Addressing Complex Social Determinants Of Health In One Region By Building Cross-Sectoral Partnerships

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SEPTEMBER 12, 2018 DOI: 10.1377/hblog20180911.903037

Over the years, our understanding of complex social issues has advanced, yet we can arguably say that it’s still a challenge to turn that cognizance into sustainable actions that create measurable impact. We
recognize that issues such as opioid use, mental illness, social isolation, and affordable housing affect many people and many systems.

However, bringing those systems, including health care, housing, public safety, youth services, and educational entities together as partners is complicated by many factors. These include limited or restricted funding sources, certain policies and regulations, and competition for funding, workforce, and community participation. These factors are often evident among various agencies.

The Rider-Pool Foundation, a small private foundation located in the Lehigh Valley region of Pennsylvania, works to address complex social issues that negatively influence the quality of life in our communities. Led by a forward-thinking board of directors, the foundation looks to proactively increase cross-sector capacity to address issues our community struggles with but has been unable to change.

In 2014 the board made a decision to support a foundation-led, five-year process with potential to offer widespread and long-term results in nonprofit and government agencies in our region. This decision is not about providing a large program grant. Rather, it is about a foundation taking action toward community betterment with its resources, including some funding, as well as its staff time, experience, knowledge, and influence.

Our actions are based on the premise that complex, cross-sector problem-solving requires a different way of prompting improvements, which starts with authentic, intentional connectivity—that is, a safe, trusting, and new-found relationship with peers from other groups working to address the same issues. When effective, connectivity leads to increased knowledge and understanding of an issue, and a greater
readiness to address it. This increased knowledge and understanding of certain issues and readiness to address them helped identify and engage partners that were necessary but had not been identified previously. Bold, data-driven actions eventually resulted. Well-developed, measurable actions, which often required prototyping (using a new approach and testing its effects) and refinement, can create the sustainable cross-systems changes that achieve impact.

Our core strategy is a cross-sector, place-based “fellowship” for nonprofit and local government leaders. The nine-month fellowship provides 180 hours of learning opportunities for each of as many as twelve leaders who work in the same “place”—an eighty-four-square-block urban area. Nine learning modules include principles and application of cross-sector partnerships, servant leadership, community engagement, results-based management, measurement and evaluation, and communication and messaging. Visiting experts from across North America are facilitators for the fellowship program.

Selection Criteria

Using specific criteria, we select fellows with input from previous fellows. A prospective fellow’s nonprofit organization must have a footprint in our “place,” which is currently the neighborhoods surrounding the downtown of one of the Lehigh Valley’s major cities, Allentown. We strive to have ten sectors represented in each class. Because we want the fellowship to focus on under-represented populations, we have a strong selection bias toward people of color, other minorities, and women. Each fellow (as well as his or her organization) must commit to the full nine-month process. As compensation for the time that its staff member is spending in trainings, each participating organization receives a modest cash stipend, which is paid out over the nine months.
To date, more than one-third of the fellows have been persons of color and/or other minorities. Two-thirds have been women. Our fellows have represented more than forty different sectors, organizations, and departments that, prior to the fellowship, had limited, if any, working relationships among them.

We are currently recruiting our fifth cohort of fellows, which will bring our total number of fellows to our initial goal of fifty. To maximize connectivity, the fellows organize a monthly foundation-supported Community of Practice, where present and past cohorts are invited to share a meal and a peer-led learning session on topics such as the relevant issues of equity, trends in collective impact, and data-sharing.

Results From Evaluations

The fellowship uses ongoing quantitative and qualitative evaluations to measure elements of innovation. We have completed four years of the fellowship, and the results are encouraging. Following our theory of action, early evaluation shows the fellowship generating more connectedness and shared knowledge among sectors, authentic community engagement, and real collaboration than we expected from our initial investment of labor and resources. Using the Community Capital Framework, we saw the following.

- We saw increases in social bonding capital (connectivity), as evidenced by new partner activities. The fellowship experience has created strong, trusting relationships that lead to meaningful, multiorganizational collaborations. For example, fellows from health care systems are now partnering with staff from our county drug and alcohol system to address opioid addiction. Fellows from the fields of mental health, health care, and law enforcement have identified common metrics leading to new approaches for
addressing two important issues in the Lehigh Valley: higher than average suicide rates and the disproportionate number of people with mental illness who are incarcerated.

- This connectivity is generating more **human capital**, as evidenced by unprecedented data sharing and information sharing between sectors, which deepen our understanding of the scope of the issues. Fellows are developing greater “servant leadership” skills that influence how they lead their organizations, departments, and internal operations.

- The increase in human capital is creating **bridging social capital**, as evidenced by the increased engagement of nontraditional partners such as the community members affected by these issues engaging with members from the for-profit sector. One fellow has started a mini-version of the fellowship for community members.

- These newly formed partnerships are using shared qualitative and quantitative data to drive **transformational capital**, as evidenced by prototyping new approaches to address inadequate affordable housing, high rates of suicide, and increased “unhealthy physical and mental health days” (a metric used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in its Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS))

**Going Forward**

We are now embarking on a process to develop the next phase of the fellowship, which may include expanding which geographic areas are included; focusing on a specific innovation in housing, education, behavioral health, or health outcomes, from the perspective of multiple sectors; and seeking new funding partners to accelerate and sustain expansion and impact.