

A Big Picture Approach to Community Planning and Action

Community partnerships, collaborations, and stakeholder groups use the stages and steps shown below to identify current community work and partners, gain a clear understanding of priority issues, identify root causes, achieve consensus for needed change, and adjust interventions until desired results are achieved.



The Forum for Youth Investment and Community Systems Group work with leaders to build their capacity to inspire and mobilize action at multiple levels — from neighborhood and issue-specific coalitions to provider networks and over-arching leadership councils. For each of the five steps outlined here, leaders learn the clear standards, organizing questions, facilitation tools and techniques, data collection methods, and analytic approaches that link each step to the next and position their group for collective impact.



What makes a community change effort “big picture?”

A *Big Picture Approach* takes a whole person or whole family perspective instead of a disease-specific or issue-centered one.

Communities naturally coalesce around pressing issues such as substance abuse, crime, school readiness, high school graduation, income security or homelessness. Personal experience, community tragedies or new data bring these issues to a community’s attention and become a moral call for collective action. It is tempting to focus on the “hot topic,” but no one experiences problems in isolation or “one at a time.” Problems must be viewed as connected and understood as they are actually experienced in the day-to-day context of a child or family’s life .

A *big picture approach* makes it more likely that a community can move outcomes for any one of these specific issues by addressing the problem from a child- or family-centered point of view.

A *Big Picture Approach* promotes alignment with other community actors and partnerships.

The first response by concerned community stakeholders is often to form a new group, partnership or coalition. The result is that most communities have more partnerships than they can sustain – sometimes upwards of 50. These partnerships can be an important venue for collective action, but not if they remain disconnected from each other and from broader community goals. Their respective work must be aligned to maximize their collective impact.

A *big picture approach* looks to existing actors and coalitions before starting new efforts. A *big picture approach* follows key steps that promote alignment with broad community goals and with the work of other community actors and initiatives. *Big picture* does not mean that everyone does everything. It means that issues are not tackled in isolation and that solutions are not implemented alone.

A *Big Picture Approach* focuses on root causes, underlying conditions and broader systems change to create lasting differences in population outcomes.

Faced with a moral call to action many community groups jump to selecting “evidence-based” interventions. While implementing the best of what is known is a requirement of good community work, an accurate diagnosis must precede the selection process. As in medicine, an incorrect diagnosis can lead to prescriptions for action that fail to address real causes and fail to produce desired results.

A *big picture approach* assures a localized and data-based diagnosis anchors the choices a community makes for needed action.

A *Big Picture Approach* puts pressing problems into a broader and long-term aspirational frame while committing to public accountability for progress.

Measuring impact is key, but it will take some time before community-level concerns respond to collective action. Sustaining community action therefore becomes imperative. Often problem-oriented initiatives struggle to sustain their efforts as communities fatigue from being the “no-fun police” (such as in the case of youth problem behaviors like substance abuse, juvenile delinquency or teen pregnancy). In the end, we all aspire to achieve positive goals for our children and families, not just to avoid specific problems.

A *big picture approach* tackles pressing problems directly while couching the overall effort in aspirational terms and as the pursuit of goals communities hold for long-term well-being.



A big picture approach promotes effective community work at multiple levels . . .

The five steps of community change management are relevant for community change efforts at all levels – ranging from top-level leadership groups to neighborhood coalitions.

- Over-Arching Leadership Councils:** P-20 Councils, Children’s Cabinets, Healthy Community Coalitions, and Poverty Reduction Task Forces are just a few examples of the kinds of broad leadership groups that are put in place to act as “coalitions of coalitions,” linking together multiple networks and systems that are each focused on major pieces of a complex goal. P-20 Councils, for example, work to connect early childhood education to K-12 and higher education. *A big picture approach* is critical to creating the nested infrastructure necessary to link efforts at multiple levels under these umbrella structures.
- Population-Focused Partnerships:** Success By 6 is one of the most prominent examples of a multi-issue or age range partnership. The goal of tackling all relevant barriers to health and well-being for an age group is one that is repeated at different points in the age continuum. *A big picture approach* provides a way to make sure that the issues considered for a particular age group are defined as broadly as possible and ensures that the partnership thinks about opportunities for alignment and connection with adjacent age group partnerships.
- Provider Networks:** The importance of out-of-school time to the learning and development of young people has given rise to Out-of-School Time Networks and these are just one example of the power service and support providers can realize through collective planning and action. *A big picture approach* provides a way for service providers to align their work with complementary community strategies such as policy and environmental change.
- Single Issue Coalitions:** Many communities have a teen pregnancy, drug-free communities, immunization, active living, or literacy (to name just a few) coalition actively working to achieve population-level goals. These coalitions can tackle their individual issues in a *big picture* way and are more likely to see outcomes if their efforts are aligned and coordinated.
- Neighborhood Organizing:** Promise neighborhoods, opportunity zones, and neighborhood improvement associations are typical examples of neighborhood-level organizing and are important venues for collective action. Place-based organizing requires alignment with broader community-wide efforts as many of the policies, programs, and practices that must be changed for the better are under the control of extra-neighborhood forces.



... and can even help link and align work across the levels

Each phase of the process (take shape, take stock, take aim, target action, and track progress) assures different aspects of alignment are realized. The steps required to Take Shape promote structural alignment across levels of community action. The steps for Taking Aim promote goal alignment. Taking Stock assures that community partnerships have a shared understanding of root causes and underlying conditions – a shared diagnosis. The steps to Target Action assure that the interventions and activities pursued by multiple community actors are mutually reinforcing. Finally, Tracking Progress sets the stage for shared measurement which strengthens all steps and provides a platform for assessing collective impact.

