investment and trust in the partnership and its work.

3. ***More Can be Achieved Together Than Alone.*** Stakeholders must be committed to working together in partnership, leveraging each partner's resources and complementary talents to create a synergy among partners that enables greater accomplishment than can be achieved by working alone.
4. ***Partner Equity Ensures Sustainability.*** Regardless of size, financial or in-kind contribution to the partnership, stakeholders

are considered equal. The success of a partnership may be dependent on backbone or anchor institutions assuming the role of conveners, facilitators or integrators, and relinquishing leadership or control of the agenda.

5. ***Community Health and Well-Being Improvement is a Shared Core Purpose.*** Members of the governance structure are stewards of the community's resources, its health and well-being, and of the trust placed in them by the community. As such, members of the governance structure must be committed to working together in partnership for the benefit of the community. The shared purpose, vision and common priorities for the health and well-being of the community are adhered to as the crucial focal point of community partnerships, meeting agendas, discussions, deliberations and decisions.

Questions for Boards about Community Collaboration and Partnerships

By virtue of their size, resources, mission, and commitment to community health, hospitals and health systems often find themselves as leaders in community partnerships. As your board evaluates and prioritizes the needs of your community, the depth of your organization's resources and its commitment to fulfilling its mission, consider the following questions for discussion:

- What community partnerships do we lead or participate in now? Do we know what efforts others in the community are pursuing? Could joining forces create a more successful outcome for the community?
- Is there an opportunity for greater collaboration, including shared governance, to grow the impact of community partnerships?
- Do we have a strategy for community partnerships based on community needs?
- What partnership opportunities should or could we pursue to improve the health of our community that we aren't currently?
- What role should the hospital or health system play in a partnership (the "backbone," facilitator, primary funder, or an equal partner without a prominent role, etc.)?
- How can our hospital or health system best use its resources to address community health, and what can we contribute to a partnership that others in the community cannot?

Building Effective Community Connections

Potential stakeholders hospitals should consider partnering with include patients, families, schools, advocacy groups, businesses, churches, health policy makers, 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 which 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.

6. **Creative Approaches are Needed to Tackle All-Encompassing Problems.** Improving community health is an all-encompassing concern that includes multiple socio-economic issues and requires: long-term perspectives and commitments; data-driven decisions; seeking out best practices; willingness to take well-calculated risks; and willingness to embrace bold, innovative approaches.
7. **A “Systems Approach” Ensures Continuity.** A systems-oriented approach creates solid foundations for building and aligning integrated delivery systems for community health improvement and maintenance.
8. **Goals and Progress Reporting Ensure Accountability.** Change requires an intense focus on results. Clear measures or indicators of progress provide direction and create inspiration and motivation. Consistent monitoring of balanced scorecards or dashboards and communicating progress to the broader community, are essential to demonstrating accountability, earning community trust and building hope for the future.
9. **Governance Must be Structured to Ensure Sustainability.** Sustainability of the governance structure and collaborative partnerships are critical to the health of the community and is dependent on a clear purpose or intention, the commitment of partners, a plan of action, adequate funding, effective implementation and demonstrated progress.

To download the complete *Blue Ribbon Panel Report: Learnings on Governance from Partnerships that Improve Community Health*, go to <https://trustees.aha.org/learnings-governance-partnerships-improve-community-health>.

Rules for Building Sustainable Community Partnerships

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Rule 1 | It’s not an event or a one-time fix, but a continuous commitment to community |
| Rule 2 | Lasting partnerships cannot be created overnight, and must be sustained over time |
| Rule 3 | Don’t reinvent the wheel; learn from and use the success of others |
| Rule 4 | Cultivate broad-based buy-in and commitment from all stakeholders |
| Rule 5 | Communicate, communicate, and then communicate some more |

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 addressing local challenges, and individual agendas and goals. In addition, partnerships often lack a formal structure and may not have a formal authority for making final decisions.

Hospital and health system 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
- 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 remains 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
- Is truly interested in advancing community health

The Result of Collaborative Community Governance. Successful community partnerships are formed with a shared vision, coordinated, sustainable solutions to improve

community health. The shared efforts and resources translate to a better use of limited resources, thus ensuring that the right care, service, test or treatment is provided in the right place and 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's commitment to providing community benefit and improving the overall health of local citizens, resulting in increased local support for the hospital.

No One Model Fits All

There is no single model of partnership or governance that will meet each community's unique needs. As boards evaluate and prioritize the community's health needs and the depth of the organization's resources, trustees must ask how the power and potential of leveraging community partnerships can help to fulfill the organization's mission and commitment to improving the community's health.

governWell™

Better governance. Better healthcare.

Illinois Office

One Mid America Plaza, Floor 3
Oakbrook Terrace, IL 60181
630-613-7580
blorsbach@governwell.net

Oregon Office

31090 SW Boones Bend Rd
Wilsonville, OR 97070
630-613-7580
larry@governwell.net

www.governwell.net