IMPROVING POPULATION HEALTH
THROUGH MULTISECTOR COLLABORATION

Building Multisector Collaboration for the Long-Term

This brief is part of a series developed by the Population Health Innovation Lab (PHIL), a program of the Public Health Institute. The *Improving Population Health Through Multisector Collaboration* brief series synthesizes lessons learned from PHIL's Aligning Systems for Health research conducted from May 2020 – November 2022 in six parts:

Brief 5 focuses on how to sustain the work of multisector collaboratives through fair, inclusive, and equitable practices.

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BRIEF 5 TAKEAWAYS

- Multisector collaboratives (MSCs) do important work to produce intentional, long-term improvements in health systems that address community health issues.
- One approach to multisector collaboration that has shown early success with sustainability is the Accountable Communities of/for Health (ACH) model.
- To ensure the long-term viability of productive collaboration, MSCs should develop equitable and inclusive practices, build shared values and commitment, and share resources with one another.
- Policymakers, funders, and practitioners should invest in initiatives that center the interpersonal elements of collaboration, such as fairness, inclusivity, trust, and resource sharing to build initiatives that will be long-lasting.

Improving Population Health through Multisector Collaboration

Improving population health requires a coordinated, cross-sector approach that directly addresses the social drivers of health (SDOH) such as discrimination, housing, transportation, education, job opportunities, food access, and pollution.[1] It is estimated that 70% of population health is attributable to these social factors, many of which worsen health outcomes but exist outside of the control of health care organizations.[2]

Health-focused multisector collaboratives (MSCs) bring together public and private organizations and community representatives to confront these upstream causes of health disparities through intentional collaboration. MSCs across the United States are working to transform the country's fragmented healthcare industry into a holistic, coordinated health system that "consist[s] of all organizations, people and actions whose primary intent is to promote, restore or maintain health."[3]

MSCs in Action: Health-focused MSCs bring together diverse partners to sustain population health improvements. For example, San Diego ACH created a new model for care coordination called Neighborhood Networks that creates value for Medicaid managed care plans, social services organizations, and Medicaid consumers while generating revenue to sustain the MSC's work toward positive systems change and improved equity.

The Role of Sustainability

Because MSCs are working toward long-term goals, it is important that they sustain their efforts over time. **Sustainability** in health-focused MSCs refers to the "maintenance or improvement of resources, infrastructure, activities, outcomes, and relationships" that impact community health over time. Many of the outcomes MSCs are working to achieve—such as positive systems change or improved equity—require regular attention to ensure progress is maintained and advanced. Complex problems like systemic racism and health inequity may never be completely solved, so continued effort is needed to ensure outcomes keep improving. For this reason, sustainability is a chief concern of many MSCs.

SUSTAINABILITY IS IMPORTANT IF COMMUNITY HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS ARE TO BE EFFECTIVE IN COLLABORATING TO ACHIEVE LONG TERM HEALTH GOALS.[5]

Leveraging Collaboration Dynamics for Sustainability

MSCs can leverage collaboration dynamics to sustain and advance outcomes like improved equity and positive systems change. Collaboration dynamics are the internal working processes among participants of an MSC. These dynamics affect collaborative outcomes like the ability to sustain engagement, build trust, establish commitment, and maintain shared understanding of problems and solutions over time. Successfully functioning collaboration dynamics are the key ingredients for sustaining MSCs and the outcomes they achieve. PHIL's research identified several collaboration dynamics that positively influence sustainability: using equitable and inclusive processes, building shared values and commitment among MSC participants, and sharing resources.

Data & Methods

Data for this brief come from PHIL's Aligning Systems for Health research, which used a mixed-methods approach. Data were analyzed using process tracing and structural equation modeling. Analyses employed survey data, secondary contextual data, interviews, focus groups, meeting observations, and documents collected between May 2020 – August 2022 for 22 health-focused MSCs using the Accountable Communities of/for Health (ACH) model. ACHs are a type of MSC that align social services, public health, and medical care to collectively address health at a local level and from a community perspective.[7, 8] For further details on study methods, please review Methods Overview: Aligning Systems for Health with Accountable Communities of/for Health (ACHs).
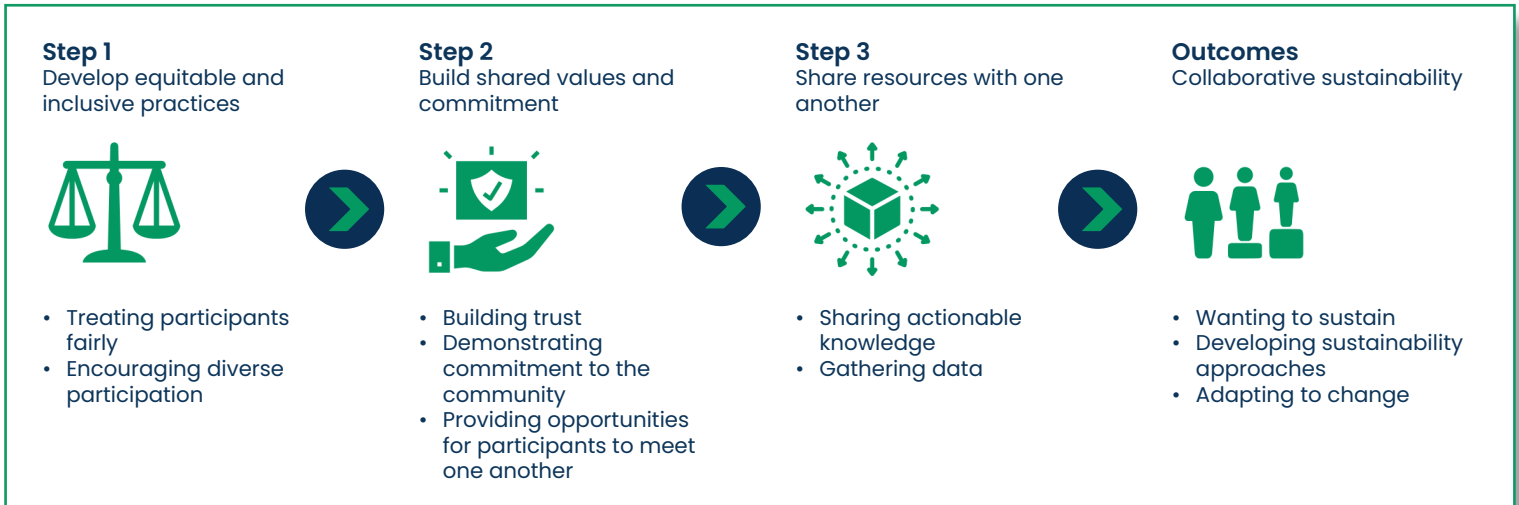
STUDY SAMPLE

- Two states (California & Washington)
- 22 ACHs
- 642 research participants
  - 596 survey respondents
  - 85 interview and focus group participants
- 1,796 documents

How to Sustain Multisector Collaboration

Research shows that MSCs can leverage collaboration dynamics to generate collaborative sustainability. PHIL's findings demonstrate how developing equitable and inclusive practices, building shared values and commitment, and sharing resources can foster MSC sustainability. The following sections provide examples of collaboration dynamics that led to collaborative sustainability in four MSCs.

Figure 1 provides an overview of key steps MSCs should take to ensure their work is sustainable. Details of the graphic are discussed in the following sections.

Figure 1. Collaboration Dynamics Leading to Collaborative Sustainability

Step 1
Develop equitable and inclusive practices

Step 2
Build shared values and commitment

Step 3
Share resources with one another

Outcomes
Collaborative sustainability

- Treating participants fairly
- Encouraging diverse participation

- Building trust
- Demonstrating commitment to the community
- Providing opportunities for participants to meet one another

- Sharing actionable knowledge
- Gathering data

- Wanting to sustain
- Developing sustainability approaches
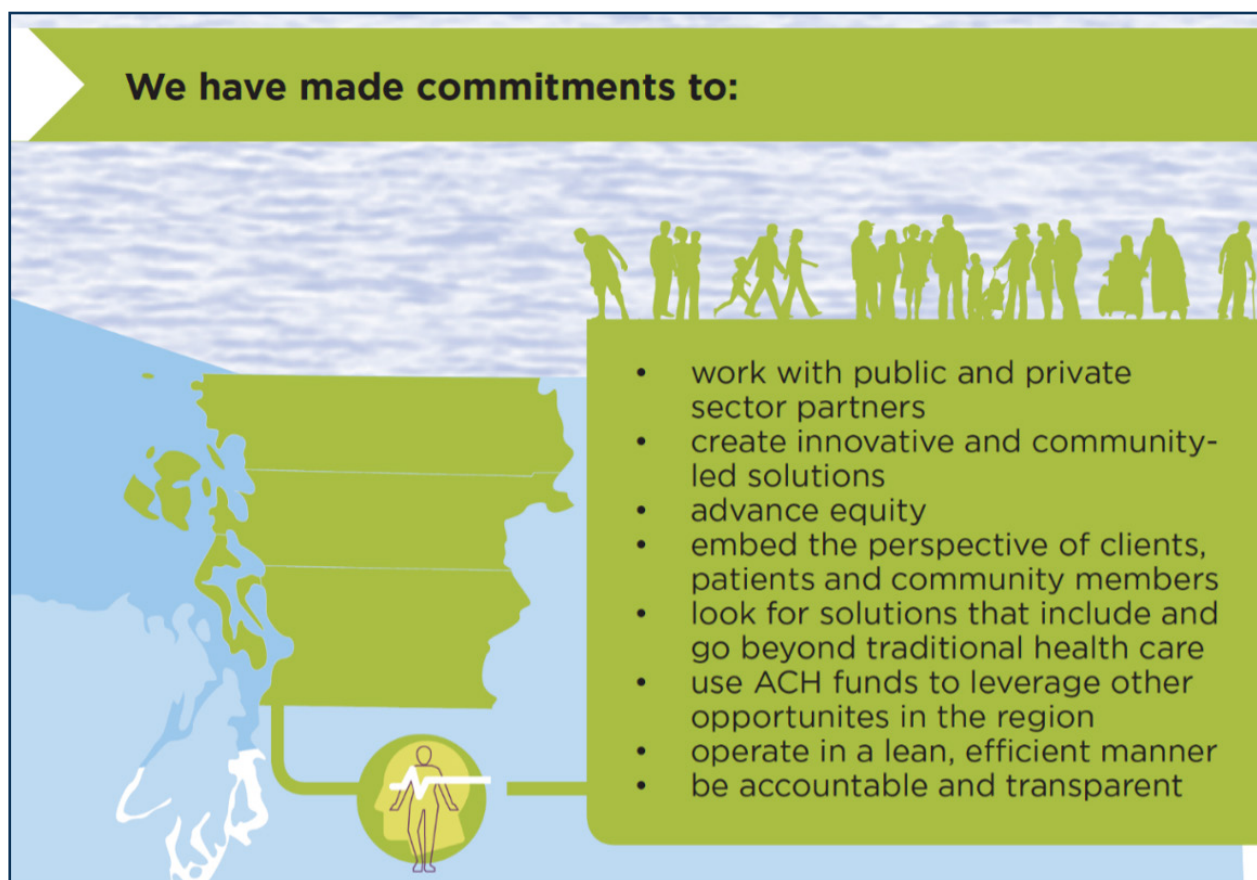- Adapting to change

Step 1: Develop Equitable and Inclusive Practices

The long-term success of MSCs requires contributions from all partners, which includes both those working directly with MSCs as well as members of the community that they serve. At the outset of their work, MSCs should develop fair and equitable processes that encourage diverse participation in the MSC, including organizations from various sectors and representatives from different communities.

MSC staff should work alongside participants to design and implement equitable processes that make engagement accessible to all, such as hosting meetings outside of regular business hours, having various meeting locations, and giving the option to join meetings remotely.

To ensure that there is adequate representation of diverse participants within an MSC, staff can encourage diverse participation using approaches such as creating board seats designated for representatives of specific sectors or members of local communities or by creating governing councils that give decision-making power to underrepresented groups. Figure 2 shows example commitments made by North Sound ACH in Washington to their community.

Figure 2. MSC Commitments[9]

We have made commitments to:

- work with public and private sector partners
- create innovative and community-led solutions
- advance equity
- embed the perspective of clients, patients and community members
- look for solutions that include and go beyond traditional health care
- use ACH funds to leverage other opportunites in the region
- operate in a lean, efficient manner
- be accountable and transparent

Step 2: Build Shared Values and Commitment

When convening diverse groups of people, it is equally important to be able to answer the questions, "Can I describe what we're trying to accomplish?" and "Do I know how we're going to achieve our goals?" MSCs should take care to develop shared values and commitment for the vision that guides the MSC's work.

Once shared values and commitment have been built, MSCs can start to grow trust among participants and with the community through equitable and inclusive practices. Trust is the cornerstone of a vibrant collaborative community.[10] With trust, it is easier for participants to understand one another, share resources, and prioritize collective goals over their own individual interests.

When people know that an MSC was designed to be responsive to their community, participants are more likely to invest in the MSC and each other. By hosting opportunities for respectful conversations with MSC staff, partners, and community members, MSCs can develop shared values and commitment that encourages MSC participants to commit the time, energy, and resources needed to sustain the MSC.

EXAMPLE
In one interview with an MSC participant, they said, "My perception is that [the MSC] was extremely transparent. A lot of information was on the website in advance. There's always opportunities for input, community response, meetings. They are very much wanting to find out: what do people actually want, what do people need? And then making sure that the decisions that were made were available for review, that there was a clear explanation of things that were done now."[11]

Step 3: Share Resources with One Another

With a strong shared commitment to support the operations of an MSC, participants can work together to pool their resources and advance the MSC's vision. In addition to funding and labor, resources can include knowledge about effective operating procedures, data that is shared among partners, and insights from community members about local needs.

These resources enable an MSC to leverage the strengths of its network of partners. Shared resources give MSC participants opportunities to grow and learn, constantly improving to stay effective for the long-term. Figure 3 shows how one MSC built capacity by sharing resources and investing in the community.

Figure 3. Community Resiliency Fund[12]
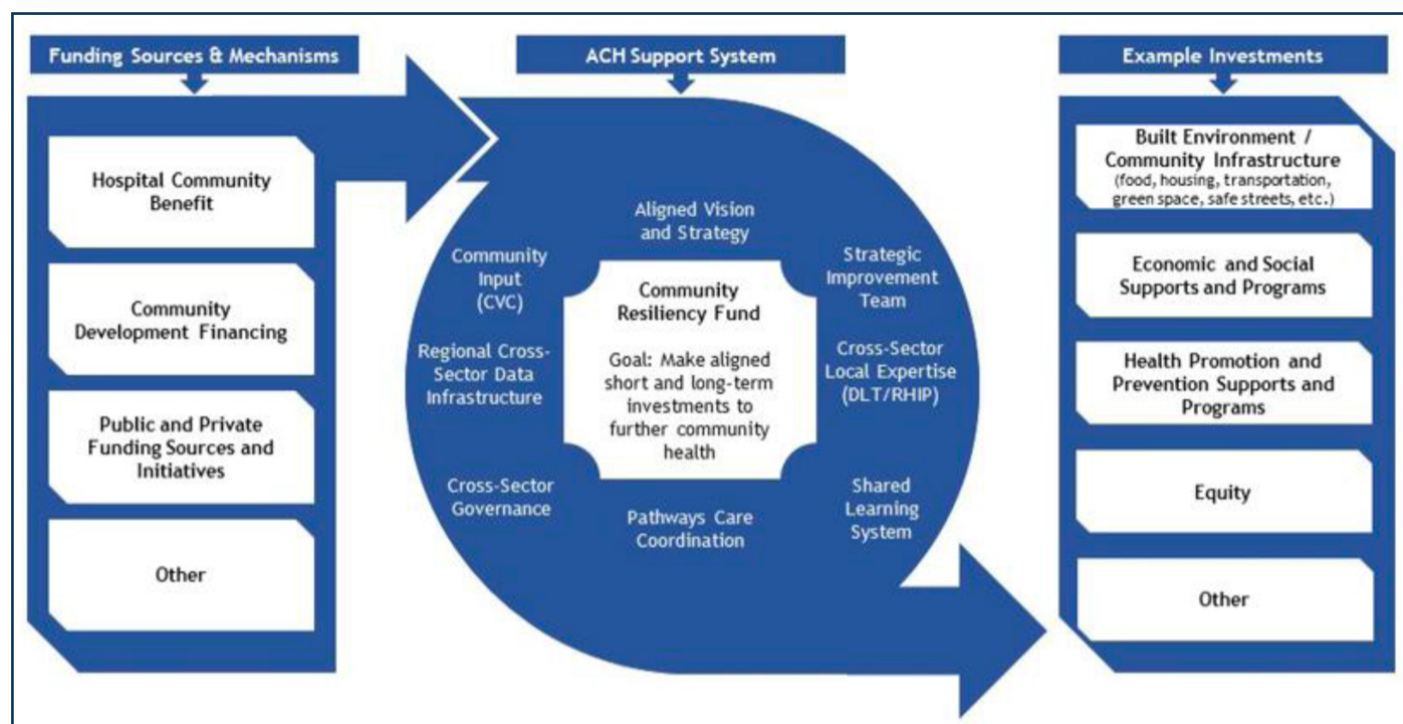
Outcome: Collaborative Sustainability

Early signs of sustainability can be seen in MSCs like ACHs that have been operating for five to seven years. Sustainability looks like MSC participants expressing desire to sustain collaborative efforts, MSCs developing sustainability approaches such as business plans, and adaptation in the face of uncertainty.

For example, PHIL's research showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, MSCs pivoted from their planned work to instead support pandemic response and build community resilience. This ability to adapt to current events and community needs and leverage an existing collaborative network to respond to unforeseen priorities is a remarkable testament to the potential staying power of health-focused MSCs. By understanding and carefully shaping collaboration dynamics, MSCs can increase their chances of sustaining collaboration that generates positive outcomes for communities.

Is Your MSC on the Path to Sustainability?

PHIL's research points to several collaboration dynamics that positively influence an MSC's ability to sustain outcomes. Use the list below to check your MSC's progress on key sustainability indicators.

- Does the MSC use fair and equitable practices?
  - *Example*: Thriving Together NCW designates board seats for each county and tribe in its region, holds open board meetings, and provides meeting minutes, presentations, and supporting materials by request.
- Does the MSC provide opportunities for diverse participation?
  - *Example*: Better Health Together provides numerous channels for participants to contribute to collaborative planning and decision-making through its intentionally diverse board, technical councils, and Collaboratives.
- Do MSC participants trust one another?
  - *Example*: Hope Rising Lake County hosted an innovation summit for partners that created the opportunity for trust building and deepened understanding of one another's work.
- Are resources, knowledge, and data shared across MSC participants?
  - *Example*: North Sound ACH curates an online resource library for partners and welcomes their suggestions for new resources using an intentional resource curation process.
- Do MSC participants feel accountable for MSC outcomes?
  - *Example*: FCHIP secures the commitment of founding members, in kind founding members, and event sponsors to share accountability for the ACH's collective actions and outcomes.
- Have participants developed new resources or capacities through the MSC?
  - *Example*: Elevate Health created a community investment function called OnePierce Community Resiliency Fund (OnePierce)
- Does the MSC have a formal business or sustainability plan in place?
  - *Example*: Greater Health Now provides services to local organizations, including technical assistance with implementing systems to improve delivery and track outcomes, workforce development through training and wellness programs, and community engagement strategies.

Moving Forward

PHIL's research shows that sustainability is integral to successful, long-term systems change and equity improvements in communities. MSCs present numerous opportunities to thoughtfully build relationships with diverse partners. Together, collaboratives aim to produce change that carries on for generations. This brief has provided a different lens to sustainability by emphasizing strong collaboration dynamics and value-add to the community over time. The real long-term feasibility of MSCs depends upon buy-in—people need to see value in and be committed to collaboration to keep MSCs strong. MSCs can facilitate long-term buy-in by creating equitable and inclusive procedures, developing shared motivation for their work, and sharing resources among participants.

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