

Community Access to Child Health (CATCH)

Lessons Learned:

Forming and Maintaining Effective CATCH Partnerships: Lessons from the Field

Background

A national effort by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the Community Access to Child Health (CATCH) program provides grant funding and technical support to individual pediatricians pursuing community-based efforts to increase access to child health servicesⁱ. CATCH grants have served as start-up funds for new and innovative partnerships, and have allowed existing partnerships to expand. Efforts supported through the CATCH program continue in a rural Nebraska dentistry program, coordinated services for new mothers in coastal South Carolina, youth health centers in urban communities, health services for families in homeless shelters in Pennsylvania, and in many other projects and places throughout the country.

In an effort to strengthen the program, the CATCH program recently reviewed application and final report materials from eighteen 2003-2004 Implementation Grant recipients. Seventeen of the 18 grantees provided additional information about their experiences via electronic and/or phone interviews. The program sought to gain a better understanding of the experience of grantees, and to provide additional support and guidance to future applicants and grantees. This report represents one of three briefing papers developed from this review.ⁱⁱ

This review of CATCH was not intended to be a rigorous research project, but rather to gather information accessible from grantees through reports and interviews in the hopes that the insights gleaned would be of benefit to future applicants and grantees. The

grantees whose experience informs this report do not necessarily comprise a representative sampling of pediatricians, AAP members or even CATCH grantees.

Partnerships

The CATCH program encourages pediatricians and pediatric practices to establish and utilize community-based partnerships in their projects. CATCH grantees have pursued and developed a broad range of partnerships with: other care providers, local institutions, churches and schools, a variety of municipal agencies, and representative members of targeted communities. These partnerships have enhanced community engagement in the projects, increased community awareness of the medical home, and established a framework for the continued support of services that support child health in communities.

Many CATCH projects have benefited greatly from the knowledge, resources, insight and support of a wide variety of partnerships. In some cases, however, CATCH grantees have found working with their community partners to be quite challenging. A review of the partnership experiences of several past CATCH grantees suggests some particular strategies which grantees should carefully consider as they identify, recruit, engage and work with partner organizations. Where available, relevant examples shared by former CATCH grantees are offered as models or cautions.

Identifying and Recruiting Partners

Effective community partnerships can provide a means of gathering knowledge about the needs and resources of a community, help to establish trust between members of the community and project staff, minimize the inherent challenges of outreach and evaluation, and continue the CATCH project long after the grant has ended. To maximize their chances of reaping all—or even most—of these potential partnership benefits, CATCH grantees should consider the following:

Have I adequately planned for the project? Adequate planning is vital to the success of a CATCH project. CATCH planning grants may provide the opportunity to define and focus efforts to build partnerships and develop a comprehensive and detailed

portrait of the epidemiologic, demographic and economic factors affecting the target community. This work may in turn provide grantees additional time to refine their project and identify and build relationships with partners.

CATCH grantees are not required to apply for planning grants, and both planning and implementation grants will provide funds to enhance partner relationships. Grantees should ensure, however, that the planning they have undertaken is sufficient to the project and the partnerships they hope to build.

- **How am I partnering with patients?** Assuring a strong connection with the population you seek to serve may be the single most important factor supporting project success. Previous CATCH grantees sought input from patients through a variety of means. CATCH grantees formed patient/consumer advisory groups to provide input into service planning and implementation, held focus groups of potential and current patients, worked with existing patient advocacy groups, and held informal conversations with patients to gather feedback on planned service development. In one project, CATCH funds provided the opportunity to include youth in the design of an enhanced youth services program. Youth engagement increased youth awareness and support for health services that had been provided on an ongoing basis. Their involvement contributed to the overall program design, thus enhancing all services. **Patient input into a CATCH project appears to be strongly correlated with the achievement of the project's goals and objectives.**

Who do I already know, with whom might I partner on this project? Our sample of previous CATCH grantees reached near-consensus on a single message to potential applicants: begin with partners you know. The short project time frame and the substantial responsibilities shared with partnering entities both argue for developing an existing relationship. Working with existing partners allows CATCH applicants to lessen the challenge of building new relationships while also starting new projects.

Existing partnerships also provide a foundation for innovative projects that might not have been possible to develop from scratch:

- *Patient input:* In one project, CATCH funds provided the opportunity to include youth in the design of an enhanced youth services program.
- *Relationship building:* A CATCH grant allowed a pediatric practice to repair strained relationships with the local mental health agency. The provision of an on-site mental health provider, as well as the training required to establish new office procedures, resulted in improved services to children and families and enhanced collaboration between the practice and the local agency. The local mental health agency now provides part-time staff on-site at the pediatric practice.
- *Expansion of services:* CATCH funding allowed a medical mission partnership to expand and provide services in their community to immigrants from the Central American communities they had served overseas.

How well do we know one other? Successful partnerships require trust and any partnership may encounter challenges that test that trust. Personal relationships between CATCH applicants and decision-makers in the partner organizations enhance a project's ability to address and overcome shifts in project design, unexpected staff changes and even funding delays.

In addition to expanding existing professional partnerships, previous CATCH grantees developed new partnerships with prior mentors, friends and colleagues. When these individuals also have decision-making authority in organizations with appropriate overlapping missions and capabilities, the personal relationships enhanced the CATCH partnership.

Note: CATCH applicants should not limit their potential partners to organizations or people with whom they have established relationships. Eager and engaged new partners can help bring a project to fruition, and prior relationships are not a guarantee of success. For example, one CATCH project lost priority with a partner organization when the organization replaced the executive director. The existence

and perceived strength of an ongoing relationship with project partners should be addressed as one of several partnership characteristics to consider.

How does this project relate to the mission of the potential partner? Significant commitment to any endeavor requires a commitment to its outcomes. Among our sample, successful partnerships were forged with organizations that had a clear, pre-existing and independent stake in the project outcome:

- Dental schools and dental students, for example, were eager partners in a project to enhance oral health in rural Nebraska.
- A community mental health agency strongly supported the provision of mental health services in a primary care setting.

How will this potential partnership benefit the CATCH project? In order to choose the right partner(s), applicants should identify the benefits they seek—and assure that the potential partner can provide those benefits. CATCH applicants should carefully consider the needs of the project, their own capabilities and expertise, and the gaps that exist:

- Community-based organizations—including schools, service agencies, advocacy organizations, patient groups and even radio stations—can provide a bridge between the project and the community. Where language and cultural barriers exist, these bridges are critical to project success.
- In some cases, partnering organizations fill a specific gap with specific expertise, such as evaluation or outreach.
- Partners such as medical schools and students allow a project to increase its reach and scale.

In other cases, the pediatrician's mission to provide primary care was part of a coalition's larger mission of service:

- A wide variety of child-serving agencies was successfully engaged in the enhancement of a Massachusetts youth center. Medical services were a part of that enhancement.

- Homeless shelters in Philadelphia welcomed a coalition of medical professionals who provided care to their residents on-site.

It can be difficult to assess the relationship between the mission of a potential partner, the CATCH project goals, and a potential partner's understanding and commitment to each. Some previous grantees worked successfully with schools, for example, while others struggled to keep their project "on the radar screen" of schools that were more narrowly focused on academic and accreditation issues.

While some overlapping in missions appeared to enhance project success, too much overlap—nearly identical missions—appeared to cause some difficulty. In some cases, for example, local physicians appeared to perceive the CATCH project as competition, encroachment or criticism of their practice. At the other extreme, a hospital partnering with a pediatrician took charge of the CATCH project, altered the design, pursued other funding, and effectively excluded the CATCH grantee from further involvement. While each partner must have a stake in the outcome, it appears that a shared stake in the partnership is also necessary to success.

How will the CATCH project benefit this partner? CATCH applicants should consider, identify, and be able to articulate the benefits to the partner of engaging in the CATCH project. Increased opportunities to advance their organizational mission are a clear benefit to a partnering organization, and thus it is important to consider the relationship between the CATCH project and the mission of the partnering organization. Other or additional benefits of the partnership may exist—if identified, they may increase a partner's enthusiasm for a project or engage a partner with a less direct commitment to the project goals. For example:

- Partnerships with medical schools and residency programs provided opportunities for students to complete residency requirements, gain additional training, or receive training in different settings or with new populations.

- Linkages created through a CATCH project between a rural district health department and a dental school enhanced the health department’s mission, and may have served to recruit dental students to stay and work in the community.
- CATCH partnerships facilitated personal relationships between the collaborating organizations—relationships which may enhance other future or concurrent projects.
- Some CATCH projects were intentionally designed to enhance funding opportunities—providing Medicaid reimbursable services, meeting state match requirements, etc. Other CATCH projects served as pilots for larger initiatives that won grant support for partnering entities.

Do potential partners know about the CATCH award? Applicants are encouraged to recruit partners in advance of receiving CATCH funding—strong partnerships may enhance the likelihood that a CATCH proposal will be funded. Secured funding, however, can reassure new partners that a project can and will proceed. Sharing the news of your CATCH planning or implementation grant is a means of announcing your project. This good news can build enthusiasm and interest in the project among community members, and may even bring new partners to the table.

Engaging Partners

The first few steps of a new partnership—whether it builds upon existing relationships or starts entirely from scratch—lay the groundwork for all efforts that follow. Careful engagement in the early stages of a partnership builds trust, promotes understanding of the project, establishes clear roles and responsibilities and can inspire enthusiasm for the work ahead. Developing a clear partnership foundation can also serve to prevent or mitigate problems as the project moves ahead.

Applicants should ensure that all partners not only understand the answers to the following questions, but are actively involved in developing those answers:

Has the project received input from partners and patients early in the process?

Involving partners early in the development and planning of the project increases their understanding of and commitment to the project and can lead to a greater chance of success. Previous CATCH grantees were appreciative of the ideas and insights provided by their partners, including, in some cases, the inspiration for the entire project.

- A health services outreach organization in rural Missouri suggested that newborn hospital visits be used to educate new mothers about outreach services, and outreach visits be used to support primary care services. The resulting project increased use of both outreach and primary care services.
- Two different projects that focused on adolescent health considered youth input from advisory or focus groups to shape and advertise services.

Ensuring the input of patients or representative groups is vital to project planning.

When input from the targeted community is absent or limited, project aims can prove difficult to achieve.

- A rural dental health project was wildly successful in the counties where staff were known to the families targeted for services. When the project sought to expand to a new county, enrollment rates dropped from 100% to 7%.
- A project to recruit childcare centers to track children's up-to-date status of immunization and well child visits ran into difficulties as they learned that many childcare providers had little interest in taking on this responsibility.
- A transportation project did not achieve the success predicted when bus tickets were provided to patients. Patients later described multiple challenges to using the bus system such as schedules, convenience and safety. Bus tickets, while appreciated, did not address these barriers to care.

CATCH planning grants can provide the opportunity to build partnerships with patients and community organizations. A planning grant can be an effective vehicle to conduct comprehensive planning for a CATCH implementation grant project and allow implementation projects to “hit the ground running.”

What are the roles and responsibilities of each partner? Clear, shared understandings of the responsibilities of each partner, negotiated early in the planning project, characterized many successful projects in our sample. Partners were assigned significant roles in CATCH grants, including leadership for a project or evaluation activities. Previous CATCH grantees were nearly unanimous in suggesting that evaluation was best handled by a partner organization with appropriate expertise. In some cases, these program evaluations led to further funding applications and awards.

Clearly establishing roles and expectations in advance can assist in program design and planning, and may lead partner organizations to identify stumbling blocks in advance. Written agreements such as a memorandum of understanding or agreement may also serve to institutionalize and define a partner organization's commitment, insulating the CATCH project from changes in staff or perspective. Several previous grantees encountered difficulties related to regulations or policies of their partnering organizations. Explicitly designating each party's role in the project at the beginning may have exposed these challenges in advance and allowed partners to request exceptions to policies or regulations, change the program design or otherwise adapt to the barrier.

Working in Partnership

The challenges of working in partnerships do not end once the work begins. Successful CATCH applicants understand that their primary responsibilities to the project include maintaining the partnerships on which it depends. The following questions can be used for periodic or ongoing assessment of the strengths—or building concerns—within CATCH partnerships.

How well—and regularly—do partners communicate? CATCH grantees identified ongoing and ample communication as a critical component to a project's success—and a primary responsibility of the grantee. As one grantee put it, “Transparent

communication—and lots of it—was key to keeping all partners involved and on track.” A variety of communications techniques were used by CATCH grantees:

- Regularly scheduled communication venues, such as weekly conference calls, allowed partners to assess progress and identify new or building concerns.
- Formal presentations by one CATCH grantee helped to recruit partners and consistently communicate the project focus.
- “Thank you” notes and other forms of appreciation promoted the ongoing efforts of partners and volunteers.
- CATCH grantees traveled to partners’ sites to provide services or training, either as a project launch activity or on an ongoing basis.
- A telemedicine project utilized telemedicine technology for weekly meetings to build communication and comfort with the technology.;
- When partners differed on their approach to a youth services project, a meeting was held with an outside facilitator to promote communication and identify shared values.

What else is possible? “Expecting the unexpected” has emerged as a requirement for all involved in CATCH projects. While challenges often surface when a project takes a surprising turn, new opportunities have also arisen:

- The local hospital took notice when a pediatric clinic teamed up with the bus company to support transportation for patients. The hospital provided funding to support transportation services targeting children with special health care needs.
- When youth and staff from a CATCH-supported youth program visited the local Boys and Girls Club, they intended to learn about peer-led programming. In addition to this insight, they gained a new partner—and access to Boys and Girls Club facilities.
- A partnership between a medical school Pediatric Club and a community advocacy organization for families of children with severe emotional disturbance generated interest among agencies serving the Latino community and thus opened new communities to service provision. Members of the Pediatric Club felt so

strongly about the program that they sought to revise the medical school curriculum to support it.

Previous CATCH grantees noted the challenge of staying open to new developments while also maintaining the original intent and focus of the CATCH project. One grantee explicitly identified keeping the project's focus as one of his primary responsibilities.

How do ongoing—or potential—project activities relate to the project focus?

Previous grantees spoke of the challenge of maintaining the central focus of a CATCH project, especially in light of emerging opportunities. In order to avoid “mission drift,” grantees carefully weighed suggestions for expansion against the time and effort required. Within a focused context, however, successful grantees were often open to new ideas, especially those that emerged during planning or in the early stages of implementation.

Conclusion

The CATCH program provides individual pediatricians with unique opportunities to reach beyond their practice and into their communities, partner with others and improve their children's access to needed health services. Previous CATCH grantees expressed great support and appreciation for the project even as they shared their struggles.

In their final reports and interview comments, these CATCH grantees made it clear that successful partnerships could be a source of great learning, growth and joy in the expansion and provision of services to children and families. In many cases, CATCH partnerships resulted in the establishment of permanent structures or policies intended to institutionalize the services piloted in the CATCH project.

With this and other briefing papers, we hope to provide guidance which will help you bring your ideas to fruition in your community. Further information, encouragement and assistance are available on the CATCH website, from CATCH staff, and especially

through the network of District and Chapter CATCH Facilitators. Contact information for these facilitators is available on the CATCH website:

<http://www.aap.org/catch/ta.html>. Working to support pediatricians interested in CATCH via one-one-one technical assistance is a vital part of the CATCH program. We welcome your inquiries!

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CATCH Committee

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CATCH Grantees

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ⁱ For more information about the CATCH program, including grant opportunities and deadlines, please see <http://www.aap.org/CATCH>

ⁱⁱ This document represents one of three briefing papers developed through this review process. The others, *Bringing Community Pediatrics to Life*, and *Implementing CATCH Programs: Strategies for Addressing Common Challenges* are available through the CATCH website (www.aap.org/CATCH/ta.htm).