



Investigating Systems Alignment of Multi-Sector Agencies to Address Child Maltreatment in St. Louis

Virtual Group Model Building Workshop Brief | June 2021

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Parents and Children Together- St. Louis (PACT-STL) aims to develop, implement, and evaluate strategies to prevent child maltreatment and reduce entry into the public child welfare system. Convening medical, public health, and social services organizations at state and regional levels, PACT-STL focuses on decreasing health and service disparities for children in families with lower risk referrals to child protective services (CPS). As part of this effort, PACT-STL engages a network of child and family service agencies, including health, mental health, housing, and child welfare organizations.

PACT-STL employed a system dynamics group model building (GMB) approach with organizational leaders of partner agencies to develop a deeper understanding of patterns of current agency collaboration. GMB sessions (n=2) were held to elicit barriers and facilitators to meaningful collaboration among child and family service providers and to identify strategies to promote enhanced collaboration within the network. GMB sessions were held virtually via Zoom due to COVID-19.

GMB workshops were organized by a design team of members of the PACT-STL team and the Social System Design Lab, including members from Vision for Children at Risk and faculty and students at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. Workshop objectives included (1) orienting PACT-STL leadership group

to a framing of strategic collaboration as a dynamic systems, 2) identifying structural barriers and facilitators to collaboration within the group and larger organizational network, (3) developing system insights about potential intervention points to enhance collaboration across organizations, and (4) establishing a baseline of how the group understands collaboration to revisit in Year 3 to assess change.

Two GMB sessions were built into regular PACT-STL Collaborative meetings and were held in back-to-back months. Participants were members of the PACT-STL Collaborative and consented to participate in the sessions. Workshop 1 focused on framing strategic collaboration as a system dynamics problem and identifying barriers and facilitators to organizational collaboration in St. Louis child and family services. Workshop 2 explored potential intervention points to enhance organizational collaboration and established a baseline of the ways in which the PACT-STL Collaborative understands collaboration at this point in their work.

Workshop 1 generated an initial brainstorm and clustering of barriers and facilitators to collaboration. Participants identified **resources**—including funding, time, and human resources—as a central theme to collaborative barriers and facilitators. In addition, **relationships** were seen as a key driver of collaboration, both in terms of facilitating resource sharing or inhibiting new collaborations. **Motivation** was also highlighted as a primary factor in collaboration, yet this was complicated by multiple definitions of collaboration. A thread throughout discussions suggested a confusion between high-level coordination and more rigorous collaboration. Lastly, **collaboration infrastructure** was identified as central to facilitating or inhibiting collaboration. The group described the ways in which convening organizations and entities such as PACT-STL provide space for collaborative efforts.

In workshop 2, participants reviewed and discussed a causal loop diagram that integrated their experiences of collaboration within two common *system archetypes*. *System archetypes* are visual descriptions of generic, recurring system structures in the form of causal loop diagrams that show up across diverse contexts and situations (Kim, 1993). First, the **tragedy of the commons** was used to describe the idea of “Empire Building,” in which competitive dynamics diminish overall system performance, even as individual organizations may become stronger. As one participant described, *Every nonprofit I have ever worked for has ended up in a merger situation. There is a focus on who is going to be the last program standing. How do you make sure what you're doing is unique? ... At some point, there won't be 20 orgs serving. How do we align with orgs with similar values?*

Second, the **capability trap**—a common dynamic within organizations in which entities face tradeoff decisions about how to spend time and money—was employed as a way of understanding collaborative decision making. Organizations can get caught in a trap that involves working harder and harder to provide direct services at the expense of upstream investments in data, learning, and collaboration capabilities (such as relationships, data infrastructure, referral networks, and advocacy partnerships). One participant described a dynamic in which organizations are “So focused on serving clients that opportunities are missed” and they feel like they are “throwing spaghetti against the wall [to] see what sticks,” rather than making strategic investments in learning.

Workshop 2 also focused on developing insights into potential intervention points to enhance collaboration. Participants discussed the need for **transparency and accountability** to build understanding and trust, specifically in terms of funding, reporting, and resource-sharing. Within these discussions, participants expressed concerns about the role of institutional racism and an uncertain political environment in St.

Louis City, which impacts multiple aspects of funding decisions and accountability. In addition, participants described the “**wrong pocket**” **problem** in collaboration, noting a persistent difference between agencies who invest in collaboration and those who benefit. This inequity of effort and benefit is a deep-seated structural issue that may require innovative approaches to pooling resources and investing in solutions that have not been part of the conversation previously. Lastly, participants described a potential intervention opportunity of **shifting time horizons** to address the problem of short-term funding and planning in inhibiting collaboration. This suggestion involves shifting funding time horizons to conceptualizing impact over 5-10 years as opposed to quarters-years, and developing a common language and vision for system-level impact beyond an individual organization’s or leader’s priorities.

GMB workshops are part of setting a baseline for the multi-year effort of strengthening collaboration within the PACT-STL network. Next steps involve integrating discussions, ideas, and intervention strategies into future meetings of the PACT-STL Executive Committee to build capacity and momentum for implementation.

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