Aligning Forces for Quality Multi-Stakeholder Healthcare Alliances: Do They Have a Sustainable Future?

The alliances in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) program (2006 to 2015) brought together diverse stakeholders (i.e., providers, payers, employers and consumers) to work collaboratively to implement a set of interventions focused on improving health and healthcare in their respective regions. An alliance’s ability to accomplish its broad goals is predicated on sustaining the interest and participation of community stakeholders over extended periods of time.

An extensive analysis of survey results, qualitative data, and secondary sources, suggests that there is cause for concern about the future viability of a substantial number of the former AF4Q alliances. Of the 16 alliances, 2 already had ceased operations and 5 more had no clear strategic direction. Some appeared to be on the verge of dissolution but can probably continue to operate in some capacity in the short-term. Adding to this picture, less than half of survey respondents across all alliances indicated that their alliance had a well-thought-out strategy and set of programs that would position their alliance for the future. These findings reflect the inherent difficulty of transitioning from a grant dependent organization to one that garners support through a clear demonstration of value for key stakeholders in its community.

Of the alliances that were able to articulate a clear strategic direction, or were on the path to developing one, it is likely that many will continue to operate, although some plan to do so in a form that differs from the “neutral convener,” multi-stakeholder model emphasized during AF4Q. For example, some alliances are restructuring and/or shifting their orientation to particular stakeholder groups that control significant resources, such as employers, large healthcare systems, or even the state. Still others are attempting to “diversify” by building off their AF4Q experience in areas such as measurement development to offer fee-for-service products, but in the process creating potential conflict with their traditional role as neutral convener for all stakeholder groups and their mission to promote community health more broadly.

Overall, alliance participants emphasized the need for a clear alliance focus centered on activities that are valued enough to be financially supported in the local or regional market. While this may seem obvious, it was not always the case under AF4Q because alliances were often insulated from accountability to their local communities through a combination of RWJF prescribed interventions and generous funding. Indeed, survey respondents gave relatively low priority to retaining existing programs/activities and there is evidence that some AF4Q “public good” activities such as public reporting and consumer engagement are already being phased out by a subset of alliances because of little stakeholder and/or financial support.

These findings raise the more fundamental question of what alliances are trying to sustain. In most cases preserving the organization, itself, appears to receive the greatest emphasis, certainly more than do some existing programs. While organizational self-preservation and infrastructure development may be necessary as a foundation to achieve broader aims, it is important to gauge these efforts against the more fundamental objective of improving community health, whether through programmatic efforts of the alliance, the efforts of particular alliance members, or even through non-alliance efforts that target issues such as the social determinants of health. The last decade was significant in terms of healthcare policy change: current national and
local realities differ greatly from those at the outset of AF4Q in 2006. For many of the alliances it remains to be seen how, and if, they will apply their AF4Q experience to their current realities in order to provide value, meet continually evolving stakeholder needs, and ultimately improve the quality of healthcare in their communities.

Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) was a nearly 10-year initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to improve health care, reduce disparities, and create national models for health reform. The initiative provided funding and technical assistance to 16 multi-stakeholder alliances across the U.S. to implement a variety of health care interventions, including efforts to improve quality in health care delivery at the community level.

This research summary was produced as part of the AF4Q Evaluation, also funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to measure the impact of the AF4Q initiative and describe key lessons learned.

For more information about the AF4Q initiative visit forces4quality.org

For more information about the AF4Q Evaluation visit www.hhdev.psu.edu/CHCPR/alignforce