RESOURCES DEFINING COLLABORATION

We have researched and gathered several resources about collaboration and have chosen a few to help guide your thinking as you begin moving your organization along the collaboration continuum.

As described in our Community Action Plan and Request for Proposal, we aspire to lift up low income families and children through the development of a regional collective impact network providing holistic services in the areas of education, economic security and well-being.

We are inviting organizations to engage with United Way and community partners to shift beyond isolated impact toward collective impact.

**Isolated Impact**\(^1\) is an approach oriented toward finding and funding a solution embodied within a single organization, combined with the hope that the most effective organizations will grow or replicate to extend their impact more widely.

**Collective Impact** is the commitment of a group of actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a complex social problem.

- A common agenda
- Shared measurement systems
- Mutually reinforcing activities
- Continuous communication
- Backbone support organizations.

Developing these five conditions to achieve collective success in addressing complex social problems takes time. On the journey toward collective impact, we are encouraging organizations in various stages of collaboration to apply for funding recognizing that community partners have varying internal capacities to devote time to collaborative work. There is also an understanding of the range of past experience among organizations in working closely with other partners.

The following summary outlines three different but complimentary elements and perspectives of collaboration.

- Collaboration Behavior
- Collaboration Core Capacities
- Collaboration Phases

BEHAVIOR WITHIN COLLABORATION

Defining collaboration can be a difficult task as perceived collaboration is not always true collaboration. Collaboration is more than networking, coordinating and cooperation (See Figure 1)\(^2\).

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Collaboration can be defined as a durable relationship that brings previously separate organizations into a new structure with commitment to a commonly defined mission, structure, or planning effort; each organization contributes its own resources to pooled resources and a shared product or service.

A collaboration or consortia is not a legal entity, but a group of organizations that have a formal agreement “to combine its resources for a project that is beyond the members’ individual capacities.”

An inter-organizational community collaboration can be identified by a collection of government and nonprofit service providers coming together to integrate service, build community capacity, or address collective problems through research, service delivery, or policy development.

**CORE CAPACITIES of COLLABORATION**

**Strong leadership and an open mindset** Organizations that build and sustain successful partnerships and networks know that it takes time and hard work. Their staff and board leaders study the ecosystems they are a part of to see who is doing what, where their organizations fit in and where there are opportunities for aligned actions. Leaders of these organizations also set out to build organizational cultures that encourage and reward outreach and relationship building.

**Ability to share power and responsibility** Working effectively in partnerships takes humility and willingness to trade control and power for a higher level of impact. As a result, participants often have to look beyond the specific objectives of their own organizations toward bigger mission goals. In order to do this well, participants need negotiating skills, the ability to compromise and see the big picture, the ability to share credit and control, and openness to criticism and change.

**Adaptability and flexibility** It is hard to predict how broad-based partnerships will evolve; issue priorities may shift as new partners come on board, and participants may decide to change the nature and focus of their collective work. All this means that organizations and individuals involved in collaborative initiatives need to approach the work with a high level of “adaptive capacity,” defined by TCC Group as “the ability to monitor, assess, respond to, and stimulate internal and external changes.”

**Strong connectivity and relationship building** Connections and relationships that evolve into productive partnerships are more likely to happen in certain organizations: those that are externally focused and those that support staff in reaching out to others to build relationships. To the extent that an organization’s board and staff have the time and the freedom to build and sustain productive relationships with others, the organization will be more successful in its collective work.

**PHASES OF REAL COLLABORATION**

David Li Piana defines Real Collaboration as grantees recognizing the possible synergies of working together and organizing programmatic and other core efforts more closely.

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It is important to understand how Real Collaboration differs from the Appearance of Collaboration where agencies form a group they will call a Collaborative without the true appetite or intent to coordinate their services but simply as another way to gain grant support.

**Formation** Informal episodic phase removed from core programmatic activities of the organizations. Partners are building trust and relationships over time. Inspiration is genuine, characterized by a common defined need for finding better ways of improving conditions and solving problems together, as contrasted to the limited and specific purpose of seeking funding.

**Formalization** Formal sustained phase where partners recognize that the ways in which they want and need to collaborate have increased and the process now has a structure. Regular meetings are established, implementation of program activities or an initiative begins at the organizational level. Additional partners join in committed to carrying out the work. An MOU is developed signifying endurance and good faith of all parties to work together as contrasted to satisfying a requirement to apply for funding.

**Operation** Ongoing operation of significant activities, within a stable organizational structure is enabled by the agreements reached previously. Partners have been working together for years now. Continuity and long-standing trusting relationships are the hallmark of this stage offering an opportunity to deepen collaboration. Close working relationships including the hiring of staff to coordinate the work of the collaborative may require the designation of a lead agency to consolidate administrative functions. In this phase, activities are actually taking place “on the ground” as contrasted to an inactive “paper” collaborative used by partners to obtain funding.

**Institutionalization** When the collaborative becomes its own entity.

We encourage you and your potential collaborators to take the time to reflect on the characteristics of collaboration described above and to think beyond referral. How will you shift your organizational mindset and behaviors to work more collaboratively? How will you begin to create common agendas and metrics? How will you develop ongoing communication and infrastructure that support joint actions toward affecting change and achieving results together?

Additional resources about forming collaborations will be provided in e-cimpact and through technical assistance sessions.

> “Underlying successful collaborations is a different kind of logic; It’s about helping things emerge and responding successfully to change. It is also about taking the long view and understanding that collaborative work delivers its own unique returns in the form of stronger connections, increased trust and more robust networks. These, in turn, can create lasting changes in a community over time.”

_Curtis Ogden – Senior Associate at the Interaction Institute for Social Change_