

RESEARCH BRIEF

Complexity in Primary Care and CBO Partnerships in Depression Care

What is known about this topic?

- A number of essential factors of successful partnerships have been identified.
- Even with these essential factors in place, cross-organizational partnerships often struggle.

What this brief adds?

- Examining primary care clinic and CBO partnerships in practice highlights their inherent, often unacknowledged, complexity.
- We highlight three strategies clinics and CBOs relied upon to negotiate complexity—adaptation, integration and cultivation.

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Challenges—Partnering is Complex

1. Fluid partnership boundaries

The idea of who is a partner and the roles different partners play are fluid and will change over time.

2. Multiple perspectives, goals, and cultures

Partnerships will include a variety of perspectives and be made up of different organizational cultures which may lead to conflicting foci, values and views of the intervention among the partners.

3. Unpredictability

Turnover, changes in leadership and personnel, and other events can result in partnerships and their dynamics being unpredictable. This unpredictability may disrupt work flow and plans.

Opportunities—Navigating Complexity

1. Adaptability

One approach to manage complexity is to build in processes to continuously adapt the partnership to changing circumstances. This might include reorganizing partners' roles, modifying intervention activities or renegotiating agreements between organizations.

2. Integration

A second approach is to establish full partnership integration, reflected by shared decision-making and communication across multiple organizational levels.

3. Cultivation

Another approach is to cultivate a unique identity for the partnership. An initial task to address the complexity of partnering is to develop a specific identity for the partnership and find ways to promote its value to both core and non-core actors within and outside the partnership.

Final thoughts

Our results suggest partnering organizations should acknowledge complexity and anticipate related challenges. Partners may consider strategies to flexibly respond to the unpredictability and fluidity inherent to cross-organizational partnerships.

Reference: Henderson, S., Wagner, J. L., Gosdin, M. M., Hoelt, T. J., Unützer, J., Rath, L., & Hinton, L. (2020). Complexity in partnerships: A qualitative examination of collaborative depression care in primary care clinics and community-based organisations in California, United States. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 28(4): 1199–1208