

Impact of Governance on Network Organizations

By: Carolyn Witherspoon, Executive Director, Coalition of Health Services, Inc.

The backbone for a successful organization is the governance structure. Each organization/network has their own unique qualities; discovering and developing can be both rewarding and challenging. The important aspect is to find what works best for you and "go with it". In my seventeen years as serving as the Executive Director of the Coalition of Health Services (COHS) I have learned how important it is to be flexible and to have a solid infrastructure.

The Coalition was formally organized in 1996, after several months of discussions among several rural hospital administrators and the Vice President of Regional Services, for what was then High Plains Baptist Hospital. At the time these discussions were occurring, many turf issues existed related to the delivery of health care in the region. Other concerns of rural panhandle providers included achieving a common voice for legislative issues and funding opportunities. In particular, an RFP for Title V funds was issued during this time and the opinion of rural health organizations was that collaboration would mean funding maximization. The Coalition was funded by Baptist St. Anthony's Hospital the first year, then; in 1997 the not-for-profit 501 (c) 3 COHS organization was formed. Northwest Texas Hospital contributed a major portion of operating funds in the beginning as well. At that time, other state-funded programs, providing services to panhandle communities, were looking for a home. Coalition leadership determined that these programs would be a good fit and decided to package these programs as COHS initiatives. Over the years, programs have come and gone (usually depending on funding). The Coalition was originated with 21 hospitals and now has 14 affiliates serving 26 counties. These hospitals are geographically located from Dalhart in the northwest Texas Panhandle to Childress, Texas in the southeast. The administrative office of the organization is located in Amarillo, Texas.

The purpose of the Coalition of Health Services is to enhance rural health through coordinated and collaborative efforts of the member rural health care facilities, their partners and to support ongoing rural health initiatives in individual communities. This effort includes preventive and public health endeavors, as well as, primary health care delivery through the establishment of comprehensive medical homes for every resident. Opportunities have arisen to provide basic public and preventive health services, the institution of services that were new to specific sites (such as prenatal care), and the simultaneous infrastructure development and modeling of a successful network of rural health entities. These entities now serve over 400,000 people living over a sparsely populated 26,000 square miles.

The Board of Trustees is comprised of the CEO or their designee from the 12 rural and two tertiary hospitals. In addition, we have Associate and Professional partners who attend and participate in Board meetings, programs and have access to member benefits. The Board meets monthly providing oversight and direction for the programs which are administered through the Coalition in addition to leveraging resources, products and services using an economy of scale mindset. Members are assessed dues which assist with the overall administrative cost of the organization. The Board also is very instrumental in providing fiscal oversight and guidance.

The Coalition bylaws were created to provide a framework for the organization. The trustees delegate the day to day operations to the Executive Director. Officers of the Board consist of Chairman, Vice Chairman and Secretary/Treasurer. The Executive Committee consists of the three officer positions in addition to two at large seats and the past chairman. Other Committees include: Finance, Audit, By-Laws, Quality Improvement and Ad Hoc committees as needed. The Board composite does not change as each facility has a place on the Board, when there are changes in the CEO of a facility the new CEO steps in to assume the vacant seat. Utilizing the committee structure it allows work to flow and issues can be addressed in small groups and taken to the Board for decision from committee recommendation. At the present time we do not incorporate any memorandum of agreements between the Coalition and the facilities.

Roundtable groups have been established for the IT Directors, Regional Quality Improvement Coordinators and the Chief Nursing Officer/ Director of Nurses. These groups meet to address issues related to their duties and assignments and their attendance is supported by the facilities' CEO. We are in the process of establishing a group of Chief Financial Officers.

Administration provides support and direction for all programs of the Coalition and maintains a working relationship with affiliate members. The Coalition promotes collaboration and partnership with all funding sources, as well as, the Department of State Health Services, the Health and Human Services Commission, Texas Hospital Association (THA), Texas Organization of Rural and Community Hospitals (TORCH), National Rural Health Association (NRHA) National Cooperative of Health Networks (NCHN) and Legislative representatives at local, state and federal levels. Leadership and staff stay abreast of changes affecting healthcare with special focus on rural health issues and evaluates opportunities that could benefit all affiliates through shared resources.

The governance structure has evolved over time and changes as the needs of the organization change. As was previously stated, in the beginning of the organization there were many turf issues, today the Board has a strong networking relationship and call on each other between meetings. There is a strong respect and trust among the group who strive to work together for the common good of the organization.

Coalition of Health Services (COHS) was organized in 1996 and incorporated in 1997 to enhance rural health through coordinated and collaborative efforts of the member rural health care facilities, their partners and to support ongoing rural health initiatives in individual communities. COHS' mission is: "The Coalition of Health Services is a regional coalition of healthcare providers leveraging resources to provide high quality healthcare through program development, education and advocacy." The Network's vision is: "Strengthening healthcare providers to build healthier communities."

Carolyn Witherspoon is currently an NCHN Board Director. She has seven years of prior NCHN Board experience including serving as the President from 2011 - 2012. COHS has been a member of NCHN since the early 2,000's.