# ModelsforChange
## Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice

## Knowledge Brief

# Harnessing the Capacity for Change

Organizational change requires more than good ideas. Organizations must also have the capacity and resources necessary to reach the desired goals. In this project, the researchers interviewed and surveyed organizations involved in Models for Change to assess their capacity to implement and sustain change. They sought to understand what resources contribute to having capacity, how capacity is used, and the ways in which different dimensions of capacity work together. From the study they identified five major dimensions of capacity—finances, human resources, technology, stakeholder commitment, and collaboration—and developed a model of how these dimensions interact, build on one another, and ultimately contribute to change. The more concrete capacities such as finances, human resources, and technology, the researchers found, can predict an organization's ability to collaborate with others to effect change.

## Background

Models for Change has set out to implement a new framework for the juvenile justice system—one that requires significant change in the system overall and, fundamentally, in the organizations that shape the system. The goal of change is to improve performance in the system and to sustain the improvements over time.

The changes envisioned for the juvenile justice system are defined and measured in many of the briefs in this series. But what about the process of change itself? How is it achieved? And what is necessary to sustain it?

Organizational change is difficult and complex. It requires identifying ideas that are feasible as well as beneficial to organizations and their clientele. But as many managers have learned, good ideas alone do not guarantee success. Organizations also must have the

capacity to carry out the tasks required to reach the desired goals. Capacity in turn requires resources; in the case of Models for Change, this means both intellectual and technological tools and skills, and the ability to mobilize and manage them in ways that will contribute to the performance of the organization.

In this project, a primary interest was to assess participating organizations' capacity to implement and sustain change. Consistent with the established literature on capacity, the researchers sought to understand what resources contributed to having capacity, how capacity was used, and the ways in which different dimensions of capacity worked together.

## The study

The study seeks to identify patterns that facilitate or inhibit change being implemented in the four Models for

Change core states. The findings in this brief reflect data collected via two methods:

**Interviews.** Participants were representatives from organizations participating in the Models for Change initiative. They ranged from managers at nonprofit service providers to state-level policy actors, with emphasis on the experiences of the local site leaders. The interviews addressed the context of the work of the organization and what factors the interviewees saw as facilitating or impeding that work. The interviews took place over two years in order to capture the evolution of insights and attitudes as reforms were implemented. A total of 56 interviews were conducted in two waves of data collection.

**Surveys**. The researchers sent an online survey to 184 managers in organizations working to implement the Models for Change initiative in each of the 22 core state local sites. (The response rate was 77.6 percent.) The survey content built on the interview findings by delving deeper into the issues of capacity that each organization faced. Fifty questions addressed specific dimensions of capacity, asking participants to rate each on a scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The researchers also had participants identify potential areas of growth for capacity, and asked some general organization-level questions.

### Findings on five dimensions of capacity

Five dimensions of capacity were most important for the participating organizations: collaboration, finances, human resources, stakeholder commitment, and technology. Figure 1 summarizes the capacities and their sub-dimensions.

**Collaboration.** Systems change requires that individuals and organizations work together in a coordinated way on policies, financing, and services aimed at specific changes. The partnerships and relationships they develop in doing this are arguably the most significant aspect of systems change initiatives. One interview participant said:

*"I think that's probably our biggest strength, and always has been in this community… [W]e've all been able to get to the table and discuss issues and try to find solutions to things collectively and collaboratively, as opposed to each… individual agency trying to run things and do things ourselves."*

Positive relationships among system partners are critical. However, true collaboration is difficult and comes with costs to the individual organizations. As one respondent explained:

*"[W]hat makes it work is everybody being at the meeting. But people don't have time. There are not time policies that support it and people are too busy. When [you're working with] billable hours, collaboration is not necessarily billable. Schedules don't allow them to have that kind of flexibility."*

Another said:

*"There's only going to be a certain percentage of people who actually roll up their sleeves and do the work and the rest of them [just] have the title. So I think there's a lot of people that initially buy in… but if they actually follow through and do much more than lend their name, I'm not sure."*

## Dimensions of Capacity

| Dimensions | Sub-dimensions |
|---|---|
| Collaboration | • External |
| Finances | • Funding |
| | • Management |
| Human resources | • Staffing levels |
| | • Recruitment and training |
| | • Staff development |
| | • Management |
| Stakeholder commitment | • Volunteers |
| | • Decision-makers |
| Technology | • MIS availability |
| | • MIS use |

figure 1

**Finances.** The ability to adequately fund the work of systems change is an important dimension of capacity.

Equally important is the ability to manage and mobilize financial resources. Both sub-dimensions of financial capacity are required to ensure that money will be available for such things as staff salaries, training, program costs, and data management systems—all essential to implementing change.

While being able to attract and secure adequate funding can be a challenge, particularly in the current economic environment, obtaining the skills to manage those funds and apply them to support program priorities can also be difficult. Those skills, however, are well worth mastering. One interviewee spoke of how they were able to use funds more effectively:

> "[W]e changed the [funding] model significantly, [and] it resulted in some cost savings which would actually be shifted to doing some other work in our world."

**Human resources.** The work associated with the Models for Change reform requires adequate staff capacity at both the organization and system level. This includes the proper number of staff; the ability to recruit and retain qualified staff with appropriate skills; training and continuing education (staff development); and appropriate review and management procedures.

Staffing must be adequate to continue the "normal" work of the organization in addition to the work involved in implementing change. As one participant put it:

> "The caseloads are very high. People are very frustrated because they feel like they can't do the basics of case management and now we're asking them to do this, too…."

A number of participants felt that the training of people in entry-level positions has been thin:

> "[W]e have a lot of people coming out of school and you would think that we have a lot of choices in terms of who we can hire. That's not necessarily true….It is

not easy to hire right now and it's not easy to find people that come in with any kind of background."

> "The other element that I would add is the skill level and the training of the people in those positions…. A lot of them are very young and [just] out of school, and as you know the schools don't necessarily train on some of the most significant evidence-based practices that we need to see."

**Stakeholder commitment.** An organization must be able to garner support—political, financial, good will, and so on—from key individuals or groups in its community. This includes both volunteer participation on boards, committees, and commissions, and the support of important political figures and decision-makers. Many of the interviewees noted that achieving long-term stakeholder commitment is a challenge. One, for example, discovered that when a single stakeholder left the organization, the commitment of others was lost:

> "What all of this illustrates is the difficulty of cross-system leadership…. [Y]ou can get buy-in on cross system stuff when you have very particular people there. But if you're not able to institutionalize it before there's a personnel change, you lose it. And I never in a million years would have thought that this could happen to us…. [O]ne of the things I learned is that institutionalizing something is a much longer and deeper process than what I thought it was."

Another addressed the importance of staying engaged with stakeholders (which in this case were schools):

> "It's relationship-driven, but it's a continual process. Never letting yourself get off the agenda. You know what we've done with the schools, what's really been important is really stay engaged with them all the time…. We never go for very long without having contact with them. And I think that's key….that you follow up on what you said you would do, so that people will see that there's an outcome to whatever energy they put into it."

**Technology.** A key goal of Models for Change is to increase the use of data to inform policy and practice at the organization and system level. Consistent with this, technological capacity—access to and effective use of technological equipment—was mentioned by participants as an important capacity for implementing change. Across all sites, three aspects of information technology capacity were cited: the ability to collect data, the challenges associated with aggregating data and using it to inform decision-making, and the difficulty in sharing and accessing data across systems. As one participant explained:

> *"I think we've come a long way [regarding] the importance of collecting data…. [W]e've made a lot of progress even to get to the point that we go 'oh, we may need better equipment, something that's not so antiquated, and we need to be able to run queries based on zip code or based on age or arrest date….' Whereas before I don't even know that everyone had an understanding of why that was important. They would make general anecdotal kind of stories of successes or failures, but there was not always the data behind that."*

Despite this new understanding of data as a tool for management and change, aggregating data in a usable form remains a challenge. As one participant stated:

> *"I think collecting data is one thing, but doing something with the data is quite a different story."*

Another interviewee said:

> *"We've got a lot of information available to us. We do struggle sometimes in getting it out and getting the information out in a meaningful way, and then understanding how to use it."*

Participants spoke of data sharing as a key element in their efforts at systems change. They described the challenges associated with sharing and accessing data across systems:

> *"These systems don't speak to each other so the information data doesn't flow across systems… It's going to be the next generation of data systems that then speak fluidly to each other, where the only barriers will be ones that are put in place deliberately."*

Other participants noted the lack of standardization across agencies in the types of data collected, which results in significant discrepancies when they try to share information.
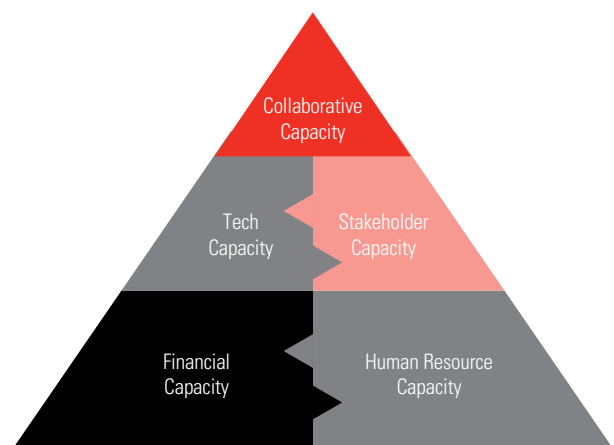


figure 2

### Interactions among capacity dimensions

The various elements of capacity work together in creating change. Understanding how to harness those synergies can be key to creating successful, sustainable change. The findings of this study suggest that the more concrete capacity elements cluster together and provide a foundation for the development of the more complex and less tangible capacities. Quantitative findings based on the survey data (not shown) suggest that financial and human resource capacities are the foundation on which other capacities can flourish; all other types of capacity rely on an organization's ability to effectively staff and fund its operations. While this may seem obvious, organizations often overlook these basic issues when they focus on what they see as the "heart" of the change.

At the same time, widespread systems change requires significant collaboration among agencies and is an

explicit goal of the Models for Change initiative. Therefore the researchers examined the extent to which other capacities contributed to the more complex and intangible collaborative capacity. They found that the more tangible capacity dimensions are highly and significantly correlated with collaborative capacity, and that in fact the level of the more concrete capacities can predict the level of collaborative capacity. In other words, the more fundamental capacity an organization has, the greater its ability to collaborate to effect change.

## Implications for practice

Implementing change is a complex process that requires organizations and systems to coordinate their limited resources. While many change initiatives are driven by a broad vision and specific goals, organizations must assess and build their internal capacities if they expect to reach those goals. Following are some implications of this study for future change initiatives:

• Capacities are hierarchically aligned; some organizational practices (such as financial management and human resource management) enable other capacities (such as implementing technological systems and garnering stakeholder commitment). Investment in the "building block" capacities will have long-term benefits.

• Some capacities are fairly objective (such as the number of staff an organization employs or the availability of computers to staff), while others are more intangible (such as the extent to which stakeholders are committed to and invested in your organization). While it may be easier to define and measure the more objective capacities and align them with change efforts, organizations must be forthright in defining and assessing the less tangible capacities as well.

• Collaboration is the most complex of all capacities— to achieve as well as to assess—in part because it relies on resources and dynamics outside an organization's control. However, an organization can maximize its collaborative capacity by developing the internal capacities (financial, human resource, and technological) that support collaboration.