

Best Practices: Using a Systems Approach



A Dialogue with

Dr. Christina Economos, Tufts University

Allison Gertel-Rosenberg, Nemours Children's Health System

Best Practices: The Importance of Multi-sector Collaboration Using a Systems Approach

The EAHS convening featured a conversation with Dr. Christina Economos and Allison Gertel-Rosenberg, who shared examples and best practices from previously completed and successful “whole-of-community” interventions, that drew on the expertise and collaboration of stakeholders from multiple sectors.

Dr. Economos spoke about a large research study she led in Somerville, Massachusetts called Shape Up Somerville. Shape Up Somerville was a community-based and participatory approach to preventing childhood obesity, that was designed to reduce unnecessary weight gain in children by improving policies and environments, as opposed to focusing on individual behavior change. The study engaged a committed group of stakeholders called the Shape Up Somerville Task Force that represented all different sectors to bring the intervention to life in Somerville. As the Principal Investigator on the study, she shared her perspective on what made this project innovative and exciting: “The reason I want to cite this example, is this was a total multilevel effort... bringing in health care, child care, city government, the school system, and the media. All the systems in a community working together.



“It took funding, collaboration, open mindedness and moving personal/ organizational agendas aside and working as a core together. You want to work on physical activity over here, you also have to address political will over there. They go hand-in-hand.”

No easy task. What we did at the time was create a coalition that represented the sectors and began to work together in a really effective way. And what we learned in that process we can now bring to other communities.”

Important takeaways from Dr. Economos:

- However you identify *community* -- whether it is defined by geography, or a shared interest or identity – define clear and straightforward priorities.
- Oftentimes a community will take on too many priorities at once, and the opportunity to make progress on any single one may be diluted as a result. Less is more.
- Build consensus among your group on one or two priorities, and make a long-term plan for achieving them. Pace yourself, and measure milestones along the way. Really chip away at those few things, and you’ll get a lot more attention and impact with your priorities.

Ms. Gertel-Rosenberg shared the following:
“For us, we wanted to look across childhood. We launched a program through a place-based initiative focused on Delaware. We looked at how we were going to get all the sectors and silos within communities to have voices in the area of education and early education and health. What best practices could be put in place? What tools could help fill in the gaps so that certain counties and areas wouldn’t have to duplicate? What could be spread and what could be scaled to be applicable to the context of specific communities?”



“We also focused on sustainability from the front end—what needs to happen in those spaces to maintain funding, interest and engagement, because without those, the models aren’t self-sustaining.”

Important takeaways from Ms. Gertel-Rosenberg:

- In systems change work, barriers can be encountered, especially when many people are brought together. What we’re asking people to do is perform work that they are not only paid to do, but to think about work that would accelerate the system.
- People need to be mindful and ask, “What can I do, even if it’s not my agenda, to help move the work forward?”
- Systems change is people change and it’s hard work. It takes time and energy and thoughtful conversations and leadership to make that change happen.
- Keep in mind – and this is exciting thing – there are lots of examples where this type of change has worked and is working. Stick with it!

Moving Advocacy and Policy Forward

One of the action steps that came out of EAHS' dialogues is doing more in the way of advocacy and communications with community integration for health and wellness for early childhood. Both Dr. Economos and Ms. Gertel-Rosenberg shared these ideas about how to encourage policy and advocacy support moving forward.

Important takeaways from Dr. Economos and Ms. Gertel-Rosenberg

- **Gertel-Rosenberg:** It's important to have communication, in sound bites, that is relatable, understandable and demonstrates its importance.
- **Economos:** Every policymaker will say, "Show me the data and show me the costs associated with it." It's important to arm yourselves with data and understand what data you can collect to be a better, stronger advocate. Link it to ROI, cost savings, reach—this connects with policymakers.

Thanks to Jodi Mitchell from JC Health Strategies, LLC for facilitating this segment.

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