

What We Learned About Building a Collective Impact Initiative in Three Colorado Communities: Implications for Community Organizing for Prevention

Complex social issues require coordinated solutions, and collective impact is one powerful way to organize communities to implement upstream prevention efforts and achieve social change. *Collective impact* requires those who are aligned around a common agenda to address root causes of a systemic problem, leading with an equity lens to ensure harm is not furthered in communities. When done with this in mind, collective impact initiatives can advance equity for historically marginalized and oppressed groups and create an environment where all individuals thrive.

22 community members from three communities in Colorado participated in interviews in early 2023 and shared their perspectives about building collective impact initiatives in their communities. The Community Organizing for Prevention Evaluation team is grateful to the community members who participated in interviews and shared their candid experiences about power in their community. Most people were currently or previously involved in Community Organizing for Prevention (COFP) efforts, and some were familiar with COFP but not actively involved. These individuals represent different ages, racial/ethnic groups, sectors, and identity backgrounds and spoke from their perspectives. Taken together, these people told a broader story about building collective impact initiatives in three communities in Colorado. Here is what they had to say:

- **Formal Organizations and Groups Take the Lead.** Official organizations or organized groups are seen as the leaders of collective impact efforts. People in the community know that these entities are committed to taking on a role in leading these collaborative initiatives focusing on upstream prevention. Local Communities That Care coalitions are an example of one organized effort that is seen to be leading collective impact initiatives in local communities.
- **A Designated Point Person is Essential to Success.** Having a point person or staff member who is responsible for organizing collective impact efforts is imperative to the sustainability and success of the initiative. It is important that this person is in a paid position for this work and they have the personal traits needed to bring people together to do work collaboratively (i.e. they are a good listener, they're comfortable talking to all different types of people, they have effective communication skills, they are passionate and believe in what they are doing, and they are persistent in driving collaborative efforts).
- **Adequate Resources.** Appropriate resources are needed for various organizations and community groups to be able to align their processes and goals in a way that successfully supports the collective impact initiative. This includes financial resources, adequate time put towards the initiative, as well as staff and volunteers who can organize the initiative.
- **Effective Communication.** Using multiple forms of communication to share information is essential to the collaborative process. Informal methods of communication, (i.e. email, text messaging, and social media), along with more formal forms of communication (i.e. community boards, newspaper, radio) were mentioned as being most effective in bringing awareness to collaborative efforts in the community.

Implications for Community Organizing for Prevention in Colorado

Collective impact is a *core component of COFP* and is an effective systems-change framework that can be highly beneficial to success in organizing communities to address shared risk and protective factors and implement upstream prevention. Collective impact can take a long time to achieve. Many communities are still in the beginning phases of building their local collective impact initiatives. These findings resulted in two recommendations:

- **Understand the Preconditions of Collective Impact in Order to Build a Strong Foundation for a Collective Impact Initiative.** Much of an initiative’s success rests on whether certain elements are in place that will allow for the cultivation of a successful collective impact initiative in that community. If any of these preconditions are missing or are weak, it is recommended that communities spend some time focusing on building up that particular precondition.

Preconditions of Collective Impact

Presence of Influential Champions

Sufficient Resources to Support the Planning Process and Collective Impact Infrastructure

Urgency to Address the Issue in New and Different Ways

- **Understand the Five Pillars of Collective Impact in Order to Build a Strong Collective Impact Initiative.** Successful collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions present that together allow for true alignment and lead to successful and sustainable results. Having a comprehensive understanding of each of these pillars and working to build them up where necessary will help a community reach success around building a functioning collective impact initiative.

Common Agenda

This means coming together to collectively define the problem and create a shared vision to solve it

Shared Measurement System

This means tracking progress in the same way, allowing for continuous learning and accountability

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

This means integrating the participants’ many different activities to maximize the end result

Open & Continuous Communication

This means building trust and strengthening relationships

Strong Backbone Organization

This means having a team dedicated to aligning and coordinating the work of the group



Reflection Questions

- Do the preconditions for collective impact success exist?
What can be done to cultivate any of these preconditions that are either not present or are weak?
**Helpful Tool* ←
- Is there a history and culture of collaboration amongst potential organizations in the collective impact initiative?
**Recommended Reading* ←
- Do relationships and trust exist that will enable engaging a broad, cross-sector group of actors to lead the collective impact initiative?
What can be done to build/strengthen these relationships and trust?
**Recommended Reading* ←
- Are stakeholders committed to using data to set the agenda and improve our work over time?
**Recommended Reading* ←