Collaboration across sectors: Bridging gaps in substance use and mental health treatment for stronger communities

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Effectively addressing community safety and well-being (CSWB) demands a collaborative approach across health, education, human services, and criminal justice sectors (Van Dijk et al., 2019). In recent years, growing recognition of the interconnected nature of these sectors – particularly concerning substance use and mental health – has catalyzed interest in coordinated strategies (Bartkowiak-Theron, 2024; Ricciardelli, 2025). This editorial reflects on my work in implementation science, particularly focusing on substance use disorders (SUDs) and mental health challenges, and explores how multi-sector collaboration can improve outcomes while incorporating perspectives from law enforcement and community safety professionals (Coetzer-Liversage et al., 2024a, 2024b; Hogue et al., 2024; Satcher et al., 2024).

THE ROLE OF IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE IN COMMUNITY SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

Implementation science promotes the integration of evidence-based practices (EBPs) into routine use, aiming to enhance the quality and effectiveness of health services (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020). Beyond clinical effectiveness, this field emphasizes the contextual and systemic barriers that impact implementation. Key to this approach is identifying obstacles at individual, organizational, and structural levels – and developing strategies to overcome them (Bauer et al., 2015).

Implementation science is especially relevant within the CSWB framework, as it supports the translation of research into practical community interventions. CSWB strategies focus on mental and physical health, food security, housing, and financial stability. In this context, law enforcement and community safety professionals play critical roles in integrating evidence-based approaches into public safety practices (Carroll et al., 2018; Van Dijk et al., 2019). This reinforces the importance of multi-sector collaboration to address complex social issues – such as SUDs and mental health – through coordinated, harm-reducing strategies (Nilson, 2018).

Olswang and Goldstein (2017) underscore the essential role of collaboration in implementation science, emphasizing

that partnerships among researchers, practitioners, administrators, and clients increase the likelihood of research being translated into meaningful EBP. Such collaborative efforts help bridge the research-to-practice gap by balancing scientific rigour with contextual relevance, ensuring interventions maintain both internal and external validity.

Similarly, Mitchell (2011) contends that although EBPs are gaining prominence, their adoption in behavioural health settings – particularly for youth with complex needs – remains limited. She advocates for integrating "practice wisdom," or the experiential knowledge of providers, with empirical evidence. This inclusive approach acknowledges the real-world constraints providers face and calls for implementation science to embrace complexity and centre both scientific knowledge and lived experience to improve the effectiveness and uptake of EBPs.

This call is echoed by Ammerman et al. (2014), who note that many public health interventions fail to achieve impact in community settings due to insufficient practitioner involvement in design, high resource demands, and limited scalability. To address these issues, they argue for greater reliance on practice-based evidence – interventions that are developed and tested in real-world environments with ongoing community and practitioner engagement. This shift is supported by policy and funding mechanisms such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Prevention Research Centers (PRCs), National Institute of Health's Clinical and Translational Science Awards (CTSAs), and the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), all of which prioritize dissemination and implementation research that reflects the realities of service delivery.

COLLABORATIVE MODELS FOR SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

Effective collaboration between sectors such as law enforcement and public health is essential for tackling complex societal issues. Despite shared goals, differing professional cultures and priorities often hinder cooperation. Overcoming these barriers is critical to advancing public safety and health (Van Dijk et al., 2019).

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In my experience working with programs like Recovery Corps and research into linkage facilitation across multitudes of sectors (Hogue et al., 2024; Satcher et al., 2024), I have seen firsthand the positive impact of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing substance use and mental health issues. By integrating law enforcement and public health efforts, we can develop more comprehensive strategies that not only provide care but also prevent unnecessary criminalization of individuals with SUDs (Satcher et al., 2024).

SERVEMINNESOTA: LEVERAGING COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION

ServeMinnesota, the state's Commission on National and Community Service, exemplifies collaborative innovation through AmeriCorps initiatives in education, public health, housing, and conservation. As director of the Healthy Futures Impact portfolio, I oversee three cross-sector programs: Recovery Corps, Public Health Corps, and Heading Home Corps. These programs enhance service system capacity by placing AmeriCorps members in community organizations, creating a networked approach to addressing critical needs.

In partnership with Ampact and the University of Minnesota, these efforts have increased workforce capacity and strengthened support for underserved populations. My research bridges the gap between science and practice by evaluating and expanding the evidence base for these initiatives. These efforts have supported the health and resilience of Minnesota's communities, especially through the integration of peer support into community-based solutions.

Additionally, as an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island, I contribute to education, mentorship, and applied research in substance use prevention and treatment. My involvement in the Justice Community Opioid Innovation Network (JCOIN) further supports the adoption of medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD) among justice-involved populations. These academic and community-based roles reinforce the importance of innovation and collaboration in advancing public health.

THE JOURNAL'S FOCUS ON SOCIAL INNOVATION AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

The *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* emphasizes social innovation and evidence-based strategies, particularly for addressing substance use and mental health. By focusing on social innovation and EBPs, the journal fosters a deeper understanding of how collaboration can enhance CSWB (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020). Its focus on data-driven, technology-enabled solutions aligns with efforts to expand telehealth and digital recovery tools, especially for marginalized populations (Jones & Sandford, 2018; Lyles et al., 2021).

In this edition, my colleagues and I share "Extending the Peer Support Specialist Pathway for Supporting Recovery," which highlights Recovery Corps – a program training individuals with lived SUD experience to deliver peer support in underserved communities. The article explores demand, feasibility, and impact, showing how Recovery Corps builds workforce pathways and strengthens service delivery through sectoral collaboration.

The Recovery Corps model advances implementation science by involving practitioners, policymakers, and community organizations in the co-design and placement of AmeriCorps members to deliver peer support. This collaborative process enhances contextual fit and increases the relevance of interventions (Weisz et al., 2014). In alignment with Albers et al.'s (2020), Recovery Corps demonstrates how collaborative partnerships support effective design and implementation.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Despite its promise, cross-sector collaboration faces persistent challenges – organizational silos, cultural disconnects, and resource constraints often impede progress. Tensions between law enforcement and public health entities, shaped by historical inequities and differing priorities, also complicate partnerships (Carroll et al., 2023). Yet, these barriers also offer opportunities for innovation and relationship building (Rodriguez, 2018).

Implementation science offers a road map to overcoming these challenges. By analyzing how each sector contributes to CSWB, we can build capacity, promote mutual understanding, and improve implementation efforts across sectors (Taxman & Belenko, 2025; Van Deinse et al., 2023). This includes developing evidence-based programs and implementation strategies to capacitate the different sectors in understanding each other and improving collaboration between these sectors (Van Dijk et al., 2019). One such strategy is the use of local change teams (LCTs), which bring together members from relevant sectors to work collaboratively as change agents, facilitating the implementation of programs within their own systems while supporting continuous improvement program implementation (Martin et al., 2021). This comprehensive approach to implementation science offers a clear path for overcoming barriers and enhancing service integration across sectors.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration among public health, law enforcement, and community organizations is essential to improve CSWB. This editorial highlights the need for sustainable, cross-sector strategies that enhance resilience and equity – particularly during times of crisis. Policy shifts supporting community-based education, integrated training, and digital infrastructure can close service gaps. Through aligned efforts and evidence-based collaboration, we can build responsive systems that promote both health and safety.

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