# SUD Collaborations that Work:
# Findings from Providers in Region 8

## SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

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# Introduction

The purpose of the Mountain Plains Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) is to improve the capacity of Region 8's substance use disorder (SUD) treatment/recovery services workforce by using state-of-the-art training/technical assistance, innovative web-based tools, and proven workforce strategies to expand access to learning, change clinician practice, and advance provider efficiencies, resulting in improved client outcomes.
In an effort to understand and describe best practices in relation to collaboration and collaborative partnerships for SUD treatment/recovery services, the Mountain Plains ATTC engaged multiple providers throughout Region 8 in a series of focus groups. The purpose of these focus groups, conducted live, online via Zoom, was to discuss the benefits, barriers, and key factors that make collaborations work.

A total of 16 individuals, from agencies nominated by the Single State Authority (SSA) In their state, participated in the focus groups and described their collaborative work with other agencies/organizations.  A variety of partnerships were described and included partners from multiple sectors across the community. Focus group transcripts were analyzed and four primary themes across focus groups were derived: Coming Together, Working Together, Keeping the Collaboration Going, Benefits of Collaboration, and Effects of Lack of Collaboration.

# Findings

## Coming Together

The impetus to develop collaborative partnerships is commonly borne out of identification of a client need or needs that could not be met by one agency alone. Being able to identify this requires conscious examination of your agency's areas of expertise and what your own agency is able to do for a client and, more importantly, what it is not able to do. When an individual agency recognizes their own limitations, it may prompt them to look to other agencies that can meet client needs in areas that they cannot. A potential collaborative partnership may exist, but the process of coming together requires that each agency must explore together what the other can and cannot offer and bring to the partnership. This process is not always easy and requires a degree of humility to be able to recognize one's own limitations.

Once two or more agencies decide to work together in collaboration, participants indicated it is important to make sure the right people are at the table; those who have the authority to make decisions on behalf of their agency and are open to forming a collaborative partnership are part of the early processes. Additionally, finding champions who are enthusiastic about the collaboration and the potential outcomes is important to getting the work off the ground.

## Working Together

To engage in the process of truly Working Together in a meaningful collaborative manner, three processes need to occur: Creating a Shared Vision, Engaging in the Collaborative Process, and Being a Good Collaborator.

### Creating a Shared Vision

In order for a collaborative partnership to succeed, it is of primary importance that the partners share a vision for the collaboration that everyone can identify with and buy into. Partners need to define their common goal and commit to working toward that goal together. This process begins with making sure that there is alignment of philosophies and values in relation to how clients are viewed and treated. It Is also important that each partner is transparent in sharing their own expertise, agency mission, and perspectives and values in relation to client services in an effort to educate the other partners, and that they are open to hearing the perspectives of others. Adequate time must be allowed for communication with each other about any differences of perspective or philosophy, and to take these differences into consideration while creating a shared vision to which all partners can commit. Additionally, partners must also create a shared language so that they are able to speak

> "We also identified key champions. There were persons that were really passionate and said 'yes' very quickly. They knew we had this aligned problem. They wanted to share in the problem-solving approach with us."

and understand the same language in relation to the work to be done. This process may not be comfortable for all, particularly for those who are anxious to "do the work," but it is important for all to understand that the process of understanding others is an important part of the work, and it takes time.

The next step in creating a shared vision is to identify possible solutions to the problem which brought the partners together. Collaborative partners brainstorm solution-focused ideas, putting their own agenda's aside, in order to work together to develop strategies which will lead to positive outcomes.

Once a shared vision, shared language, and a data-driven solution is agreed upon, partners should develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU). This MOU should outline the vision and goals of the interagency collaborative, and what each agency brings to the collaboration.

### *Engaging in the Collaborative Process*

The first step in engagement in the collaborative process is to develop a strategic plan that guides the work of the collaboration, in order to work more efficiently and avoid later problems. At the same time, it is important to be flexible with that plan, and make adjustments as needed as the work moves forward.

As the work of the collaborative partnership moves forward, it is important to build trust within the members. Trust Is primarily achieved by developing relationships with the other members of the partnership, through frequent meetings, particularly in the beginning, as relationships are being formed. Another way to build trust between agency partners is to have a consistent individual who is the contact person for their agency and is at the table for the meetings. This helps to

"So there was a lot of teaming around hearing each other, making sure that we were taking into consideration the other's perspective and making sure that we came up with protocols and expectations and processes that work for everyone and that met everyone's agendas."

> **"Good collaboration starts with openness open, honest dialogue and communication, you know, being willing to get our egos out of the way and say, 'I can't help this client. Can you help this client?' and realizing that we're all in this together with the same goal of helping our client recover."**

demonstrate reliability and individual commitment to the other members of the collaboration. Further, honesty and transparency among partners are highly valued and an expectation.

Finally, in order to truly engage in the collaborative process, partners need to be willing to change the ways in which they have traditionally been doing things. One cannot continue doing things the same way and expect different results. By having a consistent partner at the table who is able to build relationship and trust, and come to understand the perspectives of others, that partner can help individuals within their own agency be more willing to change.

### Being a Good Collaborator

The final process required for working together in a collaborative manner is for individuals who are engaged with the work to be "a good collaborator." Participants identified several key characteristics that make individuals both desirable to collaborate with and effective in their collaborative work. Being open-minded, which means that one needs to be willing to hear and consider suggestions and feedback from other partners, without judgment, is a key characteristic of a good collaborator. Patience is another important characteristic because relationships of the partnerships take time to build and even greater time is needed to implement the work. Another important characteristic is the need to be data driven, which requires that everyone make decisions based on evidence and data that best informs those decisions, as well as a commitment to collecting data on outcomes. A final characteristic that participants indicated was important for individuals was the ability to put egos aside. This characteristic makes it more likely that partners are able to create a shared vision and work toward common goals, and allows everyone to share in successes collectively, because no single member is viewed as more important than others.

> "It doesn't matter who gets the job done. We don't need to take credit for things. It's not about that. . . It makes no difference [who was responsible], if that help move that client forward in a positive way, that's all that really matters."

> "Sometimes you just have to go all the way back to the very beginning and say this is why we're doing this. Now, let's work out our issues."

## Keeping the Collaboration Going

Keeping the collaboration going requires a continued commitment by partners that Is reflected in four sub-themes: Working through Conflict, Supporting Each Other, One Collaboration Leads to Another, and Gaining Community Support.

### Working through Conflict

It is important to actively address conflicts that may arise throughout the work of the collaborative partnership. Some conflict is inherent in the work and it is important that members of the partnership commit to working through any conflicts that arise. Open, transparent communication among those who are in conflict is key to being able to successfully overcome the conflict and work together in partnership. When conflicts occur, it is often helpful to relate back to the shared vision of the partnership, and focus on achieving mutual outcomes, rather than individual responses.

> **"I think people who compliment, and praise others are better collaborators."**

### Supporting Each Other

Supporting each other was seen as an important component of ongoing work. Participants indicated that it was important to the interpersonal relationships within the partnership that a supportive environment is established. A supportive environment is also one in which partners are able to share in the successes of the collaborative, and thus the ability for individuals to put their individual egos aside lends itself to this support.

### Gaining Community Support

An important strategy for keeping the collaboration going over time, is to gain support of the larger community. Being data-driven and using data related to program outcomes were identified as effective strategies to educate the community and gain their support. Importantly, providing that information to the community was also seen as a way to decrease stigma toward individuals with SUDs, which is also a significantly positive outcome that can result from successful collaborative partnerships.

### One Collaboration Leads to Another

When one collaborative partnership is successful, others may be inspired to develop their own partnership in a similar manner. Several participants described how their work on one successful collaboration lead to them being asked to be a part of another collaboration. Others talked about how what started as a smaller collaborative partnership grew to include other partners and expand its services to a wider audience.

## Benefits of Collaboration

By working together in a collaborative manner, agencies are better able to view and treat clients holistically.  The partners within the collaborative will be able to provide services which are complementary to the other partners, and thereby better meet all of the needs of the clients they serve. Collaborative partnerships can make it easier for clients to be able access services which meet their concrete/tangible needs, such as clothing, food, and shelter, as well as provide for their emotional and/or mental health needs, and their physical health needs.  This better allows clients to focus on recovery and set goals for themselves that are now achievable.  Collaborative partnerships have the potential to provide a fuller continuum of care in which clients feel better supported and able to move forward in their recovery.

Some participants described working in a collaborative partnership which had created an integrated care model, in which client behavioral health and physical health needs were all provided under one roof. This single point of entry model allows for a seamless provision of services, which decreases redundancy for clients and provides wrap-around services to meet their holistic needs. Collaborative partnerships which do not have an integrated care model under one roof,

can still provide services which meet the holistic needs of clients, though care coordination and case management, with the consent of the client. This has the potential to increase communication between providers and thereby decrease redundancy for clients.

One benefit to the establishment of SUD collaborations that all participants agreed upon was the increase in successful outcomes for clients.  Improved rates of treatment completion, recovery maintenance, independent living, family reunification, and decreased encounters with law enforcement and incarcerations were described by participants, as a direct result of their collaborative partnership.  These successes benefit not only the individual client, but their family, and the community at large. Finally, the reduction in redundancy in services as well as improved client and societal outcomes results in the benefit of saved dollars.  When collaboration does not occur, resources are potentially wasted, and given the limited number of resources available, seeking out collaborative partnerships is the fiscally responsible thing for agencies to do.

> "Communication between [our program] and the [another agency] wasn't as good as it could have been. They had recommended that this client had to be removed from her [Medication Assisted Therapy]. So, what ended up happening was that she was doing a rapid taper off her medication, which put her at large risk for relapse."

## Effects of Lack of Collaboration

Contrary to the positive outcomes that can result from effective collaboration, a lack of collaboration can have detrimental effects, particularly for clients. When collaborative partnerships are not in place, it can result in less than ideal, often punitive, solutions for helping persons with SUDs. Clients without the benefit of effective collaboration among their providers, face a greater burden in getting their holistic needs met. In a single-provider focus, it becomes the sole responsibility of the client to seek out the services that will meet all of their tangible, behavioral health, and physical health needs. Additionally, clients often face redundancy with intake/admission procedures and forms among multiple providers. This redundancy becomes trying and clients may feel burdened by the repetition of filling out the same forms and answering the same questions over and over. Thus, clients face greater obstacles in effectively engaging with their treatment and recovery and may be at higher risk of relapse.
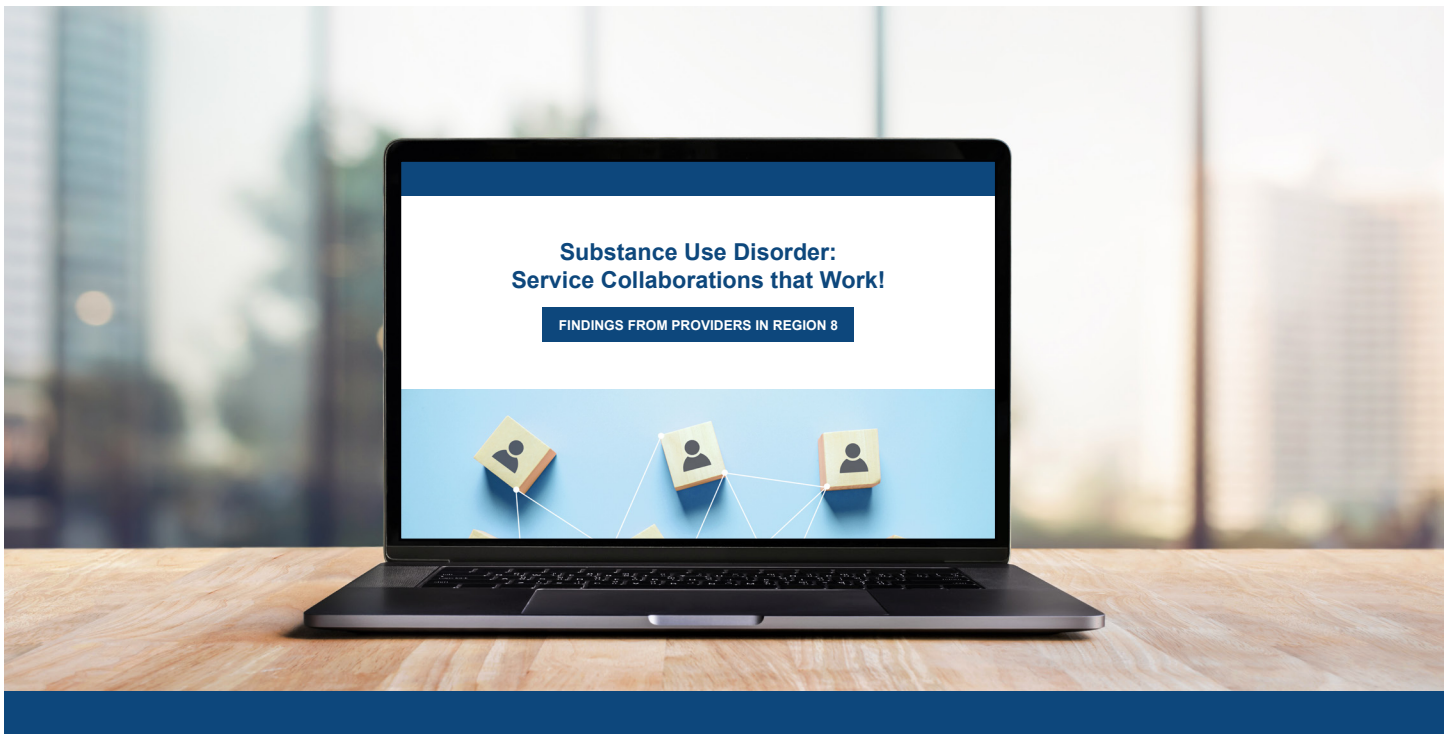
Without the relationships and trust that a collaborative partnership brings, there may be a lack of transparency between agencies and providers. This lack of transparency can result in inappropriate referrals, more time for intake/admission procedures, and mistrust between agencies/providers. A lack of collaboration can also result in turf wars, particularly from a financial perspective. When a collaborative partnership exists, agencies can still maintain their own funding streams, but the delineation of who bills for what services becomes better articulated and understood by all, and it is also possible that funding streams may be shared. In contrast, when there is no collaborative partnership, there can be significant competition for funding dollars, which may result in poor relationships between agencies and providers.

# Conclusion

Engagement in collaborative partnerships is a complex process, but collaboration Is an effective model of service delivery to better meet clients' holistic needs, achieve improved client outcomes, and conserve valuable behavioral and physical health service resources. To effectively move from single-agency service delivery to that of a collaborative partnership requires time and commitment from all staff within the partner agencies. Patience in the process, and transparent, honest communication by all are key factors in collaboration. Development of a shared vision for the partnerships and planning data-driven solutions are of primary importance. The findings from our project, derived from the experiences and perspectives of expert collaborators in SUD services, provide an excellent roadmap for those who are interested in beginning, strengthening or expanding their collaborative partnerships.

**Readers are encouraged to access the full report of this project at: https://attcnetwork.org/centers/ global-attc/products-resources-catalog**



**Substance Use Disorder:
Service Collaborations that Work!**

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