Building Consumer Partnerships to Advance Health Equity:

A Guide to Embracing Power Sharing for Mutually Beneficial and Sustainable Change

By Deborah Riddick, JD, RN

deltacenterinitiative.org

the DELTA CENTER
for a thriving safety net

About The Delta Center

The Delta Center for a Thriving Safety Net is a national initiative launched in May of 2018 that brings together primary care associations and behavioral health state associations to advance policy and practice change. The ultimate goal of the Delta Center is to cultivate health policy and a care system that is more equitable and better meets the needs of individuals and families.

The Delta Center is led by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI) with the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) and the National Council for Mental Wellbeing (National Council) as strategic partners, and support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Support for this program was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of RWJF.

About the Author

This guide offers insights and actionable strategies from Deborah Riddick, JD, RN, Founder and Principal Consultant at Alternate Frame, LLC. Deborah served as a coach for state teams of primary care associations and behavioral health state associations participating in the Delta Center for a Thriving Safety Net's second cohort of the State Learning and Action Collaborative.

Deborah Riddick has spent her career expanding patients' access to health care and bringing interest-holders together to improve community health. She has extensive experience practicing as a direct-care registered nurse and as a nurse educator. She has also shaped public health policy as an analyst and director of health policy for state and local organizations including the Michigan State Legislature, Blue Cross Blue Shield, the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers, and the School-Community Health Alliance of Michigan.

Introduction

As leaders in shaping state policy and care delivery, state primary care associations (PCAs) and behavioral health state associations (BHSAs) are well-positioned to influence public policy and the reimagining of our current health system. **With this influence comes power and the opportunity to advance equity through power sharing.**

Historically, decision-making bodies have held power—acquired through resources, influence, and networks—that is vastly unequal to the members of the communities they serve. These entities often function as a proxy for the people who will be most affected by decisions, but are not 'at the table' when decisions are made.

In the context of social movements demanding equity and justice, many organizations have engaged interest-holders only in performative ways. For example, organizations create opportunities for interest-holders to participate in highly visible, but limited-impact capacities (i.e., "virtue signaling"). While any organizational movement toward inclusion is a step in the right direction, inclusion without ceding some decision-making power is a missed opportunity to internally practice the equitable principles that are central to this work.

Power sharing is a practice in which dominance and control by a few are relinquished to community members who share a common interest but have been historically excluded from holding power. Power sharing has emerged as a promising practice for organizations, such as PCAs and BHSAs, to better serve their communities.

Power sharing fosters partnerships that are more inclusive and that use collaborative problem-solving with the goal of advancing health equity. When approached with humility and a genuine respect for alternative paths forward, power sharing can transform organizational culture and deepen community impact. To be effective:

- Power sharing must be elevated as an organizational priority.

- Engagement must have a transparent and mutually beneficial purpose.

- Outreach must be authentic and intentional.

Power sharing principles, such as decentralization and shared decision-making, can be challenging to implement, but they are central to the work of health equity.

This guide describes benefits, obstacles and strategies for PCAs and BHSAs to integrate power sharing into their activities, with the fundamental goal of advancing health equity.

Bringing a Health Equity Lens

At its core, power sharing extends visibility and voice to historically excluded groups and perspectives. Using a health equity lens to evaluate your current processes will reveal opportunities to operationalize power sharing within your organization. Further, using a health equity lens will illuminate the impacts—intentional or unintentional—of policies and practices on the distribution of health outcomes. It enables a purposeful evaluation of systems, structures, policies, practices, and resource allocations to understand disparities. The ultimate goal is to identify and resolve barriers to health. With a health equity lens, your organization can take a deeper look at an issue (see text box for sample questions) and reimagine solutions that center the communities being served.

Applying a Health Equity Lens

- What is your goal and what went into developing it?

- What are the assumptions taking place?

- What does the data reflect, and how were the metrics developed?

- Who benefits from the status quo? Who is disadvantaged?

- What values underlie your decision-making process?

- Who is/isn't at the decision-making table?

- Do programs, policies, and services reflect client values, culture, and preferences?

- What revisions are needed and what can be done differently to accommodate client values, culture, and preferences?

- Who will implement the identified remedies, and how will they do it?

- Are evaluation and revision built into an iterative cycle?

- Is there an ongoing community engagement strategy to promote trust and partnership?

- Has a commitment to sustainability and resources been firmly established? By whom? For how long?

Finding Your Why

Meaningful power sharing must begin with your WHY. Getting real about your motivation to pursue it frames its importance and probability for success. This critical step will determine your organization's readiness, uncover its strengths and weaknesses, and guide subsequent preparation, execution, and cultivation activities.

Power sharing strengthens communities by recognizing the interconnectedness of lives and experiences across the healthcare ecosystem. Too often, organizational decision makers exert their influence over communities but have limited firsthand understanding of the people who are impacted by their decisions. Community members can offer valuable knowledge about how organizational decisions may play out within their cultural context. Engaging with community members can reduce misunderstanding and ensure that organizational decisions are holistic and well-informed. Within this collaborative space, organizational members can innovate alongside community members to co-design responsive solutions.

> **The power to question is the basis of all human progress.**
>
> **- Indira Ghandi**

Acknowledging and Overcoming Challenges

If power sharing can produce better outcomes for communities, why aren't organizations including community members in more decision-making spaces? The predominant reason is power—the ability to maintain the comfort of a dominant position.

Maintaining power enables organizations to pursue their interests and priorities without centering the potentially conflicting interests of community members. It's expeditious, familiar, and does not require external compromise or the engagement of unknown and potentially confrontational community interest-holders. Organizations committed to sharing power will need to 'get comfortable with being uncomfortable' in order to engage with community members who may express skepticism and, often, resistance for legitimate reasons.

Another challenge that many organizations cite is the difficulty of engaging interest-holders at the community level, and assert that other organizations such as local nonprofits do such work better. While local nonprofits have strengths in engaging with their communities, PCAs and BHSAs still have an opportunity to develop the necessary skills to strengthen relationships instead of relying on entities that speak on behalf of communities.

Some PCAs and BHSAs also assert that their provider members are the primary interest-holders, rather than the individuals who receive services. This reasoning allows associations to defend the practice of minimally engaging them. However, the interests of associations and providers are directly linked with those of community members, which means the benefits of power sharing would be mutual.
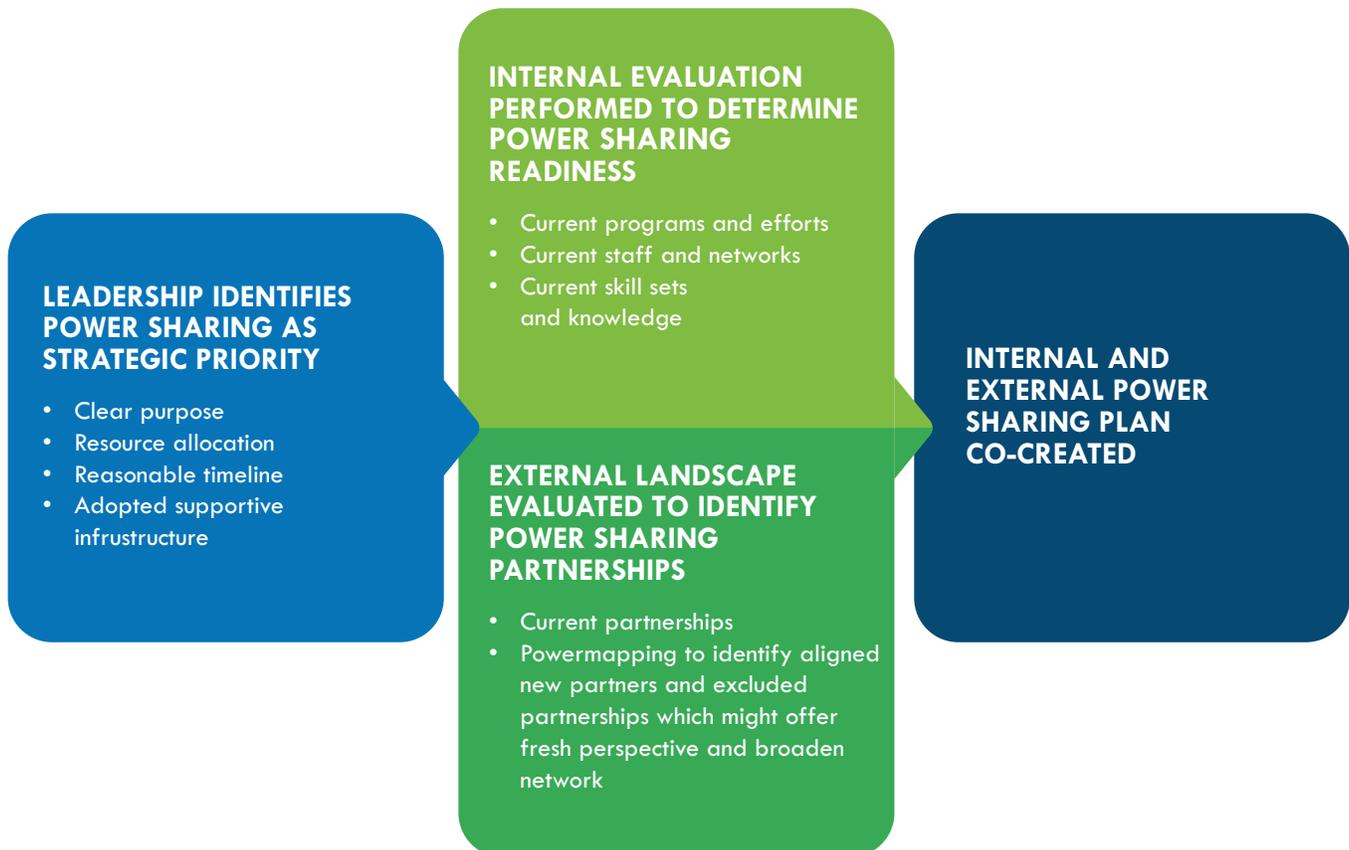
In addition, power sharing can be mutually beneficial for organizations and communities. For associations, collaborating with community interest-holders can produce solutions that are rooted in the experience of community members and strengthen advocacy through real-world examples of how patients are impacted by policy. For community interest-holders, collaborating with associations on advocacy efforts results in a better understanding of policy development and creates opportunities to shape policy. Further, power sharing efforts in themselves can be healing for constituents and communities. Sharing power can foster a sense of autonomy and self-determination that addresses historical wrongs whereby community voices were left out of consequential decision-making spaces.

Associations and providers who share power with community members can build collective capacity to influence public policy.

Preparing for the Transition

Once your organization identifies a clear "why" and considers the benefits and challenges of power sharing, the internal work can begin. Figure 1 below offers internal considerations that should be addressed to improve external power sharing efforts.

Figure 1. Considerations to Improve External Power Sharing

LEADERSHIP IDENTIFIES POWER SHARING AS STRATEGIC PRIORITY

- Clear purpose
- Resource allocation
- Reasonable timeline
- Adopted supportive infrustructure

INTERNAL EVALUATION PERFORMED TO DETERMINE POWER SHARING READINESS

- Current programs and efforts
- Current staff and networks
- Current skill sets and knowledge

EXTERNAL LANDSCAPE EVALUATED TO IDENTIFY POWER SHARING PARTNERSHIPS

- Current partnerships
- Powermapping to identify aligned new partners and excluded partnerships which might offer fresh perspective and broaden network

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL POWER SHARING PLAN CO-CREATED

Organizational decision-makers at the highest level must prioritize the transformation in the following ways:

- Demonstrate leadership buy-in through the prioritization of power sharing as a strategic priority (e.g., in a strategic plan or other organizational documents).

- Socialize the WHY of power sharing within your organization, along with how everyone contributes to the advancement of the priority.

- Avoid rushing the process or using a protracted process to stall adoption.

Use an equity lens when engaging organizational leaders to identify limiting

past practices and collaboratively frame the new direction.

Once your organization has committed to power sharing as a priority, other steps to actualize it include: engaging internal team members, engaging external partners, and defining the external environment through power mapping.

Engaging Internal Team Members

Your organization will need to create internal safe spaces across and within departments to get input from those closest to interest-holders in the community. Frequently, those working closest to community members share lived experience, past or present, and thus offer invaluable insights. Engaging such individuals provides a more accurate lens with which to analyze engagement efforts and develop a more effective plan of action for sharing power. Be mindful, however, that this internal engagement is not extractive. Staff engagement should be thoughtfully planned and conducted in a way that embraces their external power and untapped wisdom. For example, hold town halls where staff can ask questions of their leadership; collect anonymous feedback through a survey; hold open office hours; provide internal networking opportunities; and allow staff to volunteer in their communities on company time.

Engaging External Partners

Relationships with community partners provide another way to identify community perceptions, important power brokers, and potential paths forward. These relationships are a treasure chest of specialized knowledge. Relationship development takes time, yet is an irreplaceable activity that must be supported through ongoing commitment of human and financial resources.

Power sharing efforts should include community experts. As with internal staff engagement, engagement with community partners must be authentic and not extractive. The inherent power differential should be discussed candidly, then rebalanced within the partnership to demonstrate trust and equitable collaboration. The way in which engagement is initiated and maintained is critical to the process. To demonstrate an authentic partnership, leaders should:

- Co-design a unifying definition of power sharing to establish parameters and support expectations.

- Establish the scope of the collaboration to anchor your organization and community partners on collective, actionable goals and to ground accountability.

- Show respect for community leaders by picking a convenient meeting time and place, leaving sufficient space in a first meeting to surface past experiences, and clearly understanding community goals.

- Provide opportunities for community partners to acquire skills and experiences that strengthen their capacity and integrate collective decision making.

Power Mapping

To better understand the external landscape and potential interest-holders from the community, it is helpful to conduct a power mapping exercise alongside staff and external partners. A power map is a visual representation of the actual or perceived amount of influence an individual or group can exert to direct an outcome. A power map may depict interest-holders' level of influence and proximity to decision makers, or their level of influence and degree of support for or against an initiative. Power mapping can also identify significant players within the community that best represent their interests and can influence trust adoption. These relationships are not always visible to outsiders but are typically well known among community advocates. Mapping these entities, their relative access to power, and how their positionality might be leveraged to advocate for change, ensures transparency and can support advocacy efforts.

The problem of power is how to achieve its responsible use rather than its irresponsible and indulgent use; of how to get men of power to live for the public rather than off the public.

- John F. Kennedy

Figure 2 presents a sample power map. This is a visual representation of the entities—or the individuals, organizations, and industries—that influence policies. These entities may operate inside of formal processes (e.g., through administrative and legislative structures) or outside of formal processes (e.g., reflecting community organizing and civic engagement). The y-axis (Level of Influence) represents a continuum of high to low influence. The x-axis (Internal–External) demonstrates the position from which each entity is working to create change, e.g., from inside or outside the system. In this figure, when considering where the power to change policy lies, the Governor has the highest level of influence and is working inside the policy system; constituents have varying levels of influence, but are working to change policy from outside the system. The overlap between entities represents the fluid and contextual nature of power. The level of influence of hospitals, for example, varies by a number of contextual factors including: size, revenue, geography, and relationships; the positionality of each entity is not absolute.

Figure 2. Sample Power Map Illustrating an Entity's Power to Change Policy
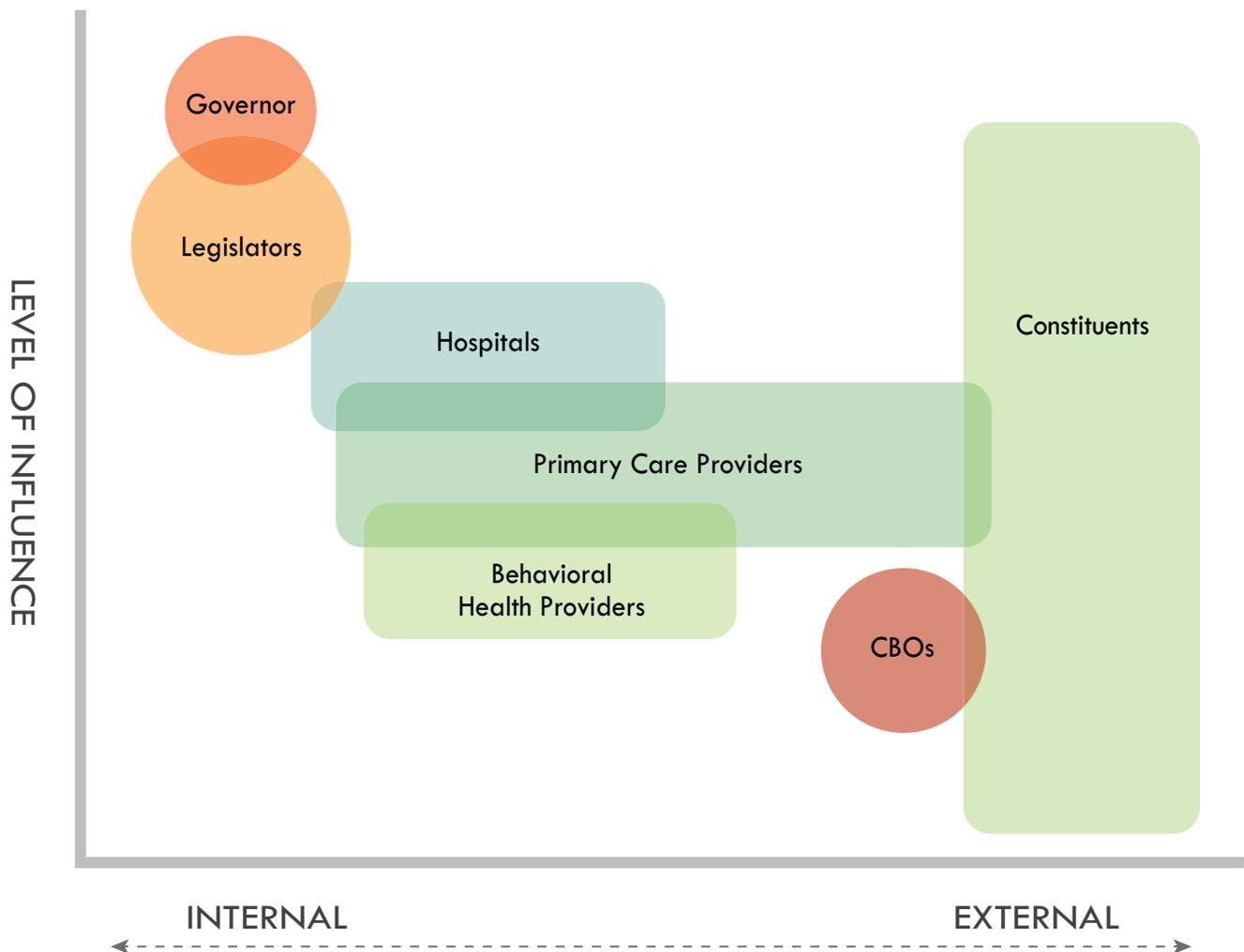
Cultivating and Executing a Plan

With this preparation as a foundation, the next step is to incorporate power sharing into your organization's strategic plan. The strategic plan should be a living document that incorporates insights from your community partnerships and reflects a willingness to evolve. Once updated, the plan should:

- Establish SMART goals with performance metrics and accountability for external work. [SMART stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound].

- Identify specific low-hanging opportunities, as well as stretch goals, to deepen connectedness.

- Reflect the breadth of internal expertise to facilitate collaborative ownership.

Include partner input on policy priorities and systems improvements, remembering that those impacted by the policies and systems understand first-hand the challenges they present to the community—the ultimate end user.

The following strategies will help you adapt your organization's strategic plan to align with your co-created power sharing goals and reflect the voice of those whose lives are ultimately affected by your organization's activities.

1. Engage Your Partners

Start by engaging your partners in an honest discussion about their power sharing experiences with your organization. The purpose of the discussion is to identify whether your current partners believe that equitable power sharing exists. This should be a face-to-face meeting to reinforce trust and to provide experiential context. Use a neutral facilitator to advance thoughtful dialogue. Information obtained should be used to update your strategic plan. Topics may include the parameters and dynamics of the partnership; the scope of partner influence and decision making; and the administrative, educational, and technical support required to enable fully activated participation.

2. Continuously Gather Input

Share back the updated plan with your partners for reflection. Gather further input to address gaps and establish mutual benefit. Once the plan has been adopted, it is important to prioritize the ongoing engagement process and bidirectional feedback. Organizational leadership and partners should receive milestone updates and key performance indicators driving the work.

3. Trust Your Partners

Remain open to doing things differently; trusting lived experience as equal to institutional and technical knowledge in decision-making; and power sharing as an essential process to most fully achieve health equity.

Power sharing is not an easy transition from the status quo—it is hard. PCAs and BHSAs are amazing at doing the hard work. Through power sharing, you and your partners will bring a collective voice that advances shared goals and, ultimately, improves the health of your community.

> **When a group of people get together, it's collective power. You know that you're doing it for the good.**
>
> **- Dolores Huerta**

For additional tips for building consumer partnership from Deborah Riddick, see "Building Consumer Partnerships to Advance Racial Equity: Q & A with Deborah Riddick" and "Building Consumer Partnerships to Advance Racial Equity: Recommendations for State Associations."

Supplemental Reading

Heller, J. C., Little, O. M., Faust, V., Tran, P., Givens, M. L., Ayers, J., & Farhang, L. (2023). Theory in Action: Public Health and Community Power Building for Health Equity. Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, 29(1), 33–38. https://doi.org/10.1097/phh.0000000000001681

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2021). Community Power in Population Health Improvement: Proceedings of a Workshop. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. https://doi.org/10.17226/26306

Chen, A. T., Smith, D. O., Ojikutu, B. O., & Auerbach, J. (2024). The Community As A Full Partner: A New Model For Public Health. Health Affairs, 43(6), 805–812. https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2024.00033

Risley, K. Y., Welter, C. R., Castillo, G., & Castrucci, B. C. (2021). Leading systems change in public health: A field guide for practitioners. Springer Publishing Company, LLC. https://www.springerpub.com/leading-systems-change-in-public-health-9780826145086.html?srsltid=AfmBOopykW_NmpZv74_f4vE12LE5i8UqIVncSaIlpPYgKTK8fzEQpuFV

Farrow, F., & Barsoum, G. (2020). An Ecosystem to Build Power and Advance Health and Racial Equity. Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://cssp.org/resource/an-ecosystem-to-build-power-and-advance-health-and-racial-equity/

Grant, A., Hebert-Beirne, J., Lofton, S., Floyd, B., Stiehl, E., & Kim, S. (2023). Actualising power sharing in community-led initiatives: Insights from community-based organisation leaders in Chicago, USA. The International Journal of Health Planning and Management, 38(6), 1757–1771. https://doi.org/10.1002/hpm.3702

Farhang, L., & Gaydos, M. (2021). Shifting and Sharing Power: Public Health's Charge in Building Community Power. NACCHO Exchange, 20(1). https://www.healthinpartnership.org/resources/shifting-and-sharing-power-public-healths-charge-in-building-community-power

Everette, T. D., Sathasivam, D., & Siegel, K. (2023). Transformational Community Engagement to Advance Health Equity. State Health & Value Strategies. https://www.shvs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/SHVS_Transformational-Community-Engagement-to-Advance-Health-Equity.pdf

Halthon, M., & Hillman, I. (2023). The Risks and Rewards of Sharing Power With Your Community. The Chronicle of Philanthropy. https://www.philanthropy.com/opinion/the-risks-and-rewards-of-sharing-power-with-your-community/

Vaidya, A., Poo, A., & Brown, L. (2022). Why Community Power Is Fundamental to Advancing Racial and Health Equity. National Academy of Medicine Perspectives. https://doi.org/10.31478/202206b