

SYSTEMS CHANGE FRAMEWORK

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Systems Change Framework

The Systems Change Framework was developed to address the challenge of assessing and documenting systems change accomplishments of grantee organizations that vary considerably in terms of their intervention models, community contexts, partnership relationships, and knowledge of how to make systems change happen.

Systems change is defined as:
changes in organizational culture, policies and procedures within individual organizations or across organizations that enhance or streamline access and reduce or eliminate barriers to needed services by a target population.

Understanding that each grantee starts from a different place, the framework incorporates evaluation criteria applicable to a range of organizations regardless of their stage of or readiness for systems change development when the Initiative was implemented. The framework can be used to compare accomplishments across multiple sites to identify common strategies that lead to systems change progress and achievement, and is flexible enough to track systems changes that occurred both within an organization (usually the grant funded organization) and across the various systems involved in the collaborative service relationship. Lastly, in applying the framework to the three Initiatives, grantee feedback confirmed that the tool and approach “makes sense” and

helps clarify systems change goals, progress, and achievements.

The Framework is grounded in developmental theory and builds on the work of Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” (Maslow 1954). We apply basic developmental assumptions to the process organizations or communities undergo to achieve sustainable systems change. There are “basic” steps or pre-conditions that need to be met before an organization or system can successfully advance to the next level and achieve progress towards systems change goals. The Systems Change Framework includes five domains of developmental progress that progressively build from Domain 1 to Domain 5:

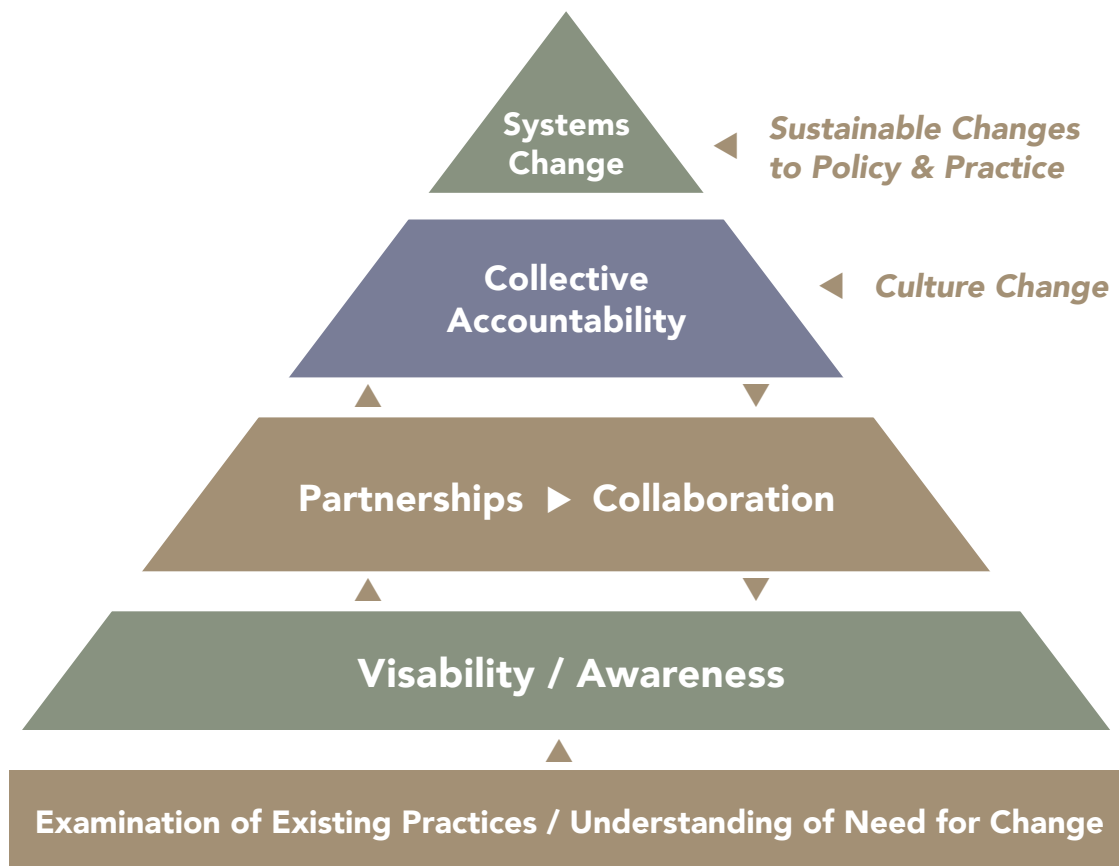
- **Domain 1:** Examining the Problem and Understanding the Need for Change
- **Domain 2:** Visibility and Awareness
- **Domain 3:** Partnership and Collaboration
- **Domain 4:** Collective Accountability
- **Domain 5:** Sustainable Systems Change (Policy, Procedures, Practice)

As Figure 1 illustrates, the progression toward systems change is dynamic and ever evolving within programs and among the various participating stakeholders and systems. The developmental progression between the first three domains (Understanding the Problem, Visibility and Awareness, Partnership and Collaboration) is more linear, with each domain building on the previous set of experiences and accomplishments. During these stages of systems change “growth,” there are continuous feedback loops that facilitate the progression by generating buy-in across partners or providing data or evidence to support

greater awareness of the issue. As organizations gain greater visibility about a given problem or population, they acquire more partners and often deepen their collaborations; this in turn brings about a deeper understanding of the problem and reinforces the need for change. The last two domains (Collective Accountability and Sustainable Change) is where the real long-term systems change occurs. Collective Accountability

assumes a much deeper commitment to the change process within and across organizations, where buy-in and awareness of the problem are no longer issues that need addressed. By definition, a systems change is one that is fully sustainable and not connected to grant funds or external expectations, but rather an organizational or cross-system priority to new policies, culture, communication or practices.

Figure 1: Systems Change Process





Applying the Framework

After conceptualizing the systems change process as a developmental progression, we applied the framework retrospectively to the grantee implementation experiences to assess progress within each of the 5 domains. We developed a series of questions within each domain to develop indicators and document evidence of change. This framework for change can be applied to different levels, including grantee organizations and across partnering

organizations. Within organizations, it includes changes to organizational culture and operational policies. Across organizations and systems, it includes developing new partnerships and enhancing existing partnerships to operate more effectively. Progress toward systems change also depends on the context, experience, and capacity of the programs to advance toward systems change goals.

Assessing Activities and Progress Towards Systems Change

Domain 1: Examining the Problem and Understanding the Rationale for Systems Change

The initial step in the systems change progression is examining the problem and understanding the reason for change. During this stage, funders and grantees collect information about the needs of the target population, service capacity gaps, access barriers, and relevant stakeholders that need to be at the table to facilitate change. This is also the time to examine the power structures associated with the systems involved to determine the readiness for change, identify resources and leaders, and identify potential challenges and barriers that will influence the context and expectations of change. Important questions to consider include:

- What system(s) do you want to change?
- What is the culture of the system?
- What changes need to occur for the system to support your goal and what is the specific change you are seeking?
- Who has the authority to make those changes?
- What are the important relationships and system interactions? Do they support or get in the way of your goal?
- What are the power dynamics between the system and community?
- Is there identified leadership (within or outside of the system) with a vision for how to change the system? Does that leader have the ability, willingness, and influence to achieve the change?
- Who needs to be educated to create buy-in for change?
- What are the training needs to implement a new intervention? You identified training below—maybe these two could be consolidated
- What data have been gathered regarding the current issues and status of the system?

Domain 2: Raising Visibility and Awareness

Once the data and information has been collected to fully understand the population needs, systems being affected and needed stakeholders, there is a period of building awareness of the problem and the need for change with a broader audience. Cross-system change cannot occur in a vacuum, therefore organizations, public agencies and funders need to convene stakeholders with a shared interest in the issue and share what they know. This domain involves forming community collaboratives, conference presentations, training and technical assistance activities, publications, policy briefings, public hearings, meetings within organizations at the leadership and front-line levels, progress and outcome reports, mixed media and communications campaigns. All of these activities serve to garner stakeholder support, create new partnerships and generate momentum for change. Important questions to consider include:

- What trainings or curricula have been developed and how have they been disseminated?
- What presentations, publications or mixed media productions have been developed?
- What evidence of program impact has been generated? How has this information been disseminated?
- What reinforcement trainings have been necessary to maintain/generate buy-in?
- Have key stakeholders been invited to participate in a collaborative?

Domain 3: Developing Partnership and Collaborations

Leadership and collaborative support from key partners is a necessary component for systems change. Strong partners and allies are important both within the organization and across agencies and systems throughout the community. Collaboration within the organization facilitates program implementation and strong collaboration between organizations who share a common population reduces fragmentation of service delivery, enhances access to services and improves efficiency. Cross system collaboration and particularly data sharing across service system, provides opportunities to assess the impact of a program/intervention on individuals and the systems involved. Important questions to address include:

- How have partnership and collaboration across system changed referrals, service delivery, and transition planning? How have these changes been formalized? (MOUs etc.)
- What new protocols have been developed as a result of greater collaboration?
- What new partnerships have developed as a result of implementation of the program/Initiative?
- How are partners sharing or leveraging resources/staff across systems to improve efficiency?
- How does collaboration improve communication and data sharing?
- How is the partner organization reducing fragmentation?
- What formal convenings/committees exist to promote information sharing across systems?
- Are there any new program champions? What has been the impact?

Domain 4: Achieving a Sense of Collective Accountability

Developing a sense of collective accountability is a stage of systems change that is difficult for many organizations and communities to achieve, particularly when a new program or Initiative has a relatively brief funding period (less than 5 years). For organizations and systems to achieve a sense of collective accountability, issues related to competition for funds, organizational culture, history of fragmentation, need to be overcome so that systems can focus on the interests of the community served rather than their own organizational interests. In this stage, collaboration across system advances beyond the funded Initiative and partners identify other populations, policy issues or social conditions that could be improved through a collaborative process in the community. Important questions to address include:

- Has there been a shift in organizational culture or philosophy?
- Does the partnership/collaboration extend beyond the original target population or issue addressed by the funded Initiative?
- Is collaboration part of the “culture” and way of doing business across systems involved in the grant funded program?
- Is data being shared consistently across system to better understand the needs of the population and the impact of programs/services? Are there fewer people being “lost in the cracks” between siloed or fragmented systems?
- Does cross-system collaboration lead to joint funding opportunities?
- Is there pooling or blending of funding streams to better serve a shared population?
- Does the system routinely involve clients, family members and community agencies in service planning and decision-making?
- Do collaborative partners have a shared vision for policy and advocacy activities?

Domain 5: Sustainable Changes to Policies and Practices

At this stage in the Systems Change Framework, changes in policies, service delivery, culture and practice are sustained within the organization and across partnering agencies. This domain represents the outcomes and major accomplishments of an Initiative. Important questions to consider include:

- Is there infrastructure in place to support data collection and data sharing across agencies and systems?
- Are the staff positions that were critical to program implementation permanent and sustained?
- Is cross-system data being used to demonstrate return on investment to stakeholders or to advance public policy?
- Are program learnings incorporated into HR trainings for new staff to continue promotion of a shared vision?
- Are there interagency MOUs and protocols to improve service coordination in place?