

Concept Paper: Community Collaboratives in Maine

Background

Maine's Child Safety and Family Well-being Plan *Version 1.0* calls for the creation of a coordinated system to keep children safe by keeping families strong. This includes promoting supportive communities where families feel comfortable seeking help and resources are available and accessible. Over 300 community and state partners recommended priorities and activities to include in the Plan. Among these partners, there was a consistent call to improve support for existing and develop more **community-based collaborative groups** across the state that bring local people together to coordinate, collaborate, and innovate to help children and families in their communities. Following these recommendations, the Maine Child Welfare Action Network and the Department of Health and Human Services have convened a statewide network of community collaboratives to share best practices and lessons learned, to use this information to assist communities in bolstering support for existing collaboratives, and to support communities interested in establishing new collaboratives. Participants in the Community Collaboratives Network are from communities across the state, and have developed this shared definition of a community collaborative in Maine.

What is a Community Collaborative?

Community Collaboratives are groups of people who are committed to developing better ways to help those who live in their communities. These groups are led by local nonprofit organizations and community residents, and are often funded by philanthropy and other donations. They create opportunities for local people to work together by providing designated staff to convene meetings, build relationships among participants, and coordinate shared activities and resources.

Community Collaboratives involve all the necessary people to bring about positive change, including local leaders, neighbors, and families, especially those who are most impacted by the issues. Members work together to redefine roles and responsibilities for supporting people in the community, improve coordination of existing resources and develop new ones, and respond to emerging needs. Established Community Collaboratives in Maine have made a significant impact by creating safe and supportive housing, collecting and distributing funds and everyday items like food and clothing, and developing recovery resource centers.

Although Community Collaborative structures and activities are unique to each community, there are consistent core components in each one that make this model effective: committed **local leadership**; paid staff and practices that provide the **relational infrastructure** needed to build trust among partners; **financial infrastructure** including investors and fiscal agents; access to **physical spaces** in the community for meetings and events; a collective **focus on service** delivery and improvement; **shared initiatives** among partners including projects, training and technical assistance; and a commitment to creating **intentional change** for the community by leveraging the collective resources of the group. The goal of every Community Collaborative across Maine is to activate place-based, responsive approaches that support wellbeing for local people of all ages.

Core Components of Community Collaboratives

1. Local Leadership
2. Relational Infrastructure
3. Financial Infrastructure
4. Access to Physical Space
5. Service Focus
6. Shared Initiatives
7. Intentional Change

Core Components

Local Leadership: Every Collaborative needs champions - people who talk up the value of the group and the work being done. Effective champions are decision makers and opinion leaders with the ability to mobilize groups of people to work together. Some champions may be from the dedicated organization that takes the lead on resourcing conversations to build and strengthen relationships, and to solve problems. **Core partners** are a diverse group of people and organizations who are most deeply involved in the Collaborative and regular attendees at meetings. They secure and strengthen key partnerships that require time and attention. **Issue partners** are people and organizations who plug into activities around specific issues.

Relational Infrastructure: One of the most essential components of a successful Collaborative is a **dedicated organization** that provides **paid staff** with the **skills** to convene partners and to create the conditions for people to build working relationships. Effective Collaboratives have a **diversity of representation** that includes local leaders, service providers, and people with lived experience. They must be able to mobilize community members and other partners who do not typically work together, including state and local public and private sector partners and community members. They also have to be willing, open, and able to seek new members and modify the work as issues change and priorities emerge. Collaborative staff must also be able to facilitate hard conversations and reframe issues, notice who is showing up and who isn't, and focus on building **trusting relationships** and ensuring value for every participant. Staff have a broad awareness of service provision in the community, pay attention to community level data, and track trends in resource access and funding. These positions also ensure Collaborative members develop and actively use **group agreements**, another essential part of relational infrastructure. Group agreements reflect the history and purpose of the Collaborative, outline members' shared values, and establish guiding principles for working together. They may include descriptions of how members will govern the group and make collective decisions, policies and processes for working together, and financial agreements about how to share and distribute funds among members and/or with the community.

Financial Infrastructure: Partners in effective Collaboratives recognize the value of the resources being provided by the **dedicated organization**, and the importance of the financial infrastructure that supports it. This often contributes to more cooperation and less competition for funds among members, as members pool funds and apply for grants together to ensure the relational infrastructure of the Collaborative is supported. Effective financial support for Collaboratives is **flexible** and comes from multiple, diverse sources. Some Collaboratives have donors or grants that provide dedicated funds for paid staff. Some Collaboratives don't have a dedicated funding source for staff, and positions are resourced by pooling funds or by organizational commitments to fundraising and contributing in-kind staff time. **In-kind resources** play an important role for the health and impact of Community Collaboratives by providing essential skills, staff and volunteer time, and space. These donations are an important type of hidden financial infrastructure for Collaboratives that should be tracked and communicated to communities and investors.

Examples of Group Agreements

- Focusing on a shared purpose
- Centering community voices and lived experiences
- Committing to collective action
- Working together instead of competing for funds
- Recognizing both "needs" and "offers" in meetings
- Coming together to identify and solve problems
- Acting in ways that build trust and relationships among members
- Sharing and using community level data

Access to Physical Space: Successful Collaboratives all have access to physical **space in the community** for meetings, activities, and resource distribution. These spaces are often not owned or operated by the dedicated lead organization or staff, and are accessed through established relationships and connections with accessible community spaces such as libraries, churches, and town offices. These spaces may be used for meetings or community activities, and provide the richness and depth of being together in a welcoming space. The role of the Collaborative is to **make connections** between those who have space and those who need it, and to facilitate sharing these resources and activities among group members for the benefit of the entire community.

Service Focus: Collaborative partners share a sense of responsibility for **servicing people** in the community by connecting them to resources that help meet their needs. They pay attention to community health data, recognize input from people who live in the communities is essential to **assessing gaps** in resources and support. Effective Collaboratives notice trends of what's working and what's not working in the local service array, and are alert to calls from the community for help. They also pay attention to the people in the community they are not hearing from and actively seek their input, developing creative ways to overcome or work around barriers such as the culture of not asking for help. Collaborative members continually listen for local stories about problems that need solving, and often support the development of **new resources** in the community.

Shared Training Topic Examples

Shared professional development needs and opportunities are identified through conversations among partners. Some groups can secure funding to provide access to national trainings. Topics may include:

- Partnership with state agencies
- Partnering with community members
- Lived experience partners
- Developing shared values among diverse perspectives
- Bias and stigma
- Cultural humility
- Difficult conversations

Shared Initiatives: Effective Collaboratives provide opportunities for partners to work together on initiatives that require coordinated action. These may include **specific projects**, such as incubating new programs, or adapting current resources so they work better for the people they serve. Collaboratives sometimes help bring in funding for new projects to address service gaps in the community, and are often strong candidates for grants when they apply as multiple organizations working together. Collaborative meetings can also be an effective conduit for sharing information and building partnerships that result in projects that are not organized or managed through the Collaborative. Partners often note these projects were a direct result of the relationships that were generated from participation in the group. Overall, Collaboratives focus less on specific projects and more on the group process to **support coordinated action** among partners. This includes shared training and technical assistance for partners to ensure everyone has the latest information on best practices, is using the same language, and develop shared values, knowledge, and skills. Staff for the Collaborative also continually remind group partners of their shared goals and encourage them to work together to develop strategies for change.

Intentional Change: The ultimate goal of an effective Collaborative is to create **lasting change** for people who live in the community. Established Collaboratives are able to identify and share information across issues and programs. Partners focus on solving problems with a

collective approach that works to address **community conditions**. This often means advocating among partners and looking for ways to change the way things are done within local organizations or communities. Trusting relationships are foundational to building the type of architecture that is needed to create a stronger local system of support. While Collaboratives don't often engage in structured policy work, they can also be important resources for state leaders, policymakers and funders who are looking for ways to improve community

conditions. Effective local initiatives that are developed as a workaround to a community challenge often demonstrate important policy and investment opportunities.

Conclusion

The goal of every Community Collaborative across the state is to activate place-based, responsive approaches that support well-being for local people of all ages. These respectful, culturally responsive groups have the infrastructure and the skills to work together to solve local problems and respond swiftly and effectively to emerging needs. Established and new Community Collaboratives will be essential partners to reach the vision of the Child Safety and Family Well-Being System: that Maine will be a place where all children, youth, and families live in supportive communities where people work together to keep kids safe by keeping families strong.

For more information, contact Melissa Hackett, Coordinator of the Maine Child Welfare Action Network at mhackett@mekids.org

Representatives from the following Community Collaboratives participated in the first year convening a network of Collaboratives (2023-2024). Their work included the development of this concept paper.

- Community Caring Collaborative <https://www.cccmaine.org/>
- Community Partnerships for Protecting Children – Southern Maine Provider Group (Listserv)
- Poverty Action Coalition <https://www.kvcap.org/our-work/poverty-action-coalition/>
- Helping Hands with Heart <https://www.facebook.com/hhhpiscataquis/>
- Lakes Region Collective Action Network <https://www.opportunityalliance.org/lrcan>
- Midcoast Community Collaborative <https://www.facebook.com/groups/689063952657539/>
- Oxford County Wellness Collaborative <https://www.ocwcmaine.org/>
- Aroostook Community Collaborative
<https://www.facebook.com/AroostookCommunityCollaborative/>
- AK Collaborative <https://www.akcollaborative.org/>