

ENGAGING PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



ChangeLab Solutions



“We would not be able to provide our residents with the services they need if we did not have strong partnerships with a lot of service providers.”

– Renee Nicolosi, director of resident and client services, Denver Housing Authority

Public health departments, public housing authorities, and hospitals regularly serve and interact with the people who stand to benefit the most from improving access to safe, stable, affordable housing, including low-income people and communities of color. Each institution has unique resources to address this issue, but the resources and power of these institutions can be even more profound when leveraged in partnership. This allows institutions to learn firsthand from the people they serve about their most pressing issues and needs, as well as what local assets are already in place to work toward meeting those needs, and it creates a space for sharing ideas, resources, skill sets, and diverse perspectives. When institutions engage in robust partnerships, they also increase the likelihood of achieving systemic change that might not have been possible without collaboration.

What Is Meant by Organizational Partnerships?

Organizational partnerships are collaborations between a local institution and government agencies, other local institutions, community-based organizations, or cross-sector partners, such as business, philanthropy, or academic institutions. These partnerships are essential to making healthy housing a shared vision and value, promoting multisector collaboration, and increasing a community’s capacity to effect positive change.⁹

A well-functioning organizational partnership brings diverse stakeholders together and expands available resources. It focuses on a shared problem and coordinates resources to minimize duplication of efforts. Organizational partnerships can create unique opportunities to support one another’s work, break down sector “silos,” encourage strategic and collaborative thinking, and allow partners to share costs and associated risks. In short, they allow partners to operate more efficiently and effectively.⁹

Organizational partnerships can:

- Move individual organizations from “competing to building consensus; from working alone to including others from diverse cultures, fields, and settings; from thinking mostly about activities, services, and programs to looking for complex, integrated strategies; and from focusing on short-term accomplishments to broad policy systems and environmental changes”¹⁰
- Create new or enhance existing communication channels and build trust among organizations and agencies¹⁰
- Facilitate information sharing; build stronger networks; and increase access to experts, ideas, materials, financial and social capital, and other resources¹⁰
- Break down silos and encourage strategic and collaborative thinking, and allow partners to share costs and associated risks¹⁰
- Allow partners to operate more efficiently and effectively⁹
- Achieve better results than any single group or agency could achieve on their own¹⁰



Benefits & Potential Challenges

Multisector collaborations require a strong leader and facilitator, sometimes referred to as the “quarterback,” to mobilize the diverse stakeholders and keep them engaged and coordinated.⁹ Public health departments, public housing authorities, and hospitals can make natural quarterbacks within their partnerships, bringing stability and commitment – 2 essential traits for any leader or facilitator. They can provide the necessary administrative support to sustain effective partnerships. They are also well positioned to access and analyze data to better understand community needs and evaluate the effectiveness of partnership interventions. In return for their investment as quarterbacks, these institutions improve their working understanding of community assets, build trusting relationships with partners, and gain support from the community at large, all of which are vital to effecting positive and lasting changes at the intersection of health and housing.

Organizational partnerships can be formal or informal. Informal partnerships are grounded in interactions between people who are familiar with each other’s work and/or know each other personally.³ Informal partnerships serve as a key channel for knowledge sharing and trust and consensus building that can lead to collective action and collective empowerment.³ They also play a critical role in creating a safe space for dissenting views and dialogue, prompting discussions and disagreements, and allowing for new ideas and sometimes controversial opinions to surface that may be suppressed in a formal partnership, but can be key to generating innovations in practice.³

A common challenge is funding. Partners’ involvement may wane or end completely when major problems (or high-priority opportunities) arise in their primary area of business, particularly if the partnership is not separately funded.² Even if anchor institutions fund a partnership, those institutions are susceptible to budget changes, especially when they rely on state and federal government support. For all of these reasons, strong buy-in and support from the leadership at each partner’s organization is essential to help ensure sustained engagement through possible fiscal challenges.

Another challenge that’s relevant to health and housing is how to share data. As noted by the Urban Institute, data sharing “is critical for understanding the outcomes and cost implications of housing and health care partnerships.”⁴ Some institutions may lack the infrastructure to collect and exchange information between different partners. Additionally, there may be limits on sharing sensitive information (eg, hospitals disclosing health information protected by HIPAA).⁴



Developing Successful Organizational Partnerships

“We’ve [Bon Secours] never been a housing development entity. Enterprise [Community Partners] is that kind of entity. . . . They had a good reputation. So in the beginning, we traded on their reputation when we were going after financing. They had a broader set of core competencies.”

– Brother Art Caliman, vice president, sponsorship, Bon Secours Health System

To reap the full benefits of an organizational partnership and help overcome the potential challenges, drivers of new organizational partnerships should institute a careful and deliberate planning process at the outset.⁴ This should include a needs assessment and an appraisal of existing resources to identify potential partners, their respective roles, and the assets they can bring to the partnership. Additional criteria to consider when evaluating potential partners include whether the partner is involved in health or housing work already; whether it serves overlapping populations; whether the partner can provide data or stories to illustrate impact; and whether vision, goals, and expectations for the health and housing partnership are aligned.⁵

The nascent partnership should have clearly stated vision, mission, and values agreed upon and firmly supported by all partners.² The partnership should articulate its goals and objectives, communicating them widely and making them readily accessible to all partners and the public for accountability purposes.²

How to Create and Maintain Successful Organizational Partnerships

Defining the Need for a Partnership

Step 1: Identify the added value of a partnership, and don't be afraid to think broadly about what kind of value that might be. For example, the Denver Housing Authority (DHA) has over 100 partnerships with community-based organizations that allow for the provision of additional services to residents. DHA's financial partnerships have allowed it to accomplish more than it could have on its own: “For every \$1 of public funds, we're able to leverage \$4 of private funding,” explains Kimball Crangle, former senior developer at DHA and manager for the Mariposa redevelopment project.

Step 2: Survey the field and look for any other partnerships doing similar work.⁷ When applicable, determine whether it makes more sense to form a new partnership than to join an existing one.

Step 3: Ensure buy-in from senior leadership to enter into a partnership and/or serve as its quarterback. Tammy Lee at the Alameda County Public Health Department reflects on the importance of institutional buy-in for the department's partnership with Causa Justa :: Just Cause to do housing work: “It's been key to have leadership on board with ... an epidemiologist doing this kind of work. . . . It means that they will let the community epidemiologist spend months and months and months ... looking deep in partnership with the community at this particular issue of foreclosure.”



Partnership Formation

Step 4: Identify potential partners using an assets-based approach.⁶ For each partner, think about how the organization’s mission, strengths, and resources aligns with and supports the partnership’s intended work. As an example, Brother Art Caliman at Bon Secours Hospital in Baltimore saw that Enterprise Community Partners had tremendous experience developing affordable housing, and would be more valuable as a partner than a competitor for resources. “We don’t need to come into a place where people are [developing affordable housing] and they’re good at it and become a competitor,” said Caliman. “We do need to say we’re a big health system [and we’d like to] find a way to partner with you to help develop more or better, safe, and affordable housing . . . in the particular communities that we serve.”

Step 5: Bring the selected partners together for a kick-off meeting. Talk through the purpose of the partnership. Map out the mutual benefits of the partnership for all parties to secure buy-in and commitment.⁸ Come to an agreement on the high-level vision, mission, and values of the partnership, as well as specific goals and objectives.²

Step 6: Come to an agreement on a shared framework and processes for reaching the goals and objectives of the partnership. If possible, create a shared language and terms for discussing this approach consistently across organizations.⁶ Create a formal decisionmaking process and partnership norms, “a set of shared values that act as informal guidelines on how partnership members will behave and interact with one another.”⁷ Topics may include communication, knowledge and resource management, conflict resolution, and meeting protocols.

Step 7: Talk through the capacities and limitations of each partner and begin to define roles. Take stock of skills and competencies needed to manage and support the partnership.⁷ Where necessary, provide education, training, and technical assistance to help partners meet goals and objectives.⁴ Acknowledge any differences between partners and a willingness to accept them. Address only those differences that impede on partnership success. The process of taking stock and identifying areas for additional education or training is crucial, particularly when first entering into a new line of work.

Assets Organizational Partners Bring to the Table¹

Public Health Departments, Public Housing Authorities, and Hospitals

- Subject matter expertise
- Land
- Data sharing, collection, and analysis
- Funding
- Brand value/reach
- Cultural understanding
- Meeting and event space
- Technical support
- Grant writing capabilities
- Additional staffing capacity

Other Organizational Partners

- Complementary subject matter expertise
- Provision of unique services
- Community relationships
- Established networks
- Relationships with government partners and local elected officials
- A meeting space that may be considered neutral
- The ability to openly advocate
- Additional staffing capacity



Setting up the Partnership for Success

Step 8: Determine a plan for action and priorities, including a timeline based on each activity within the plan. Clarify leadership, including your institution's potential role as the partnership quarterback. Clearly delineate individual members' roles and responsibilities. In the partnership between the Alameda County Department of Public Health and housing advocacy group Causa Justa :: Just Cause, ACDPH's Tammy Lee noted the importance of role definition in maintaining community trust. "One of the challenges is ... balancing the research and organizing," said Lee. In this case, the department crunched the numbers and decided to share its research findings with Causa Justa :: Just Cause, which would then take the data and transform it into a story that could be used for community organizing and advocacy. "So it's pretty important to ... establish some protocols and processes, so that you're able to get unbiased research, but then also push the envelope in terms of organizing."

Step 9: Establish a performance management framework that defines criteria for benchmarking achievements and allows for monitoring and measurement. Ensure that this framework provides the partnership with the opportunity to act on evaluation results and changes in internal and external demands.⁷

Step 10: Implement a robust communications strategy for the partnership, both internally and externally. Use the communications strategy to instill a culture of learning and knowledge sharing between organizations, and accountability between partners and the broader community.

Step 11: Develop a diverse fundraising plan to allow for continued operation of the partnership in the event of changes in current funding streams.

Reflect and Iterate

Step 12: Set up regular opportunities to reflect on the partnership's vision, goals, and progress. Celebrate successes. Learn from failures. Be open to making changes where necessary (eg, seeking additional partners to join, shifting goals or priorities, etc.) to become more responsive to community needs. For example, Brother Caliman of Bon Secours characterizes his team's housing work in different phases. In one of its most recent phases, it identified a new partner: churches. "A lot of our recent developments have been in partnership with either local churches that had a piece of land, and/or they had congregants who were seniors or low-income, living in terrible housing and didn't want to leave the neighborhood, didn't want to leave the church. So the church was interested in having some kind of housing, but no idea of how you'd do that." At this point, Caliman and his team could bring their working knowledge of supplying housing, and the churches could offer their land for housing their congregants.



Learn More

We strongly encourage you to also read the “Partnering with Communities” section of this guide to see how working with community members can bring its own advantages, complementing your organizational partnerships.

Endnotes

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