



(Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators)

Exploring Voluntary Human Services
Multi-County Collaboration
Guidelines for Counties to Consider

February 27, 2008

Revised March 26, 2008

Revised July 1, 2008

Revised July 17, 2008

Approved by Policy Committee July 23, 2008

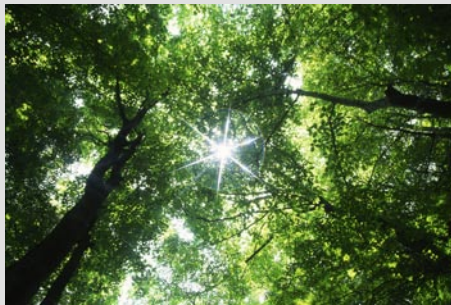
Approved by MACSSA August 21, 2008

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Introduction

Multi-county collaboration has been a long-standing topic of discussion for many involved in Minnesota's state-supervised, county-administered human services delivery system. The topic has been explored, primarily, as a means to promote greater efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of publicly-funded human services. This has occurred as budgetary constraints have become increasingly tight and the need for services has grown. As noted by the Minnesota Office of the State Auditor, "Budget concerns have forced local governments to look for new ways to provide services." (MN Office of State Auditor, p.22) This type of collaboration was also identified by Carl Neu as one of five mega-trends redefining the role of counties in the delivery of human services (Neu, 2005), while the Office of the Legislative Auditor made a number of recommendations pertaining to the development of multi-county collaborations across Minnesota's publicly-funded human services system (MN Office of Legislative Auditor, 2007). Furthermore, MACSSA endorsed the concept of counties maintaining authority to develop locally-determined multi-county collaborations to improve service delivery (MACSSA, 2005).



The challenge currently faced by counties, as articulated in MACSSA's first policy paper and endorsed by the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC), "...is to re-align systems and governmental structures to accomplish a new strategic direction for the future of human services delivery." (MACSSA, p.17) This challenge begs the question:

What dynamic principles or criteria can guide counties' decision making as architects of the human service delivery system? The primary purpose of this document is to address that question by providing county decision-makers with guidelines to consider in making the best decision for their local community-with regard to pursuit of a multi-county collaboration.

Needless to say, the decision to explore and pursue multi-county collaboration requires thoughtful deliberation on the part of all those involved. Collaboration models seeming to be beneficial to one county may not prove beneficial to another. Given the many variables involved, this document is not intended to serve as a wholesale endorsement of any particular model of multi-county collaboration; that decision can only be left up to each county to assess independently, according to the specific circumstances and unique context in which the decision is being considered. However, it is critical human services stakeholders and decision-makers have an understanding of the complexities involved in the human services delivery system as they explore the possibility. This document is, therefore, intended to outline a variety of key questions and other considerations county decision-makers may wish to examine as discussions regarding multi-county collaboration continue.

Changing the County Delivery System: *How to Decide If It's Right for Your County*

Careful analysis is required when considering any type of multi-county collaboration. The complexity of the factors involved in such a process can make it difficult to ascertain how best to proceed with such an analysis. This section is intended to provide a high-level overview of the process and specific questions counties might wish to consider as the potential for multi-county collaboration is explored.

Once a county has clearly defined the reasons change is being sought, the specific outcomes desired, solutions that have the potential to bring about the desired outcomes and the specific criteria against which each solution will be evaluated, it's time to carefully consider the potential of each solution to achieve the desired outcomes. It's important to approach this exercise with realism about what each proposed change will or will not accomplish as each solution brings certain costs and benefits. (Walsh in MNDOC, 2008)

*Process for Analyzing Change***

Define the Issues

Why, specifically, is the county considering a change? Being clear about the reasons for change allows county-decision-makers to better evaluate whether or not the change is likely to bring about the intended outcomes.

Gather Data

Is there data to support the rationale for change? Talk to other counties that have pursued multi-county collaboration as well as those that have explored the option but decided against it. Review any pertinent research on the issue.

Develop Potential Solutions

Do not assume multi-county collaboration or a particular type of multi-county collaboration is the only potential solution to consider in addressing the county's defined issues. Often, a variety of potential solutions exist and are worth exploring. Perhaps the defined issues require internal organizational changes rather than program, administrative or systems collaboration across counties.

Identify Evaluation Criteria

Identify specific criteria to be used in evaluating the merits of each potential solution. What outcomes are being sought? For example, will the proposed solution bring about:

- improved client outcomes?
- improved funding?
- greater efficiency in service delivery?
- increased capacity for staff specialization?
- improved accountability?

*(**Walsh in MNDOC, 2008)*

The decision to change is, first and foremost, a question about how best to serve clients, which is a policy decision that requires thoughtful analysis.
(Walsh in MNDOC, 2008)

Multi-County Collaboration Models

County human service departments have a long history of entering into partnerships in varying forms. The focus of this paper is on multi-county collaboration which can be defined in many ways. This paper uses the term broadly to refer to any type of programmatic or administrative collaboration involving more than one county.

Counties wishing to explore new alliances have a myriad of existing models to consider, from informal to structured, formal relationships. For the purpose of discussion, the section below has been included to delineate the variety of partnerships. Please note this list is not all inclusive, but rather shows progressive levels of involvement-from less- complex to more complex.

1. Programmatic Collaboration.

This model is aimed at sharing or coordinating best practices, policies or procedures within specific programs. Programmatic collaboration may occur through regional meetings by Directors, Supervisors or line staff for the purpose of discussing a particular issue. Agreement may or may not be reached related to implementation. Examples include the Region Six Supervisors guidelines on child protection, the development of consistent emergency assistance guidelines, Behavioral Health Mutual Aid Agreements, and shared training sponsored by counties.

2. Functional or Departmental Collaboration.

Collaboration of this nature involves sharing or merging specific components of county business with another county or entity. Examples include: partnerships such as the MFIP Regional Agreement (St. Louis County being the lead), assigning an FTE employee to complete the same function for two or more counties, development of programs such as Mental Health Crisis Services-operating across counties, Family Group Decision-Making-a form of Child Welfare conferencing, Fraud Prevention and Investigation services, WARMM-Waiver Alliance of Renville, Meeker and McLeod counties- a DD Waiver management group in which waiver dollars are pooled and spent collectively. The list of options within this category is almost endless.

3. Supervisory Collaboration.

Similar to the functional model, supervisory collaboration specifically requires sharing a Supervisor (with specialization within a program area) to provide staff guidance in more than one county (Wilkin/Ottertail counties).

4. Administrative Management Collaboration.

Comparable to the previous two models, administrative collaboration is clearly defined as the sharing of the Human Services Director position (e.g. Pipestone and Nobles counties-August 2008). One Director will have administrative authority and oversight in two counties-while separate governing structures are maintained.

5. Multi-County System Collaboration.

Agency operations are governed by a joint powers agreement in which two or more counties merge entire human service delivery systems. Currently Lincoln/Lyon/Murray counties have such an agreement as do Faribault and Martin counties.

6. Multi-System Collaboration.

Many entities from outside the Human Service system entered successfully entered into Joint Powers agreements. These include multi-county health plans (i.e. Primewest and South Country), Public Health Agencies, Community Corrections, Area Agencies on Aging, and Work Force Centers.

Benefits of Multi-County Collaboration

How Might Clients Benefit from Multi-County Collaboration?

Depending on the model chosen, multi-county collaboration may be of benefit to clients.

■ ***Service Specialization***

Creating an environment where county staff are able to specialize in specific program areas could benefit clients who may now be afforded the opportunity to receive more specialized services, or, perhaps a broader array of service offerings, as well as interact with county staff that have more specialized knowledge about specific services. As stated in [Maximus Study], “Providing services to meet limited demand through relatively small agencies may not provide the most responsive nor effective allocation of resources. Pooling both service demand and service resources allows for a more flexible, demand driven approach to resource allocation and service fulfillment” (Maximus, p.30).

■ ***Financial Benefit***

Clients could benefit from combined budgets across counties. For example, multiple counties sharing a pool of waiver funding could allow for greater spending flexibility and the ability to serve more people.

■ ***Service Consistency***

Some collaboration models could allow for greater consistency in the way services are delivered and policies are administered across a larger geographic area, thus reducing confusion for clients if they move from one county to another.

■ ***Client Choice of Worker***

Some collaboration models create a larger pool of county staff in each program area which allows clients greater flexibility to choose the staff person with whom they are most comfortable working. This could help alleviate the tendency for conflict of interest or vested interest between county staff and the client that may exist particularly in smaller counties.



How Might Service Providers Benefit from Multi-County Collaboration?

■ ***Administrative Simplification***

Some collaboration models create a simplified administrative structure for contracted vendors who now must only contract with one entity instead of multiple entities.

■ ***Policy and Service Consistencies***

Interpretation of program policies, rate structures, and expectations around service delivery may be more consistent across counties participating in certain multi-county collaboration models.

How Might Other Stakeholders Benefit from Multi-County Collaboration?

(i.e. Court Services, Probation/Corrections Agencies, Public Health etc.)

■ ***Policy and Service Philosophy***

Service delivery could be standardized and consistent within counties involved in the collaborative effort. Long range planning and policy development could be afforded time and attention smaller systems can not provide. Specialized services could now be available to more clients-regardless of community size or population base.

■ **Administrative Simplification**

Partner agencies could be accountable to a consistent set of standards within the contracting process - as opposed to conflicting desires of each individual county. Reporting to one entity would eliminate duplication currently in place.

How Might Counties Benefit from Multi-County Collaboration?

Depending on the model chosen, multi-county collaboration can bring benefits to those counties involved, particularly in terms of efficiencies of scale.

■ **Specialization**

Collaboration across counties can enable greater staff specialization within specific program areas such as children's mental health, employment and economic assistance, or disability services, to name a few. Staff specialization within administrative functions can also result, including areas such as contract management/purchasing services, technology or personnel services. At a time when publicly-funded human service programs have become increasingly complex, staff specialization can be particularly helpful as it allows county workers to focus on a specific area of specialization rather than to function as a generalist across a variety of program areas. In smaller counties, it also has the potential to improve staff morale as it allows for county staff to belong to a larger staff unit rather than being the only one staffing a particular program.

■ **Administrative and Service Consistencies**

For counties, enhancing consistency across administrative or service functions may streamline processes and reduce administrative complexity which may lead to more efficient use of county resources. Specifically, collaborating county partners could carry-out planning, contracting and rate setting as one entity rather than separate entities. Department, Program or Area Directors may have more time to effectively monitor and coach staff to increase effectiveness and productivity while also monitoring providers more closely to ensure there is value in the purchase of services being provided. In the event of turn-over or temporary staff absences, a larger unit of staff may be able to absorb the extra duties with less stress on co-workers.

■ **Financial Benefits**

While the topic is not well-researched in Minnesota, anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that counties with very small populations could be in a better position to absorb and react to routine and dramatic funding changes if the risk is spread across a wider population base and shared among a group of counties through a multi-county collaboration. In addition, some collaboration models could allow more efficient use of financial resources within various program areas as a result of dollars being pooled together across counties (e.g. home and community based waiver programs, etc.). Staff specialization resulting from multi-county collaboration could have positive financial implications for the county as efficiencies are gained. Particular units may be able to downsize due to their functions (e.g. accounting or payroll).

■ **Appropriate "Economies of Scale" & Risk Mitigation**

It is important to be aware that the size of a human service system can have a direct impact on its ability to perform a variety of functions. This concept of "economies of scale" can yield benefits to counties pursuing multi-county collaboration and therefore is critical to incorporate into any examination of whether or not multi-county collaboration effectively meets the intended goals of the collaborative partners. For example, there are marked differences in the volatility of the human services system relative to system size. Larger operations may be better shielded from risk associated with program funding and costs (Maximus, 2006). As a result, past studies have indicated that "program risk mitigation may provide the strongest qualitative argument for service consolidation." (Maximus, p.30) In addition, "[implementation of a departmental or full systems collaboration in an effort to meet] expanded service demand has the potential to yield economies of scale that may be associated with production efficiencies or more effective application of technical and human resources." (Maximus, p.20) In an environment of increased scrutiny (i.e. Federal and State audits, along with the potential of paybacks) system accuracy and overall accountability becomes essential to long-term sustainability.

Challenges Associated with Multi-County Collaboration

What Challenges Are Involved in Multi-County Collaboration?

In addition to the potential benefits of multi-county collaboration, delivery system change of this magnitude may also pose challenges to be carefully considered. First and foremost, a thorough assessment of how multi-county collaboration could best meet the needs of each county system requires considerable staff time and financial resources. The willingness and ability of counties to allocate resources to this task can be an immense challenge from the start. However, once the decision to pursue multi-county collaboration has been made, it's critical to recognize system change as complex – in terms of the logistics involved, the cultural transformation accompanying change of this nature, financial considerations, and the State/County partnership throughout such an endeavor.

Counties exploring multi-county collaboration should prepare to navigate through a series of questions related to how the new system will function as a whole. Depending on the collaborative model of choice, this process can be both time-consuming and complex.

Resource issues may include:

■ ***Staffing***

Administrative, supervisory, or staff-level responsibilities may require adjustment based upon the needs of the collaborative. The more sophisticated the collaborative design, the greater the potential for some degree of realignment of responsibilities. Staff realignment should focus on ensuring the appropriate staff compliment to maximize the opportunities that multi-county partnerships can bring. (Maximus, 2006) For example, as previously noted, "...smaller systems require staff to be assigned a variety of tasks due to the need to provide services, but lack sufficient demand to allow individual employee specialization." (Maximus, p.13) Staff assignments should



capitalize on opportunities to promote increased staff specialization -both on the front-line and supervisory levels. This dynamic variable is challenging but essential to the new partnership in achieving its shared goals.

■ ***Clients***

It is possible collaborative efforts may not have the best interest of the client as its first priority. This could lead to decisions adversely affecting individuals. For example, specialized staff, located in only one office, may increase barriers related to transportation. Every effort must be made to assure staff mobility as opposed to increased expectations for clientele. Another consideration could be the need for multiple workers due to a multitude of services. Again, a county review of program assignments must allow for cross-training- decreasing the need for multiple staff working with the same individual/family.

■ ***Financing***

The funding distribution or financial participation among collaborating counties must be carefully considered. Decisions related to how funding should be appropriately allocated can be difficult, depending upon the circumstances involved. Funding formulas must be fair and equitable yet encourage all collaborative partners to function as one - maintaining a holistic approach to service delivery.

The management of financial risk is a key consideration as human service departments prepare for the future. Mitigating financial and program risk can be one of the most powerful reasons to encourage multi-county collaboration. However, it also presents a challenge requiring careful examination.

■ **Governance**

Collaborating agencies must examine which governance structure/composition most effectively meets the needs of the group (e.g. Joint Powers Agreement, Family Services Board, Advisory Council, etc.) Effective governance structures for multi-county collaboration will vary depending upon the needs of the county, the impetus for pursuing such collaboration as well as the type of multi-county collaboration being implemented. The choice of governance structure is also closely tied to the importance of determining where the authority for administrative and policy decision-making will be placed. Some types of multi-county collaboration require little involvement from the State while other models depend greatly upon the State's ability to adapt state support systems (e.g. IT systems, reporting functions, etc.) to the new collaborative model. Agencies involved in multi-county collaboration emphasize the importance of relationships in the continued success of such ventures. Regardless of the governance structure chosen, parties must engage in a "group think" of sorts. The more blended and wholistic the multi-county approach, the higher its likelihood of achieving its shared goals.

■ **Cultural Transformation**

Because of the complexity involved in planning for and implementing a multi-county collaboration, the cultural challenges accompanying change of this type may easily be overlooked. Anticipating and planning for the cultural transformation required may be one of the most challenging elements to manage, but undoubtedly one of the most important elements to consider. "The reason that policy/decision makers must pay attention to organizational culture is that culture tends to drive organizational behavior and organizational behavior drives performance and results." (ibid, 2008)

In order to assure the desired outcomes of the multi-county collaboration are achieved, careful attention must be paid to organizational culture - both to each agency's individual culture as well as the collective culture of the new partnership. This not only requires conscientious planning prior to implementation, but consistent and vigilant communication with staff and other key stakeholders throughout the entire process. In particular, "[county] staff members will require additional assistance and coaching to understand and appropriately respond to the organizational cultural change should...agencies pursue consolidation." (Maximus, p. 6)

There are a myriad of cultural considerations that counties may wish to examine when considering a multi-county collaboration. Examples include: (1) the vision and mission of each entity; (2) behavioral norms; (3) values guiding decision making; (4) conflict resolution protocol; and (5) work performance standards. (ibid, 2008)

The cultural considerations above are closely linked to the "human issues" involved in any type of multi-county collaboration. Staff issues and concerns are equally important to plan for and monitor throughout the process. Those responsible for system change should pay particular attention to staff morale, issues of power among and between staff, or changes in professional relationships that may result from certain collaboration models. Failing to adequately address both the cultural transformation and human issues involved could significantly hamper the success of any type of multi-county collaboration.



Conclusion

The purpose of this document is to assist county decision makers interested in pursuing multi county collaboration. Information, guidelines and resources used to examine the process and possible outcomes of collaboration are provided.

The document explores the factors that may determine if multi-county collaboration is appropriate for your county. It was not intended to serve as an endorsement of any particular

model of multicounty collaboration but designed to:

- Guide the process of analyzing a change in human service delivery
- Define and review examples of various models of multi county collaboration
- Examine the benefits of multi county collaboration for clients, counties, service providers, and other stakeholders
- Identify the challenges involved in staffing, financing and governing a multi county collaboration

Weighing the costs and benefits of multi county collaboration can be complex and resource intensive. However given the examples of functioning, successful multicounty collaborations identified in this document, it is evident that it can be an appropriate means to address the state mandated requirements, service delivery and funding challenges experienced by county human service agencies.

Overall, decision makers should carefully assess their situation, consider the impacts on clients and personnel and understand the potential organizational, operational and cultural effects. Clearly the decision to enter into a multi-county collaboration must be a local choice and should not be dictated by any other entity.

Multi-County Collaboration Contact List

Faribault and Martin Counties (Multi-County System Collaboration)

Faribault County Courthouse
415 N Main
PO Box 130
Blue Earth, MN 56013-0130
507.526.6265

Kandiyohi County (Functional or Departmental Collaboration)

Health & Human Services Building
2200 23rd Street NE
Willmar, MN 56201
320.231.6232

Lincoln/Lyon/Murray Counties (Multi-County System Collaboration)

Lyon County Government Center
607 W Main Street
Marshall, MN 56258-3021
507.537.6747

Lyon County (Functional or Departmental Collaboration)

Lyon County Government Center
607 W Main Street
Marshall, MN 56258-3021
507.537.6747

MFIP Regional Agreement (Functional or Departmental Collaboration)

St. Louis County Courthouse
100 N 5th Avenue W
Duluth, MN 55802-1292
218.726.2053

Pipestone and Nobles Counties (Administrative Management Collaboration)

Pipestone County Courthouse 416 Hiawatha Ave. S Pipestone, MN 56164-1566 507.825.6726	Nobles County Government Center 315 10 th Street, PO Box 757 Worthington, MN 5687-0757 507.295.5213
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PrimeWest Health (Multi-System Collaboration)

Main Office:
2209 Jefferson St. Suite 101
Alexandria, MN 56308
320.763.4135

South Country Health Alliance (Multi-System Collaboration)

Owatonna Office: 110 W Fremont St. Owatonna, MN 55060 507.444.7770/1.866.567.7242	Brainerd Office: 322 Laurel St. Suite 31 Brainerd, MN 56401 218.316.3199/1.800.903.4182
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WARMM: Waiver Alliance of Renville, Meeker, and McLeod Counties (Functional Collaboration)

Renville County Social Services
801 S 7th Street
Olivia, MN 56277
320.523.2202

Meeker County Courthouse
325 N Sibley Ave.
Litchfield, MN 55355
320.693.5200

McLeod County Courthouse
830 E 11th Street
Glencoe, MN 55336-2200
320.864.1395

Wilkin/Ottertail Counties (Supervisory Collaboration)

Wilkin County Courthouse
300 S 5th Street
Breckenridge, MN 56520
218.643.7161

Ottertail County Government Services Center
500 Fir Avenue W
Fergus Falls, MN 56537
218.998.8150

Western Mental Health Center (Programmatic Collaboration)

1212 East College Drive
Marshall, MN 56258
507.532.3236

Woodland Centers (Programmatic Collaboration)

1125 SE 6th Street
Willmar, MN 56202
1.800.992.1716

Yellow Medicine County (Programmatic Collaboration)

Yellow Medicine County Courthouse
415 9th Avenue
Granite Falls, MN 56241-1397
320.564.2211

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