Coordinating Human Services Programs with Health Reform Implementation

A Toolkit for State Agencies

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, located in Washington, D.C., is a non-profit research and policy institute that conducts research and analysis of government policies and the programs and public policy issues that affect low and middle-income households. The Center is supported by foundations and individual contributors.

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Project Management and Communications

Background

Each state is approaching the Affordable Care Act (ACA) governance and planning somewhat differently, so project management and communications may be handled quite differently depending on the approach. The planning associated with preparing eligibility and enrollment policies and systems may have been folded into the work of a pre-existing workgroup tasked with coordinating health and human services eligibility policies. Other states are creating a new organization to manage ACA readiness and the HIX post-implementation. Others have just begun planning for ACA and haven't yet decided how they will manage implementation. Regardless of how a state structures its planning and implementation effort, a foundation for success will be ensuring that the state's workgroups have a clear understanding of their mission — for example through a project charter — and a plan for how to communicate internally and externally about the project team's role and how its work relates to the agency's overall efforts. This is especially important if more than one agency is involved in eligibility and enrollment in the state.

A project charter contemplates the urgency for change, the team structure, the vision for change, and empowering the project team. This is important because it creates transparency and accountability for their mission and why it is important to the goals of the agency.

A solid communications plan will help ensure that staff throughout your agency or agencies know the purpose of the change the project team is undertaking. Internal communications about a project fall into two broad topic areas:

1. **How the change affects the organizations involved.** This includes explaining where the organization is today and why change is necessary; offering a broad overview of how the organization will transition to a new service delivery model, including what will change and when the changes will occur; presenting the benefits to the agency, providers, and clients as a result of the change; and letting people know that the change is real and that it will happen.
2. **How the change affects employees.** This involves discussing the details of changing roles and/or how employees' day-to-day activities will be affected (e.g., answering the question: why should I care about this?); letting employees know that resources and training opportunities will be provided to give them the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the new model; soliciting feedback, ideas, and input about the change from staff; planning to periodically update staff on the status of the project; and letting staff know where they can go for more information.

It is important to communicate the right information to the right people at the right time. If messages are communicated too soon, staff will forget critical information. If information is communicated too late, there is a risk staff will not be ready for the changes in their roles and responsibilities.

Best Methods for Communicating Change

Research done on large-scale projects — like the transformational changes required to implement the Medicaid provisions of the ACA — shows that employees prefer to receive information about the project vision and urgency for change from executive managers. The employees' immediate supervisors or managers are the key senders of messages that pertain to the individual and work unit-level experience of change. The two most effective communication methods for communicating change to employees are:

1. One-to-one or face-to-face discussions that are honest, straightforward, and offer details of the change on a personal level. Employees prefer personal interaction over reading information.

2. Small group meetings to share information, brainstorm ideas, and discuss new or changed work processes.

The purpose of the Project Management and Communications module is to help states successfully initiate a project to redesign their service delivery model in preparation for the Medicaid eligibility and enrollment changes in the ACA. The tools and templates included in this module assume that the project has a sponsor(s) who is committed to approaching the planning process in a holistic and integrated way.

Goals

This module of the toolkit will help your team:

- Use solid project management principles in your project planning efforts.
- Create an outline of a project plan with answers to the fundamental questions about the structure and principles of your project, including roles and responsibilities of team members, a project calendar, and an issue resolution process.
- Create an outline of a communication plan that identifies key themes, target audiences, campaign messages, delivery methods, and timing.

Tools

This module includes the following tools:

1. **Exercise 6.1:** Initiate a project charter
2. **Exercise 6.2:** Build a communication plan outline
3. **Wrap-Up and Next Steps:** Prepare for implementation of project management and communications plans

How to Complete this Module

This module is intended to be completed by one or two people — typically the project sponsor and project manager — at the inception of the project, prior to chartering workgroups. The project charter exercise does not require broad stakeholder input, but once it has been signed by the project sponsor it can be shared with potential workgroup members as a way to understand the project goals and objectives.

You may want to create a small workgroup to help develop the communications plan. If you have a communication expert in your organization, be sure to tap their expertise.

Exercise 6.1

Initiate a project charter

The goal of this exercise is to help you answer the questions you'll need to address in order to manage the tasks associated with changing your Medicaid service delivery model and associated human services administrations. It is possible your state is already working with an IT systems vendor to build a state health insurance exchange (HIX) and/or to develop or upgrade your eligibility system(s). You may have multiple complex project plans to support those IT systems projects. They may include considerations for staff training, project-related communications, and issue resolution. The project charter envisioned here would not replace those more detailed plans, if they exist.

Rather, the project charter you will develop as part of this exercise is intended to be used by a project sponsor and a project manager who wish to initiate a project plan that integrates the types of tasks required to transform an eligibility and enrollment system for health and human services. Think of it as an "umbrella" plan that aids different groups of people working on simultaneous changes to better communicate and coordinate on important points for integration.

In order to complete a project charter, you will need to assess (1) what work units in your organization will need to be involved to ensure a successful project, and (2) whether the agencies involved have established procedures for approving key decisions and removing barriers. For example, in most states implementing a new automated system the IT Division needs to be involved in the daily operations of the project, but there may also be an IT oversight committee which must approve any new project — both to validate the benefits of the project and the availability of funding. A project charter would define the role of that oversight committee and the types of decisions and issues that should come before the committee for approval. If ACA readiness in your state will involve creating new staff positions, then the HR office will need to be involved, and their role would be defined in the charter. If the project involves an outreach campaign, then the public affairs office would need to be involved and their role would also be defined in the charter.

The series of questions below can be used to guide a conversation between a project sponsor and a project manager about the guiding principles of the charter. The project manager can then take the answers and flesh them out in a draft project charter using the Project Charter Template in Appendix 6.1.

Project Charter Purpose

Describe the purpose of the charter and the intended audience.

Key Questions	Key Decisions	Next Steps
What is the name of the project?		
Who is the managing agency or agencies?		
What is the purpose of the charter?		
Who is the intended audience for the charter? What group is being "chartered"?		
What is the charter intended to prevent or encourage?		

Project Objective

Identify the project objectives and how they relate to the overall goals for the organization(s) involved.

Key Questions	Key Decisions	Next Steps
What are you hoping to accomplish in this project?		
Who will benefit from completion of the project? How will they benefit?		
What are the strategic goals of the organization?		
How do the project objectives support these goals?		

Project Scope

Provide a high-level description of the assumptions related to scope and constraints. The project plan will include a more detailed description of the tasks associated with the project.

Key Questions	Key Decisions	Next Steps
What types of tasks are included in the scope of this project?		
What assumptions have been made about resources needed to support the scope?		
Are there any constraints on the scope, like time, budget, or human resources?		

Project Authority

It's important for project sponsors to have an appropriate level of authority over funding, staffing, and program decisions for project success. Describe who is sponsoring the project and the role they will play.

Key Questions	Key Decisions	Next Steps
Who is the project sponsor?		
What will their role be in overseeing the project?		
Who should approve and sign the project charter?		

Roles and Responsibilities

Describe the overall structure of the core project team and their roles and responsibilities in the project.

Roles	Project Responsibilities	Contact Information for Representatives
Project Manager		
Steering Committee		
Stakeholders		

Expected Outcomes and Success Criteria

Describe how the project team will know they are on the right track and what success criteria the steering committee will use to evaluate whether the project is on track. Including expected completion dates for the major milestones will help to track progress. A more detailed project timeline will be developed in your project plan.

Expected Outcome	Success Criteria	Expected Completion Date
Example: **1.** Implement new verification policies and processes to support Medicaid ACA rollout.	• Medicaid verification policies are in compliance with the new ACA rules. • Verification processes for Medicaid and SNAP have been streamlined. • Job aids for eligibility staff have been created.	• Medicaid policies adopted by January 2014. • Process improvements implemented by 2014. • Job aids ready for staff training in October 2013.
2.		
3.		
4.		

Exercise 6.2

Build a communication plan outline

This exercise is intended to be used by a project manager and a core project team who wish to have an outlined schedule of when, how, to whom, and how often communication can be expected by project stakeholders. The outline will aid different groups of people working on simultaneous changes to better communicate and coordinate on important points for integration. The following key questions will help you complete the communication plan template available in Appendix 6.2.

6.2 Discussion Questions on Developing a Communications Plan

Key Questions 1: *Who are the audiences or stakeholders that will be covered by the plan?*

Key Decisions:

Decisions Pending:

Key Questions 2: *What are the communication themes of this project? (Goals, objectives, and values) What are the key messages about those themes?*

Key Decisions:

Decisions Pending:

Key Questions 3: *What types of communications channels have been used in the past? Were they successful? What new channels might need to be created?*

Key Decisions:

Decisions Pending:

Key Questions 4: *When does communication need to begin? When will it end?*

Key Decisions:

Decisions Pending:

Key Questions 5: *Who will be responsible for updating and managing the communications plan?*

Key Decisions:

Decisions Pending:

Key Questions 6: *Who will help to implement the plan (resources)? What other types of resources will be needed?*

Key Decisions:

Decisions Pending:

Wrap-Up and Next Steps

Prepare for implementation of project management and communications plans

By now your core project team should have a common understanding of the importance of project management and communications and should have identified next steps that need to be taken to develop a project management and communications plan. We recommend the project manager complete the following next steps:

- Identify potential workgroup members that will be needed for subsequent sections of this toolkit;
- Identify additional resources needed to help with project management and communications;
- Begin developing basic communications collateral (e.g., a one-page project description to be shared with potential workgroup members; and
- Schedule project management and steering committee meetings.

Resources

The Roots of Agile Project Management, by Rick Freedman, Tech Republic, June 16, 2009, http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/tech-manager/the-roots-of-agile-project-management/1491.

Project Management Institute website for multiple articles and resources, http://www.pmi.org/.

15 Tips for Effective Communications Planning, by Putnam-Walkerly, Philanthropy411 Blog, May 24, 2011, http://philanthropy411.wordpress.com/2011/05/24/effective-comm-planning/.