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Improving Health – Eliminating Disparities

Take-Home Advice from Community Initiatives Improving Health & Equity

A CJA UPDATE: MONITORING THE NATIONAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE LANDSCAPE

September 2016

Thousands of communities are moving forward on their long, but important journeys to improve population health. These regular updates, produced by Communities Joined in Action (CJA), are intended to provide usable, take-home advice that can accelerate local organizations' efforts towards achieving better health and well-being for their communities.

Evidence shows technical assistance tailored to the needs of local communities is paramount in driving local health system change. However, there is no universally accepted definition of what level of support is considered technical assistance, nor is there a single approach to technical assistance that guarantees organizational or programmatic success. This report uses a broad definition of technical assistance that includes coaching and facilitation of peer learning.

CJA drew upon the wisdom of experienced technical assistance providers to identify current trends that can guide engagement with community leaders and help bring value to funders. These learnings are beneficial to organizations receiving technical assistance, providers of technical assistance, and funders of community health improvement initiatives. By sharing successes and challenges, CJA hopes to give communities useful perspectives and inspiration to accelerate achievement of their intended goals.

COMMON THEMES EMERGED FROM INTERVIEWS WITH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS AND CATALYST LEADERS.

CJA IDENTIFIED OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE THE PROVISION AND RECEIPT OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

DEVELOP A STRATEGIC MINDSET

FOCUS ON SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

MAINTAIN FLEXIBILITY

APPRECIATE PEER LEARNING

REMAIN PATIENT

VALUE RELATIONSHIPS

DEVELOP A STRATEGIC MINDSET

A big-picture orientation is necessary to create large-scale change. Often times, understanding the big picture requires a shift in mindset. Technical assistance can help organizations and leaders broaden their view, understanding the full scope of issues influencing the outcome and the breadth of coalition partners necessary to meaningfully address it.

"We believe the way you think impacts the actions you take and the results you get," explains Karen Minyard, executive director of the Georgia Health Policy Center. *"Creating a strategic mindset and shared understanding of dynamics related to leadership, partnership engagement, the program approach, the outcome of interest, and the local context requires consistent support and focus over several years."*

Developing a strategic mindset, Minyard adds, enables stakeholders to get on the same page by developing a clearly defined vision of what is to be achieved and ensuring all partners share this vision and can align activities around this common agenda.

"When there are too many goals or goals are too broad, a prevailing sense of being overwhelmed can often obstruct the collaborative from moving forward," says Chris Parker, co-principal investigator of Bridging for Health. *"It is important in the advising process, however, to value the interconnectedness of goals and to use a transparent and fair process in priority setting or narrowing."*

FOCUS ON SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

Often times, grantees are singularly focused on completing the programmatic planning and implementation described in their work plan. Grantees often do not recognize the need to focus on the sustainability of their efforts until near the end of the grant period. At this point, options for generating additional revenues, demonstrating the program's value, or expanding partner relationships are limited. This cycle of engaging in short-term, grant-funded projects can be frustrating to funders and community members.

"Sustainability of community-based interventions can be broadly defined, going beyond resource diversification to include ways community coalitions and networks can position themselves to have a sustainable impact at multiple levels: programs and activities may continue; local coalitions and networks may endure; and other long-term benefits may accrue to the communities through policy changes, increased awareness, and shifts in culture," says Karen Minyard, executive director of the Georgia Health Policy Center. *"GHPC*

has developed a comprehensive technical assistance approach that helps grantees and their partners to begin to plan for sustainability early in the grant cycle and to integrate sustainability planning into their everyday work."

Minyard says there are distinct elements that technical assistance can focus on to enhance programmatic or organizational sustainability. Incorporating sustainability planning from the beginning can also strengthen local capacity and overall impact.

"Consider early on how what they do today will impact the future of their program," explains Tanisa Adimu, a Spreading Community Accelerators through Learning and Evaluation (SCALE) coach. *"This includes thinking about the most appropriate strategy given their community's health needs; engaging the right community partners; developing evaluation and communication plans to demonstrate the impact of their work; and considering sustainability strategies from day one."*

MAINTAIN FLEXIBILITY

Communities may face similar challenges in their communities, but it is widely recognized that there is no one-size fits all solution to improving population health. Experienced technical assistance providers have built their processes on best practices, where each technical assistance plan must be tailored to the local needs and community culture. This requires technical assistance to maintain flexibility in order to address the dynamic needs of individual grantees.

"Hosting an introductory call at the beginning of my engagement with a community helps to clarify their program goals, who's involved, and local contextual factors that would hinder or facilitate their success," says Tanisa Adimu, a Spreading Community Accelerators through Learning and Evaluation (SCALE) coach. *"I find it difficult to create a customized technical assistance plan that would contribute to accomplishing their goals without this initial baseline data. As a technical assistance provider, I use past insights and experiences to create a plan that is customized to meet the unique needs of individual communities."*

Technical assistance needs will vary by stage of the initiative's development and previous technical assistance experience. *"For Pathway to Pacesetters, where communities are much earlier in the journey, they are often just trying to survive,"* says Soma Stout, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's external lead for health improvement. *"We learned that technical assistance has to be offered at a slower pace that embeds the core curriculum while helping organizations to meet their day-to-day needs to survive, even*

as they are working to improve the health of the community."

"The application of cookie cutter process may result in a more modest success rate than a process that has more flexibility," says Sherry Immediato, director at ReThink Health. *"Technical assistance providers need to create space to fail and celebrate the learnings."*

Applying learnings from throughout the technical assistance process, exemplifies the flexibility that is needed on the part of all parties—the grantee, the technical assistance provider, and even the funders.

Debbie Chang, senior vice president for policy and prevention at Nemours Children's Health System and co-principal investigator of Moving Health Care Upstream (MHCU), says that the sites that make the most significant progress receive support that shares several characteristics, including technical assistance or coaching that:

- Is ongoing and focused on using probing questions to guide the site in identifying its barriers and accelerators and how to overcome/utilize both in achieving their goals;

- Creates a reflective process of developing and revisiting the goal as progress is made to ensure the site focuses on the key strategies to help achieve goals; and

- Encourages the site to constantly articulate the intended change, test the underlying assumptions about their theory of change, track results, and assess whether assumptions were accurate.

APPRECIATE PEER LEARNING

Technical assistance providers can help community organizations develop the capacity to address technical challenges—those that are clear with known solutions (e.g., understanding an evaluation tool). For complex, adaptive challenges (e.g., collaboration-related concerns or community engagement issues), technical assistance providers can play a key role by facilitating learning between communities.

"Creating opportunities for sites to learn from one another facilitates change at a faster pace and can provide ongoing connections for support and shared learning," says Debbie Chang, senior vice president for policy and prevention at Nemours Children's Health System and co-principal investigator of Moving Health Care Upstream (MHCU). *"This does not need to be limited to geographies—take advantage of technology and build on existing networks. Sites, though, need to be open to sharing challenges and*

articulating their underlying theory about what they believe will change community health."

Catalyst organizations, technical assistance providers, and funders all can play a role in facilitating active peer learning. But it is up to organization and community leaders to take advantage of these opportunities.

"Our role is to make those connections—community to community," says Annette Pope, from Communities Joined in Action (CJA). *"My advice is to network, network, network. Do not be afraid to reach out because there is always another organization or community that has experienced the same challenges or opportunities. There are always individuals who are willing to help so you don't have to recreate the wheel."*

REMAIN PATIENT

"Keep a pioneering spirit and prepare to be in it for the long haul," says Chris Parker, co-principal investigator of Bridging for Health. "The journey toward community health improvement is not likely to be a sprint, unless all the stars are aligned."

Improving population health is a big, complex task that requires the participation of multiple community stakeholders. The good news is that communities are investing significant energy in designing new, collaborative strategies to meaningfully improve health outcomes. All too often participants and funders want quick results. Technical assistance providers are perfectly positioned to remind both grantees and funders that this is hard, complex work that takes time to see meaningful results.

"This is an iterative process where ongoing learning encourages sites to consistently revisit their theory of change and reflect upon learnings along the way," says Debbie Chang, senior vice president for policy and prevention at Nemours Children's Health System and co-principal investigator of Moving Health Care Upstream (MHCU). "Recognizing that change is not linear, despite the fact that our theories of change often are, can help to ease the anxiety for communities when the work is not progressing as planned."

It is not just a matter of identifying and implementing an intervention. These large-scale collaborative efforts take time to innovate, to build trusted partnerships, to develop a strategic mindset around a shared vision, and align agendas.

"Collaboration is vital to success, but it takes time," says Catherine Patterson, senior program officer at the de Beaumont Foundation, which helped launch the BUILD Health Challenge. "Trust building is an essential component of all effective community health improvement initiatives. Make sure to leave plenty of time for this essential step."

Technical assistance providers can play a pivotal role in helping to build endurance for a long journey.

"Support and sustain your pioneers as they work toward something much greater than themselves and their individual organizations or positions," says Sherry Immediato, director at ReThink Health. "Encourage ambition and bold thinking and don't be afraid to focus on policy change as part of a larger strategy."

Technical assistance providers can also help initiatives scale their plans appropriately while maintaining the overarching goal of health system transformation.

"Help communities break down the ambitious goals to smaller manageable chunks, while engaging in rapid-cycle improvement to continuously work toward and improve the master plan," says Soma Stout, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's external lead for health improvement. She adds that technical assistance providers can help grantees "maintain joy and motivation throughout the process."

This is particularly important as grantees may hit bumps on their path towards improved community health.

"Cultivate a culture of learning, and embrace failure," says Patterson. "We all like to talk about success stories, but the real learning often happens when things don't go as planned!"

VALUE RELATIONSHIPS

Open communication between grantees and technical assistance providers is not only key to ensuring tailored, appropriate support, but it promotes a trusted relationship between thought partners.

"Having a thought partner to share ideas, affirm strategies, and keep a community on track are beneficial outcomes even for the most sophisticated recipients," says Tanisa Adimu, a Spreading Community Accelerators through Learning and Evaluation (SCALE) coach.

To take full advantage of technical assistance offerings, grantees need to ask for what they need.

"Having a partnership that values delegated leadership and embraces support from experts and others who have been learning for longer are some key elements that invariably seem to accelerate progress and achievement," says Chris Parker, co-principal investigator for Bridging for Health. "It feels like being present together with these communities early on in their efforts is valuable to all, but care should be taken to ensure that there is a strategy that sees the technical assistance provider as being the coach from the stands and not in the middle of the field."

Acknowledging the technical assistance provider as a coach, can be an adjustment for sites with limited resources.

"A challenge we have faced with our sites is how to address competing priorities. Many of the organizations we work with through MHCU feel overburdened and understaffed," says Debbie Chang, senior vice president for policy and prevention at Nemours Children's Health System and co-principal investigator of Moving Health Care Upstream (MHCU). "It has been a challenge asking people who believe that they are already doing too much to take on another set of defined activities. Strong relationships with our sites and creating strong links between activities and shared goals have been key to overcoming this obstacle."

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Achieving Health, Well-Being, and Equity

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THE CATALYSTS

Bridging For Health: Improving Community Health Through Innovations in Financing

Bridging for Health is fostering connections among diverse stakeholders to align investments in health to achieve improved population health outcomes. This is done through focusing on innovations in financing; collaboration and collective impact; and health equity. The Georgia Health Policy Center is the national coordinating center of the initiative, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

BUILD—Health Challenge
Bold, Upstream, Integrated, Local, and Data-Driven

The inaugural BUILD Health Challenge launched in June 2015 with grants to 18 communities to strengthen partnerships among hospitals, nonprofits, and local health departments to improve the health of low-income neighborhoods. The goal is to increase the number and effectiveness of cross-sector collaborations to improve community health, promote health equity, and stimulate more effective methods of sharing and using health data. Awards were possible through funding from The Advisory Board Company, the de Beaumont Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Colorado Health Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

CJA—Communities Joined in Action

CJA is a national, private, non-profit membership organization with nearly 200 members representing a variety of public and private organizations, all committed to improving health, access to care, and eliminating disparities in their communities. CJA mobilizes and assists these community health collaboratives through its ability to broker important dialogues and to convene stakeholders. The Georgia Health Policy Center is the administrative home for CJA.

GHPC—The Georgia Health Policy Center

GHPC provides evidence-based research, program development, and policy guidance to improve health status at the community level. The center's technical assistance supports system change and strives to improve population health at the local level. The GHPC approach to technical assistance focuses on sustainability, maintains a systems approach, tailors assistance to local needs, and values the relationship between partners. To date, GHPC's technical assistance team has partnered with more than 1,000 communities nationally to support programmatic and organizational development.

MHCU—Moving Health Care Upstream

Moving Health Care Upstream tests, shares, and accelerates population health innovations. The focus is on helping clinical systems go upstream. While the lens is children and families, the work applies generally to communities and learnings will be available on an open source platform. MCHU is funded by The Kresge Foundation with additional support from the Dorris Duke Charitable Foundation. Nemours Children's Health System and the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities co-direct MHCU.

Pathway to Pacesetter

The Pathway to Pacesetter program is the result of the 100 Million Healthier Lives and the Spreading Community Accelerators through Learning and Evaluation (SCALE) teams' efforts to identify simple, scalable, affordable ways to make meaningful technical assistance available to all communities. The Pathway to Pacesetter program will support over 100 communities in accelerating their improvement journey.

ReThink Health

ReThink Health works with communities to help them foster catalytic leadership and test innovative ideas for bridging and redesigning their health and health care systems to achieve system-wide change. ReThink Health envisions a "healthy health system"—one that bridges stakeholders from across the community by focusing on the critical domains of active stewardship, effective strategy, and sustainable financing. At the core of its approach is the interactive ReThink Health Dynamics Model. The Ripple Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation fund ReThink Health.

SCALE—Spreading Community Accelerators through Learning and Evaluation

SCALE is the first community-based phase of the 100 Million Healthier Lives initiative. The goal of SCALE is to equip communities with skills and resources to achieve significant community health improvement, to ultimately close equity gaps. The 20-month SCALE intensive involves partnering of "pacesetter" and "mentor" communities. SCALE, an Institute for Healthcare Improvement initiative, is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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