



THE PROCESS OF PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

September 2021

The first two-and-a-half years of the Aligning Systems for Health project stressed the importance of community co-leadership in cross-sector efforts.¹ Community co-leadership is expected to help partners focus on community concerns and promote more equitable outcomes. Understanding community members' prior experiences with collaboration may help institutional partners better collaborate with community partners, improving the odds of successful co-leadership.

In July and August 2021, the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) conducted interviews and a focus group with 15 community members who have participated in, and in some cases been affected by, collaboratives in their communities. The first goal of this work was to better understand community members' experiences with collaboratives. The second goal was to build relationships with community partners and to build experience that may be helpful to GHPC, our community partners, and others in future community partnerships. This brief addresses this second goal by presenting lessons learned about the community partnership process, itself, and was reviewed and revised in partnership with the participants.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

Building Trust

Community members often do not trust researchers and others entering their communities for the first time, especially when they enter only for the short term. Several participants expressed frustration with people, including sometimes researchers, who came into their communities but did not stay in contact and did not deeply engage with the residents. This kind of frustration may have affected decisions to participate in the study. Some of the people we initially contacted declined to participate in interviews, even after being assured their information would be kept confidential.

This project had a timeline of roughly three months. The challenges faced with building trust and recruiting participants in this timeline highlight the importance of planning enough time to create trust. The team was able to overcome some, but not all, of the challenges with building trust by contacting potential participants through partners that already had relationships with community

¹ Aligning Systems for Health is a project of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is coordinated by the Georgia Health Policy Center. Researchers at the Georgia Health Policy Center recently published a review of research on community voice in health collaboratives. Petiwala, A., Lanford, D., Landers, G., Minyard, K. (2021). Community voice in cross-sector alignment: concepts and strategies from a scoping review of the health collaboration literature. *BMC Public Health*, 21, 1-11. Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-021-10741-9>

members. An ideal outlined by the participants would be to take the time to establish rapport, engage in meaningful conversation, and demonstrate genuine interest in the challenges of the community. To help set the groundwork for future community partnerships, multiple staff were involved in most interactions with community members in order to build a network of relationships that would remain in place and be helpful in future community-oriented activities, even if there were changes in team staff.

Payments, Paperwork, and Time

Researchers and funders increasingly recognize a need to pay community participants in a way that honors their experience as a form of expertise. This means that payment for community participants may be higher in some cases than what community members received for research participation in the past. In this project, we adopted the new approach and paid community participants as experts. In some cases, this did not help build trust. Some potential participants were wary of what they would be asked to do and how their information would be used in return for such payment. Accordingly, talking more about different approaches to payment with participants may be helpful.

Other participants described a feeling that “monetary compensation is meaningless if it does not serve the purpose of enhancing — and changing the challenges of — the community.” Accordingly, community members may not participate if they do not perceive a benefit to the community.

The paperwork required to pay participants also created challenges. The burden on participants included obtaining, filling out, scanning, and returning several different forms. Some of these forms required personal information. The research team had several internal talks about ways to take the burden off participants, and solutions included talking about the paperwork with participants over the phone and following up with personalized emails. In the end, however, participants were still left with the same kind of paperwork that is filled out by professional consultants or their assistants, and the process was time-consuming for both participants and researchers. A more efficient process with reduced requirements could be helpful.

Timing was also a factor in cases where potential participants were unavailable for interviews during daytime hours. Conducting interviews only in daytime hours limited who could participate, and in the future, it may be helpful to have an option where interviews can take place in the evening or on weekends.

Compassion

Several participants spoke of the need for compassionate partners, describing compassion as a prerequisite for work with community members. One participant noted that “historically speaking, underserved communities suffer from lack of compassion from researchers and others.” Participants noted that researchers and others entering their communities should be ready to relate and not stay removed or withdrawn. There was also a suggestion to send a “recon team” to learn about the community and its challenges. That could help researchers identify factors such as language differences or community concerns that they could take into account as they begin building relationships.

Context and Communication

Some members of the research team felt that it was easier to communicate with participants from the same area (Atlanta) because there was a familiar setting for the discussion. This highlights the value of having experience in the communities where participants live whenever possible, whether through embeddedness in that community or through relationship building that begins before the research.

Having researchers from different backgrounds present in interviews helped the research team probe the same questions from different angles in some cases, making the questions clearer for the participants.

Emotional Interviews

Many of the participants regularly experience discrimination, poor treatment, unhelpful services, being ignored, and systemic disadvantages that have persisted for generations. In some cases, the interview subject matter evoked strong emotions as participants reflected on these difficult experiences. The interview team wanted to be sensitive to the stress participants felt while discussing their experiences but also wanted to provide a forum for participants to tell about their experiences when they felt led to do so. To limit unnecessary stress on the part of participants, the interview staff instituted several strategies: (1) working to create a space where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences, (2) beginning interviews with standard protocols from the institutional review board, including letting participants know they could conclude the interviews at any time with no reprisal, and (3) honoring participants' experiences by listening carefully. Drawing on the experience of the first few interviews, the team also decided to implement additional check-ins in cases where conversations seemed emotionally difficult for participants. In these check-ins, interviewers would ask participants if they wanted to continue or, alternatively, talk about a different subject. The goal was to help participants feel a greater sense of control over the interview, whether by sharing their experiences or choosing not to do so.

Gratitude

Several members of the interview team expressed to each other that they felt a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to work with community members. In internal meetings, members of the team expressed interest in additional work, as well as closer work, with community members in the future.

CONCLUSION

Understanding community members' prior experiences with collaboration may help institutional partners better collaborate with community partners, improving the odds of successful co-leadership. In July and August 2021, GHPC conducted interviews and a focus group with 15 community members who have participated in, and in some cases been affected by, collaboratives in their communities. This brief takes stock of this project and highlights lessons learned about the process of working with community partners in this research. Important lessons were learned about building trust, payments and paperwork, timing, the need for compassion, the importance of context, methods of communication, and emotions in interviews.

In the course of the project, participants provided GHPC with a wealth of ideas as well as valuable experience in community partnership building. Relationships were started with trusted community liaisons and community members themselves. The lessons highlighted here are likely to be helpful in the future for GHPC as well as others across the country wishing to collaborate.

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55 Park Place NE, 8th Floor
Atlanta, GA 30303
ghpc.gsu.edu/project/aligning