

BUILDING STRONG COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO ADDRESS SOCIAL NEEDS

A CASE STUDY IN EFFECTIVE ADVISORY BOARD COLLABORATION FROM THE ACCOUNTABLE HEALTH COMMUNITIES MODEL

Health Net of West Michigan is a nonprofit organization in Kent County, Michigan, that aims to create a “community where everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible.” As an Alignment Track bridge organization participating in the [Accountable Health Communities \(AHC\) Model](#), Health Net established an advisory board made up of community partners across sectors who strive to create equitable systems change. Health Net’s advisory board focuses on addressing social determinants of health at the community and systems levels, involving community advisors and executive-level representatives from community entities, coalitions, and local government.

Strive to meaningfully involve community members in the advisory board

Health Net invests resources to identify and include community members who reflect the population served by the AHC Model in its advisory board (see community advisor recruitment strategies) and uses the following approaches to engage community members in collaborative, equitable, and mutually beneficial ways.

- **Shows community advisors that their experiences and opinions matter.** Health Net recognized and empowered community members by letting them create their title for their role on the advisory board: “community advisor.” The bridge organization also helped the community advisors develop talking points that highlight the value of their lived experience to use with the advisory board and in the broader community.
- **Prepares community advisors for their role on the advisory board.** Health Net showed its community advisors a documentary series about social determinants of health and health disparities, “[Unnatural Causes](#),” which gave them context for the advisory board’s work.
- **Invests in the professional development of community advisors.** Health Net works with community advisors to identify their strengths using the [StrengthsFinder tool](#) and to exercise their strengths on the advisory board. Health Net also encourages them to participate in public speaking opportunities and connects them with organizations seeking feedback from people with lived experience.
- **Facilitates community advisors’ participation in the advisory board.** Health Net compensates community advisors for their time, and provides free transportation, childcare, and a snack or meal for in-person meetings.

Community advisor recruitment strategies:



Reach out to people who received AHC Model navigation services.



Distribute flyers in community locations that program recipients frequent (e.g., transit stations and community centers).



Engage cultural, faith-based, and community-based organizations in recruitment.



Enlist current community advisors in recruiting new members.



Pro tip for strengthening relationships

- Devote time to explore the motivations of advisory board members and build relationships. This helps future conversations to be more candid, in depth, and productive.

“It’s important to me to decrease disparities about who gets help and who doesn’t... Being part of this board is a blessing for me...I give them the idea of what it’s like to be a client out here... They always listen to what I have to say and support whatever I mentioned.”

—Community advisor

Community advisors’ positive impact on the advisory board:



Bring an authentic community voice to the work of the advisory board to ensure that the board’s efforts are aligned with community priorities.



Humanize the issues discussed and remind everyone that personal stories lie beneath the abstract data.



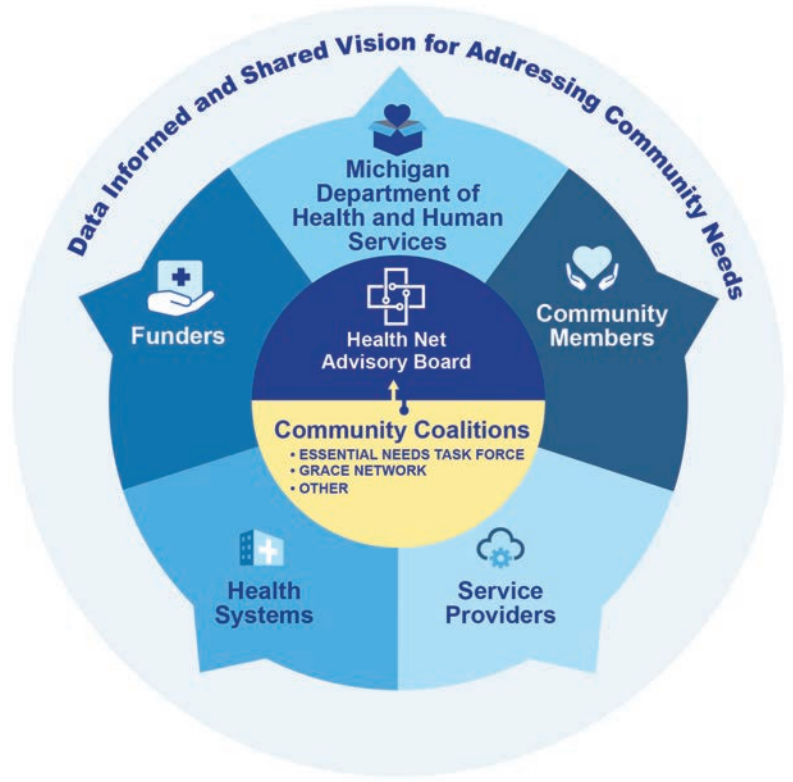
Add perspectives of community members, which can prompt changes to programs to make them more culturally sensitive and user friendly.

Cultivate diverse relationships for cross-sector collaboration

Health Net leverages existing relationships and invests in new relationships across multiple sectors. Health Net uses the following strategies to build consensus among its partners.

- **Establishes a shared commitment and allows time for members to build trust.** Health Net’s advisory board shares a commitment to supporting vulnerable populations, which provides the foundation for collaboration. Guided by a common focus on systems-level change, historic competitors such as health plans collaborate as advisory board members.
- **Joins parallel coalitions and community networks.** In addition to program requirements, Health Net relies on synergies between its goals and the work of community groups to avoid duplication of efforts. Health Net leaders participate in meetings hosted by advisory board members and connect with members outside of meetings to foster relationships.
- **Highlights community expertise.** Showcasing community organizations’ expertise in the advisory board encourages health systems and other stakeholders to tap into community knowledge and invest in community-driven efforts to address social determinants of health.
- **Facilitates cross-disciplinary conversations.** Through shared dialogue, advisory board members identify effective strategies and apply them to other areas of their work. This often leads to ongoing conversations that transcend meetings and strengthen cross-sector connections.

NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS TO SUPPORT CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION



Structure advisory board meetings to facilitate connections and active participation

- **The advisory board meets quarterly, and meetings follow a standard format** (see [Sample Agenda](#)). Meetings include time to foster relationships through informal ice breakers and structured breaks for interactive discussion.
- **To ensure the advisory board focuses on community and systems-level issues**, Health Net maintains a separate consortium of staff from clinical delivery sites to discuss AHC Model implementation.

Sample Agenda

- Welcome/Ice breaker
- Implementation update and client story
- Current AHC data presentation
- Featured speaker and Q&A
- Structured small group discussions
- Report on small group discussions with full committee
- Next steps



Pro tip for effective small group discussion

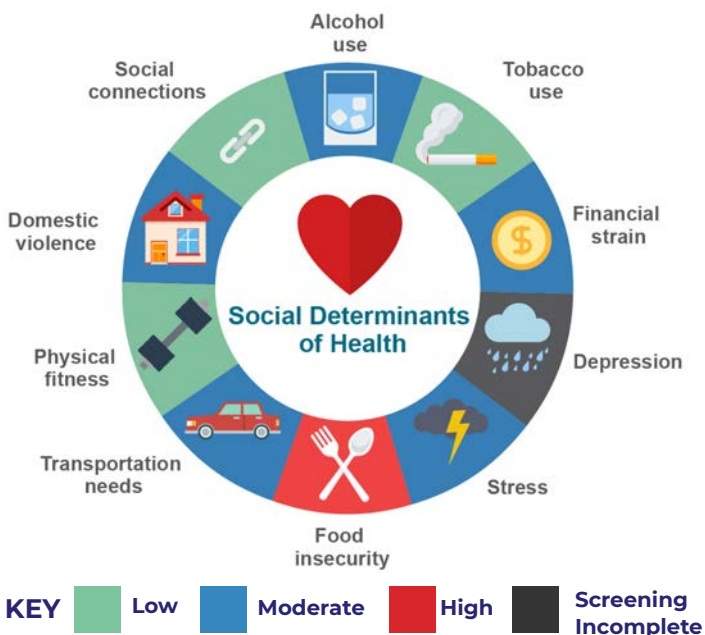
- Group diverse stakeholders together to provide different perspectives and foster new connections.
- Frame the discussion with a few guiding questions about equitable systems-level change in a priority area to focus the conversation.
- Designate a facilitator to keep the discussion on track and ensure all voices are heard.

Promote evidence-based community action

At advisory board meetings, Health Net presents AHC Model data on the prevalence of health-related social needs in the community and gaps in community resources for addressing the needs. These formal data reviews often trigger community partner action such as the following:

- **Community data showing that the 2020 public health emergency** made it harder for community members to obtain transportation to access food prompted community service providers to come together and secure funding for on-demand transportation to and from food pantries.
- **A health system partner elevated the visibility of social needs data for clinicians** by activating a feature in its electronic health record that pulls data from AHC screening and other screening tools to display a graphic of patients' social needs in various domains. Needs are color-coded to reflect the risk level of AHC core needs and other supplemental needs (low, moderate, high).

Display of Social Needs in the Electronic Health Record



Share data with advisory boards to:



Establish a shared understanding of community needs.



Prioritize focus areas for community-level adjustments of resources to improve access for beneficiaries.



Spark ideas for members to discuss and act on in the community.

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