

Inter-agency Services Collaboration Project Abstract for MOPAN Conference

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The Wellesley Institute completed a year long research project on non-profit inter-agency service collaborations in 2007 to explore collaboration's potential to enhance NPO capacity and effectiveness.

The project examined collaborations among NPO agencies that directly or indirectly enhance service delivery. This includes collaborations to enhance organizational operations, and collaborations to enhance service planning and delivery. Examples of such collaborations include shared administration, budgets, or administrative staff; shared infrastructure such as co-location; joint service planning, or joint program delivery such as single intake and information-sharing. The project investigated the characteristics of service delivery collaborations in Toronto, critical success factors and barriers, and similarity of NPO collaborations with public sector and business sector collaborations.

The project used multiple methods; literature searches, key informant interviews, case studies and a roundtable table process to include the ideas, views and concerns of local funders, government officials, capacity builders and service providers.

Main findings were:

- The NPO service delivery collaborators and the governments and foundations that largely fund them have no clear common understanding of service collaboration goals. Collaborators most often aim to leverage resources to respond to complex community needs, while funders are perceived to be seeking service rationalization and efficiencies.
- Sustainable service delivery collaboration perceived to impact clients and communities positively is typically "bottom-up". It originates among service providers, strongly motivated, who join together to respond to a need. Stakeholders report that funder-mandated or incented collaborations, or collaborations in which agencies are not strongly motivated to participate, tend not to last or to improve client and community outcomes.
- Bottom-up collaborations most often form to respond to complex community needs rather than to increase efficiencies or rationalize services. This motivation may explain in part why most Toronto health and social service delivery collaboration consists of informal information-sharing, with some protocol and process sharing to link clients to services, and little efficiency-driven back-office consolidation.
- Collaborations that share resources intensively very often coalesce out of informal information-sharing among agencies, or the ongoing activities of sector networks, alliances and other project partnerships.

- Increased financial and other resources would increase collaboration, as would more collaboration-friendly government policies, such as standardized funder policies and procedures, direct funding for collaboration, and skills training on how to build sustainable NPO collaborations.
- NPO service collaborations share some similarities with private sector collaboration, on which public sector and NPO collaboration strategy is modeled in Ontario. Just as business collaboration aims are often strategic – e.g. increasing firms’ long-term profitability in complex, intensely competitive globalized markets – NPO collaborations most often aim to leverage resources to respond innovatively to local complex need. Both business and NPO collaborations often respond innovatively by bringing together different core competencies from within the different organizations.

The study also found there is a lack of research evidence on the impact on clients, communities, and services of different types of service collaborations, due to a lack of outcome evaluations of individual service collaborations.