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Recommendations for Public Health Leaders Who are Consolidating Local Health Agencies

Between January and June of 2012, a project team from Kent State University's (KSU) Center for Public Administration and Public Policy (CPAPP) and College of Public Health (CPH) conducted an assessment of progress in the consolidation of three local health departments in Summit County, Ohio. The findings of that assessment are contained in the report, Consolidating Health Departments in Summit County, Ohio: A One Year Retrospective, which is available through Summit County Public Health (SCPH) and KSU-CPH.

Based on findings and conclusions from this Summit County study, this document identifies recommendations for public health leaders who are implementing local health department consolidations. It is intended to assist public health leaders and departments in moving forward effectively in their efforts to improve efficiency, organizational capacities, and public health services. It is available through SCPH and the website of the KSU-CPH.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Define baseline measures relating to financial, capacity development, and/or service goals and – to the extent possible – collect baseline information on them prior to the consolidation.*

Consolidating organizations of any kind -- including local health agencies -- requires work and effort, and those involved are going to ask, "what was the return?" Was it worth it? For this reason, it is important to define goals and objectives as early as possible as the consolidation is being discussed. It is also critical to identify measures for these goals and objectives, and – if at all possible – to establish baseline measurements across existing agencies which can be used as a reference point for future analyses.

In our assessment of the Summit County Health Department consolidation, we relied heavily on perceptual information to inform our assessment. In part, we did this because there was an evident need recognized by SCPH management to understand the perspectives of their staff and stakeholders about the consolidation. We were also fortunate that the SCPH staff were able to provide a set of program output measures which provided a basis for comparing services before and after the consolidation. Unfortunately, however, these output measures were not clearly tied to the goals of the consolidation. As a result, they were not as revealing as other measures might have been. By contrast, the SCPH staff we worked with compiled before and after financial information, and this information proved useful in demonstrating that the consolidation was achieving at least one of its goals – saving taxpayer funds.

If consolidators can establish goals and objectives -- and collect baseline data to measure them -- prior to consolidation, they will be in a better position to demonstrate success and to collect information to use in guiding continuing improvement efforts for the new organization. With this kind of information, consolidators can put themselves in a position to demonstrate that the inevitable difficulties encountered during the transition process were "worth it after all".

2. *Plan carefully and fully for the process of implementing the consolidation.*

Consolidating public sector organizations is a challenge, and it requires tremendous planning and organizational efforts if it is going to be successful. During the first year of its consolidation process, SCPH addressed at least five major operational challenges:

1. Adjusting personnel roles and work arrangements
2. Converting technological systems, such as computers and telephones
3. Assessing and altering facility arrangements
4. Managing culture change
5. Communicating and engaging staff

All five of these challenges require forethought, planning, and active management if they are to be addressed successfully. Failures in any one of these areas can derail efforts to consolidate and/or diminish its likely benefits, so consolidators need to be thoughtful and organized in the ways in which they address these five major challenges. While planning will not eliminate all difficulties, it can enable more successful efforts to manage them.

In Summit County, Ohio, employees of the new consolidated organization indicated that they believed that integrating organizational cultures and communicating and engaging with staff represented the greatest obstacles to the achievement of the new consolidated agency's goals. While this should not be surprising, given the rapid organizational changes that tend to occur during a consolidation, it is nevertheless important. For this reason, consolidators should make sure to actively address the human issues associated with the transition to a consolidated agency and implement conscious strategies for managing and minimizing negative impacts on employees as the consolidation is being planned and implemented.

3. *Address strategic opportunities and challenges in planning and implementing a consolidation.*

Public health leaders faced three important strategic challenges as they consolidated local health agencies in Summit County, Ohio. They needed to:

1. Develop and implement new strategic directions
2. Build credibility and engage key stakeholders
3. Assess their consolidation and its progress

While the operational details of implementing a consolidation among health departments are critical, the full benefits of consolidation cannot be achieved without thinking totally anew about goals, strategies, and funding, as well as the relationships that are necessary to achieve success. It is also critical to take stock of how the consolidation is going, both by assessing the internal dynamics of the organization(s) and reaching outward for insights, advice, and support.

In Summit County, the public health leadership has been conscious of these strategic needs, and this has resulted in a consolidation effort that is demonstrating significant progress as it pursues key goals associated with consolidation.