



Our strength is in our numbers. At Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department in Washington State, we recognized that the strength to protect and improve the health of all people and places in our communities comes from our many community-based partnerships.

### Our Success Story

About five years ago, our original Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) partners – we call them “core partners” – came together to provide leadership and oversight to the initiative. Our goal: to develop a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). MAPP is a community-driven strategic planning process that helps apply strategic thinking to prioritize public health issues and identify resources to address them. Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department convened the original group, which included CHI Franciscan and MultiCare Health Systems, as well as the Nursing and Healthcare Leadership Program at University of Washington Tacoma. A few years into the process, Group Health Cooperative, another nonprofit health system, also joined the partnership. It is important to note that our partnerships include a wide range of community agencies and organizations, from faith-based organizations, to school districts, and to human service non-governmental organizations.

Currently, we are in the “Action Cycle” using MAPP, where we develop and implement strategies to address the priority health needs of residents, based upon our CHIP. These priorities include mental

health, access to care, and chronic disease prevention. This version of MAPP is a work in progress and a framework that guides our work. We plan to embark on our second iteration of MAPP in mid-2017.

### **Partner Engagement and Contributions**

Early in the MAPP process, our core partners gave thoughtful consideration to qualitative assessments: How to reach out to and invite diverse Pierce County communities? How to work with the media, and what sort of facilitation methods and venues would work best? Our core partners also helped develop and review criteria to rank health issues.

### **Partnership Benefits**

Over the four years of the process, our core partners have broadened their involvement. They shared opportunities for grants, internships, collaborations, and networking. They participated in collaborations, opportunities for shared funding, requests for presentations at each other's organizations, letters of support, and more.

### **Challenges and Solutions**

While most of the process has been smooth, we faced barriers, such as:

- **Competing initiatives with similar priorities.** This created confusion within the community and drained time and energy of staff and residents. For example, one of our priorities is chronic disease prevention. Within a year of identifying this priority, the Health Department received a significant chronic disease grant with overlapping goals. Work group members became confused and many dropped out, which resulted in a group size that no longer made sense. To overcome this, we are trying to use other means to involve community partners, such as an electronic newsletter and large community gatherings.
- **Maintaining clear communication with everyone involved about the status of plans, strategies, and individual interests.** It's challenging to keep a running log of everyone's attendance and level of interest, but this does help all partners have a sense of involvement and accountability.
- **Using meeting time effectively.** We check in frequently to make sure partners feel meeting time is well used. If not, we try to "course correct." Our core partners made the decision not to use meeting time for strategy updates. Instead, they chose to focus on discussions of large-scale initiatives in Pierce County.

Overcoming these issue and challenges required a focus on what was unique about the partnership: an emphasis on assessment and evaluation as a "data-driven" and community-led process. We also made sure to nurture existing relationships and work to develop important new ones by allowing time before during and after meetings for community partners to talk and get to know one another and to exchange information.

### **Lessons Learned and Strategies for Cultivating a Strong Partnership**

As we reflect on our past work and look ahead to MAPP 2.0, we see areas for improvement. A continuous check-in with partners at all levels is critical, and we may not have done this enough. Having

community partners who are at the *grassroots* level allows the effort to stay in touch with residents, while having some partners at the *grasstops* (paid staff) is often easier, as these individuals are more available during the day for meetings. A structure for process and outcome evaluation eliminates problems down the road. We plan to use a group of *community facilitators* for some of our next iteration of MAPP. We hope this helps to empower residents, build capacity within communities, and create buy-in for the process.

Two strategies that helped keep up our momentum include:

- **Use thoughtful meeting strategies.** Take time to check in with important community partners. Ask them their perceptions on whether meetings maintain a focus on priorities. Also, ask how they want to be involved. They will be glad to be asked!
- **Provide opportunities for relationships to develop and deepen.** This will have a huge return. Consider a balance between process and outcomes when there are opportunities for relationships to develop and deepen.

One area where our partners have been most useful is their wisdom to identify and address the priority needs of the county. For example, one of our health system partners wrote a successful grant, in consultation with the CHIP mental health workgroup, to its own foundation. The proposal was to fund an array of interventions, which included an easier way for residents to find mental health services and resources. After exploring options, the work group found that a collaboration with Pierce County [2-1-1](#) to address this need was a more effective solution than trying to start something from scratch. Other examples include community group mentorships to implement community-based participatory research (CBPR) with a crime and violence prevention focused non-profit organization, and cooperation in a community health needs assessment collaborative with multiple health systems.

The benefits of community partnerships are often surprising. Relationships form when agencies and organizations come together around common priorities and creative ideas spring forth. We have found one of the best ways to generate and improve partnerships is to ensure there are ample opportunities for relationships to grow. Meetings need not be *all business*. They can also provide a thoughtful agenda that allows for fun, quality snacks, non-rushed social time, idea sharing, and a way for everyone to have a sense of participation that leads to helpful and productive conversations.

We work hard to maintain positive partnerships, because we know they are vital to our work. As we think about our next round of MAPP, we celebrate our successes and look for ways to improve our service to Pierce County through stronger and more diverse partnerships.