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ALIGNING IN ACTION: ALLEGHENY COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

- Lead organization: Plan for a Healthier Allegheny Advisory Coalition, led by the Allegheny County Health Department
- Lead sector: Public Health
- Location: Allegheny County (Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania
- Year founded: 2015
- Interviews with Karen Hacker, M.D., then director of the Allegheny County Health Department, and Alaina Conner, special projects program manager at the Allegheny County Health Department

Health is impacted by factors outside of the health care delivery system, including housing, education, poverty, employment, food availability, transportation, and safety. Recognizing that addressing these socioeconomic determinants of health is needed to meaningfully impact health inequities, a national policy shift is taking place.

Government agencies, payers, and providers are all adopting a social determinants perspective. To effectively address these nonclinical needs, partners must work across sectors. Now, the question is how — what are the best practices for effectively aligning systems?

[Aligning Systems for Health: Health Care + Public Health + Social Services](#), sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and managed by the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC), is focused on learning from stakeholders across the nation about effective ways to align these three sectors to better meet people's goals and needs.

Given variance in the local context, there is no single model or formula to align systems. However, Aligning Systems for Health seeks to understand commonalities that drive successful efforts to align sectors. This series examines how communities that describe their work as aligning systems are doing it around four core components of a [theory of change](#) that RWJF and GHPC are testing: purpose, governance, data, and sustainable financing mechanisms.

The Allegheny County Health Department serves as the backbone organization aligning efforts of a large, multisectoral collaborative focused on implementing the Plan for a Healthier Allegheny (PHA).

LOCAL CONTEXT

The Allegheny County Health Department is acting as the leader and the convener of a large coalition that includes health care and social service organizations. This is in line with the [Public Health 3.0](#) model, which calls for local health departments to engage multiple sectors and community partners to generate collective impact to address social, environmental, and economic conditions that affect health and health equity.

The PHA serves as the Advisory Coalition's road map to improve the county's health. The PHA Advisory Coalition uses a Health in All Policies perspective to engage diverse partners (like the Port Authority of Allegheny County, Uber, the Allegheny County Department of Economic Development, the YMCA, and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank) around collectively working toward a healthier community in which all citizens maximize their quality of life and well-being.

PURPOSE

The PHA, which came out of the 2015 community health needs assessment, grounds all coalition partners around a health- and well-being-related perspective and serves as a road map for action. The plan includes five priority areas,

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each with its own objectives, metrics, and actionable strategies that require broad community participation for progress: access to health care, chronic disease health risk behaviors, environment, maternal and child health, and mental health and substance abuse. Each priority area has a series of objectives, metrics, and actionable strategies that rely upon commitment from health care providers, social service agencies and organizations, and community-based organizations.

DATA

The Allegheny County Health Department launched the Allegheny Community Indicators Dashboard. The publicly available, interactive dashboard allows coalition partners (and others who are interested) to examine data about different public health topics. Comparisons can be made between Allegheny County and its municipalities, neighborhoods, ZIP codes, and census tracts versus county, state, and national health data (including Healthy People 2020 goals).

The dashboard was developed in conjunction with the Healthy Communities Institute and aggregate data from nearly 30 sources. Available searches include demographic information, health indicators, and disparities, as well as curated resources to locate promising practices and available grants. Progress toward priority outcomes is measured through the initial metrics laid out in the PHA, which were further refined by each workgroup.



FINANCING

The Public Health Improvement Fund is a philanthropic collaboration and is a blended distribution fund of The Pittsburgh Foundation. It is designed to serve as a flexible funding resource to support the Allegheny County Health Department leadership in developing and strengthening its capacity and activities.

Initial investments from the Public Health Improvement Fund enabled the community health assessment that informed the PHA. The mission of the Public Health Improvement Fund was subsequently expanded in 2016 to fund innovative public health projects addressing the needs identified in the PHA. The health department leadership team applies for the funding and manages these projects as they partner with organizations.

In addition to the Public Health Improvement Fund, the PHA Advisory Coalition partners have been successful in applying for other grants (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the BUILD Health Challenge) to fund multisector efforts.

GOVERNANCE

The feeling in the community is that as a public agency, the health department should be bringing people together, Karen Hacker, M.D., says. The PHA Advisory Coalition collaboratively developed the PHA. The coalition has grown to include more than 100 organizations.

The coalition has established work groups around each priority area. The groups have been identifying gaps in existing work, building on existing community efforts, shaping innovative and collaborative interventions, and building momentum to improve the health of Allegheny County. The work groups have also successfully brought partners together that subsequently apply for grants to further the work. Each work group is co-chaired by a health department representative and a person from another coalition partner.

INSIGHTS FROM THE COLLABORATIVE

As in any community, it takes a long time to develop meaningful, cross-sector relationships. By establishing trust through the Allegheny County Health Department's Plan for a Healthier Allegheny, the community was primed to respond quickly and effectively to emerging issues and was able to demonstrate the relationships necessary for successful grant applications. In Allegheny County, external pressure in the form of government commitment and significant public investment helps to bring issues into the public arena, to generate interest, and to engage multisector partners in creating action or change. Public accountability, Alaina Conner says, is critical — otherwise it is easy for initiatives to fall off the radar.

INSIGHTS FOR ALIGNING

- The PHA Advisory Coalition is an example of cross-sector partnership that is built to last beyond one-off grant opportunities.
- Allegheny County's community health needs assessment served to create a common purpose.
- External factors — focus the PHA Advisory Coalition on opportunistic cross-sector opportunities.
- Factors that ensure success include public accountability.

ALIGNING IN ACTION

In 2016, childhood lead exposure became a flashpoint issue for public discussion. While lead was not identified as a priority issue in the PHA, the health department and cross-sector partners from the PHA coalition sprung to action.

Aging infrastructure, especially in housing, makes Allegheny County residents particularly vulnerable to lead exposure. (More than 80% of the Allegheny County homes were built before 1978, and 40% of homes were built before 1950.) There is no safe level of lead exposure in children, with even low levels of lead associated with cognitive and behavioral issues. Children under six years of age are both at the highest risk for absorbing lead from their environment and most susceptible to the long-term harm caused by lead absorption.

In response to increased public interest in reducing exposures to lead hazards, Allegheny County's Board of Health and County Council were able to pass a local universal lead screening ordinance in 2017 — the first in Pennsylvania. In 2018 more than 23,700 children were tested. Additionally, the Allegheny County chief executive commissioned a lead task force, which produced recommendations in December 2017 and its first annual lead report in 2018.

In response to the recommendations from the Lead Task Force and in partnership with numerous local and state organizations, the Allegheny County Health Department is working to address exposure hazard through:

- Surveillance — The department tracks data on lead exposure and monitors children's elevated blood lead levels in real time by extracting data from the Pennsylvania National Electronic Disease Surveillance System. The health department also offers free lead testing for the uninsured or underinsured.
- Prevention and education — The health department launched its Get Ahead of Lead campaign and funded 10 community organizations to help with this education effort, especially in higher-risk communities. The partners included Circles of Greater Pittsburgh — Mon Valley, Clairton Cares, Consumer Health Coalition, Environmental Occupational & Public Health Consultants, Homewood Children's Village, Perry Hilltop Citizens Council, Pittsburgh Learning Commons, United Somali Bantu Community of Greater Pittsburgh, Women for a Healthy Environment, and Youth Enrichment Services.
- Intervention — The Safe and Healthy Homes Program (SHHP) is available to anyone who meets income requirements and has either a child under 22 years of age or a pregnant woman residing in the home. SHHP provides free in-home health and safety assessments to qualified participants in Allegheny County as well as Beaver, Washington, and Westmoreland counties. Free inspections are also offered in the homes of children under 6 years of age with a confirmed blood lead level of 5 µg/dl and above. The goal of this inspection is to identify any sources of lead exposure.
- Community-driven leadership — With the increased public focus on lead, a coalition of community partners emerged, many of whom had been involved in work on the PHA. In 2018, the health department and local advocacy organization Women for a Healthy Environment received funding from the National Centers for Healthy Housing to support staffing a reconstituted community-driven lead advisory coalition. Led by Women for a Healthy Environment, the coalition takes a Health in All Policies approach to addressing lead issues in the county.



Source: Marcus Charleston / 90.5 WESA