

Working Together:

Building Successful Partnerships



Families First
EDMONTON



About this Report

This report provides the data resulting from four annual administrations of a self-assessment questionnaire completed by Families First Edmonton (FFE) partners. The FFE partnership made a decision that few partnerships have done: to devote resources to study its own collaborative process. The Partnership Self-Assessment Tool¹ enables the FFE partnership to receive ongoing and honest feedback from its partners. Ultimately, the Tool allows the partnership to track and evaluate its collaborative efforts in a systematic and longitudinal manner.

The Partnership Self-Assessment Tool measures the partnership's level of synergy by asking questions about different aspects of the FFE partnership. Synergy influences the effectiveness of partnerships, and occurs when organizations combine their perspectives, resources, and skills. Results from this questionnaire help identify strengths and weaknesses associated with relative levels of synergy including leadership, efficiency, management, and sufficiency of resources. The findings also shed light on FFE partners' perceptions about the partnership's decision-making process, their perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of the partnership, as well as their overall satisfaction as a result of participating in the partnership.

In reviewing the data trends, a key observation is that the partnership had its lowest scores during the implementation stage of the partnership (2006-2007). This "implementation dip" indicates the challenges faced by the partners as they worked to implement the project, define roles and responsibilities, resolve conflict, and work toward common goals.

Findings from this report will provide management and policy makers with the critical elements of partnership that are necessary to promote and sustain a complex, long-term, cross-sectoral collaboration.

Acknowledgements

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Funding for the partnership collaboration research project was provided by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation and the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research.



¹ Permission to administer The Partnership Self-Assessment Tool and to use the sample report of findings as a reference has been obtained from the Centre for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health, The New York Academy of Medicine.

Introduction

Families First Edmonton

Families First Edmonton (FFE) is an innovative community-government-university research project that is testing four different ways of delivering services to families with low income, to see if better outcomes can be achieved. The project is based on the idea that coordinated, targeted, and proactive services provided to families with low income may lead to healthier, happier, and more successful families.

The FFE project has three main objectives:

1. To test the social, health, and economic impact of four service-delivery models on children and families living with low income
2. To identify the best ways for governments and agencies to work together to support children and families with low income
3. To understand and describe the best practice to support program delivery.

The project is founded on the principle that issues facing families with low income are rooted in a complex range of social, economic, and political conditions that cross through government departments, social service agencies, and community programs. With this in mind, part of the research project (objective two, above) is devoted to learning how organizations and government work together, and whether there are opportunities to improve these relationships to achieve better results for children and families. This report provides summary findings of the FFE collaborative process.



History of Families First Edmonton

Discussions about the potential for FFE began following the 2000 release of “Listen to the Children,” a report by the Quality of Life Commission. The report identified the impact that poverty has on the lives of children. At about the same time, a research project in Ontario was being completed, and it showed that providing proactive access to health, recreation, and other supports made a difference in the lives of children. The FFE partners made a decision to undertake a research project in Edmonton to understand made-in-Alberta opportunities to improve the lives of children and families with low income.

Families First Edmonton Partnership

FFE is co-led by representatives of Alberta Employment & Immigration and the City of Edmonton Community Services department. Funding for the project is provided by Alberta Employment and Immigration, City of Edmonton, United Way of the Alberta Capital Region, Edmonton Community Foundation, Urban Aboriginal Strategy, Stollery Charitable Foundation, and an anonymous donor. Funding for the collaboration research was provided by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation and the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research.

FFE is grateful for the participation of the following partners:

- Alberta Employment and Immigration (Co-Lead)
- City of Edmonton Community Services (Co-Lead)
- Alberta Health Services (Capital Health)
- Alberta Mental Health Board
- Community University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) and the University of Alberta
- Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Advisory Committee
- Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services Authority – Region 6
- Edmonton Community Foundation
- Quality of Life Commission
- United Way of the Alberta Capital Region
- YMCA of Edmonton, together with KARA Family Resource Centre, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society, and Multicultural Health Brokers Co-Operative.



Partnership Stages

About Partnerships

The development and lifecycle of partnerships are as varied as the partnerships themselves. Many factors influence whether partnerships will be successful. Although there are a range of models, the most widely accepted model is the chronological stages of formation, implementation, maintenance, and the accomplishment of goals (Butterfoss et al., 2006). Following are brief descriptions of these stages, to provide context to the FFE partnership and this evaluation report.

Formation Stage

In formation stage, the partners come together to define and achieve a specified goal. At the time of formation, the partners agree on the terms of reference, including vision, mission, goals, objectives, strategies, and other relevant factors. Critical at this stage is the establishment of governance committees and the formalization of these committees' operating roles and rules (Forrest, 1992; Kreuter, Lezin, & Young, 2000). These procedures enhance the partnership's ability to sustain itself beyond the tenure of any particular leader or key member (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001) and across the introduction of new members, thereby promoting the continuity of partnership work.

Strong leadership is needed for partnerships to move from the formation to the implementation stage. In the FFE partnership, this leadership was provided by the project funders and the Project Management Team, whose determination and commitment helped the partnership move to the implementation stage.

Implementation Stage

In the implementation phase, the partnership moves from initial formation tasks to the actual implementation of strategies, programs, and policies designed to achieve the partnership goals (Butterfoss & Francisco, 2004; Kreuter et al., 2000; Wandersman et al., 1996).

Since participation in a partnership is voluntary, the ability of partnerships to provide benefits (e.g., solidarity, appreciation, evidence of impact) that exceed costs (e.g., time, frustration) is particularly important in reducing turnover and maintaining momentum (Chinman, Anderson, Imm, Wandersman, & Goodman, 1996). Furthermore, because partnerships increase in scope, scale, strategic importance, and operational complexity as they advance along the collaboration continuum, partners must be prepared to expand their allocation of personal, institutional, and resource commitments accordingly (Austin, 2000).

Successful partnership implementation depends on factors such as:

- timely decision-making
- exceptional managerial skills
- sense of solidarity
- available resources, a time-phased action plan, and a supportive organizational and community environment
- good interpersonal relationships and cultural compatibility
- open communication
- strong leadership
- management commitment

For the FFE partnership, the first three factors were especially vulnerable to and negatively impacted by the changes in partner membership during the critical implementation stage. As a result, more time, money, and effort was required during this stage.

As this report demonstrates, the implementation stage is where most partnerships ‘make it or break it.’ The “implementation dip” reflects a general drop in satisfaction among partners. However, the key learning is that with proper management of the above (and other) factors, partnerships can survive and thrive.

Maintenance Stage

The maintenance stage is the time when partners mobilize and pool member and external resources, continue to implement strategies, and experience increased levels of commitment, participation, and satisfaction (Butterfoss et al., 2006).

This stage builds on work started during the implementation stage to sustain member involvement and take concrete steps to achieve the partnership’s goals (Butterfoss et al., 2006). To uphold momentum and rebuild, a collaboration also has to recruit and orient new members, train leaders, prepare leaders-in-waiting to take over when there is turnover, address and resolve conflict, engage in public relations, and celebrate its accomplishments along the way (Presby & Wandersman, 1985).

The FFE partnership is currently in the maintenance stage.



Selected Findings At-A-Glance

Over the four-year administration period, the following tables show the tasks/factors that:

- (a) were rated consistently high – these ratings are important as they identify tasks/factors at which the FFE partnership has consistently excelled. FFE partners need to acknowledge and congratulate each other for attending to such important partnership activities constantly over the long term.
- (b) were rated consistently low – these ratings are important they identify tasks/factors that are extremely difficult to master during formation and are resistant to improvement over time.
- (c) had the most fluctuation in ratings – the changes in score in these factors significantly contribute to the overall trend observed, meaning the partnership must pay specific attention to these factors as it progresses from one stage to the next.

Synergy

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Identifying new and creative ways to solve problems	Communicating to people in the community how the partnership's actions will address problems that are important to them	Responding to the needs and problems of the community
Identifying how different services and programs in the community relate to the problems the partnership is trying to address		Implementing strategies that are most likely to work in the community
		Carrying out comprehensive activities that connect multiple services, programs, or systems

Leadership Effectiveness

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Taking responsibility for the partnership	Empowering people involved in the partnership	Fostering respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness in the partnership
	Working to develop a common language within the partnership	*Resolving conflict among partners
	*Resolving conflict among partners	Combining the perspectives, resources, and skills of partners

*These factors appear as areas of note in two places over the four year survey timeframe

Efficiency

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Use of partners' financial resources	*Use of partners' time	*Use of partners' time
Use of partners' in-kind resources		

Administration and Management Effectiveness

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Applying for and managing grants and funds	Coordinating communication with people and organizations outside the partnership	Preparing materials that inform partners and help them make timely decisions
	Providing orientation to new partners	Performing secretarial duties
	Evaluating the progress and impact of the partnership	

Sufficiency of Non-Financial Resources

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Skills and expertise	Connections to people affected by the problems	Connections to political decision makers, government agencies, and others
Legitimacy and credibility		
Influence and ability to bring people together for meetings and activities		

Sufficiency of Financial Resources

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Space	Money	
Equipment and goods		

Decision Making

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Supporting the decisions made by the partnership		Being comfortable with the decision making process
		Being left out of the decision making process

Benefits

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Acquisition of useful knowledge about services, programs, or people in the community	Acquisition of additional financial support	
Development of valuable relationships		
Ability to have a greater impact than I could have on my own		
Ability to make a contribution to the community		

Drawbacks

A. Consistently High	B. Consistently Low	C. Fluctuated Most
Diversion of time and resources away from other priorities or obligations	Viewed negatively due to association with other partners or the partnership	
Frustration or aggravation		

NOTE: In this case, drawbacks that received low ratings reflect a positive rating, and drawbacks that rated highly reflect dissatisfaction with the partnership.

Overall Satisfaction

Overall, the majority of respondents are mostly or completely satisfied with the following aspects of their participation:

- The way people and organizations work together
- Their influence in the partnership
- Their role in the partnership
- The partnership's plans for achieving its goals
- The way the partnership is implementing its plans

In the 2008 survey, for example, 97% of respondents mostly or completely agreed that “the benefits of the partnership outweigh the drawbacks.” In 2008 the FFE partnership was in the maintenance stage, and this rating reflects the successful transition from the challenging implementation stage.



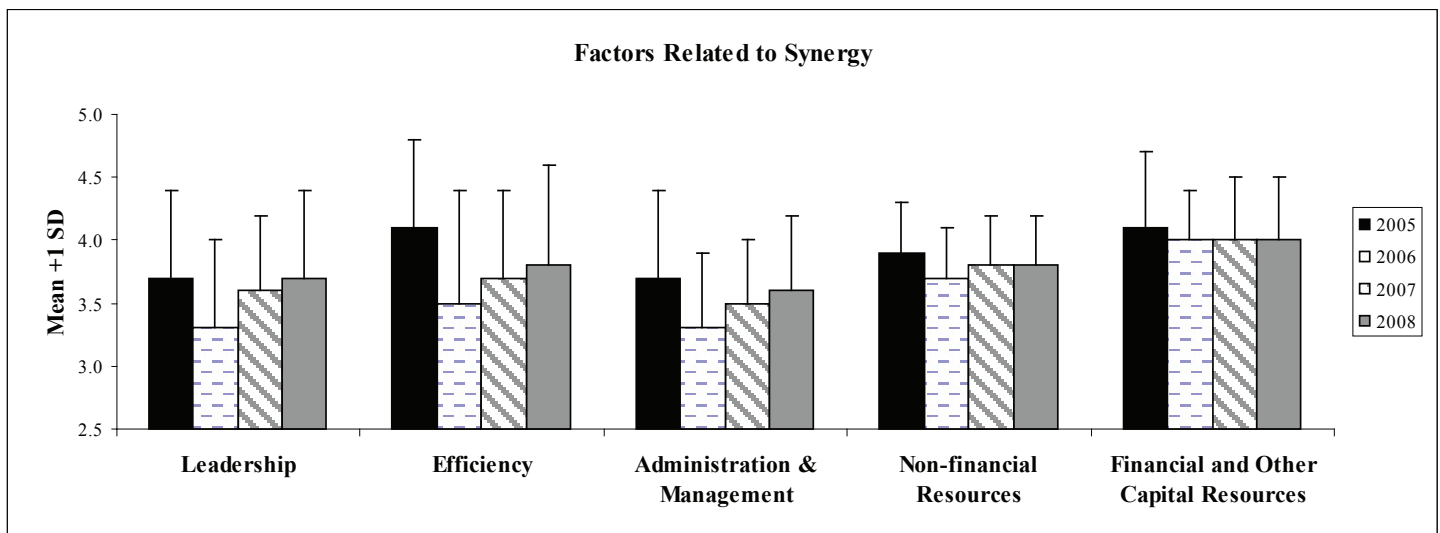
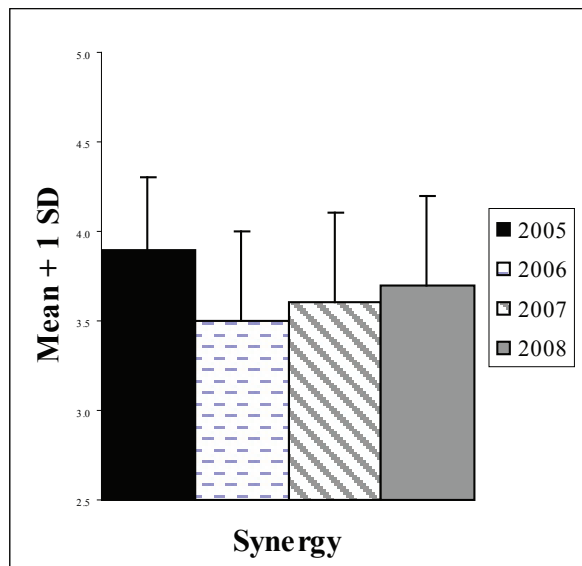
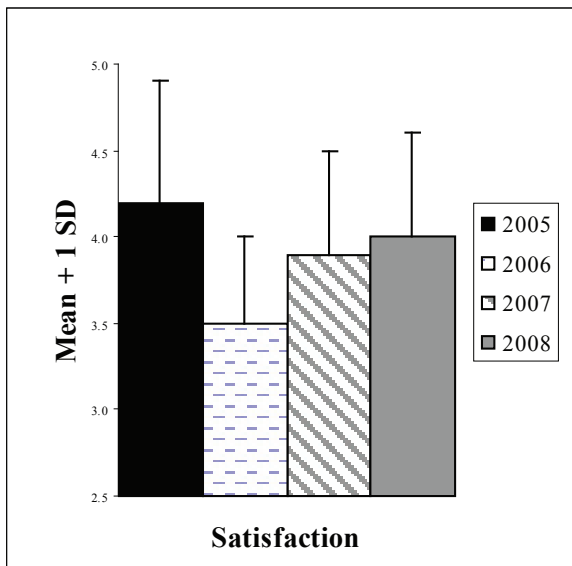
A Key Observation

The Implementation Dip

When looking at the four-year trend, the FFE partnership experienced the lowest levels of satisfaction among participants in 2006. This is the implementation stage of the partnership, and the time during which the relationships among the partners are being solidified. As identified previously, this is also the time when partners weigh whether the benefits of the partnership (e.g. solidarity, appreciation, evidence of impact) exceed the costs (e.g., time, frustration). It can be a critical time during which partnerships either continue or come to an end.

In looking at the data trend for satisfaction with the partnership, scores show that:

- satisfaction is high in 2005 as the partners anticipate the project (formation stage)
- satisfaction drops in 2006 as the partnership enters its implementation stage
- satisfaction increases again in 2007 and 2008, as the partnership moves into the maintenance stage



NOTE: In each chart, on the vertical axis, 'SD' means Standard Deviation, which is a measure of how spread out the data are.

The FFE partnership's level of synergy indicates how successful the partnership's collaborative effort has been thus far. The overall synergy score gives an indication of how well the collaborative process is enabling FFE partners to accomplish more together than they can on their own.

The charts above illustrate that the 'implementation dip' is a consistent pattern in the factors of, and related to, synergy. This is a significant finding, and something that should be considered in the establishment and development of other partnerships. 'Staying the course' through challenging times is important. The FFE partnership demonstrates that, with perseverance, personal, organizational, and partnership goals can be achieved.

Explaining the Implementation Dip

There are two reasons that satisfaction ratings drop during the second stage (implementation):

First, the implementation stage is difficult. The relationships among the partners are being solidified, concepts are being put into action, and decisions are being made.

The second reason is that the formation and maintenance of partnerships is an evolving and often cyclical process (McLeroy, Kegler, Steckler, Burdine, & Wisotzky, 1994). As new members join, key members leave, and problems and needs arise, partnerships recycle through these stages and revisit the respective developmental tasks embedded in each stage (Butterfoss et al., 2006; Clark, Friedman, & Lachance, 2006).

This is precisely what happened with the FFE partnership. At the end of 2005, new partners joined, a new project manager was hired, and service delivery began. It took significant time and effort from all partners to revisit tasks from the formation stage (e.g., develop committees and procedures). This also lengthened the implementation stage.

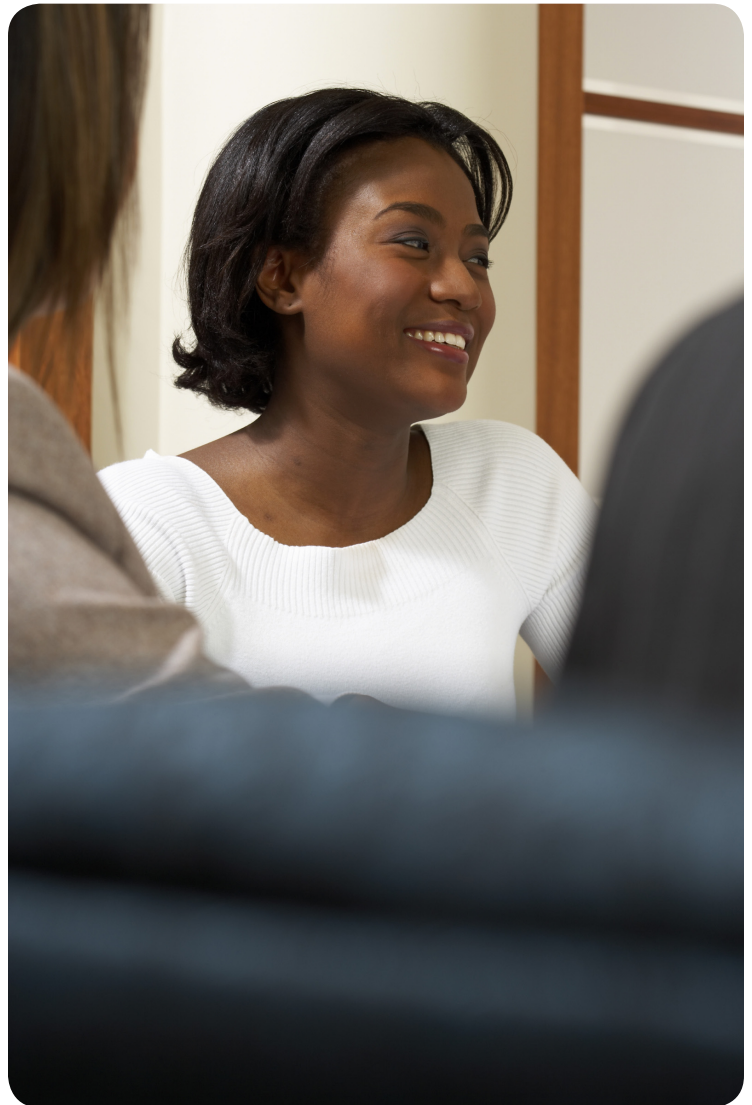


Conclusion

The Families First Edmonton partners and funders should be acknowledged for their decision to study the effectiveness of working in partnership. This project-within-a-project provides unique insights about the FFE partnership, irrespective of the outcome of the main Families First Edmonton research project. These insights, and the data collected, can help the formation and working relationships of other partnerships now and in the future.

The first four years of the collaboration study show interesting findings:

- The formation stage generally yields partner satisfaction as they anticipate the project.
- The implementation stage, when conflict arises, new processes are undertaken, and decisions are made, is very challenging.
- Partnerships can bounce back and forth between stages. This is evident when new partners join, or original partners withdraw, and 'rules' have to be revisited.
- Knowing the key factors that affect satisfaction within a partnership can be helpful in moving forward toward partnership goals.
- Perseverance, commitment, and passion about the project can help propel the partnership through the stages.



For More Information

This report is intended to be a companion to the four annual reports, “Partnership Self-Assessment Tool: Report of Findings,” released from 2005-2008. For more information, the reader is advised to review the full reports and to contact the Families First Edmonton Collaboration Research Team: Maria Mayan, along with Jane Drummond, Erin Gray, Kathy Kovacs Burns, Sanchia Lo, and Doug Wilson (listed alphabetically).

For more information on Families First Edmonton, please visit www.familiesfirstedmonton.ualberta.ca

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Partners in Families First Edmonton

Project Co-Leads

Alberta Employment and Immigration
City of Edmonton Community Services

Service Delivery Providers

YMCA of Edmonton
Multicultural Health Brokers Co-Operative
KARA Family Resource Centre
Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society

Funders



Canadian Institutes of Health Research
Canadian Health Sciences Research Foundation
Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research

Partners

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