Partnership Profile
How the Boulder County Area Agency on Aging Is Building Demand for Cross-Sector Partnerships in Their Community

There are many roads that community-based organizations (CBOs) can take to begin the journey to cross-sector partnerships. For some, state governments mandate the creation of programs that lead to partnership opportunities between health care entities and CBOs. For others, cross-sector partnerships begin with an initiative that promotes engagement across sectors to improve health system performance. And in markets where mandated opportunities and cross-sector initiatives have not yet developed, the cross-sector partnership journey begins when a CBO decides it wants to get noticed by its local health care providers and payers, opening doors that had been otherwise closed. This is how the Boulder County Area Agency on Aging (BCAAA) embarked on its journey to cross-sector partnerships.

A focus on creating more accountability in the health care sector, a growing uncertainty around sustainable funding within the social sector, changing demographics among the aging population and related increases in the demand for health and social services create an environment in which great potential exists for integrating the medical and social sectors to create better health systems. The convergence of these conditions illustrates the value inherent in having the medical and social sectors work together more efficiently to better meet the needs of older adults and people with disabilities—while producing mutually beneficial financial and operational results.

But even when market need appears to exist, the demand for the health care sector to invest in and partner with social services isn't automatic. In this scenario, it is often up to CBOs to proactively generate attention, build demand and demonstrate compelling value[i] for their services. Recognizing this dynamic, BCAAA concluded that it would have to start from scratch to build the needed business acumen to create the conditions for thriving cross-sector partnerships.

Identifying the Potential for Partnerships

As the only Area Agency on Aging (AAA) in Boulder, BCAAA's mission is to deliver, fund and advocate for services that promote the well-being, independence and dignity of the older adults, people with disabilities, family caregivers and veterans in its community.

In 2014, to better understand the Boulder landscape and to evaluate the potential for partnerships, BCAAA identified several factors that it could use to its advantage when creating cross-sector partnerships:

- Changing demographics of the aging population would likely lead to a growing need for BCAAA's services
- The growing size of the aging population could create possible challenges for health care systems
- A trend in health care systems toward rewarding accountability for the delivery of cost-effective, efficient and quality care could present an opportunity for health care partnerships

BCAAA realized that the response to these trends would likely provide a clear incentive for a coordinated system to support the overall health and well-being of individuals in the community. Furthermore, traditional funding sources for AAAs, including government funding and grants, were becoming increasingly uncertain, leaving BCAAA with the issue of needing to provide services to a growing population while having less funding from traditional sources.[ii]

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An analysis of the internal concerns about the agency's sustainability and the trends noted earlier led BCAAA to realize that it should pursue revenue-generating cross-sector partnerships with health care organizations.

To inform this decision, BCAAA looked beyond the Boulder area to gain a wider view of how similar agencies in other parts of the country were addressing these trends in their own communities. With focused curiosity, the BCAAA team learned about approaches other AAAs were taking to develop more sustainable, diverse funding streams—particularly by engaging in cross-sector partnerships with health care providers and payers.

Armed with examples of ways other CBOs successfully pursued cross-sector partnerships, BCAAA secured an opportunity to participate in the Linkage Lab program.[iii] Sponsored by the Colorado Health Foundation,[iv] the goal of the Linkage Lab program is to help CBOs build the business acumen required to establish revenue-generating partnerships with health care—a perfect fit for BCAAA.

Responding to New Opportunities with New Talent

BCAAA leadership realized that, in order to pursue partnerships in a proactive way, the agency needed someone to lead the charge. In 2015, BCAAA took the opportunity to redefine the job description for an open position on its leadership team and decided to seek a candidate who could focus on business results and partnership development.

This decision led to the creation of a Business Results Manager role, which would be responsible for leading BCAAA's health care integration and partnership development efforts. The position would also be responsible for leading the BCAAA team through in-depth market research, a redesign of its service offerings, the development of a value proposition and the implementation of a pilot program with a local hospital. As part of this implementation, the BCAAA team was tasked with critical steps, such as contract negotiation, operational process development and training, and developing a monitoring and evaluation program.

Of course, the agency needed the right person to breathe life into this new role—and to design an infrastructure that emphasizes cross-sector collaboration as a path to revenue. Enter: Jacob Bielecki. "The agency leadership was ready to take a keen awareness of the market opportunities and funnel that into a realistic vision and strategy for creating new business," says Bielecki.

CBOs adding a Business Results Manager or someone to initiate and advance their cross-sector partnership strategy should look for individuals with a mix of vision, discipline, and a thirst for knowledge to bring to the role.[v] "When I came in, I read everything I could find about the aging services and health care sectors. I sought new networking opportunities with hospitals and physicians to help me understand their challenges and learn how they view community-based service providers," Bielecki says.

Building the Knowledge Foundation for Cross-Sector Alignment

To dig into the new position and begin the knowledge-building necessary to determine where potential health care alignments and partnerships could exist, Bielecki sought resources that would help him understand the health care space, including regulatory factors and payment transformation. BCAAA recommends that anyone assuming a new role like Bielecki's train their eye to pick up on certain words and phrases like "value-based purchasing" and "bundled payments" anywhere they can find it—such as in national literature, newsletters and other publications.

From there, Bielecki recommends that agencies take knowledge gained at the national level and apply it locally. "We had informal relationships with local hospitals in Boulder County, so that was a natural place to start. We looked at local performance data and asked questions in a way that demonstrated we understand what health care organizations are facing. 'How are you performing in the Bundled Payment experiment?'...'What pressures are you facing due to health system reform?'... 'What are you doing about your readmission rate?'"

BCAAA's new knowledge of the national and local landscapes served as the perfect complement to BCAAA's participation in the Colorado Health Foundation's Linkage Lab program, which kicked off around the same time Bielecki joined the agency.

An invaluable starting point for someone new to the space, and for an agency early in its cross-sector partnership journey, the Linkage Lab program afforded the BCAAA leadership team an opportunity to gain formalized training and insights that would be invaluable as the agency pursued new partnerships with health care providers and payers.

"Being a part of Linkage Lab was a major driver of success for us. When we began the program, we struggled to define our business case and value proposition for health care partnerships. Participating in the Linkage Lab program helped us start aligning the services we offer to the interests and needs of health care entities and understand the return on investment of addressing social determinants of health," says Bielecki.

The Linkage Lab program was one step on BCAAA's journey to preparing for and pursuing health care partnerships. Though the program set the tone and provided guidance for what BCAAA needed to do, it was up to the agency to fully incorporate and maintain new processes and practices well beyond the timeline of the Linkage Lab program—a task that the BCAAA team was unequivocally committed to.

Taking Advantage of Every Touchpoint

One of the first steps BCAAA took to apply its new knowledge was by using something it calls its "touchpoint strategy," which helps the agency kick off the pursuit of cross-sector partnerships. Bielecki says this strategy is critical to identifying any and all existing touchpoints between BCAAA and health care entities.

"A key question CBOs interested in health care partnering should ask themselves early on is 'Who on our staff is already interfacing with health care professionals?'" explains Bielecki. "Whether it is a social worker, nurse, discharge planner or wellness coordinator, it's important to know where the existing touchpoints are, determine who they are affiliated with and understand what information is being relayed back and forth."

An interesting application of the agency's health care "touchpoint strategy" occurs within the agency's call center. BCAAA receives thousands of calls per year on a host of issues—both from clients and health care professionals. BCAAA captures those calls and case managers work to ensure the needs are met. But now, BCAAA takes it a step further.

"On the back end of the call center system, we analyze who is calling and what they are calling for, and we factor that into our health care partnership marketing strategy," explains Bielecki. The agency has started asking some clients about their health coverage, whether they are willing to share contact information for their primary care physicians and if they give the agency permission to mention they are working with the client. "This tactic enables us to communicate directly with physicians about the types of services their clients are receiving from us," Bielecki says. "We're gathering more health information from clients who grant us permission, so we can close the loop ourselves with their physicians. This helps us ensure that our messaging to potential partners has even more of an impact."

Painting a Local Picture of Aging

In terms of expertise on aging in community, the buck stops at the AAAs. BCAAA leverages this expertise and funnels it into data-driven reports that it can use to help boost the agency's credibility with health care organizations. "A local community foundation produces and distributes a robust trend report every two years, which includes and references data BCAAA collects and publishes. This gives us credibility on aging at a level that no other local organizations have," says Bielecki.

"Health systems see the value in this sort of data too—and we see it resonating with potential health system partners as it finds its way into their community health needs assessments."

BCAAA is currently developing what promises to be the most robust report on aging that Boulder County has ever seen. Bielecki believes that the fusion of BCAAA data with that of other local agencies and departments, as well as secondary data from other organizations, will help paint a richer picture of what aging looks like in Boulder. "This will help us build even more legitimacy at the institutional level, which we believe will help us earn even more legitimacy as a cross-sector partner," Bielecki says.

BCAAA uses data points to help it paint a picture of how older adults live in the community for potential health care partners. For example, BCAAA is able to use its own data to show that there will be a 250 percent increase in the number of older adults age 80 and older in the Boulder area over the next 20 years. "Population increase trends create a strong visual for potential health care partners who respond to numbers and volume data points," Bielecki says. "We also have data from focus groups about the accessibility of services, perceptions on the cost of care and needs such as transportation—market intelligence that health care organizations find valuable but don't have easy access to. It's important for AAAs to relay their expertise and paint that picture of aging in the community, particularly as the health care sector starts to think more socially."

BCAAA is able to use its data and expertise to paint the picture of aging as the backdrop for conversations where it can ask potential health care partners, "What are you going to do in response to these demographic trends?"

Reaching Potential Health Care Partners Where They Are

As BCAAA is actively capturing micro-opportunity touchpoints and bolstering its credibility as an expert on aging in the community, it is also seeking to initiate conversations where potential health care partners are networking. Embracing a hyper-local marketing strategy to build demand, BCAAA is proactively pursuing as many networking opportunities as possible.

"Once we began participating in local committees and advisory groups, we met a lot of people who are aligned with us and who now understand what BCAAA does. We started looking at these committee opportunities not just from a community involvement standpoint, but through a lens of networking with potential health care partners. We'd say, 'We're in this together, but we could be doing so much more. How can we add value to each other's organizations and to the community as a whole?'"

As far as generating interest from health care providers and payers, BCAAA is focused on aligning its services with programs that health care entities are participating in, with the goal of delivering better health outcomes at lower cost, with one example being the local hospital's bundled payment program. Bielecki says, "To generate potential partnership opportunities, we are honing our ability to communicate that we understand the risk that health care organizations are taking with new payment and delivery models, and hence we can customize our portfolio of social services to help mitigate that risk. When we align our services, we can nudge key metrics like readmissions and post-acute care utilization in a way that can save significant sums for health care organizations, while also producing better health outcomes for aging members of the community."

Another key element of activating the hyper-local marketing strategy comes in the form of a new web page that will communicate key messages and convey the agency's vision to potential health care partners. "The development of our new landing page, which is inspired by what we've seen from technology and app companies that also market to health care companies, will be a major driver for our marketing and sales efforts," shares Bielecki. "We are putting forth an idea to potential health care partners to get people thinking: 'Imagine if we formalized a cross-sector relationship to create a more coordinated system of care in the Boulder community.'"

Achieving Results and Gaining Momentum

This go-getter approach to creating new cross-sector opportunities has already yielded results for BCAAA. Most notably, the agency has recently developed a cross-sector partnership with a local hospital in a pilot program to provide individuals who are high-risk for experiencing complications following a joint replacement with care management services. The agency also has secured two new partnerships, one with a health plan broker and another with a Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) to provide the National Diabetes Prevention Program[vi] (DPP), which enables BCAAA to receive payments for delivering DPP when their participants hit certain benchmarks, including retention and weight-loss.

These initial partnerships have quickly taught BCAAA which services provide the most value, leading to new opportunities for the agency, Bielecki says. "While we have received some income from this work already, we see the future as full of opportunities. Our efforts have led us to pursue becoming a Medicare supplier for the Diabetes Prevention Program, providing the opportunity to directly bill Medicare for this service. This will allow us to expand partnerships with health care payers and providers—and open doors to offer other valuable services."

BCAAA is now moving from pilot mode to permanence. "We're in this for the long run. Right now, I am focusing on solidifying our infrastructure to support the growth of our partnership work over time. We are customizing our information technology systems to improve operational efficiency, refining our projection modeling based on our experience with certain risk populations and further professionalizing our case management staff through trainings and certifications," shares Bielecki. "And, we are getting creative with how we can work with payment and provider systems for value-based and non-traditional care. Ultimately, we're building up our ability and long-term commitment to deliver as a community partner to health care organizations."

As Bielecki puts it, "This is the future of aging services. The future has to include an alignment between community organizations and the health care system—and there will be opportunities large and small for CBOs to be included as long as we are willing to be proactive and open to the possibilities."

The authors are grateful for the time and insights provided by those who were interviewed for this cross-sector partnership profile, especially Jacob Bielecki, Business Results Manager at BCAAA.

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i.   Measuring the Value of AAA Services: https://www.n4a.org/files/n4a_ROI_Report_July2018_Final.pdf

ii.   2017 National Survey of Area Agencies on Aging: https://www.n4a.org/Files/2017%20AAA%20Survey%20Report/AAANationalSurvey_web.pdf

iii. https://coloradohealth.org/funding-opportunities/funding-opportunity-long-term-services-and-supports-colorado-linkage-lab

iv.   https://www.coloradohealth.org/

v.   Sample job description for a Business Development Manager: https://www.aginganddisabilitybusinessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ADBI-JobDes-BDM-508.pdf

vi.   https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/prevention/index.html