

Site Feedback on Early Technical Assistance

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The following is a summary of feedback from key informants in the Aligning Forces for Quality sites regarding the Foundation-sponsored technical assistance they received during the initial years of the project. The information contained in this report comes from responses to broad, open-ended questions about technical assistance that were asked in over 300 interviews conducted by the evaluation team with alliance directors, key staff and other key contacts at the sites from July 2006 through October 2008 (for more detail, please see the methods section at the end of this document). This report focuses on the themes and patterns that have emerged regarding early technical assistance and is not intended to provide feedback on specific technical assistance providers.

The actual words used by the respondents to describe their experiences with technical assistance have been included as often as possible. In order to protect the confidentiality of the respondents, identifying details have been removed from quotations, as needed. Additionally, in order to further protect confidentiality, the feedback from individual respondents is attributed collectively to the respondent’s site.

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Introduction

The 14 Aligning Forces for Quality sites reported that they found value in the technical assistance that they received in the initial years of the Aligning Forces program. All 14 sites expressed enthusiasm for multiple aspects of the technical assistance they received and nearly every site commented on the volume of technical assistance that was provided to them: **“The technical assistance is abundant beyond anything I might have imagined prior to coming into the program. I would say it comes at you in waves so it’s sometimes hard to keep up with it or digest it.”**

Aligning Forces for Quality Evaluation Team

This report was prepared by the Aligning Forces for Quality Evaluation Team at Penn State University's Center for Health Care and Policy Research which is studying the AF4Q initiative to gain insights about community-based reform that can guide health care practice and policy. For more information, visit

<http://www.hhdev.psu.edu/CHCPR/alignforce/>

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Introduction (continued)

Nearly all reported that much of what they received in the initial years was framed very broadly and geared toward the entire collection of sites. For most, this meant that they had to invest a very large amount of time mining the technical assistance in order to find the “**gems**” or “**nuggets**” that really helped them. While several sites offered criticism about the repetition of information in the early technical assistance they received, most understood that to be an inevitability of launching a program of large scope across multiple sites. As one site explained: **“The technical assistance was somewhat preordained . . . and that was probably necessary to create a baseline for all of the communities . . . [since] they’re at different places.”**

As expressed by one site, above, it was a near-universal pattern across sites that they were overwhelmed by the volume of information that was directed toward them at the start of the program: **“I think that initially it kind of felt like we were drinking out of a fire hose and there was a sense of – we are early in the initiative and just within our community trying to get our heads around what this means”**

Additionally, every site also commented on the fast pace of the program: **“We all had to define a conceptual model really in our proposals. And because of the tight time frame, have to work pretty rapidly in implementing it.”**

The feedback of the sites on particular areas and aspects of technical assistance follows.

Performance Measurement/Public Reporting

The feedback from sites regarding performance measurement and public reporting varied considerably; a few sites, such as this one, expressed satisfaction with what they received in these areas: **“I think the webinars have provided some very, very great experts and diving deeply into the details of some of the things we’ll be encountering in the future.”**

Performance Measurement/Public Reporting (continued)

Other sites voiced that they needed little support in these areas, while the majority of sites expressed concerns that what they received did not align well with their needs in terms of content or timing. One site expressed it succinctly by saying: **“I guess I would frankly have to say that the technical assistance on performance measurement has been a little lacking, and not very well organized.”**

One site emphasized the impact of being in the program by saying that: **“When you’re just a small organization calling NCQA you have trouble getting through the system. We would struggle [pre-AF4Q] to get involvement from NCQA. [Now] they’re our partners, our buddies.”**

Although the feedback on technical assistance in performance measurement and public reporting varied, two clear themes did emerge. The first relates to the excitement of sites about the following: **“The best technical assistance we had [in PR] was sort of an ‘ah ha!’ moment that . . . was shared with a lot of other people at Amelia Island, which was the Puget Sound report calling itself a ‘Community Check-Up.’”**

The second consistent theme related to the sites’ desire for targeted, rather than general, assistance in these areas: **“We’re starting to be clearer on where we’re going to need it [PM/PR technical assistance] and we’re hopeful that the funding will allow that level of involvement . . . hearing another talk by a company isn’t going to solve our problem, but having somebody sit through and plan and think with us . . . [and] being able to call them and ask them questions would be very useful . . . that’s the level of TA that we really need.”**

Additionally, a few sites expressed hope that they will be able to get the targeted help they need through the mini grants or from direct assistance from other national leaders in these areas. Some expressed frustration with the legal issues related to public reporting and were eager for technical assistance to expand to include help on those problems.

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Consumer Engagement

Similar to the feedback in Performance Measurement and Public Reporting, a mixture of themes emerged from sites' comments about the assistance they received in Consumer Engagement. Sites, generally, expressed that they found some of what they needed, but that: **"There is that sense that it's served up in a pre-arranged format. And it would, it might be more helpful if we could have more freedom to negotiate what the product would look like."**

Other sites said that they were pleasantly surprised by the amount of adaptation to their needs that did come out of the technical assistance in this area. As one site expressed: **"I find it to be very valuable. And actually, in recent meetings, I think they've really solidified on a good program. I think originally we were a little concerned that it was a lot of sort of, you know, having national speakers sort of talk broadly about consumer engagement."**

Amidst their critique of specific aspects of the technical assistance they received in this area, most of the sites communicated something similar to the following comment made by one of the sites: **"I think they've provided a lot of rich, very rich, great research and insight into what consumers think about this work and the words and buzz words to avoid and to use in trying to communicate with them."**

A few sites said that the best help they received in Consumer Engagement came from the resources that exist in their local area while others spoke to the importance of, **"hear[ing] how other Aligning Forces markets are engaging the public and around what aspect."**

In addition to discussing the content of the assistance they received, every site expressed some concern about one or more of the required activities in Consumer Engagement. As explained by one site: **"We're happy to do the work the Foundation requires in terms of, you know, work plans and stakeholder analysis and frameworks and stuff, but you know, [it's] a little bit of a disconnect from what we're actually getting done."**

Other sites discussed the helpfulness of the processes that they were required to undergo, but expressed concerns similar to the following: **"We had a month and a half to do a communication plan. And I really wish that we had had a little bit more of an opportunity to take that through a structured approach."** Another site explained that: **"We had to go through a lot of process work to put all the stuff that we had already decided to do in a different format."**

One site expressed the thought that: **"It was a little odd to put the communications plan in the consumer engagement workgroup . . . you wouldn't want necessarily your Consumer Engagement people to be the main ones who were there . . . I don't know why they're putting it . . . in that group, because it's much broader than that."**

Related to this point, one site expressed: **"The need to be multi-lingual . . . across different sectors. What you say to the faith group is different from what you say to the media, is different than what you say to the employer, is different from what you say to specific cultural organizations."**

Quality Improvement

The feedback that sites provided regarding the technical assistance they received in Quality Improvement is summarized well in the following statement made by one of the sites: **“We probably haven’t had as much on that TA [QI] as we have in some of the other areas.”** A few sites expressed that the early assistance provided to help them see the national picture was helpful, and several spoke positively about the restructuring of technical assistance in this area: **“I think that we have received kind of more specific technical assistance from them once we got to a one on one call format.”**

One site said that, **“I think that [QI] has been the hardest area to get our hands around – what can we take on in QI with our limited resources and really make an impact – particularly a measurable impact.”** Their statement resonated with the comments of many other sites. Some stated that they are excited for the work that is being planned by George Washington University in this area.

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Alliance Networking

When asked about technical assistance, nearly every site discussed the importance of relationship-building and networking with other sites: **“Everyone’s trying to figure out how to do all this, pretty much at the same time. So that’s very helpful to go back and forth on these issues.”** Several sites communicated something similar to this site’s notion that: **“Conversations [with other sites] have been more fruitful than any formal technical assistance.”** Many sites offered detail about the ways in which they were connecting to other sites and the ways in which other sites were seeking their help. Several sites mentioned the particular importance of the national meetings to helping sites share information and to build relationships.

Alliance Networking (continued)

Many of the sites expressed appreciation for the opportunities that the Foundation and its partners create for site-to-site contact: **“One of the real pluses . . . for us being part of this initiative is [that] there’s been no shortage of meetings and opportunities to actually interact with our counterparts around the country.”**

Other sites asked for more facilitated opportunities for interaction: **“I would put out a pitch for the structure of Aligning Forces to maybe do a little bit more to try to facilitate that networking and those conversations beyond just what we’re able to do one at a time.”** One site offered suggestions for areas where networking between sites could be facilitated in additional ways: **“I think that the structure and some of the websites, you know, [and] the webinars lend themselves a little less to that [networking] . . . I [also] wish there were . . . more formal process to . . . have some of these discussions [at meetings] maybe where there’s an open microphone discussion.”**

There were a handful of sites that saw the responsibility of site to site networking as being their own: **“My radar is always open trying to find out who’s [which sites] doing what well and then I’ll follow-up with them.”**

“Leading” Sites

It is evident from the feedback that some sites are recognized by others as being leaders or the **“go to”** site on particular issues. A few of these **“leading sites”** reported that they felt that their primary role in technical assistance has been to

bring things to the table for the benefit of others. Each described being willing to invest time in sharing lessons-learned and models with other communities, but also expressed some frustration in that they were not getting the technical assistance that they need to help them move forward in their own communities.

Some of these leading sites expressed concerns such as: **“The fact that we are a little further along, it [more basic technical assistance] tends to . . . take us backwards.”** Others, however, feel differently: **“It validates the struggles that we have mostly are the same struggles that are recognized by national experts. So it’s helpful in that sense that we know that we’re not alone. And it’s helpful to kind of reaffirm that we’ve identified what some of the issues are that we wrestle with.”**

The Business Case

As referenced earlier, several sites have been eagerly awaiting the start of technical assistance on legal issues. Additionally, many sites expressed that the need for technical assistance to help them learn **“how to demonstrate the value of the work that we do and how to make the business case [to partners in the community] continues to be a burning need.”**

Another site further explained that: **“It’s still very difficult to demonstrate to folks at the table in these challenging times what the value is of this long-term work. Some of them that even acknowledge that this is really valuable for the long-term just have such tremendous pressures on them to demonstrate something in the short-term**

The Business Case (continued)

. . . There's very little specifically to give them that helps them communicate with management what kinds of value we are bringing to them and why they need to stay involved even if it's not giving them the concrete or short-term dollars that they wish they could find."

Several sites expressed similar notions about the importance of the business case: "That's where the rubber hits the road; if you can't get those [commitments], the rest of it is going to fall apart."

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The Administration of Technical Assistance

As mentioned in the introduction, many sites were simply overwhelmed with the requirements of the program and were unable to make the most of what was being offered to them. As one site explained: "Basically, we just try to stay one step ahead of what we're being asked to do . . . we're constantly dealing with priorities with no time left over for program implementation." Often sites attributed the challenges they faced in making the most of the early technical assistance as being related to the limited amount of time they had to build capacity and get organized. One site explained that: "We've been buried in help. We've had so much help I feel like we can't take advantage of all of it. But this is not a complaint." Another said: "And I think where part of the struggle has been on that part is you know, having the right people on our end on the webinar." Additionally, some sites shared feedback about the way that technical assistance was coordinated. One opined that: "No-one even asked, 'Are these times suitable or convenient?' It's just announced and most of them on very short notice."

In conclusion, while sites' comments and feedback regarding technical assistance vary, overall they see it as being integral to the Aligning Forces for Quality program. Several sites stated that they have noticed improvement in terms of both the content and administration of technical assistance as the program matures. The key message about administration of technical assistance that sites express is that they like being able to influence what is coming at them. In the words of one site: "There is now more active solicitation for targeted technical assistance, which I think is really good. So, I'm encouraged by that and just want to make sure that you and others know how much we appreciate being asked"

Methods

The data used in this report were collected in 275 on-site interviews with participants in the 14 Aligning Forces for Quality communities in 2006 and 2007, and in three rounds of follow-up phone interviews conducted with Alliance Directors and Aligning Forces Project Directors in 2007 and 2008. This body of data, which included over 5,500 pages of transcripts at the end of 2008, is systematically coded and serves as the basis for many of the products, papers and reports generated by the Evaluation Team. The Evaluation Team continues to track, monitor and learn about the work of the sites and the impact of technical assistance through surveys, phone and on-site interviews, and the tracking and analysis of documents generated by the sites and project partners.