Solution Direction 4

Convening partners in the system to help solve higher-level challenges and find alignment on roles, language, and a vision for the community housing sector of the future

This research paper is part of the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association (ONPHA) Solutions Lab on "Community Housing for the Future: Taking Collective Action Toward Resiliency." This paper is for use by Lab participants and attendees, as part of their pre-read materials.

This document covers an introduction to the Solution Direction (one of five), an overview of the policy or environmental context within which this intervention lives, and a summary of implications/opportunities that Lab participants should be aware of when designing for this Solution Direction.

Solution Direction Overview

The idea for convening partners in the system came from the recognition of the value of system collaboration that lab participants experienced in many of the activities of this solutions lab. Lab participants described a desire to work towards a collective vision for the future, while adopting a set of shared definitions and success criteria. This solution aims to embed a sense of collective action towards a common goal of ensuring everyone has a safe, stable, and affordable place to live in Ontario. This solution would also support stakeholders being able to understand each other's roles in the system and build more awareness for the value each group brings. **The essence of this solution direction is to bring a group of community housing system stakeholders together on an ongoing basis to leverage collaborative efforts to solve system challenges, to ensure alignment and agreement through collaboration and dialogue, and to shape a shared, systems-level vision for what we are trying to achieve for the future of community housing.**

"What if…"

This Solutions Lab aims to ignite new conversations among housing providers, service managers, and other stakeholders in the housing system in Ontario. When reviewing this paper and participating in the next workshop, consider envisioning the possibilities around the following potential scenarios:

- What if we more regularly convened stakeholders to address a common problem—using the opportunity to take risks and create potential solutions together?
- What if we more frequently had the "difficult conversations" together, those which challenge the status quo and keep people's needs at the forefront?
- What if we created more safe spaces for peer exchange, where failures could be discussed, and lessons learned could be shared?

What was the intention from which this solution direction was developed?
The intention behind this idea is to engage multiple stakeholders in the system as collaborators in developing collective action towards change-making or new initiatives. This solution direction emphasizes

a strengths-based approach that values and appreciates each of our partners' unique capabilities, allows for engaging in dialogue that promotes trust, transparency, and accountability, supporting the development of actionable outputs, and that provides space to consider actions across the varied operating contexts and constraints of the system's members.

Potential Components

A systems table could be formed, where stakeholders who do not always interact can share experiences and work together. This group could begin its work by articulating a framework and philosophy for the community housing sector of the future, building on the vision emerging from this Solutions Lab.

Outcomes

Through this Solution Direction, we are seeking to design interventions that support…	
Changing relationships between players	• Create a community of practice that learns from each other, builds on collective experiences, and shares expertise and capabilities so one provider or service manager doesn't have to "know it all" • Communicate a renewed value proposition for the community housing sector of the future, including the philosophy and definitions
Changing the way we work and the impact we can create	• Act as a resource for the sector to take advantage of the new funding environment
Changing roles in the system.	• Reposition community housing's role in the surrounding community

The Surrounding Context:

Why is convening partners in the system important?

We often speak about the concept of "community" in housing, and it is fitting that this Solution Direction could be considered as the act of developing and building community within the housing system. The work of coming together—to apply our collaborative efforts to align on a vision, to share resources as we overcome shared challenges, and to combine our strengths to promote and support areas of mutual interest and success—is an effort that can be rewarded with meaningful relational ties, powerful opportunities for learning, and robust system impacts. Just as much as building a community is challenging and powerful as a function of a housing system, convening partners can be a powerful tool for promoting change and supporting innovation.

Convening partners has been a focus for many social innovation and philanthropic organizations, and many collaboration frameworks have been developed from which we can glean wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for this Solution Direction.

Looking to Collective Impact for Inspiration

Collective impact (CI) is one framework for cross-sector collaboration developed by social change consulting firm FSG. The CI framework assumes a collaborative of varied stakeholders who bring diverse interests to challenges within social systems.

Structural Conditions

The CI framework lays out a set of structural conditions required to support collaboration efforts for social change, and suggests the following 5 conditions for success (Brady & Juster, 2016):

1. **Common agenda**: All participants have a shared vision for change that includes a mutual understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.

2. **Shared measurement**: Agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported, with a short list of common indicators identified and used across all participating organizations for learning and improvement.

3. **Mutually reinforcing activities**: Engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinating a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.

4. **Continuous communication**: Frequent and structured open communication across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.

5. **Backbone support**: Ongoing support by independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative, including guiding the initiative's vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. Backbone staff can all sit within a single organization, or they can have separate roles housed in multiple organizations.

Principles for Practice

The CI framework has since been augmented with principles for practice which inform the methods and approach to take when working for CI. These are:

1. **Design and implement the initiative with a priority placed on equity.** Ensure you apply an equity lens throughout all CI activities and your strategies focus on improving outcomes with affected populations

2. **Include community members in the collaborative**. Members of the community must be meaningfully engaged in your CI activities. True inclusion means you've ensured all stakeholders have opportunities to contribute.

3. **Recruit and co-create with cross-sector partners**. Your CI effort requires an authentic diversity of actors to ensure a systems level view.

4. **Use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve**. CI is about collaboration for problem solving and requires an ongoing ability to identify change and learn from the environment. There should be a learning culture and methods for assessment using data.

5. **Cultivate leaders with unique system leadership skills**. To achieve change, you need leaders who can foster the facilitation of convening. You need a collaborative with leaders who are willing to change in service to the group agenda, and who can build relational ties and trust between participants.

6. **Focus on program and system strategies**. CI efforts should set goals for collective program and system changes rather than individual organizational needs.

7. **Build a culture that fosters relationships, trust, and respect across participants**. Partnerships in CI must be based in authenticity, trust, respect and inclusion. Leaders must create and reinforce these principles through their efforts.

8. **Customize for local context**. CI ensures that there are impacts at a systems level scale and it requires that efforts are customized to reflect local contexts to align with existing work and build on the real needs of the community.

Collective Impact is not the only framework for convening that exists, but it has been included here as an example because CI includes explicit, practical actions that can be used to support convening.

Examining Other Community Change Frameworks

In an article that examines multiple collaborative forms and contrasts the successes of multiple community change frameworks (including CI), authors Christans and Inzeo provide a summative overview of all frameworks to identify key common features for success in collaborative efforts.

Christans and Inzeo conclude that:

1. Positive internal relationships between participants are critical to success;
2. Successful collaborations can rarely be effectively initiated from the outside; and

3. Member diversity and formalization of rules and procedures are important in achieving goals.

This research suggests that regardless of the framework used to support convening the system, critical work to initiate in support of this solution direction should include:

1. Fostering positive internal relationships between participants
2. Ensuring that the collaboration serves the needs of the internal group and maintains relevance for solving their common challenges
3. Sourcing members of a collaborative working group that authentically represent the diversity of the stakeholders in the communities we seek to support
4. Developing and formalizing rules and procedures for managing collaborative efforts

Considerations for the Community Housing System

What might we need to consider for successful convening as a system?
There are current operational realities that will influence the approach to convening, and where this influence will need to be evaluated to ensure success in convening as a system.

* **Diversity of perspectives and lived experiences**: currently, systems participants do not have a formalized shared vision for change that includes a mutual understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.

* **Lack of shared measurement**: inconsistencies in expectations of outcomes, differing evaluative metrics, and differing levels of data integrity and rigor mean that we do not have a consistent approach to shared data and measurement across the system.

* **Lack of clarity of mutually reinforcing activities**: engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinating a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.

* **Continuous communication**: frequent and structured open communication across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.

* **Backbone support**: ongoing support by independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative, including guiding the initiative's vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. Backbone staff can all sit within a single organization, or they can have separate roles housed in multiple organizations. (Brady & Juster, 2016)

References

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