Operationalizing Partnerships for Quality Improvement and Health Equity Initiatives

Making A Connection

During your needs assessment, you may have identified an opportunity to improve equitable care for underserved patients that requires, or would be strengthened by, collaboration with an external partner. Before reaching out to potential community partners, be sure to research their mission, values, and history. Ask yourself:

Do their goals align with mine?

Do my services meet an expressed need of theirs?

Next, identify key leaders with whom you plan to connect and learn about their backgrounds as well. If contact information is published on their website, write them a brief and direct email explaining who you are, what your goals are, and how you would like to partner. Request the opportunity to meet them.

An Important Note: Community-based organizations have long-standing trust with the people they serve, and exercise caution to protect them from harm and exploitation. Even though you are well-intended, don't expect the organization to immediately agree to any form of partnership. They will likely want to spend time getting to know you and your organization to understand if you are trustworthy and aligned with their values. Be prepared for them to ask you some hard questions regarding the nature of your request and the history of your organization:

"Why haven't you reached out to us until now, when your organization has been around for (X) years?"

"Do you plan to fund this work through a grant, and if so, what will you do when the funding runs out?"

"Does your organization have a values statement? How have they demonstrated those values?"

During this process, consider these "Key Principles" of a Community-Based Participatory Partnership as outlined by the March of Dimes Making Community Partnerships Work Toolkit:

→ Share a common vision, mission, goals, and values

→ Have genuine interest in, and commitment to, the community

→ Show mutual trust and respect for partners

→ Recognize the strengths and contributions of all partners

→ Share leadership, decision-making power, resources, and credit among partners

→ Ensure that each member of the partnership is treated equally

→ Foster a safe environment for clear and open communication that values feedback from all partners

→ Value the knowledge and expertise of all partners

→ Gain community input

→ Value diversity

→ Understand that relationships take time to develop and that they change over time

Defining Roles and Responsibilities in a Partnership

A commonly used tool for defining roles and responsibilities within a partnership is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Think of this as your partnership's rulebook. In the MOU, you'll outline the collaboration's objectives, making sure that everyone is on the same page. This is where roles and responsibilities come into play. Define who will be responsible for what, and be as specific as possible.

Your MOU should also address leadership and coordination. Who will be in charge on both sides of the partnership? Who makes which decisions? The MOU should also lay out conflict resolution strategies in case any issues arise.

Resource allocation is another important aspect of the MOU. Who is providing which resources, including staff time, services, equipment, or funding?

Articulate how, how often, and what you and your partner will communicate throughout the course of the partnership, so that both parties know what to expect and when. Consider whether data-sharing and reporting agreements are needed, especially for research initiatives.

Finally, don't forget the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation. The MOU should include processes for assessing your partnership's progress and adapting to changing needs.

Remember, an MOU isn't a one-and-done exercise. It's a living document that needs regular review and updates to ensure your partnership remains effective. Whether you're in the early stages of establishing a partnership or looking to strengthen an existing one, follow this structured approach to define roles and responsibilities, maintain accountability, and foster a successful collaboration.