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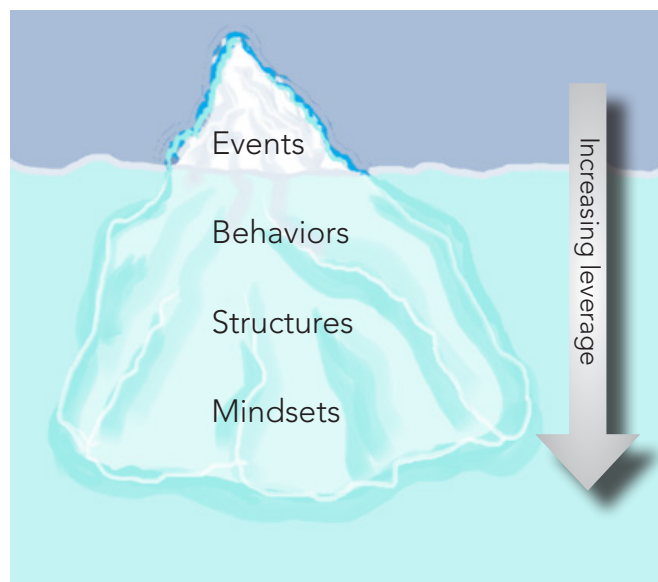
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Systems Thinking at the Georgia Health Policy Center

The Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) at Georgia State University focuses on solutions to complex challenges, including financing health and broader socioeconomic determinants of well-being, aligning stakeholders to effectively serve society's most vulnerable, improving population health, and developing community health systems in both rural and urban areas.

GHPC recognizes that these multifaceted challenges call for new conversations, collaborations, and insights. The center facilitates these new approaches using the principles and tools of systems thinking, as well as the iceberg metaphor. By illuminating the system — the interconnected set of elements that produces characteristic results — decision-makers can overcome compartmentalized thinking to gain a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the specific challenge before them, identify and avoid historic pitfalls and unintended consequences, and find high-leverage opportunities for significant, lasting change.



The Iceberg, a metaphor for the level at which individuals interact with a system.

Approach to Using Systems Thinking Tools

GHPC uses systems thinking tools in conjunction with its meeting design and facilitation services to help stakeholders explore issues and bolster their adaptive, systems thinking capacity. The center also helps organizations and group collaboratives develop and deploy maps or models of dynamic systems of interest to integrate the best available evidence and rigorously explore options for program implementation, as well as policy and economic analysis.

| Tools | |
|---|---|
| Principles and characteristics of systems | Ask the right questions to spark strategic, outside-the-box thinking |
| Behavior-over-time charts | Discover how those with different experiences, knowledge, and perspectives see an issue and deepen everyone's understanding |
| Stock and flow diagrams | Locate the "valves" responsible for changes in the amount of a key variable over time |
| Causal loop diagrams | Explore how different parts of a system interact to create feedback loops with either balancing or compounding effects |
| System dynamics models | Simulate future outcomes based on best available evidence for hypothetical combinations of interventions |

Guiding Principles

- Create the right environment to have important conversations.
- Think systemically about tough problems.
- Bring relevant information that is integrated, translated, and interpreted from primary and secondary research, best practices, and thought leaders.
- Build and value relationships.
- Continuously learn within and among projects and programs.
- Promote a way to approach a problem rather than a specific solution.
- Find creative ways to teach others what we have learned.

Project Examples

Support for the National Maternal and Child Health Workforce Development Center

GHPC serves on the Systems Integration Core of the National Maternal and Child Health Workforce Development Center, funded by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration Maternal and Child Health Bureau. The development center creates a continuum of learning and engagement opportunities for state and territorial Title V practitioners and future practitioners to develop the competencies needed in today's evolving health care environment. GHPC shares systems thinking expertise as a thought partner and trainer



in competencies such as cross-sector collaboration, finding leverage in policies, and addressing social determinants of health and health equity.

State Child-Serving Agencies Map System of Care

The Interagency Directors' Team (IDT), a multiagency leadership collaborative, was created as a result of the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities' State Infrastructure Grant to design, manage, facilitate, and implement an integrated approach to a child and adolescent behavioral health system of care to achieve collective impact. Members of the IDT used systems thinking to visually map out a system of care for children's behavioral health that informs policy and practice. This launched the brainstorming of solutions toward the IDT's long-term vision that children, youth,



and families who access interagency services achieve "independent, enriched, and productive lives in their communities of choice."

Assets and Challenges in Rural Health Systems

GHPC has long-standing experience in providing technical assistance and capacity-building support to more than 1,000 rural communities funded through the Health Resources and Services Administration Federal Office of Rural Health Policy's grant programs. Key areas of technical assistance have included rural health network development, data sharing and integration, analysis of grant-funded program activities and services for long-term impact, and coalition and partnership building. Lessons learned through the center's field work have been integrated into a series of modules intended to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities for improving the rural health system. Core to this work is understanding the interrelationship between key system players and elements that impact rural health and well-being.



Georgia Legislators Experiment with Childhood Obesity Model

As part of the Legislative Health Policy Certificate Program, GHPC developed a system dynamics model of childhood obesity that lets state legislators rapidly explore impacts of specific policy changes prior to enacting them. The model engaged participants, but it also contributed to real-world change. The model informed their deliberations during the legislative session and contributed to the passage of HB 229, requiring fitness testing and stricter enforcement of physical education requirements in Georgia's school system.

