

Collective Impact: Aligning Organizational Efforts for Broader Social Change

DIFFERENT AS THEY MIGHT seem on the surface, organizations in the private and public sectors have many goals in common. Working together, their synergy yields tremendous potential in achieving those aims, as evidenced in the use of an emerging approach known as collective impact.

Within the sphere of health care professionals, both governmental and academic, the same holds true. The common agendas of groups such as the National WIC Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics afford the opportunity for any number of mutually reinforcing activities, such as participation in the United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC), which won a \$694,000 grant in April 2012 with this practice.

By developing multifaceted initiatives along the lines of structured collaboration, funding opportunities not only widen, but the chance to impact broader social change is increased. Jeanne Blankenship, MS, RD, CLE, vice president of Policy Initiatives and Advocacy for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, said registered dietitians (RDs) need to recognize the many players involved in topics as complex as childhood obesity, breastfeeding, and nutrition on the whole. Learning to think and work in more collaborative terms helps all involved and is key to the future of health care, she said.

STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

Collective impact has been loosely defined by its advocates as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common

agenda for solving a specific social problem.”¹

First introduced as a concept describing efforts, such as The Strive Partnership, an educational initiative in Cincinnati, OH,¹ the joining of unlikely partners has yielded positive trends in high school graduation rates, fourth-grade reading and math scores, and the number of preschool children deemed prepared for kindergarten, all in spite of recessionary budget cuts.

“Why has Strive made progress when so many other efforts have failed? It is because a core group of community leaders decided to abandon their individual agendas in favor of a collective approach to improve student achievement. More than 300 leaders of local organizations agreed to participate, including the heads of influential private and corporate foundations, city government officials, school district representatives, the presidents of eight universities, and the executive directors of hundreds of education-related nonprofit and advocacy groups.”¹

Participants understood that isolating one goal within the education continuum wouldn't affect the interwoven problems facing area schools.

“No single organization, however innovative or powerful, could accomplish this alone. Instead, their ambitious mission became to coordinate improvements at every stage of a young person's life, from ‘cradle to career.’”¹

Projects using the collective impact approach share five key conditions that distinguish it from other collaborative efforts. These conditions are

- the use of a common agenda;
- a shared measurement system;
- mutually reinforcing activities;
- continuous communication; and
- the presence of a backbone organization.²

Addressing an issue as broad as education reform, childhood obesity, or di-

etary needs of elderly people is challenging enough, particularly when done by a group Blankenship described as uncommon associates. Despite approaching the topic from a variety of unique perspectives, the group must maintain a common agenda, or “shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.”² Likewise, a consistent form of data management must be used, and agreed upon, to keep the focus on the problem at hand, rather than the interests of any one group involved. Each group, by definition, brings a particular specialty to the project, and the activities of these groups must be coordinated so as to mutually reinforce one another, all the while maintaining the requisite differentiation needed to address the problem at all angles. Continuous communication comes into play when, as was the case in The Strive Partnership, as many as 300 different individuals and organizations are involved.

The fifth condition, that of a backbone organization, helps solidify the effort.

“Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.”²

In contrast to collective impact stands *isolated impact*, where private and public sector participants operate removed one from the other. Nonprofits work separately, often competing for the same funding, as grantors select individual recipients and projects rather than holistic models.

For a collective impact approach to be successful, the collective first requires “influential champions,”² adequate financial resources, and a sense of urgency for change. Whether the influential champions of a cause are private sector executives or public sector activists, dynamic leadership is required to

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generate top-level support for an initiative, thus ensuring adequate funding and convincing others of the need for change.

“Together, these preconditions create the opportunity and motivation necessary to bring people who have never before worked together into a collective impact initiative and hold them in place until the initiative’s own momentum takes over.”²

AT WORK IN NUTRITION

Blankenship said the collective impact approach is at work in a number of nutrition initiatives, including that of the USBC, one of the Academy’s alliances, which, in April 2012 announced its receipt of a \$694,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The USBC is one of five organizations deemed “Field Builders” that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation is bringing together to address breastfeeding as part of its “First Food” initiative.

The USBC is an independent nonprofit coalition of more than 40 organizations, all sharing a common mission to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding. As its past chair, Blankenship said the collective impact model is an integral part of the project. The 3-year award will fund a two-part initiative to establish and maintain national and state coalitions creating “collective action to implement policy, systems, and environmental change needed to increase breastfeeding rates and eliminate disparities.”³

The USBC, affiliated state coalitions, and federal interagency groups were identified as partners in achieving 20 recommendations made in “The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding” released in January 2011. The first phase of the grant initiative will help support state-level breastfeeding coalitions, including comprehensive assessments to enhance training and networking opportunities for leaders, as well as establish customized technical assistance programs. The second phase applies the collective impact model toward the specific goal of increasing access to, and continuity of skilled support for, breastfeeding between hospitals and community health settings.

“Upon discharge from the hospital, many new mothers are unable to find or access skilled breastfeeding support. Hospitals, health care providers, and

community organizations often lack systems to connect mothers to this skilled support.”³

The responsibility to fill this void lies with a wide range of stakeholders spanning sectors private, public, and governmental. Hospitals, community organizations, educators, and nutrition professionals all play a role in the collaborative effort.

In September 2012, Blankenship explained that large grant-making entities and corporate foundations alike share a growing interest in achieving the most progress possible for their dollars. In the past, fundraisers have sought money individually for more narrowly defined topics. And when the grant-makers later examine the impact their funds have had, they see results that reflect that narrow focus.

“Most funders, faced with the task of choosing a few grantees from many applicants, try to ascertain which organizations make the greatest contribution toward solving a social problem. Grantees, in turn, compete to be chosen by emphasizing how their individual activities produce the greatest effect Funders search for more effective interventions as if there were a cure for failing schools that only needs to be discovered, in the way that medical cures are discovered in laboratories. As a result of this process, nearly 1.4 million nonprofits try to invent independent solutions to major social problems, often working at odds with each other and exponentially increasing the perceived resources required to make meaningful progress.”¹

For a number of reasons both economic and social, these funders are seeking to broaden their approach and address larger scale social issues. This opens up possibilities if the individual groups collaborate with a common agenda addressing those big topics such as obesity, Blankenship said.

In the same vein, in October 2012 the W.K. Kellogg Foundation concluded a 2-year \$75,000 grant for work toward an integrated food and farming system in East Lansing, MI.⁴ The relatively broad purpose of that grant was to, “Enhance the economic sustainability of families within Covert Township, Michigan, by strengthening the financial, organizational, agricultural, nutritional, and physical skills of vulnerable youth and their families,” thus incorporating

a wide range of stakeholders into a common mission.

Ultimately, many of the fundable projects stemming from health care in America have some tie to obesity, Blankenship said. And what group, corporate or otherwise, is not interested in that?

RISKS TO CONSIDER

Collaborative efforts provide obvious benefits through diversity of backgrounds and experiences. That said, certain risks have been identified as pitfalls to avoid. This is particularly the case when fostering relationships between the private and public sectors, as detailed in a policy study initiated by the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition.⁵

Concerns expressed by those involved in panel discussions on the topic of public-private partnerships included a greater corporate influence over public policy and the potential for groups to view private sector engagements as ends unto themselves.³ Potential opportunity costs also exist if corporations attempt to steer projects toward profitable endeavors without regard to nutrition science⁵ as a corporation's ultimate responsibility lies with its shareholders, not in social justice.

The potential for conflicts of interest isn't necessarily limited to the private sector though.

"As one participant pointed out, most high-profile academics are themselves at risk of conflict of interest because they 'build their entire careers around a particular perspective'."⁵

Those risks understood, corporate leaders might point out that without direct input from, and collaboration with, public official experts, their awareness of problems is limited.⁵ Also, these potential influences are ever-present as researchers and solicitors of grants seek corporate sponsorship for existing programs.

Meanwhile, corporations do answer to their shareholders, and whether the question is obesity's impact on health care costs, or improved production, the collective impact model is being studied as social problems mix with business. Mars, Inc, a global manufacturer

of candy and chocolate products including US brands such as M&M's and Snickers, has been using the model as a means of securing its own supply chain.¹ The corporation has joined with the World Bank, farmers, local governments, and other nonprofits to work with cocoa farms in the Ivory Coast, from whence it derives a large portion of its cocoa.

"Research suggests that better farming practices and improved plant stocks could triple the yield per hectare, dramatically increasing farmer incomes and improving the sustainability of Mars' supply chain."¹

NO MORE COMMUNICATION IN SILOS

As Blankenship observed, the mission of the Academy lends itself toward collaboration and is tailor-made for collective impact. The idea of "empowering members to be the nation's food and nutrition leaders" is a broad mission, as is the Academy's vision of "optimizing the nation's health through food and nutrition." Whether seeking partnerships to promote breastfeeding, or networking to place locally grown produce in elementary schools, RDs need to recognize that other players are on the field. Instead of competing for grant money to address singular issues, the application process can be strengthened significantly by working in conjunction with other individuals or groups. The key, she said, is to think in terms of "what's in it for us, not just what's in it for me."

And health through nutrition is a hot topic, with RDs providing valued expertise. In Somerville, MA, a collective impact approach was undertaken as the city took aim at reducing and preventing childhood obesity through an initiative titled "Shape up Somerville."¹

Led by Christina Economos, PhD, an associate professor at Tufts University's Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, the project received funding from an eclectic mix of interested parties including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Blue Cross Blue Shield

Massachusetts, and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley. Action steps included schools and restaurants agreeing to provide healthier foods, teach nutrition, and promote physical activity, while the city organized a local farmers' market and provided reduced-price gym memberships for city employees. Sidewalks were also modified to encourage increased walking.

"The result was a statistically significant decrease in body mass index among the community's young children between 2002 and 2005."¹

The power of diverse groups adopting a common agenda and shared measurement system to engage mutually reinforcing activities is being demonstrated daily, as continuous communication grows between the increasing number of backbone organizations rising to meet these opportunities. And in the effort to optimize the nation's health through nutrition, RDs are needed to play the role of influential champions.

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