

Backbone Organizations 101

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The Problem

Fragmentation dominates homelessness response efforts:

- Continuum of Care geographies are non-uniform and often cut across other funding, programmatic, or administrative boundaries (counties, VA catchment areas, etc.)
- Data management is not interoperable across systems, geographies or programs, nor is the data itself of equal comprehensiveness, quality, or reliability
- Stakeholders have different definitions of success and ways of measuring progress giving way to competing narratives on how to tackle the issue
- Elected officials and community leaders are under increasing pressure to deliver results but uncoordinated or duplicative efforts slow progress
- Coordination requires capacity but funding streams have been historically focused at the programmatic level

As a result, regional and local actors suffer from:

- Poor line of sight into homelessness
- Competing incentives across a siloed array of actors
- Constrained ability to respond to evolving conditions
- Inadequate tools for determining whether various efforts, resources, and policy decisions are adding up to population-level results
- Lack of system-level capacity and capability to support alignment and problem-solving
- Potential for quick wins that can't be sustained in the long-term

Collective Impact

Collective impact is defined as “the commitment of a group of cross-sector actors to a common agenda for solving a complex social problem.”

With the collective impact approach, cross-sector leaders come together and strategically organize all of the relevant groups in a community to accomplish a population-wide outcome. Complex social problems are affected by large and interdependent systems that no single organization can change alone.

Five core elements:

- 1) Common agenda
- 2) Shared measurement
- 3) Mutually reinforcing activities
- 4) Continuous communication
- 5) **Backbone support**

Backbones & Place-based Partnerships

Backbone: structures comprised of a single or multiple organizations that fulfill several core functions and facilitate action and accountability across place-based partnerships.

Place-based partnerships: networks of people and organizations in the same geographic area who work together to change systems, improve community outcomes, and achieve shared goals.

*In the best of circumstances, these **backbone organizations** embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people's attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders.*

Functions

- 1) Community Engagement and Network Building
- 2) Visioning and Goal-Setting
- 3) Partnership Coordinations and Communications
- 4) Fund Development and Resource Alignment
- 5) Measuring Community-Level Impact
- 6) Building Partner Capacity
- 7) Organizing and Advocacy for Systems Change

A group of people are seated in a room, likely attending a meeting or workshop. They are engaged in conversation and some are taking notes. A woman in the foreground is wearing a black top and a green lanyard. Another woman is wearing a blue top. The background shows other participants and a door.

Backbone Overview

A Solution

Collective Impact

LARGE-SCALE SOCIAL CHANGE REQUIRES
BROAD CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION,
YET THE SOCIAL SECTOR REMAINS
FOCUSED ON THE ISOLATED INTERVENTION
OF INDIVIDUAL ORGANIZATIONS.

BY JOHN KANIA & MARK KRAMER

Illustration by Martin Jarrie



**COLLECTIVE
IMPACT FORUM**



**Nonprofit
Finance Fund®**

Non-Homeless System Backbones



Expanding Your Learning Locally

Who acts as a backbone in your local community regardless of homeless system relevance? Look to:

- United Way
- Public Health Department
- Universities
- Philanthropy
- Regional Planning Organization/Council of Gov't

What history or precedence can successful local collective impact campaigns teach you and how can you apply it to homeless systems?



Homeless System Applications

Our Backbone Partners

Colorado Division of Housing

Maine Housing

Illinois Office to Prevent & End Homelessness

Partnership between:

- **Kansas** Department of Aging & Disability Services
- **Kansas** Statewide Homeless Coalition

Maryland Department of Housing & Community Development

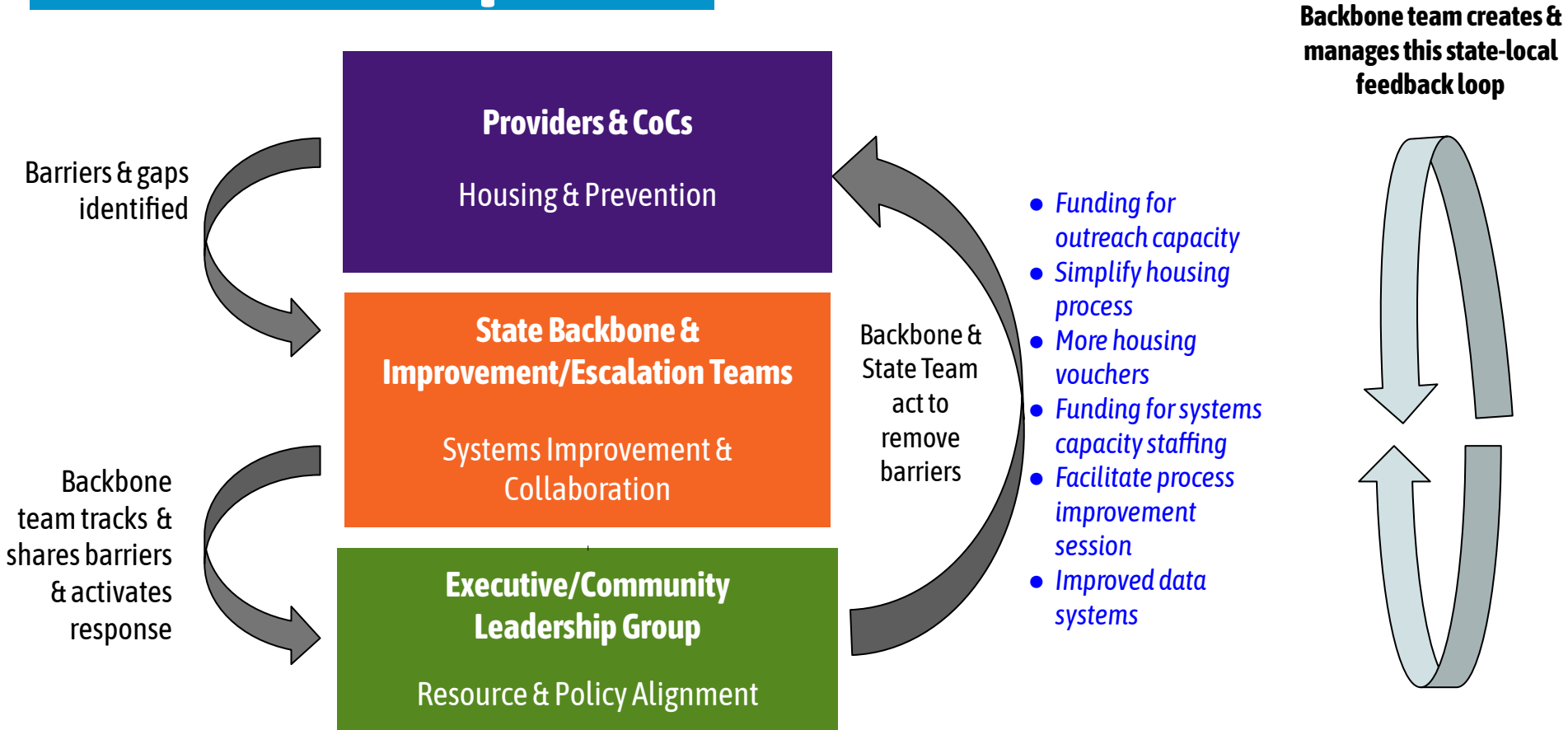
Metro Washington Council of Governments

Southwest Colorado - Rocky Mountain Health Plan

Metro Denver Homeless Initiative

Oahu CoC - Partners in Care

Barriers & Response



Backbone Functions

- 1. Community Engagement & Network Building**
- 2. Visioning & Goal Setting**
- 3. Partnership Coordination & Communications**
- 4. Fund Development & Resource Alignment**
- 5. Measuring Community Level Impact**
- 6. Building Partner Capacity**
- 7. Organizing & Advocacy for Systems Change**

1. Community Engagement & Network Building

- 1) Convene partners around a community-level indicator to use a continuous improvement process to improve that indicator.
- 2) Necessary partners for the necessary conversations — i.e., not everyone at every meeting, inclusive of the right stakeholder voices for the topic.
- 3) Manages the logistics of a partner network such as documenting notes, scheduling meetings, creating agendas, etc.
- 4) Waste No Will: Offers a path for the broader community to engage the strategy — i.e., the congregation group that wants to volunteer or the business improvement district that is wanting to improve their block.
- 5) Visualizes the relationship of backbone and partners, staffing and supports.

2. Visioning & Goal Setting

- 1) The backbone team works together with the steering committee to provide data, prioritize opportunities for action, and adapt to changing context and systems in the overall vision and strategy of the effort.
- 2) It is critical that the backbone prioritizes equity in its efforts to guide the vision and strategy, thereby ensuring that steering committee and working group members keep equity at the center of their strategies and actions.
- 3) Long-term and short-term milestones, aims and drivers are mapped out and made public to partners who understand and see themselves in the strategy.
- 4) The backbone team can articulate the various layers of support needed and offered.
- 5) Relevant strategic plans at external organizations or governments align with the backbone's vision and goal setting wherever possible.

3. Partnership Coordination & Communications

- 1) Meeting not just for the sake of meeting — time together has an agenda, clear objectives, starts with data and notes are shared out afterwards with action steps.
- 2) Meeting representation is the right amount of partners at the right time — i.e., not 10 people from Org. A with one from Org. B.
- 3) Information is communicated up and down organizations — i.e., clarity on what are the takeaways to teams or leaders.
- 4) Develop a set of key messages about the partnership and communicate them regularly to internal partners and the broad community.
- 5) Release an annual report card to the community that effectively communicates the importance and meaning of the data for each of the partnership's community-level outcomes.

4. Fund Development & Resource Alignment

- 1) Resources are mapped to organizations and funders in a consistent manner — i.e. you know who is funded, for what.
- 2) Gaps are identified through qualitative and quantitative data — i.e., trends in an underserved population are rooted in data, e.g., 25% increase in seniors in 6 months.
- 3) Funds are pursued and supported broadly — i.e., don't let the application pass by, someone has to apply.
- 4) Funders and philanthropy shift accountability toward the backbone's strategic outcomes — i.e., non-HUD resources go through coordinated entry, and/or oriented towards permanent housing deliverables.
- 5) The backbone org. receives capacity building funding for staff, not just service provider orgs. — i.e., Improvement coaches and data analysts v. case managers

5. Measuring Community Level Impact

- 1) Data is relevant and timely — i.e., moving away from the PIT as the primary local data source.
- 2) Data is shared and drives decisions — i.e., definitions of success, and ultimate outcomes are shared across communities.
- 3) Data is visible — performance measures and outcomes, no matter how they look, are available publicly.
- 4) Data is supported — backbone trains and supports partnership and network members in the process of using data for continuous improvement.
- 5) Leverage evaluation and data-oriented partners (universities, healthcare, local evaluators) as objective leaders in asking critical learning questions.

6. Building Partner Capacity

- 1) Training on best & emerging practices and aligned services is provided by the backbone organization.
- 2) Resources are provided for both direct service and coordination/strategic staffing.
- 3) Expertise is leveraged at a staff and organizational level for the betterment of the homeless crisis response system.

7. Organizing & Advocacy for Systems Change

- 1)** May include direct lobbying on local, county, state, or federal policy addressing homelessness and housing.
- 2)** Advocating with and bringing partner organizations to decision-making tables.
- 3)** Incorporating voices of lived experience of homelessness as systems change advocates.
- 4)** Open to utilizing all levers of change to obtain the win: grassroots, relational, media, political, funder-driven.
- 5)** Gathering policy examples from other communities and backbones nationally working on similar strategies, or a collective advocacy agenda.

Self Assessment



Write down the function that you feel like your community is
GLOWING (is a bright spot for others).



Separately, note the function that you feel like your community
is GROWING (has room to improve).

Self Assessment

1. **Community Engagement & Network Building**
2. **Visioning & Goal Setting**
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7. **Organizing & Advocacy for Systems Change**

Group Assignments

Group A

Purple

Group B

Blue

Round 1 - 4 Minutes

Group A: Purple

Find the sign around the room with the function that best represents where you feel like your community is **glowing**.

Group B: Blue

Find the sign around the room with the function that best represents where you feel like your community is **growing**.

Once at your sign, find someone with the opposite group and have a conversation about why your community is glowing or growing around this backbone function.

Round 2 - 4 Minutes

Group A: Purple

Find the sign around the room with the function that best represents where you feel like your community is **growing**.

Group B: Blue

Find the sign around the room with the function that best represents where you feel like your community is **glowing**.

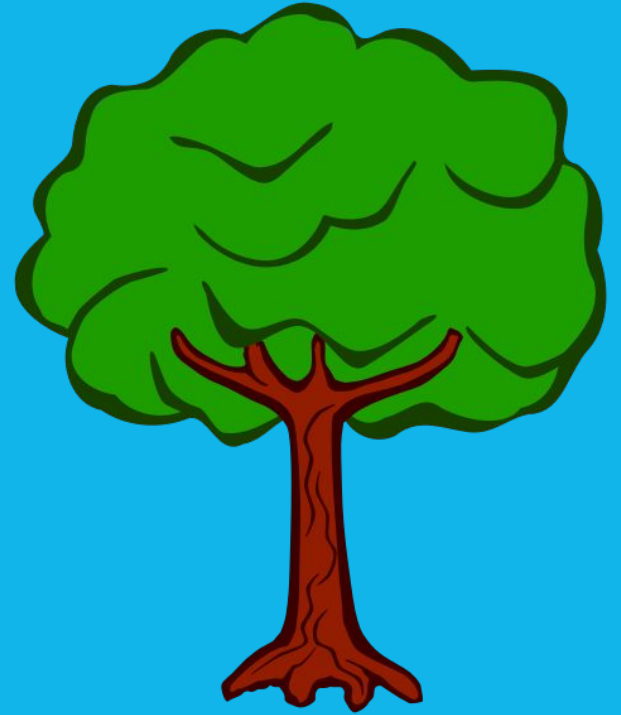
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Important Message #1

*A backbone organization needs to ensure all of these **necessary functions** are fulfilled but is not necessarily the entity to fulfill all the functions.*

Important Message #2

*Our theory is that all of these **functions** are necessary for effective homeless response systems. Backbone organizations are one way to **effectively package** these functions, but not the only way.*

Important Message #3

***Equity** is not a separate function (like #8) but it is embedded within each of the existing functions (#1-7)*

Thank You

For follow-up, contact
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