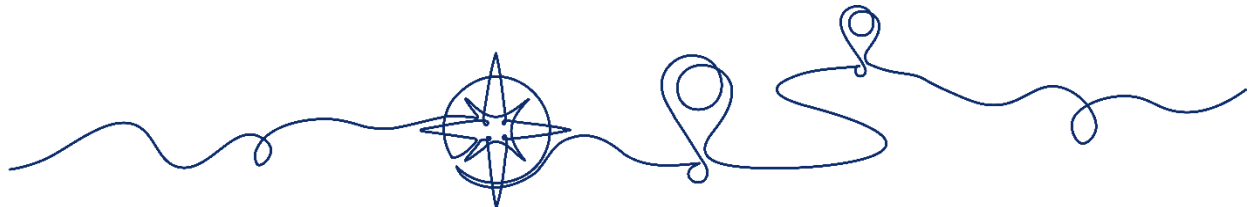# Stories of Change:
How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region

A Reflection & Discussion Guide for Collaborative Systems Change Practitioners

This reflection and discussion guide accompanies the publication *Stories of Change: How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region,* written by Jessica Conrad with Rotary Charities of Traverse City. This version has been designed for practitioners who are actively involved in a collaborative systems change initiative. It is meant to be valuable both as an individual reflection tool and/or as a guide for group discussion.

Intro & Using a Systems Change Approach (pp. 1 – 12)

- What social or ecological problem(s) does your initiative address? Would you describe that problem as *complex* (p. 5)? If so, what makes it complex?
- Stories of Change defines a systems change approach, in part, as one that primarily addresses the causes rather than the consequences of complex problems. Would you say the work of your initiative primarily addresses the consequences or causes of the problem? In what ways?
    - What is standing in the way of a greater focus on the problem's *causes*?
- Stories of Change presents the work of systems change in four phases (pp. 9-11). How do these phases align with your initiative's approach? Where do they differ?

Rotary Charities of Traverse City: From Charity to Changemaker (pp. 13 – 24)

- This story shows the importance of learning in community to bring about transformational change. Where within your initiative are you learning alongside your partners and/or funders? Where might there be an opportunity for greater shared learning among all stakeholders?
- Within your initiative, what would it mean for you and your partners to work together differently (pp. 19-20)? What barriers to a different way of working exist? How might you overcome them?
- Stories of Change surfaces the insight that the principles and work of shifting complex community problems also applies to us as individuals and organizations (p. 16). How might you be both advancing and/or inhibiting change within the system at stake?

- How might your funding or funders be both advancing and/or inhibiting your initiative's ability to advance change?

A Story of Change: Ending Youth Homelessness in Northwest Michigan (pp. 25 – 36)

- The problem of youth homelessness is challenging to quantify. Why do you think it's important to create accurate baselines, even when they are so hard to establish for complex problems?
  - Does your initiative have an adequate understanding of the current state of your problem? (e.g., Who or what experiences it? Who or what experiences it most severely? (p. 10)) How has this baseline been helpful?
  - If not, what additional information do you need? What might be a next step in collecting it?
- This initiative benefitted from several smaller grants that helped them build capacity and eventually leverage additional larger grants for the work. What additional capacity might increase your initiative's ability to advance the work?
- Tina Allen reflects, "For us, there is a significant difference between the homeless response system and the 'systems work' we were embarking on" (p. 29). How does your initiative draw a boundary around your system?
  - How might expanding or contracting this boundary impact the work?
- This story shows that centering the voices of people with lived experience in a change effort is about more than careful listening. What stands out to you about the way in which NWCEH uplifted the voices of youth/young adults with lived experience and shifted power into their hands?

A Story of Change: Securing Healthy Food Access in Northwest Michigan (pp. 37 – 52)

- Early on, the Healthy Food Access Partnership developed a systems map using tools offered through Acumen Academy's free Systems Practice course. More recently, the Partnership began experimenting with Ripple Effects Mapping, a nontraditional participatory evaluation tool. To what extent does your initiative experiment with different tools to support systems thinking? Where might there be an opportunity (or need) for greater experimentation?
- A lack of clear roles and responsibilities within the Healthy Food Access Partnership quickly became a barrier to collaboration. Where are roles and responsibilities clear within your initiative? Where might there be a need for improvement?
- The Healthy Food Access Partnership advanced their change effort by swiftly responding to a dramatic change in context brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. What mindsets and capacities do you think enabled their response, ongoing adaptation, and deepening partnership over time?
  - What lesson might this example hold for your initiative?

A Story of Change: Improving Health and Health Equity in Northern Michigan (pp. 53 – 67)

- The CHIR's tagline reads "Aligning systems. Transforming lives." If you created a tagline for your initiative, what might it be?
  - There seems to be an inherent tension, or polarity, in systems change work between the reality of its complexity and the need to communicate it simply.

Which side of this tension does your initiative currently favor? How might you better balance this tension in your work?

- During an in-depth systems change training, CHIR partners learned that how they work together across the system is just as important as what they work on (pp. 57 - 58). What barriers to cross-sector collaboration do you see within your initiative? What changes might be needed to overcome them?
- The Northwest CHIR Learning Community uses community agreements to create a safe, neutral setting for partners (p. 62). Does your initiative follow any explicit or implicit community agreements or norms? How do you hold each other accountable?
  - Could any of the barriers to cross-sector collaboration you highlighted above be addressed by creating a new community agreement?
- The CHIR has organized itself differently for different functions or purposes. They found their place-based action team format was an ideal structure when COVID-19 hit. It allowed them to quickly troubleshoot new issues and support each other. When needs shifted more recently, so did their structure (pp. 60 - 61). How is your current structure "fit to purpose?" How is it not?
  - What might need to shift in order for your initiative to be more nimble or fit to purpose? (e.g., Policies, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics, mental models)

Insights from Systems Change in Action (pp. 68 - 71)

- **Systems change through trusting relationships and clear roles.** When have you been a part of a trusting space? What value did that space bring to you? Is there anything that could have been different about it that would've increased its value?
  - What did/do you contribute to that space? Is there something more you might offer?
- **Systems change when we see them as completely as possible.** How do you currently gather multiple diverse perspectives to inform your initiative's goals, strategy, and collaborative action? What different practices might you like to begin experimenting with?
- **Systems change when we make equitable power shifts.** Has your initiative made a commitment to equity? How are you acting on it? What shifts within the system, if any, are you noticing as a result? What else might you do to embed equity more deeply into your collaborative work?
- **Systems change when learning becomes strategy.** How is "learning as strategy" different from how you have viewed learning in the past? What benefits might this framing have?
- **Systems change—bring patience.** How are you tending to your wellbeing during the long game of systems change?

Now that you've come to the end of the discussion guide, we invite you to review your reflections. What is one question or idea that is completely within your power that you want to commit to move from insight to action?

Did this guide spark any new insights or action? Do you have a question to add or other feedback? We'd love to hear from you! We're eager to connect with and learn from others who are engaged in, or interested in, systems change strategies. Please reach out to Freya Bradford, Rotary Charities Director of Systems Change & Learning: fbradfrod@rotarycharities.org, or on LinkedIn.