Cross-Sector Collaboration: Replacing Silos with Shared Vision and Joint Strategies

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What’s New About Collaboration?
The term collaboration is nothing new. County and community agencies have worked together within networks, cooperatives, and alliances for decades. However, what is new (and markedly different) are intriguing examples of diverse sectors working together to create protocols to solve specific, complex problems. Even more significant is the success they are discovering.

This Tactic will highlight two counties in California that are implementing cross-sector collaboration in unique ways. Using diverse strategies, these communities are creating innovative programs and notable outcomes despite our current climate of budgetary restrictions. The Tactic will also provide recommendations and resources to support communities in strengthening cross-sector collaboration on a local level.

But First, What is Cross-Sector Collaboration and Why is it Intriguing?
Cross-sector collaboration is the creation of partnerships that include nonprofits, government, business, coalitions, philanthropies, and/or community members. Within counties, it may include an innovative array of disciplines and county departments integrating prevention goals, activities, and funding.

Fundamental to collaboration, a group creates a collective vision and joint strategies to address concerns that exceed the agenda of individual members. The group enters into an intentional partnership with shared power, resources, responsibilities, and accountability to have a dynamic impact on multifaceted problems.

Complex Solutions for Complex Needs
With the complex social challenges today’s families and communities face, a cross-sector collaborative approach proves critical. With cross-sector collaboration, prevention professionals can work as a team to ensure the multiple needs of a family or community can be systematically addressed in a cohesive manner.

For instance, family members may require alcohol and other drugs (AOD) prevention services, mental health services, and support for an open juvenile justice case to equip them with skills and resources to sufficiently overcome risk factors. Historically, accessing such services would require the family to engage multiple, disparate agencies for services that operate independently of each other, and any integration needed would be forged on a case-by-case basis. Formalizing processes for cross-sector collaboration across multiple fields can more readily integrate an expanded array of strategies, resources, and capabilities to create outcomes one agency or one field simply cannot accomplish alone.

A Priority at State and Federal Levels
To support further cross-sector collaboration, the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), in alignment with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), is prioritizing integration and coordination of prevention services in public health, mental health, social services, juvenile justice, and education for youth and families with multiple areas of need. This is reflected in SAMHSA’s Center for Substance Abuse Prevention’s determination that, “the field of prevention aims to create communities where individuals, families, schools, faith-based organizations, and workplaces take action to promote emotional health and reduce the likelihood of mental illness, substance abuse including tobacco, and suicide.” When we consider the constellation of needs experienced in communities we serve, it makes sense to organize a team approach to support them.
Laura Colson, Chief of the Policy and Prevention Branch under the Substance Use Disorder Prevention, Treatment & Recovery Services Division at DHCS explains, “At the state level, DHCS is committed to fostering cross-system prevention planning. Over the last two years, promotion of state and local cross-system collaborative efforts has taken place as the prevention field prepares for health reform. Multiple state departments and local public health and AOD prevention agencies, as well as non-profit advocacy groups, community-based organizations, and the research community have been working together to promote the power of prevention and to foster integrated thinking and collaborative action around pursuing comprehensive prevention strategies.”

Colson stresses that through collaborative work, professionals can work toward the vision outlined in the National Prevention Strategy: Working together to improve the health and quality of life for individuals, families, and communities by moving the nation from a focus on sickness and disease to one based on prevention and wellness.

Placer & Marin Counties: Cross-Sector Collaboration at its Best

There are a growing number of innovative cross-sector collaborations occurring in California. Two examples are within Placer and Marin Counties. While Placer began building an integrated Children’s System of Care in the mid-1980s to strategically link county services and private agencies, Marin County began formalizing cross-sector collaboration in 2008. Following is a concise overview of each county’s integration process, as well as common implementation tools, methods, and navigated obstacles.

Placer County:
Working Together to Eliminate Service Silos

In the mid-1980s, longtime colleagues and friends in Placer County leadership positions evaluated the systems they worked within. Due to disjointed regulations and fragmented services, the county systems were ineffective in solving complex social challenges faced by youth and families. Instead, the systems cultivated service gaps, confusion for families, and finger pointing when needs remained unaddressed. The leaders envisioned a collaborative system that bypassed funding restrictions, tradition, and the multitude of service silos which families found virtually impossible to navigate. Around the same time, a Placer juvenile justice judge called county department heads together and tasked them with creating a system in which departments could work closely together to create cohesive plans for children.

Placer created Children’s System of Care to unify county departments serving children. The county also created the overarching collaborative leadership body, SMART: Systems Management, Advocacy, and Resource Team. SMART consists of both a policy board and management team to support Children’s System of Care in close collaboration with Juvenile Probation, Placer County Office of Education, Adult System of Care, Community Health, Human Assistance, a Parent Advocate Manager, and multiple community organizations.

SMART replaced agency silos with an integrated system where braided funding allows partners creativity in meeting family needs in a comprehensive way. SMART maintains key structures to ensure Placer’s strategically developed culture of collaboration and power-sharing remains embedded in the county. (For a comprehensive review of these key structures, please refer to Resources textbox at end of article.) Together with management staff and multidisciplinary teams, SMART sustains the county’s departure from self-preservation and myopic viewpoints, to efficiently address a constellation of needs in ways families can understand and appreciate.

Marin County:
Creating Streamlined Service Delivery via Community Access Through Any Point of Entry

In Marin County, the impetus for formalizing cross-sector
collaboration came in 2008 from county management’s desire to create a system where community members could access a variety of services through any point of entry. It was also driven by senior administration’s need to streamline county services to be more cost efficient and effective in the midst of severe budget cuts.

Marin County Health and Human Services (HHS) unified six departments into four to support cross-sector collaboration. Marin County HHS now consists of Aging and Adult Services, Mental Health and Substance Use Services, Public Health, and Social Services. The county co-located divisions to support communication and streamline resources. It also created an innovative Marin Health and Wellness Campus to bring a spectrum of county and community services to one inviting, convenient location.

One example of cross-sector collaboration in Marin County is the Prevention Hub. This unique program unites roughly 25 prevention professionals across HHS divisions. Their fields of focus include tobacco, nutrition and maternal services, child and adolescent health, aging and adult services, public health, social services, mental health, and substance use.

Initially, Prevention Hub leaders coordinated training to create common language and undertake a skills inventory to identify individual strengths. Partners across divisions shared networks, strategies, funding sources, and information regarding contracts. With this information, prevention professionals now work closely to streamline community programs, media campaigns, grant writing, and contracts with community agencies. Partners meet as a group once a month, but work collaboratively on an ongoing basis to optimize programs.

Kristin Law, Resource Development Coordinator for Marin County explains, “We work with complex issues that require complex environmental solutions to solve. Marin County has always embraced collaboration, but now we have institutionalized it.” To ensure sustainability, operating procedures were strategically developed to ensure Prevention Hub’s integrated work force remains intact.

**Common Methods & Tools Utilized by Placer and Marin Counties**

Although Placer and Marin Counties’ integrated systems of cross-sector collaboration look different in many ways, they use similar tools and processes to create change:

- **Strategic Planning.** Both counties used a formal strategic planning process to begin collaboration, and continue utilizing the process to ensure plans are implemented successfully. Partners in Placer meet annually to recommit to its strategic plan. Continuous strategic planning efforts are supported by weekly meetings of the advisory board.

- **Shared Goals and Agendas.** Both counties rely heavily on shared goals and agendas to forward collaborative work. These shared goals and agendas are clearly defined in strategic plans. For instance, both counties place heavy emphasis on providing a system where community members can access relevant services through any point of entry. Previously, a family had to enter the door of a particular “silo” to receive a particular service. Today, a family simply needs to walk through any door. It is the role of staff to use creativity and collaboration to meet a family’s needs. One Placer administrator explained, “The old system was confusing to families, the new system can be confusing to staff.” Placer adheres to its mission to overcome systems challenges in order to serve families first and foremost.

- **Continuous Communication.** Both counties developed structures to ensure on-going communication between partners. There are regular weekly or monthly meetings of administrators, management, and multi-disciplinary teams across service sectors to forward trust and collaboration. Meetings are specifically designed for planning purposes and formal information flow. Staff is strategically co-located to support continuous communication.

**Webinar Resources**

*Details on Placer & Marin Counties*

Online webinars offer details about the collaborative processes in Marin and Placer Counties. These webinars are presented by county staff and include:

1. Examples of effective collaborative projects;
2. Outcomes of collaboration;
3. How to strengthen collaboration in your county.

These webinars are available on the Community Prevention Institute’s website at [http://www.ca-cpi.org/training/webinars_past.php](http://www.ca-cpi.org/training/webinars_past.php)

- **Marin County Hub: A Story of Evolution, Collaboration, & Prevention**
- **Interagency Agency Collaboration: How We Can Work Together**
• Utilization of Expertise. Both counties created systems to fully utilize partner expertise. As noted previously, the Prevention Hub began its collaboration with county prevention staff by inventorying staff skill sets to identify each professional’s resources and strengths. As a result, if one department is working on a specific strategy, staff can readily ask for assistance from another department with expertise in that area. This proves invaluable in utilizing expertise in tasks such as grant writing, policy development, and community organizing. Investment in creating a culture of cross-sector collaboration enables this to be a fluid exchange.

• Shared Funding. Both counties are braiding funding streams to support the success of programs. In Marin County, there are currently five joint prevention projects across different departments in various stages of implementation. Departments are discovering where prevention goals overlap, and where funding can be shared.

Challenges: Doors to Change & Opportunity

Challenges are distinct and legitimate; however, so too are opportunities to overcome obstacles with skillful leadership, strategic planning, commitment to putting families first, and investment in shifting agency culture. Placer and Marin counties navigate similar obstacles using these strategies. Common initial challenges include the following:

• Opposition to Change. One challenge both counties faced was opposition to changing the old way of doing business. Staff expressed concerns about information overload and the possibility that one field’s priorities would be lost in favor of another’s agenda. Senior administration in both counties invested time and training to strengthen relationships with management and line staff. Marin County’s HHS, for instance, began generating a monthly newsletter to strengthen a culture of communication, trust, and collaboration within the department. Each month the newsletter communicates happenings in various departments, as well as highlights an HHS employee.

• Fragmented Funding. Coordinating funding streams across different sectors required research, creativity, and at times, sheer commitment. As one administrator stated, “It will be inconvenient for us, in order to be convenient for families.” Marin County’s Prevention Hub weaves together funding from HHS for four divisions: Aging and Adult Services, Mental Health and Substance Use Services, Public Health, and Social Services. Prevention Hub members discovered strategic ways to overlap various federal/state timelines and funding streams to their advantage.

There’s No Going Back to Silos

In recent interviews, representatives from Placer and Marin counties express there is no going back to working in silos that isolate services based on funding and fields of expertise. Cross-sector collaboration is essential to maintaining and advancing health outcomes for families and communities. Monies saved and outcomes illuminated create political buy-in, as well as increased funding opportunities.

Recommendations for Counties

Integrating cross-sector collaboration within counties is a priority at local, state, and federal levels because it yields positive results for agencies and for populations they serve. While there are many opportunities to engage in coordinated efforts, the following recommendations are advantageous regardless of the current level of cross-sector collaboration within a county.

Strategically Review Current Resources

Whether beginning or expanding cross-sector collaboration, all counties should conduct a critical review of current linkages and alliances. Once this assessment is complete, the results can be evaluated from two perspectives: (1) shared populations served among different partners, and (2) common environments or contexts of service areas. Consider which other
agencies and sectors are also working with these same or intersecting populations. Which other agencies and sectors are also working within these same environments and contexts? Where overlap is discovered, there is potentially natural alignment to create collective impact in prevention efforts.

As there are many moving parts in any collaborative process, it is helpful to maintain a reference sheet of core information. A spreadsheet or simple grid serves as an inventory of significant but changing details, such as current/potential partners, key contacts, preferred methods of communication, respective strategic plans or logic models, and areas of overlapping needs or mutually beneficial resources. There are planning tools and templates available to guide the creation of this “cheat sheet” for enhancing cross-sector approach to new or existing initiatives.

**Complete a Comprehensive Cross-Check**

To advance any cross-sector collaboration, conduct a comprehensive cross-check process. With (potential) partners, begin with the most common starting point: What is a pressing need or priority in the community? Next outline resources or strategies that are available to address the need or priority both directly and indirectly. Generate a list that addresses both the individual and environmental levels. From here, each sector considers who current and potential partners are, as well as the unique perspective driving each partner. For instance, if graduation rates are low, how do educators work to increase graduation rates? How do preventionists approach the concern? How do mental health professionals approach the concern? By considering different perspectives, resources, and areas of expertise, a community can develop cross-sector strategies to ensure collective impact.

Alternately, assess what resources and funding are currently available in each sector. Then, discuss all the possible needs these resources and funds could potentially address – again, directly and indirectly. This reverse approach is underused, as we usually start with the problem, not the available supports or solutions. Employing this technique, however, is helpful for generating innovative connections with diverse partners. For instance, a county’s Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment (SAPT) Block Grant funding may be used to engage the local Police Athletic League in providing after school clubs such as cycling, running, boxing, or art for vulnerable youth. While the prevention team aims to reduce substance use among these youth through the program, there are likely also health and fitness outcomes that result from participation. In this simple example, public health may be a natural partner for a coordinated initiative. When counties conduct the cross-check process (starting either from the “need” or the “resource” side), they are more likely to provide cohesive and meaningful supports to youth, families, and communities.

**Make No Little Plans**

Change is rarely easy, particularly when multiple players and complicated systems must be navigated. Creating and maintaining cross-sector collaborations is no exception. Nevertheless, cross-sector collaboration is dynamically more efficient and effective in serving families and communities in meaningful ways. Representatives from Placer and Marin Counties who have enacted this practice assert there is no going back to working in silos. According to Placer County officials, “sandbox play” is far more fun, too!

With county, state, and federal agencies prioritizing cross-sector collaboration due to its effectiveness, there is a growing body of resources to support counties in both beginning and strengthening cross-sector collaboration. In addition to the recommendations provided in this Tactic, a list of resources in the following section provides links to webinars, publications, and tools detailing cross-sector collaboration. These resources offer concrete methods and tools, along with inspiration and encouragement in developing successful cross-sector collaborations.

Doors leading to both challenge and opportunity lay before us as we prioritize prevention. As new visions and strategies are formulated, may the words of Daniel H. Burnham remind us:

*Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood...*
**Tools to Support Cross-Sector Collaboration**

**Collaboration Multiplier.** Available from Prevention Institute.

Collaboration Multiplier provides a systematic approach to laying the groundwork for multi-field collaboration. It is based on the understanding that different groups and sectors have different views on an issue and different reasons for engaging in a joint effort. The tool guides organizations through a collaborative discussion to identify activities that accomplish a common goal, delineate each partner’s perspective and potential contributions, and leverage expertise and resources.

http://www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-44/127.html

**Archived Webinars.** Available on the Community Prevention Initiative website.

Webinar topics include:

- County Spotlight Series-The Marin County Prevention Hub: A Story of Evolution, Collaboration and Prevention
- Interagency Collaboration: How We Can Work Together
- Alliance for Change: Tools for Collaboration
- Collaboration Between Health & Safety

http://www.ca-cpi.org/training/webinars_past.php

**Related Publications.** Available on the Community Prevention Initiative website.

Publication topics include:

- New Approaches to Prevention:
  - Aligning Interventions between Substance Abuse and Mental Health
- Community Prevention: New Opportunities to Create Impact through Collaboration
- The Crossover between Substance Abuse Prevention and Schools

http://www.ca-cpi.org/resources/browse_resources.php

**Additional Information on Placer County’s Implementation Process**


References


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