

Collaborative State Projects: A Practical Guide to Implementation

Over the course of four years, HAP worked collaboratively with about ten state SHIP programs to build their capacity to serve a diverse and growing Medicare population. Each project, called a Collaborative State Project (CSP), identified and addressed a programmatic challenge or issue. This document summarizes “what worked well” and the “lessons learned” over the course of those four years. It also provides recommendations for programs that are considering implementing a new project or making a change. For a more complete summary of the CSP process, please see the [CSP summary](#).

I. What Worked Well?

- **Conduct a Needs Assessment:** It’s crucial to bring state and local SHIP stakeholders together at the beginning of the project to brainstorm about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the SHIP program. This process allows participants to identify and prioritize their needs and provides a strong foundation for the development and direction of the project.
- **Convene a participatory Outcomes Planning Workshop:** Providing an opportunity for an open and inclusive discussion to identify and agree upon the project goals, objectives, and desired outcomes is important to establish buy-in and commitment by all project participants. Additionally, participants seem to welcome and enjoy the opportunity to share thoughts, brainstorm ideas, and discuss challenges with colleagues.
 - Holding the Needs Assessment and the Outcomes Planning Workshop over the course of two consecutive days works well. Not only does it help build and maintain project momentum, it saves time (as opposed to scheduling the two meetings over the course of a few weeks or months).
- **Develop a specific work plan:** Developing and maintaining a specific work plan helps keep the project on track while also holding project participants accountable for their specific activities. The work plan should identify the project goal, objectives, activities, timeline, and the person(s) responsible for each activity. It is also important to assign one person to update and disseminate the work plan as the project progresses so that project participants know what is going on at any given moment.
- **Engage in regular and ongoing communications with all project participants:** By engaging in regular and ongoing communications, such as monthly

conference calls, you will provide an opportunity to discuss project successes, barriers, challenges, and strategies to help move the project forward. You will also help project participants feel valued and connected – especially if they are geographically dispersed. Finally, regular conference calls provide another forum to gather feedback and evaluate activities while also keeping participants engaged and on track.

- **Select a pilot group to develop and test tools:** Identify and use a manageable and representative pilot group to develop and test tools before disseminating statewide; but be sure to keep others informed so they are not caught off guard! Pilot participants should be viewed as leaders within your program as you will need them to champion – and sell – the project to other stakeholders.

II. Lessons Learned

- **Establish collective buy-in early:** Getting buy-in from key stakeholders, including those who direct a program or agency, can help move the project forward in a more timely manner. However, be aware that by involving more people, you may need to factor in more time to complete project activities and finalize products.
- **Set realistic objectives for the specified timeframe:** Be realistic about how much time it will take to complete project activities or tasks. Additionally, the project leader must enforce the agreed upon deadlines for completion of activities or tasks in order to keep the project on track.
- **Clarify participant expectations and roles:** From beginning to end, be clear about what each participant is expected to do as well as what resources – including time and money – each person is expected to bring to the table.
- **Provide hands-on implementation support:** It is not enough to develop and disseminate tools and expect people to use them. It is important to take the time to walk people through each tool and explain how to use and apply each tool to their particular situation or setting. To the extent possible, it is also beneficial to conduct periodic field or site visits to monitor activities and the use of tools. Site visits are also another way to gain valuable feedback and insight from those “in the field.”
- **Timing is everything:** Build in extra time to your work plan – there will be delays! Also, be sure to plan around key events or periods, such as the Annual Enrollment Period, that may take priority.

- **Beware of “unintended” outcomes:** Unintended outcomes – both positive and negative – can affect the project and the participants’ involvement in the project. For example, we found that the collaborative nature of the project was equally as powerful as the products and tools developed.

III. Recommendations

- **Ask participants to set individual goals:** Ask participants to set specific goals for their program – this will both motivate them and hold them accountable.
- **Communicate regularly and often:** Communication is key, and remember it is better to over-communicate than under-communicate!
- **Appoint a strong project leader:** Identifying the “right” project leader is critical to the success of the project. A strong project leader should have a clear vision of and commitment to the project. Additionally, excellent communication skills and the ability to engage and motivate team members to participate in project activities in the short, mid, and long-term are also important characteristics.
- **The three L’s:** Remember the three L’s - listen, listen, and listen! In addition to listening, be sure to actively seek feedback from all project participants throughout the project. Use this feedback to make any necessary adjustments.
- **Continue to evaluate beyond the project timeline:** Projects that require significant behavior change often do not produce measurable outcomes for some period of time. Consider extending the evaluation of the project beyond its stated period so that the long-term benefits can be more accurately gauged.