Some Lessons Learned Along the Way

Lead with future-oriented vision and purpose.

A credible vision of a positive future is much more likely to lead to desired change than fear. In addition, having a common purpose and clear and compelling, mutually targeted outcomes is critical for mobilizing and sustaining the work of systems. System members might come together to implement strategies, but they won't stay together for the long-term without a more powerful purpose.

Create ownership and investment at the highest levels of decision-making.

This is critical for establishing a solid foundation of support, trust, and political will to coordinate efforts and leverage resources across boundaries.

Cultivate relationships carefully at every level.

Relationships are frequently more important than formal authority. Frequently, relationships—rather than the power associated with position—has been the most important factor in successfully achieving and sustaining desired system changes.

Cultivate system members at all levels to serve as ambassadors for systems approaches within their own organizations.

This will go far in leveraging expertise, political will, and social and intellectual capital across sectors, and significantly increases collective ownership and advocacy of system initiatives.

Ensure that the bottom line needs of all individual system members are met— not just the bottom line needs of the system.

Constructive reciprocity is a foundation for social cohesiveness, and is key to addressing and overcoming the challenges of turf and territory.

Establish clear roles and formal processes for decision-making, communication and conflict resolution.

Conflict is inevitable. Prepare for it proactively by having mutually agreed upon roles and responsibilities, and clear processes for decision-making, communication, and conflict resolution.

Use neutral and credible outside experts to navigate issues associated with turf and territory.

Neutral and credible outside experts can supply expertise and critical "outside eyes" to support and advance system assessment and planning, and help navigate around the pitfalls associated with turf and territory issues.

Allow localities to define and self-determine community boundaries.

This—as opposed to imposed, pre-selected criteria—can be a powerful catalyst for mobilization efforts that are able to leverage positive social capital and collectively address issues that few may be prepared to address individually.

Invest in ongoing and intensive technical assistance.

Training alone is rarely sufficient for achieving change. Ongoing, intensive technical assistance—every single step of the way—is critical for helping people to implement new knowledge and create the structures and systems needed to support desired change.

Build the capacity of system members to serve as skilled diagnosticians.

Provide tools, training, and ongoing technical assistance to help system members accurately and objectively assess problems and associated intervening variables. Data is the most powerful way to break through assumptions, denial and passivity; significantly advance readiness; and transform community behavior in support of positive social change.

Reach for "low hanging fruit."

Start with one problem that everyone agrees is a problem, for which there is sufficient data to understand why it is happening. Success in that area will ripple positively into other problem areas and increase readiness for greater degrees of change with regard to more complex problems.

Be aware that developing leadership and expanding capacity where it does not exist, or is largely undeveloped, is a highly political endeavor.

Empowering the powerless almost always involves a shift in resources and power. Those who have always had access to both will be keenly aware of the threat and will act to prevent it. Those who are not accustomed to having either may not know how to keep them or use them to best advantage.

Teach the powerless to act powerfully from the very beginning of the change effort.

This includes political self-advocacy, increased access to resources, and enhanced communication, mobilization and problem solving skills and abilities.

Focus on sustaining outcomes, not efforts.

Strategies can quickly become irrelevant or non-responsive to needs when problems and/or underlying conditions change. Focusing on sustainable outcomes is key to ensuring long-term success.