

Effective Leadership in Network Collaboration: Lessons Learned from Continuum of Care Homeless Programs

By Dr. Hee Soun Jang, Dr. Jesús N. Valero, and Dr. Kyujin Jung

Cross-sector collaboration has become a prevalent form of governance for tackling difficult problems that can't be addressed by a single organization or sector. A scarcity of resources and efforts to reinvent the way governments function has also conditioned many public managers to pursue new approaches that go beyond organizational boundaries. To date, the assumption has been that collaboration is good and that pooling resources will automatically result in positive outcomes. Because the benefits of collaboration are too often assumed, there is little research about what effective collaboration means or looks like. Collaboration requires effort, coordination, and most importantly, effective leadership. Therefore, it is essential to understand the scope of leadership behaviors that lead to successful collaboration.

Leaders have choices in how they engage with member agencies and how they achieve the mission and objectives of collaboration. Different styles of leadership will lead to different outcomes that will either enhance or reduce effective partnerships. A key reason for this is because a public manager who leads a collaborative network plays an incredibly important role in the process. Among other responsibilities, they are commonly tasked with bringing organizations together, securing the necessary resources to achieve network goals, and articulating a common vision. Scholarly research has usually treated network leaders as agents of underlying organizational decisions, driving the management of collaboration. But public managers leading collaborative efforts are real people who possess leadership qualities and skills that will influence effective collaboration in numerous ways.

As a result, the report focuses on answering two practical questions:

- What does effective collaboration look like and does leadership matter?
- If leadership is important, what specific skills and qualities are valuable for leaders to possess and/or develop in order to lead successful collaborative efforts?

To answer these questions, we studied collaboration within the context of homelessness policy networks (an area receiving significant policy attention in recent years). This report specifically investigates the role of managers leading continuum of care homeless networks and the leadership behaviors that matter in achieving successful collaborative outcomes.

Understanding Continuum of Care (CoC) Homeless Networks

A CoC is a collaborative system for planning and providing services to a specific person or group of people on an ongoing basis. In effect, it involves tracking the progress of the services provided. The term is commonly heard in healthcare, but it can also apply to other fields employing an integrated service program. It is frequently used in social services contexts such as homelessness mitigation programs.

A public service network is defined as a structure of cross-sector organizations working to jointly implement public policy. A homelessness network is a structure of multiple organizations representing public, private, and nonprofit sectors that work together to address homelessness within their community. The creation of homeless networks across U.S. communities has been promoted by federal policy. The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 was key in stimulating federal activity in this area.

Local communities that establish a homeless network are eligible to apply for competitive HUD funding on a yearly basis. In 2014 alone, over \$1.8 billion was awarded to CoC homeless networks to implement a variety of programs and services to end homelessness in the United States. The underlying assumption in the promotion of CoC homeless networks as a tool to reduce and eliminate homelessness is that collaboration is the most effective way of tackling this difficult and complex problem.

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According to the interim federal rule that governs the CoC approach, the primary purposes of a CoC homeless network are to:

- Promote community-wide goals to end homelessness
- Establish a board that oversees the operations of the network
- Design and operate a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) that tracks client data and service provision
- Engage in collaborative planning activities such as yearly counts of homeless people

The analysis of CoC homeless networks helps to develop a deeper understanding of what effective collaboration looks like and the conditions that lead some networks to be more effective.

Report Objectives

Based on data collected from a nationwide survey of U.S. continuum of care (CoC) homeless networks and in-depth interviews with network leaders, this report has the following objectives:

Develop measures of effective collaboration

The report describes measures of effective collaboration that public managers can use to assess performance at two levels—the network and the community. They are a reflection of the competing interests of network members and community stakeholders.

Offer a network leadership model

The report outlines a model of network leadership that highlights important leadership behaviors in collaborative governance within the context of homeless policy. The model consists of two leadership styles found to impact effective collaboration:

- Task-oriented behaviors—focused on facilitating network goal achievement
- Relationship-oriented behaviors—focused on building positive social relations

Findings

Our findings discuss the degree to which networks perceive that they are being effective, the key leadership behaviors in networked collaboration, and the impact of leadership on effective collaboration.

Networks have positive impacts

Public managers can realize important benefits through network collaboration—namely, reducing the duplication of services by pooling resources, coordinating efforts in the community to increase the range of services, and increasing member agencies of the CoC.

Networks raise awareness of homelessness

Public managers should continue using the various tools and methods to educate and engage the community about what homelessness is and what can be done to resolve the problem.

Leaders enhance internal capacity of the network

Public managers should focus on establishing and building CoC homeless network capacity by ensuring that it has the necessary resources and involves the right people in collaborative efforts (e.g., potential leaders and members).

Leaders foster idea and information sharing

Cultivating a culture of sharing ideas and solutions can prove to be rewarding for networks that are looking for new ways to eradicate homelessness. In addition, including the voice of network members will send a clear message to members that their thoughts and values matter. In turn, this will encourage member commitment and support for the network.

Six Recommendations for Successful Collaborative Policy Arrangements

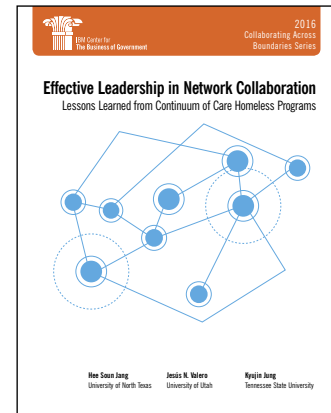
From our survey, interviews with network leaders and review of literature, we have generated six recommendations. In general, our findings indicate that leadership matters in explaining the effective implementation of cross-sector collaboration. It is important to note that these recommendations include both the leadership skills and leadership qualities that public managers should aim to possess and/or develop, especially in the context of homeless policy.

1. **Develop Expertise** – Managing networks requires the development of expertise in a subject matter policy area. This recommendation is centered on the idea that managers need to be equipped with extensive knowledge, expertise, and best practices to be effective network leaders.
2. **Cultivate a Collaborative Culture** – The collaborative process is about constant communication, building trust among network members and, just as importantly, cultivating a culture that welcomes both competition and collaboration.
3. **Take Risks** – Network leaders should not be afraid to risk relationships with other members of the network when necessary, particularly when enforcing shared norms, rules, and expectations. Risking relationships means being a bold leader and communicating expectations to network members, whether some members like hearing those expectations or not.
4. **Be an Inclusive Leader** – Research shows that homelessness is a multidimensional problem, requiring a cross-sector strategy that engages a wide array of supportive programs and services. As a result, any intervention to eradicate homelessness will take real coordination and a diverse group of stakeholders. The same is likely for other types of public services in response to difficult social problems. This reality requires network leaders to be inclusive of community stakeholders such as local governments, nonprofit shelters, food pantries, church-operated soup kitchens, and school districts.
5. **Be Agile and Adaptive** – Networks evolve over time—sometimes the network evolves for good and other times it does not. Network leaders must stand ready to accept the reality of their network's status and adapt as necessary. Effective leaders must understand reality and adapt quickly to the new normal for the best interest of the community.
6. **Use Performance Indicators Effectively** – Network leaders must realize the advantages in having access to data and information, and they must use them properly. This allows the network to make a stronger case for why funding is needed and important for a new area of service. ■

TO LEARN MORE

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The report can be obtained:

- In .pdf (Acrobat) format at the Center website, www.businessofgovernment.org
- By e-mailing the Center at businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com
- By calling the Center at (202) 551-9342