Chapter 5: Key Elements of Successful Collaborations

What is a successful collaboration for survivor-serving organizations? A successful collaboration comes about when "**each organization brings their best contributions to a joint effort that benefits the health and well-being of the whole community.**"[1]

Building a successful collaboration is a lot like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. All pieces are equally important and valuable, and the puzzle would not be complete if missing a piece.

Partnership, shared values, sustainability, leadership, communication, program structure come together to create a full picture. In this chapter, we explore the different core components that make a successful cross-sector collaboration, including:

- Different types of collaboration
- Building trust and empathy between organizations
- Creating a clear structure
- Partnership sustainability

To learn more about creating successful collaborations and partnerships, visit FUTURES' **Building Collaborative Responses to Human Trafficking Project**.

Different Types of Collaborations

There are different models to use to create a unique partnership that fits the goals of the collaboration, organizational needs and ultimately, the needs of the community.

Cooperation is the most basic level of partnerships. Two or more organizations who are in cooperation with each other will share resources in order to be more effective. Potential shared resources include staff members, volunteers, space, funds, and other resources. To create a partnership that is based on cooperation, the partnering organizations must have an understanding of community needs and some agreement on communication and structure.

An example of a cooperative collaboration is a victim services agency referring survivors to a workforce staffing partner, and workforce partners referring clients who are in need of support back to the victim services agency.

The next level is **coordination**, in which partners mutually exchange of information and resources to actively support survivors. Compared to cooperation, coordination needs an increased level of trust and communication in order to be fully successful. One person or multiple people from each organization need to be involved in leading a coordination effort by assigning tasks, roles, and responsibilities that need to take place to support survivors. These partnerships will oftentimes have a shared mission independent of their respective organization's mission.

An example of a coordination is two or more organizations coming together to do a community-wide outreach campaign to raise awareness of their services for trafficking survivors during Human Trafficking Awareness Month.

The highest level of cross-community partnerships is a **collaboration**. Collaboration is when different organizations or groups help each other to expand or enhance capacities to do their jobs more effectively. Each organization or person has different skills to support survivors, and each piece is important for the whole partnership to function. A collaboration has a high level of trust and support between partners, as well as well-defined roles and responsibilities. There are written protocols, projects, and plans in place that include a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and a new common mission that the collaboration creates together. Most importantly, there is shared decision-making among partners to implement the program. Collaborations generally create something (a product, program, service, etc.) new to address an issue that spans different fields.

An example of a collaboration is bringing together a victim services agency, a workforce partner such as a staffing agency, and an education partner such as a local community college as a joint initiative providing wraparound job training, education, and supportive services for survivors of trafficking to access better pathways to employment opportunities.

Building Relationships between Organizations

Building a sustainable partnership is a process that takes the equal participation of all stakeholders in the relationship. Once **potential stakeholders** are identified, create connections in neutral settings by inviting them to meetings, conferences, and other events to learn about what each partner's skills are and unique areas of expertise.

To learn more about how to identify stakeholders, consider engaging in **community resource mapping** using the information about potential workforce development partners described in **Chapter 2**.

After the initial outreach and identification of potential partners, identify common ground and acknowledge where differing strategies or goals may exist. Stakeholders may come from a variety of industries, have different skills and knowledge, and hold different values and missions than your organization.

For example, workforce development organizations may not be aware of the prevalence of trauma among the individuals they serve or know how to implement trauma-informed practices. Victim services organizations can offer their expertise to help strengthen workforce development programs through partnership. Understanding each organizational perspective and history can help identify gaps in knowledge and room from growth and cross-sector learning opportunities. Take time to learn from each other and understand the successes and barriers each organization has experienced.

Here are some examples of trust-building exercises that organizations can do to help build the groundwork for collaboration:

- **Community Resource mapping**. Each organization fills out their resource maps and comes together afterwards to discuss findings. What existing relationships do partners have? Where are there gaps? Can the stakeholders utilize each other's relationships to strengthen the potential collaboration?
- **Meeting Activity**. Each organization is assigned the task of mapping out an understanding of the partner organization program and mission. This can be a fun ice-breaker to lighten the mood, but can also be informative way of identifying common misconceptions and misunderstandings of each other's work.
- **Discussion Questions**. These are potential questions to use to facilitate the first few partnership meetings. Each organization and/or stakeholder shares out to the whole group in a round-robin style, while someone takes notes as follows:
    - Share something personal about your commitment to support survivors or advancing safety and economic opportunity for individuals with complex obstacles.
    - What would you like to get from participating in a collaboration, personally and as a team?

Pro tip: Practice humility. No relationship is perfect, especially at a first attempt. In creating a collaboration there will be ups and downs and miscommunications. Assume the best intentions and practice healthy communication skills in moments that are awkward, uncomfortable, or tense by setting group agreements each encounter or meeting.

Clear Structure: Trauma-informed Practices, Policies, and Programming

Most workplaces and organizations are not structured to practice and create systems of trauma-informed care. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma-informed care as "a program, organization, or system that realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization."[2] The partnership, in whatever structure that fits the community best, should strive to implement practices of trauma-informed care, which can be broken down into the four Rs: realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatization.

Realize: the widespread presence of trauma. As victim services providers who work with individuals with histories of trauma, this might seem like a no-brainer. However, this is not the case in many industries and the workforce development industry is no different. The partnership might be the first introduction to trauma for a workforce development agency and can create a mutually beneficial learning opportunity.

Recognize: elements of trauma and how it impacts individuals and communities. Trauma manifests itself in individuals physically, emotionally, and psychologically. All organizations in the partnership should discuss symptoms of trauma and how it might show up in the individuals who engage with your respective agencies. Here are some common responses traumatized individuals might experience:

Emotional	Physical	Cognitive
Numbness, apathy, and withdrawal	Gastrointestinal issues	Difficulty making decisions and concentrating
Anxiety, fear	Headaches	Flashbacks
Guilt and shame	Sleep problems	Attention bias towards threats
Anger and irritability	Chronic pain	Hypervigilance

Depression & suicidal thoughts	Panic attacks	Decreased working memory

Table 1. Common Trauma Responses *Read more information on how trauma specifically can impact education and job training success here: Trauma Responsiveness in an Integrated Workforce Service Delivery System*.

Respond: by incorporating an understanding of trauma into all program and/or partnership operations. Knowledge of trauma and proven, effective responses to trauma should be implemented into all policies, practices, and procedures of the partnership. This might look different for every partnership, but consider incorporating the following six principles of trauma-informed practices from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):

- **Promote physical and psychological safety**. Does the organization rely on/practice mental wellness and provide necessary supports for all people to feel safe in their space and programs?
- **Build trust by practicing transparency**. Does the organization provide transparency in the structure, policies, and procedures of your partnership and your joint efforts? Do all members of the partnership understand how decisions are made?
- **Provide peer support and mentorship opportunities**. Does the organization offer opportunities for engagement among peers of different organizations? Doing so can help build a stronger relationship and build more trust.
- **Foster a collaborative environment**. Practice sharing and collaborating on different components of your partnership. Examples include rotating who takes notes/facilitates meetings, or using shared online folders through Google, SharePoint, DropBox, etc. to work collaboratively.
- **Empowerment, Voice, and Choice**. Give program beneficiaries and people who have experienced trauma the opportunity to help frame and guide the partnership and meaningful decision-making power. As an example, integrate the experiences of survivors or survivor leaders who are knowledgeable on the experiences and choices they make to be economically secure.
- **Acknowledge histories of oppression and discrimination**. Does your partnership center people who need it the most, or is it replicating harmful power dynamics that stem from histories of oppression?

Resist re-traumatization: by examining and modifying potentially harmful practices. Take opportunities to periodically self-assess the strengths of the partnership as well as areas for improvement, including by soliciting and examining program participant feedback. Sometimes finding the right approach to trauma-informed programming takes a few attempts, but do not be discouraged as these things take time, effort, and humility for each stakeholder in the partnership.

> We Recommend Trauma Training For Collaboration Members And Organizations To Identify Symptoms Of Trauma And Respond In A Trauma-Infomed Way, Such As Motivational Interviewing, Crisis Intervention Strategies, And Safety Planning.

Cooperation, Coordination, and Communications

Other aspects of your partnership include specific components of collaboration. What is the level of cooperation sought by and willing to be reciprocated by each partner? What available methods (both in person and online) should be used to create a coordinated effort? What will be the primary method of communication? Who will lead this partnership and how? All of these questions need to be considered in the process of partnership development.

Documentation

To formalize the partnership, obtain all agreed upon elements in writing including meeting times and dates, stakeholders, partnership members, and policies and protocols. Creating these systems are invaluable as they hold all parties accountable and create project sustainability.

A **Memorandum of Understanding** (MOU) can help build and solidify a partnership between one or many different organizations. An MOU is “a document that expresses mutual accord between two or more parties. MOU is not a legal contract but it can be recognized as binding on the rights and obligations mentioned in it. It is more of a formal agreement between two or more parties and proof of their commitment to each other.”[3] This Social Enterprise Client Agreement is an example of an MOU.

Resource Sharing is key. All resources pertaining to the project, collaboration, or partnership should be easily accessible to all members of the group in order to build trust and accountability. There are many free and low-cost online file-sharing platforms such as Google Drive, Microsoft SharePoint, and DropBox.

Roles and Leadership

Who will be leading the work of the collaboration or partnership? Should one organization or person taking the lead? Or should the group to be co-led by a few? What about group consensus and shared decision-making? Here are a few different types of roles and leadership structures to consider:

Primary Lead. One organization is in charge of the partnership. This lead may be grant-funded and is in charge of the overall partnership coordination. The lead schedules and facilitates meetings and manages any data collection and reports of the partnership.

- *Pros*: This type of leadership is simple and one-directional, and many organizations are already familiar and comfortable operating with this structure.
- *Cons*: This partnership may not sustainable in the long-term, as it often relies on one program to do the bulk of the work. If the lead organization decides to go a different direction or if there is an unforeseen personnel change, it could affect the continuity and longevity of the partnership.

Co-leadership: Two or three organizations share the roles of the primary lead. Oftentimes, the leadership is shared by an advocacy organization and another sector, such as service providers or a higher education institution.

- *Pros*: There is still a clear point of contact and hierarchy of power in place, which makes it easy to communicate goals and expectations. The workload will be divided, easing the burden off one organization.
- *Cons*: In larger partnerships that consist of more than two organizations, some organizations may feel left out or unheard in the decision-making process.

Core Group: Typically, this type of leadership consists of seven – eight people (less than 10) and has multi-sector representation, including key service providers. This group equally distributes tasks and accountability of the partnership.

- *Pros*: This type of leadership is generally seen as the most equitable and allows for multiple perspectives and identities to step into the leadership role.
- *Cons:* There may be "too many cooks in the kitchen," leading to ineffective decision-making.

Pro Tip from FUTURES **Building Collaborative Responses to Human Trafficking Project**: Invite all organizations and partners to collaborate to draft a shared mission and vision statement and core values to agree upon and have a shared sense of purpose.

Types of Decision-making

There are a wide range of possibilities in decision-making depending on what form of leadership is chosen in alignment with partnership needs.

Hierarchical: One person or organization, typically in the primary lead position, makes the decisions and disseminates the information regarding the decisions to all other parties in the partnership.

Representative: Key stakeholders or representatives from each partner come together to make a decision on an issue or a topic.

Consensus: All members of the partnership convene in-person or virtually and come to a majority decision together, making sure everyone has the opportunity to provide input.

Tip: A useful tool for making decisions is **Gradients of Agreement**, where members of a group express their support for a proposal in degrees along a continuum.[4] This tool works well in a representative or consensus decision-making process. To learn more about how to use gradients of agreement, visit Michigan State University's' Facilitative Leadership page.

Sustainability

Each partner has put in a lot work, time, and effort to build something that did not previously exist to help serve survivors of trafficking. The next question is: how do you make it last? Here are some pointers on sustainability measures to take that help ensure the longevity of the partnership.

Agency involvement and commitment. Hopefully, there is more than one person at each organization who knows about the cross-sector collaboration and partnership. Work to get buy-in from coworkers, senior leadership, and the organization's board of directors. Getting people at your organization excited about this opportunity, will increase support for the partnership's efforts and may even encourage the involvement of others!

Individual involvement. There needs to be equal investment in the partnership. Commit to showing up for each other to make the project last.

Personnel Changes. Sometimes roles change and people join and leave organizations for a variety of reasons. The partnership should preemptively prepare for these changes to eventually take place. Implement contingency plans for personnel changes for each stakeholder. Make sure documents and communications are saved on a shared platform that can be easily accessed by replacements in the partnership.

Outline duties and responsibilities in these documents so each new individual joining the partnership feels confident and welcome. It is also worth individual organizations to discuss personnel funding, if any, to ensure that a new point person will be allocated to the correct funding source upon any personnel change.

Funding. Oftentimes, people do not existing funding streams to collaborate or enter partnerships, particularly when they are broad, cross-sector efforts such as collaborating with workforce development allies. Look creatively at different resources to use to fund each partner in this work, so that all partners can benefit from the collaboration. For local funding, use community and resource mapping to look for where you can apply to a variety of community-based grants or loans to sustain the partnership. For both local and larger grants, consider ones that allow for personnel and administrative costs for participation in the partnership. To learn more about funding opportunities, continue on to Chapter 7: Resources to Fund Your Partnership.

"Forces of Change". There will be times of crisis that no one can predict. For example, COVID-19 has rapidly shaped how partners engage with each other as a lot of work and partnership-building has gone virtual and large gatherings have been restricted. Other unforeseen events may happen as well (political, climate change, etc.) that will shift the priorities of your partnership. Discuss sharing organizational emergency preparedness plans with the partnership, and create an emergency/crisis response guide for your partnership.

Conclusion

No two communities are alike when creating a new partnership or collaboration between sectors. Survivors may have a different set of obstacles, and employment and educational opportunities look different for each individual depending on a variety of factors. Use the information provided in this chapter to think creatively about your community's particular strengths and how to utilize different people, organizations, and sectors to create a sustainable and lasting model that benefits everyone. The next chapter provides case studies of successful collaborations and highlights key aspects needed when working with businesses, educational institutions, or engaging with a local workforce development agency.

Continue on to Chapter 6.

[1] University of Kansas. 2021. Community Tool Box: Chapter 7. University of Kansas: Center for Community Health and Development. https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/identify-stakeholders/main

[2] "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," n.d., 27, https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4884.pdf.

[3] "Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Definition & Meaning with Example." Accessed April 21, 2021. https://kalkinemedia.com/definition/m/memorandum-of-understanding-mou

[4] Sam Kaner and Duane Berger. 1987. Participatory Guide of Shared Decision Making. https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/gradients_of_agreement_can_help_move_groups_forward