Minnesota PDG B-5 Mixed Delivery Action Lab Project Final Report:

Findings From the Action Lab Process Used to Inform and Transform Minnesota's Mixed Delivery System

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Introduction

The overarching goal of Minnesota's current and past Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) program has been to "make it easier for children and families – particularly the ones furthest from opportunity – to get what they need to thrive" (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2023, p. 59). The PDG B-5 planning grant that funded this project was focused on strengthening the state's early care and education (ECE) system to support children and families' experience using early care and education across a variety of programs, providers, and settings (e.g., Head Start, licensed centers and licensed family child care, community-based organizations, Early Childhood Special Education [ECSE]) by supporting mixed delivery and workforce efforts. At the community level, having a comprehensive ECE system that leverages mixed delivery will enable all families, including those with children with disabilities, those who speak a language other than English, and those experiencing racial, geographic, and economic inequities, to have access to high-quality and affordable ECE programs and services.[1]

SRI Education, together with our partners at Third Sector Capital Partners (Third Sector) and the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota (UMN), designed, led, and implemented Mixed Delivery Action Labs in seven local Minnesota communities using human-centered design (HCD) principles to build local capacity to strengthen mixed delivery partnerships. This report summarizes the project participants, approach, and findings and provides suggestions for the next steps in moving mixed delivery forward across the state.

Mixed Delivery in Minnesota

Broadly, ECE mixed delivery refers to coordinating ECE funding streams, programs, and services to better meet the needs of young children and families. The numerous benefits of ECE mixed delivery systems include leveraging public and private funding, streamlining program eligibility and enrollment for families, improving quality across program settings, ensuring families have access to the care and services they need, and coordinating professional development opportunities for all providers. Yet local communities often struggle with conceptualizing and implementing such systems. Additionally, state-level challenges with aligning and coordinating various ECE programs impact local community efforts. It is a monumental task (at both the state and local levels) to bring together multiple funding streams

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[1] A comprehensive ECE system also requires that providers are supported in ways that allow them to continue to grow as professionals and are provided with adequate compensation and working conditions that motivate them to remain in the workforce. A second component of this project was conducting an ECE Pay Equity Pilot. Note that this final report does not describe the Pay Equity Pilot activities. The results of the pilot can be found in the Pay Equity Pilot summary**.**

and varied programs across settings that have different requirements, policies, and histories. Additionally, individuals often come to conversations about mixed delivery with different understandings, expectations, and experiences. Starting with a clear definition of what mixed delivery means is an important first step.

Minnesota has been working toward a vision for a comprehensive ECE mixed delivery system that considers local variations and contexts. State leaders conceptualize partnerships between service providers in a mixed delivery system as spanning a continuum of collaboration that ranges from immuring (i.e., conducting activities without input from or exchange with others) to integrating (i.e., completely merging operations, administrative structures, and budgets; Mashek, 2015). Ideally, partners would move toward deeper, more meaningful collaboration even if the goal is not to reach full integration.

In Minnesota, young children are in a variety of settings and programs before kindergarten. These settings and programs are parts of formal systems (e.g., licensed child care, Head Start, or voluntary prekindergarten [VPK]), parts of informal systems (e.g., family, friend, and neighbor [FFN] care), or a combination of the these. ***In Minnesota, a comprehensive ECE mixed delivery system includes the formal and informal high-quality prekindergarten (prenatal–age 5) programming and coordinated comprehensive services through a variety of agencies, programs, providers, and settings.***

This working definition focuses on aligning programs, services, and supports that encourage an ECE mixed delivery system that:

- leverages public and private funds and existing infrastructure in licensed center-based and family child care programs, public schools, Head Start, and community-based organizations to maximize access to high-quality, affordable options for all children through age 5;

- increases family choice by expanding diverse program options that meet families' needs;

- ensures children and families have access to quality preschool programs and experiences that operate using established high-quality standards;

- provides comprehensive services (health, human services, etc.) and supportive services such as screenings, referrals, interventions, and transportation; and

- encourages partnerships and resource sharing between various programs and professionals (Head Start, school district including early childhood special education, community-based child care including center-based and family child care, etc.) to improve alignment, program quality, and family engagement.

Much of Minnesota's mixed delivery work has centered on establishing and supporting formal partnerships between districts implementing the state's VPK program, Head Start programs, and community-based child care, although it has been more challenging to include the latter.

This project was an effort to expand and broaden the state's approach to building ECE mixed delivery systems.

Project Goals

The three primary goals of the Mixed Delivery Action Labs project were to (1) establish Mixed Delivery Action Labs that identify and work on a local project with tangible benefits to the community, while (2) building capacity for facilitation and sustainable processes for working together using Human-Centered Design (HCD) and community co-design tools, in order to (3) strengthen ECE relationships and collaborations (both within local communities and between communities and the state) to create strong mixed delivery systems. The project's theory of action (Figure 1) was that if each community used HCD and co-design principles and tools in the process of working on a local project, there would be rich opportunities for establishing relationships and collaborations, and the result would be communities strengthening ECE mixed delivery systems. This increased intentional interaction would also lead to the cultivation of communication mechanisms, establishing greater feedback loops within communities as well as with the state, and contributing to more responsive and collaborative state government.

Figure 1. Mixed Delivery Action Labs Project Theory of Action
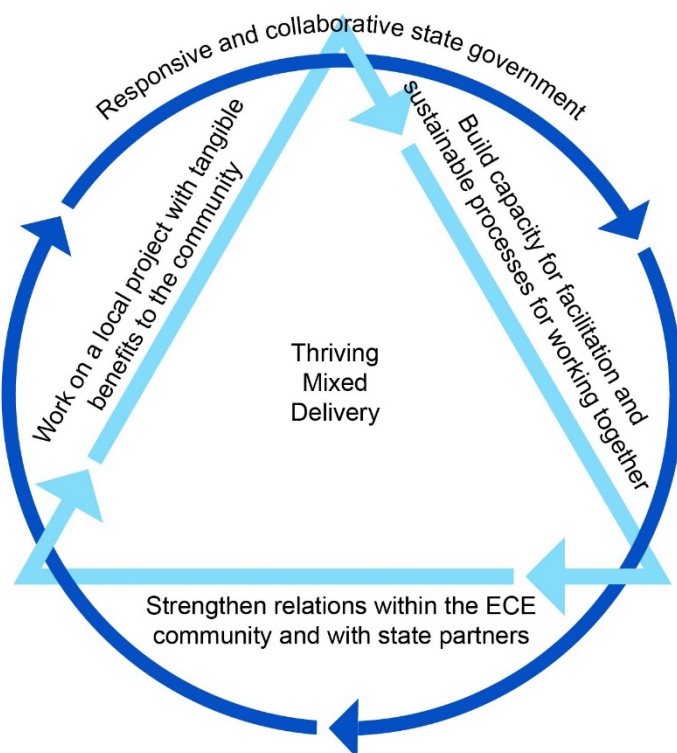
The purpose of **establishing the Mixed Delivery Action Labs** was to create or build on sustained community engagement structures and local organizing entities for ECE leaders that would shift local ECE efforts from the traditional program and setting siloes toward a mixed

delivery collective strategy. The Action Labs were the forum in which local communities could organically identify challenges, set goals and problem-solve, and plan for increasing mixed delivery of services and programs. The immediate work of the Mixed Delivery Action Labs during the short time frame of this project was for each community to **identify a local challenge to mixed delivery and plan a project** to begin addressing it. Central to this approach was providing opportunities to develop **strong relationships and collaborations** among the Mixed Delivery Action Lab participants and the entities they represented. Additionally, a priority for the state was to establish feedback loops so that local communities and the state could learn from and support one another, identify challenges, and problem-solve. The **HCD and community co-design processes** were used to support the development of organizational capacity and leadership within the Mixed Delivery Action Labs as well as to provide a framework for establishing state-to-local feedback loops. Using HCD and co-design processes to build capacity of local staff will accelerate the development of positive relationships and ultimately local mixed delivery systems.

Human-Centered Design and Community Co-Design Processes

Based on the goals of the project, the HCD and community co-design processes were a good fit to serve as a foundation for the design of the Mixed Delivery Action Labs. HCD (IDEO.org, 2015) offers structured activities for helping teams articulate a shared problem or challenge to address, identify potential solutions, and develop plans for implementing them. Given the relational challenges of operating a mixed delivery system, such as coordinating and supporting the participation of ECE providers across a range of programs and settings, and the state's explicit commitment to equity, the team supplemented HCD with strategies from community co-design (Minnesota Design Center, 2022) and Liberatory Design (Anaissie et al., 2021), two frameworks that focus heavily on relationship building and on equity. Relational and equity challenges can exacerbate real (and perceived) differences among interested parties and produce unwanted impediments to long-term systems change.

Community co-design is an iterative and equity-driven process for engaging communities to design systems and solutions. It uses a combination of group sessions and individual work efforts to build toward action. Effective co-design is a way of collaborating directly with, and investing in, community members most impacted by challenges. The work of ECE mixed delivery is difficult and can be messy, but the HCD and co-design processes provide structure and tools that can bring a community together to make progress.

Participants

Communities

To identify the Mixed Delivery Action Lab communities, state staff brainstormed a list of communities that would be "good candidates" for the Mixed Delivery Action Lab work based on

state staff's knowledge of existing collaboration structures or communities' interest in exploring mixed delivery collaboration. The state reached out to these communities to gauge initial interest, and most but not all of the communities responded that they wanted to be considered. Then, the state systematically reviewed the interested communities, comparing various characteristics including demographics of the population under age 5, geography, ECE programs, existing community partnerships, and level of readiness to improve mixed delivery in the community. The state extended invitations to those communities that ranked high on the review list.

Seven communities accepted the state's invitation to participate in the project. Table 1 lists the lead agency or organization for each of the seven communities (see the Appendix for more details). The communities represented the northern, southern, and western regions of the state and included rural, suburban, and urban geographies (none of the communities in the Twin Cities Metro region that were identified as good candidates expressed interest in participating). Some communities had relatively homogeneous demographics, while others had greater demographic diversity. The communities varied in terms of the number of ECE settings and programs available, but all had family child care, center-based child care, and school-based programs, and all but one had at least one Head Start program. At the start of the project, the communities also varied in terms of their experience with collaboration and could be categorized at different levels of ECE mixed delivery (beginning, in progress, or coordinated).

Table 1. Mixed Delivery Action Lab Communities and Their Lead Agency or Organization

Community	Lead Agency/Organization
Cook County	Cook County Public Health
Itasca	Itasca Area Schools Collaborative
Mankato	Mankato Area Public Schools
Rochester	Rochester Public Schools Rochester Cradle to Career
Thief River Falls	Advance Thief River
Willmar	Willmar Public Schools
Worthington	Worthington Public Schools

Project Team

Five groups played a role in the Mixed Delivery Action Labs. Table 2 describes each group and outlines their roles in the project. Staff from SRI, Third Sector, and CAREI made up the project

team and were responsible for facilitating the Mixed Delivery Action Labs. At least two project team staff members were assigned to each community. Project staff were assigned to communities using a "train-the-trainer" approach when it came to expertise and experience using HCD and community co-design. For example, for the first Mixed Delivery Action Lab sessions, Third Sector staff (experts in HCD and co-design) modeled facilitation for other project staff, and over time and with Third Sector's support, other project staff led facilitation. Third Sector also created **online workbooks** for individual communities and a **Mixed Delivery Action Lab toolkit** to help facilitators design sessions with tips and strategies for supporting the communities and facilitating collaborative conversations. State partners were also assigned to each community and participated as their schedules allowed.

Table 2. Descriptions of Project Groups and Their Mixed Delivery Action Lab Roles

Project Group	Description	Mixed Delivery Action Lab Roles
SRI	International nonprofit research and technical assistance organization specializing in finding out what works, for whom, how, and why, with expertise in ECE mixed delivery systems.	Lead contractor working with MN state leaders to plan and carry out the project in coordination with state priorities. Primary and secondary facilitators working with assigned communities. Planned sessions in collaboration with community leads.
Third Sector	National nonprofit technical assistance organization that supports government agencies on ways to reshape policies, systems, and services toward better outcomes, with expertise in early childhood development and in HCD and community co-design principles.	Lead trainer in train-the-trainer model of using HCD and community co-design as facilitation frameworks. Primary facilitator working with some communities. Supported partner organizations in their facilitation of other communities. Created the toolkit and online workbooks for each community.
CAREI	Center that serves as a link between research and practice in MN schools, PreK–16, and other agencies interested in applied education research.	Primary and secondary facilitator working with assigned communities. Planned sessions in collaboration with community leads. Frequently traveled to facilitate meetings in person. Lead analyst of community feedback on the Mixed Delivery Action Lab process.
MN State Partners	Staff representing various early childhood programs within the MN Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), including child care, state preschool programs, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), early childhood special education (ECSE), and Head Start Collaboration Office; the MN Department of	Attended sessions as invited by community leads. Answered technical questions and offered resources as able. Built relationships with the community leads and other participants.

Project Group	Description	Mixed Delivery Action Lab Roles
	Education (MDE); and from the Office of the Governor, Children's Cabinet.	
Mixed Delivery Action Lab Communities	Individuals from across mixed delivery settings in the 7 participating communities. Participants varied across communities but commonly included school-based programs (state preschool, community education, early childhood family education, early childhood special education), community-based child care, Head Start, public health, home visiting, other community partners, and local economic development groups and business leaders.	Community leads planned and organized sessions in collaboration with contracted facilitators. Participants attended and participated in sessions, engaged in activities (e.g., conducting community interviews and information gathering) outside of the sessions, and built relationships with other participants and MN state partners.

Method/Approach

The following sections describe the Mixed Delivery Action Lab project start-up and the community sessions, including the community session structure and pre- and post-session planning meetings.

Project Start-Up

The project team worked with state staff to plan start-up activities. The project team held a virtual project orientation meeting with the leads from each of the communities to share the project timeline and key activities and answer any questions. The community leads were asked to sign a partnership agreement at the beginning of the project that outlined the roles of the project team, the state partners, and the community participants and included information on how to spend the $6,000 of project funds allocated to each community. Then, the project team completed two exploratory conversations with each community lead. The purpose of these exploratory conversations was to inform initial goals and priorities for the communities and provide the facilitation team with information on how to plan for the first session.

Prior to starting the sessions, staff from Third Sector hosted a 2-day in-person facilitation training for SRI, CAREI, and Minnesota state partners to orient all staff to the project, provide an overview of the principles of HCD and community co-design, and start planning the sessions. The project team also invited all Mixed Delivery Action Lab participants to attend a virtual project kickoff meeting to introduce the project team and the Minnesota state partners; provide a brief overview of the project, mixed delivery, and HCD and community co-design; and discuss next steps.

Community Sessions

The project team and each community lead scheduled sessions about once a month between May and October 2024, based on the availability of the project team and the community members. Sessions were all between 1.5 and 2 hours in length. They were either in-person, virtual, or hybrid (i.e., some participants in-person, some virtual).

## Community Mixed Delivery Action Lab Session Structure

Guiding Framework. To support communities in meeting the goals of the project, the principles of HCD and community co-design were applied to develop a guiding framework for the sessions (Figure 2). The project team used this framework, called "Gather, Seek, Sketch, Structure," to identify a starting place for each community based on exploratory calls and build a session arc that would meet the community where it was in the process of improving mixed delivery, support the community in building connections, and create meaningful process on a project.

Figure 2. The "Gather, Seek, Sketch, Structure" Guiding Framework

Gather	Seek	Sketch	Structure
Building strong practices for collaboration, including bringing people together, and establishing working norms	*Understanding the perspectives of community partners and systems and identifying which issues to address*	*Coming up with potential ways to address community issues and prioritizing solutions to try out*	*Putting ideas into practice, testing and getting feedback, and ensuring solutions stick*

Session Arc. An initial six-session arc was designed as a starting place for each community (Figure 3). The initial session focused on setting a community goal (or goals) and identifying existing resources. The arc included time for information gathering in the community through interviews or community conversations and ended with developing a plan or next steps. The initial session arc was developed with flexibility in mind, knowing that each community's arc would be individualized to meet the community's needs.

**Figure 3. Initial Six-Session Arc**
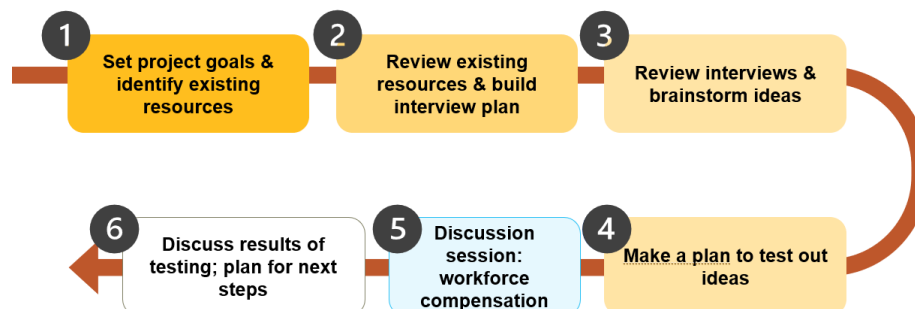
Using the initial session arc and the guiding framework, project staff assigned to each community customized and tailored the sessions to meet the needs of the community. This often involved making changes between each session based on the previous session, or even pivoting during a session to make space for a productive conversation or new line of thinking. The Appendix provides detailed information on each community, including its unique session arc and descriptions of each session.

As the session arcs for each community began to wrap up, project staff built in conversations about what the community needed to sustain its mixed delivery efforts, including developing roadmaps, articulating clear next steps, and even scheduling meetings for the coming months. During the last sessions, some project staff also invited state staff to highlight resources that could support ongoing mixed delivery work. The sustainability conversations looked different across the communities, again reflecting different community priorities and needs.

Session Structure. Sessions all followed a similar pattern of a welcome; a connection activity; at least one facilitated activity to discover, elicit, or decide; and a closing activity. This session process is often referred to as a "meeting canoe" (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The Meeting Canoe
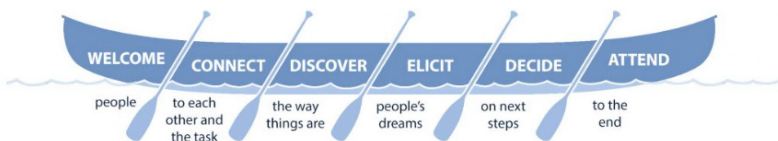
Note. From "What Is the Meeting Canoe?" by yoyomeeting, n.d. (**https://yoyomeeting.com/meeting-resources/the-meeting-canoe/**).

Facilitation. Project staff were the primary facilitators of each session. However, in a few cases the community lead(s) co-facilitated sessions with project staff, and in one community with well-established meeting processes, the community lead(s) facilitated, and project staff supported the sessions. Project staff also took notes during each session and used the community's workbook to capture conversations and review any prework from the prior session. The workbook was an online shared document that included all the activities from the session and places for the participants to complete their prework. The workbooks will serve as a resource for the communities moving forward.

Participation. To strengthen ECE relationships and collaboration within communities, project staff encouraged community leads to think broadly about who to invite to participate in the Mixed Delivery Action Lab sessions. We suggested they cast a wide net and include individuals who would represent the range of prenatal to Grade 3 programs in their area, including community-based child care, Head Start, school-based programs including early childhood

special education, family friend and neighbor care, health and mental health programs, home visiting, parents/caregivers, cultural liaisons, libraries, local government, tribal nations, and employers.

Pre- and Post-Session Planning Meetings

Prior to each session, the project team conducted two planning meetings. One planning meeting included only the project staff assigned to that community (SRI, Third Sector, and CAREI). The purpose of the first meeting was to start planning for the next session by reviewing the past session (including feedback survey results) and brainstorming activities for the next session in the arc. Third Sector supported SRI and CAREI during these meetings in applying the principles of HCD and community co-design. The second planning meeting included the project staff assigned to that community, the community lead, and state partners as applicable. The purpose of the second meeting was to go over the agenda and incorporate any feedback from the community lead.

Following each session, the project team and state partners met to debrief the session. The project team reviewed feedback provided by community members via the feedback survey and discussed what worked well; what could be strengthened related to logistics, content, and facilitation; and any thoughts for planning the next session.

Evaluation/Data Collection

This project used a formative evaluation approach that relied on multiple sources of information, including post-session and end-of-project surveys, structured notes from the sessions, and virtual project wrap-up and reflection meetings.

Surveys

At the end of each session, participants were given a survey link to provide brief feedback on the session, including what went well and what could be improved for next time. The project team used these survey results, session notes, and the community's workbook when planning future sessions and identifying any issues to address.

The project team gathered end-of-project feedback and input via a final session survey. Project staff provided 10 minutes at the end of the final session for participants to complete a more extensive final survey.[2] The final survey included questions about the impact of the Mixed Delivery Action Lab process and any known plans for the community going forward.

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[2] Six of the seven communities were represented in the final survey. Members of the seventh community were not able to complete the survey during their last session and also did not respond to requests that they complete it at another time.

Project Reflection Meetings

The project team hosted two culminating meetings at the end of the project to reflect on project challenges and successes and generate input on the state's next steps for promoting ECE mixed delivery. As part of the HCD and community co-design processes and feedback cycle, these meetings included opportunities for all project participants to share thoughts and feedback about what worked, opportunities for improvement, and input on future activities.

First, the project team hosted a virtual meeting with all project team members and the state partners. The purpose of this meeting was to review the project goals, briefly discuss the work of the communities, and discuss lessons learned and initial findings. The project team gathered information from the state partners related to what they thought went well, what was challenging, and initial thoughts on strategies for success connected to each of the project goals. The project team also shared lessons learned and findings and discussed the similarities and differences from the information from the state partners.

Second, the project team hosted a virtual meeting with all project team members, the state partners, and participants from each of the communities (6 of 7 communities were able to attend). The purpose of this meeting was to have MDAL participants reflect on the successes and challenges of mixed delivery and give input on how they would like the state to support them moving forward. The project team provided a high-level summary of the themes that emerged from the project, and state partners provided an overview of initial thinking on the next steps for promoting ECE mixed delivery in Minnesota. Using Padlet in a whole-group discussion as well as breakout groups of MDAL community participants only, project staff gathered input on participants' perceptions of the benefits of mixed delivery, the challenges communities face in implementing it, and how the state can support local communities' mixed delivery efforts.

Findings

In the sections below, we share major project findings. These are based on the project team's reflections after having planned and facilitated the MDAL sessions, our review of session notes, direct input from MDAL participants through session and end-of-project surveys, and feedback collected through the project reflection meetings with the state partners and MDAL participants.

Project Goals

Establish a Mixed Delivery Action Lab and Work on a Local Project

As described above, the Mixed Delivery Action Lab project had three interconnected goals. The first was for each participating local community to establish a Mixed Delivery Action Lab and identify a challenge to mixed delivery that participants wanted to address. Several of the communities already had a group of ECE partners that met regularly and were going to build on this work (e.g., Mankato, Rochester, Thief River Falls, Willmar). The others were reconvening a

previously active group (Itasca), bringing together new staff from familiar organizations (Cook County), or formally convening multiple new partners for the first time (Worthington). See the Community Fact Sheets in the Appendix for more details about each community.

As the Mixed Delivery Action Labs came together, participants were tasked with deciding how they would address their mixed delivery challenges. Most communities chose to work on a project with tangible benefits for the communities through which mixed delivery partnerships could be strengthened, such as developing a community resource guide. Rochester and Thief River Falls were exceptions, however: Although they were addressing mixed delivery challenges, they did not do so through "projects." Rochester worked on the challenge of kindergarten transitions through the lens of mixed delivery (involving the various settings from which children enter kindergarten), while Thief River Falls worked to include a broader set of partners in its ECE strategic planning and on updating and addressing previous community ECE goals.

Successes

Many participants shared that working on their projects or other collaborative work led to positive outcomes for their communities.

- Examples of progress included **increased awareness of community resources, increased awareness of the state's definition of mixed delivery, and building of relationships among community partners** (although the scale of change was not as systemic as the participants had originally hoped for). One community also noted that work done through the Mixed Delivery Action Lab will directly inform other ECE work that another established network in the community is doing.

- The end-of-project survey asked participants how much progress they felt their communities had made on their local projects. The average participant rating was 3.27 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 3 being "some" and 4 being "a lot" of progress. This was the highest rated of the five subitems listed as part of this question.

Challenges

However, participants also described difficulties with their projects.

- Several communities shared that it was **hard for them to balance the need to make progress on their projects with the other project goals** of building sustainable processes using HCD and community co-design and strengthening ECE relationships and collaborations. Given the time frame of the project and the limited number of sessions, communities did not have time to address all three goals equally well, and one did not feel successful at any of them. In the words of one participant,

  "It was honestly a struggle. We felt we had the momentum to move forward, but the process was so long that we lost involved members. We also have a group of doers, so it was hard

to actually go through the process. It felt like we didn't actually make any progress, and we were not sure we were actually doing a project that aligned with our initial goal."

▪ There was also the challenge of **right-sizing community expectations and goals** given the constraints of the project timeline and resources. Some communities had the appetite for ambitious local projects, but the scope of the project meant the support we could provide was limited. Also, there were the constraints of participants already having very full workloads prior to being asked to add this work.

Build Sustainable Processes Using HCD and Community Co-Design

The second goal was for Mixed Delivery Action Lab participants to build their capacity to facilitate their community sessions and establish sustainable processes for working together using HCD and community co-design tools. As previously described, using a train-the-trainer model, staff from Third Sector explicitly trained project team members from SRI and CAREI to use the tools and modeled their use. Project team members then used these tools in the sessions and modeled their use for the participants. State staff were also exposed to this training and modeling as participants in the project staff training and many of the sessions.

Successes

Participants shared positive feedback regarding their experiences with the HCD and community co-design tools.

▪ Participants appreciated the **use of the online workbook and the facilitators modeling the techniques and activities and giving structure** to the sessions. Two participants explained:

"The [online] workbook was helpful especially as something people could work on outside of the hours or during the session (hopefully created more room for thoughts that might not have been vocalized, etc.)."

"I really enjoyed some of the tools used during the facilitation that I will be looking at using in events I facilitate in the future. … The workbook in Google Docs was a good format for us to be able to work in during the sessions and outside of the sessions and have as a lasting place for us to have notes and reflections, and next steps. The facilitators were really enjoyable to be with – they are skilled in facilitation. … I think many of the conversations we had were good ones, and I will often think about the Liberatory Designs and the idea of 'Embrace Complexity – Recognize that equity challenges are complex and messy. Stay open to possibility. Powerful design emerges from the mess, not from avoiding it.' It is hard to know what the impact on the community will be in the long run, but I appreciate the ripples that it has and I am sure will continue to create."

- Participants also noted that through the session arcs, they created processes that are sustainable for their communities by **establishing a leadership structure and clarifying roles**. For example, one community formed a shared leadership model across child care, the school district, and a nonprofit, which makes the structure more sustainable and not person-dependent. Another community defined roles that 4–5 community members have committed to helping with to sustain and strengthen their Mixed Delivery Action Lab's work.

- The end-of-project survey asked participants how much progress they felt their communities had made on building capacity for facilitation and sustaining processes for working together using HCD and community co-design tools. The average participant rating was 3.15 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 3 being "some" and 4 being "a lot" of progress. This rating was in the mid-range among the five subitems listed as part of this question.

Challenges

Participants also reported they experienced challenges with this goal.

- As noted above with the local projects, community members found it **difficult to balance the need to learn facilitation techniques and build sustainable processes for working together with the other Mixed Delivery Action Lab goals** of making progress on their projects and strengthening ECE relationships and collaborations. Again, several communities expressed that given the length of the project, they did not have time to address all three goals well, and one community explicitly asked the facilitators to stop using structured activities because facilitation was not the community's priority. Although some project participants experienced the need to balance project goals as a challenge, others found community members' willingness to prioritize and advocate for themselves to be a positive development. Additionally, a number of other communities did express interest in building their repertoire of tools, and Third Sector created a manualized **facilitation toolkit** to share with them by the project's end.

- Because of scheduling difficulties and busy workloads, many state partners were unable to regularly attend planning meetings for the sessions. Because the project team used a train-the-trainer model, **attending planning meetings was a key way to learn about and select facilitation tools**. State partners' low attendance likely impacted their ability to increase their capacity to use HCD and community co-design tools.

Strengthen ECE Relationships and Collaborations

The main goal of the Mixed Delivery Action Lab project was to strengthen ECE relationships and collaborations, both within local communities and between communities and the state, to create strong mixed delivery systems. The other two goals (working on a local project and building sustainable processes) were in service to this goal.

Successes

Participants described successes in building and sustaining relationships and collaborations *within their communities*.

- Participants in almost all the communities shared that over the course of the project, they **built relationships with new partners, strengthened connections with longtime partners, heard new perspectives, and increased their understanding of the resources** their partners had to offer. One community in particular was pleased it could successfully bring child care providers into its Mixed Delivery Action Lab after previously struggling to do so. A participant from this community shared,

  "We were missing the connection with family child care providers. We have now established a strong, and hopefully lasting, connection with them. I believe that this will be springboard for additional productive work."

  In another community, multiple participants described how they learned more about their partners through the sessions, despite this community having a history of working together with partners. One participant stated,

  "I've communicated with many people in a purposeful way, listening to their thoughts and concerns. I thought I'd know pretty much all they were going to say, being that we're all in the same profession, but I heard a lot of other topics as well."

  Another participant said,

  "It was great to meet other people in the community and hear their perspectives. I'm much more educated having had this experience."

  And their colleague agreed,

  "This opened up my eyes to a lot of the needs throughout the community!"

- The end-of-project survey asked participants how much progress they felt their communities had made on building and sustaining relationships and collaboration within the community. The average participant rating was 3.17 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 3 being "some" and 4 being "a lot" of progress. This rating was in the mid-range among the five subitems listed as part of this question and could have been impacted by selecting communities with some level of existing partnerships, as these communities might not have felt they needed to make much progress in relationship building.

- A separate survey question asked participants to select all the ways that the Mixed Delivery Action Lab project helped them build and sustain collaboration across ECE partners. Table 3 lists the response options for this question and the percentages of participants who selected them.

Table 3. Ways in Which the Mixed Delivery Action Lab Project Helped Build ECE Collaboration

Response Option	Percentage of Participants Who Selected Option
Allowed information sharing about the programs and resources available in the community	74
Expanded our understanding of what mixed delivery means and what its benefits are	70
Gave community leaders a common goal to work on	62
Provided a mechanism for bringing local leaders together	60
Strengthened relationships and built trust between community leaders	55

Participants also described their successes in building and sustaining relationships *with state staff*. This was part of creating feedback loops between local communities and the state.

▪ Participants in many communities reported they experienced **positive interactions with state staff, built connections, and felt supported**. State staff **introduced or gave more information on larger state initiatives** such as MN StoryCollective and Help Me Connect to the communities. They also **provided communities with data** pulled from state data systems (e.g., the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System) so service providers could see demographic information for local families and what programs they were using.

From the state staff's perspective, they were afforded an **on-the-ground view of issues affecting local communities and the barriers to mixed delivery** and partnerships. State staff members shared that this increased awareness of the perspectives of local communities and the challenges they faced was positively changing the way their larger state agency team works together. They are discussing how they can sustain this shift in thinking moving forward, as they do not want to fall back into old patterns of interaction.

Challenges

Participants also experienced challenges in strengthening ECE relationships and collaborations *within their communities*.

▪ The first challenge was logistical. Participants found it very difficult to bring ECE professionals from across their communities together to do this work. Community members had **full schedules that were hard to align**, and understaffing in the ECE field increased the likelihood that invitees could not step away from their jobs.

- Further, despite some successes, communities were **still trying to expand their range of partners and overcome the long-standing challenge of lack of representation** from certain ECE programs and settings. For example, one community moved its sessions to the evenings but continued to lack attendance from family child care providers and families.

- One community's participants felt that the sessions **did not provide enough opportunities to uncover and address challenges within the community**. They were most concerned with **community-based child care providers' inability to participate in the state's VPK program**. During the end-of-project reflection meeting that project team members, state partners, and participants attended, participants from this community again expressed this concern and were joined by members of several other communities. When asked what they saw as the barriers to mixed delivery in their communities, they responded:

  "Lack of funding and resources that are dedicated to this [mixed delivery] purpose. If we cannot provide an equitable care and education model, that levels the costs to families, we will continue to struggle in this area. Small providers cannot compete with school district funding."

  "The resources from the state need to be managed locally and not necessarily with the public school in control of the funding. They are also a competitive entity. A neutral center that distributes resources and manages accountability might be best."

  "Funding in early childhood is siloed and complicated. There needs to be a systemic change that would fund early education well from birth through kinder[garten] entry. Funding needs to find a way to equitably compensate child care centers that can provide wraparound services that families need."

- Other feedback from participants at the reflection meeting included that there are **too many funding streams with differing administrative requirements**, even among those going only to public schools. One participant suggested,

  "Provide streamlined funding in school districts and allow local districts to have control of how to implement programs within some general guidelines. There are too many funding streams with different expectations for local school personnel to manage effectively."

- Another participant raised the similar issue of **difficulty aligning program standards** and requirements.

  "[A barrier is] mixing delivery when there are multiple program guidelines/standards and expectations to make sure are followed."

Additionally, participants shared challenges they experienced in strengthening relationships and collaborations *with state staff*.

- One community noted it was difficult to make progress on this goal given that the **issues the community was facing did not always align with state priorities**. This misalignment negatively impacted relationship building between the community and the state.

- The end-of-project survey asked participants how much progress they felt their communities had made on building and sustaining relationships and collaboration with the state. The average participant rating was 2.76 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 2 being "a little" and 3 being "some" progress. This rating was the lowest among the five subitems listed as part of this question.

- However, on a separate survey question asking participants to rate a list of project supports on their helpfulness, the average participant rating of the presence of state staff was 4.32, with 4 being "somewhat helpful" and 5 being "very helpful." While this rating was below the average ratings of notetaking (4.38) and facilitating (4.35), it was above the ratings of $6,000 in funding (4.27), session planning (4.25), session scheduling (4.08), and providing information on topical areas (4.08). Our interpretation is that participants **welcomed the presence of state staff in their sessions but did not necessarily build strong relationships with them** by the end of the session arcs, potentially because of the state partners' limited role in planning and carrying out the sessions. The Action Lab process also varied by community, and in some places the role state staff played evolved while in others it did not.

The project team also observed **variation in how the state partners interacted with local communities**, with some taking a more active role in the sessions than others. We hypothesize that this variation may have arisen from some state partners being unclear on what their roles in the sessions and on the project were, some not having expertise that matched well with community needs, and some being more willing to speak and engage based on personality. Some state partners were also very busy and struggled with competing priorities. Additionally, some communities set boundaries around who they invited to attend their planning meetings and sessions.

Cross-Community Observations

Variability in "Mixed Delivery" Across Communities

As the project progressed, the project team as well as some state partners observed that **some Mixed Delivery Action Labs were defining and conceptualizing mixed delivery differently from each other and from how the state conceptualizes it, while other Mixed Delivery Action Labs did not overtly discuss or conceptualize mixed delivery at all**. This was partly by design; as described in the introduction, the state intentionally broadened its definition of mixed delivery for the project to give local communities flexibility in how they approached strengthening their local ECE systems. To meet communities where they were at and not be

overly directive, the state gave communities wide latitude in project selection and setting their session arcs. Thus, few if any communities addressed mixed delivery directly and explicitly. However, many addressed expanding partnerships across their ECE systems broadly or worked on challenges that impeded their ability to deliver ECE services comprehensively through a variety of agencies, programs, and settings.

The idea of formal mixed delivery partnerships as coordination of services and sharing of resources between districts, Head Start programs, and community-based child care was not central to any community's work. However, in several communities, **the issue of schools, Head Start, and child care competing to serve 4-year-old children** was peripheral to the discussion and felt like the "elephant in the room." There were hints of lasting relational damage within communities and between communities and the state, but these were not openly addressed until the reflection meeting with the project team, state partners, and participants at the end of the project.

The Mixed Delivery Action Lab community projects also reflected the **early state of partnership** in many communities. Few if any communities had projects that addressed integrating multiple ECE programs through shared family access, staffing, professional development, or funding; they were at the point of wanting to share information. Two communities had previously held integrated professional development, and one had integrated programming between Head Start and schools, but this changed with a change in the funding context.

Strengthening Mixed Delivery is Iterative

Over the course of the Mixed Delivery Action Lab project, the project team heard from community members and observed that **strengthening mixed delivery is challenging but important work**. At the end-of-project reflection meeting, we asked participants to define mixed delivery using one word (Figure 5). There is acknowledgment of the promise of benefits for families, service providers, and the larger community, as well as how complex it is and how hard it can be to do.

Figure 5. Word Cloud for "Mixed Delivery Is…."

- Although there was an almost universal recognition among participants that a better-integrated ECE system where families can choose among high quality and affordable programs is a worthwhile goal, some also recognized the reality that to achieve this goal, much more work will be required. On the end-of-project survey, they commented,

  "[This project] has brought up the fact that mixed delivery is still not clearly defined and understood by many. Great to know that the state has funding and support to continue this project."

  "There's still work that needs to be done. There's many gaps to be filled. It's a journey that requires ongoing work."

- On the survey, participants rated on a 4-point scale how much progress they felt their communities had made on strengthening mixed delivery, and the average participant rating was 3.02, with 3 being "some" and 4 being "a lot" of progress. This subitem was one of the lower-rated among the five listed as part of this question.

At the end-of-project reflection meeting, we also gathered input from participants on **how they would like to see mixed delivery expressed in their community** in the next five years. Below are the visions they shared with us.

- Participants would like to see a **deeper understanding of mixed delivery among service providers and the broader community**, leading to shared goals around best meeting families' needs and more integrated service delivery. They stated,

  "I would like the mixed delivery providers to be more connected and in community."

  "I would like the community at large to understand the mixed delivery concept and be able to access programs and sites that meet their needs."

"[I would like to] Have a common group of early care and learning providers who are collaborating on a shared purpose and the best ways to meet the families' expressed needs for the education and care of their young children."

- Relatedly, another participant was hoping their community would **progress along the collaboration continuum** toward integration. They described,

"Ideally, we would be able to have shared professional development, so that all children have access to licensed teachers' birth through kindergarten entry. I would like to see funding mechanisms in place that would enhance the collaboration and integrated funding to sustain both school and childcare centers so that the needs of all children and their families are met."

- Participants also described how their local communities **need more resources** to support mixed delivery. This includes **financial resources to support collaboration, and opportunities to share experiences with others** outside of their communities. They said,

"[I would like] Ongoing opportunity to connect with other programs across the state who are engaging in mixed delivery work. Someone who is supporting those connections regionally to help us think outside of the box of how we are doing mixed delivery."

"[I would like a] Community of practice. Each community is going to be different, but you can always glean information from the work of others."

"[I would like] Resources to continue to support innovative thinking around how to collaborate across environments. This includes fiscal resources to be able to strengthen shared use of curriculum, assessment, and coaching support."

Suggested Strategies for Future Success

Below, we outline for the state's consideration two overarching suggested strategies for future mixed delivery success. The suggested strategies are based on the project team's reflections after having planned and facilitated the Mixed Delivery Action Lab sessions, our review of session notes, direct input from participants through session and end-of-project surveys, and feedback collected through the project reflection meetings with the state partners and participants. Additionally, the recommended strategies reflect the project team's expertise and experience in working on mixed delivery in other states.

Strengthen and Model ECE System Coordination Within DCYF and Between State Agencies

- **Build on the establishment of Minnesota's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) by modeling collaboration** and leveraging the opportunities of organizing many early childhood programs under one agency while also strengthening cross-agency

collaborations (e.g., between DCYF, Minnesota Department of Education, and Department of Employment and Economic Development [DEED]).

- o **Increase cross-program and cross-agency communication as well as communication *within* programs about mixed delivery.** Include state staff from the range of ECE programs (child care, VPK, Head Start, early childhood special education, and others) in regular presentations and communications regarding the what, why, and how of implementing mixed delivery of services. Also recognize that although select program leaders may be involved in planning for mixed delivery, state staff within programs are not always aware of ongoing efforts.

- o **Similarly, engage state staff from all ECE programs to hear information and give input when there are major initiatives or policy changes being designed and launched.** A current example is the redesign of **Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) – Parent Aware**, which represents an opportunity for alignment of quality standards across ECE programs.

- o **At the state level, model collaborations that are desired at the local level.** For example, include a leader from child care licensing, alongside those from VPK and Head Start, when making presentations to local communities on mixed delivery of ECE for 4-year-old children so that there is state-level representation of child care interests and a three-way partnership is modeled for local program staff.

- ▪ **Continue aligning program, policy, and funding requirements across ECE programs to support mixed delivery.**

  - o **Expand the state's existing ECE collaboration grids** (**Head Start and Local Educational Agency Collaboration Grid for Providing Services to Children with Disabilities in Part B** and **Head Start and Local Educational Agency Collaboration Grid for Providing Services to Children with Disabilities in Part C**) to include other ECE program types to support programs in understanding and meeting requirements while supporting collaboration. Through this process, identify ways to reduce misalignment across ECE programs as well as offer technical assistance and mediation support for programs/communities.

    - • To facilitate expansion of the grids, conduct an analysis of the various ECE program and funding requirements to identify and address unintended barriers to mixed delivery (e.g., child care providers' challenges in accessing public funding; unaligned program standards between Head Start, VPK, and licensed child care).

- **Have ECE agencies and programs coordinate their efforts to strengthen program quality, and do so by leveraging existing investments.[3]** For example:
    - Coordinate and streamline existing efforts to support and strengthen the child care industry, such as the **Child Care Wayfinder**, **Great Start Compensation Program**, and **Child Care Economic Development Program**, and identify opportunities within these initiatives to promote mixed delivery.
    - Build on and expand cross-agency state efforts to address the ECE workforce shortage with consideration of all ECE settings, including leveraging preparation programs like **Empower to Educate**.
    - Coordinate and streamline **Develop** and Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) professional development reporting systems to recognize approved professional learning course and training documentation. This will enable professionals to avoid submission duplication. Work across ECE programs to create individualized training pathways that are less arduous than current offerings.

- **Better understand, document, and make transparent the ECE funding landscape. Also persist in developing cross-system funding approaches** that promote ECE mixed delivery similar to the Walz-Flanagan Administration's Fiscal Year 2024 proposed expansion of mixed delivery through **dedicated VPK funding** for Head Start and child care.
    - As part of developing the next legislative proposal, consider holding community engagement activities (perhaps through the targeted supports for the communities described below) to share information, road-test ideas, and gather interest-holder feedback (similar to what was done for the ECE wage scale).

- Promote the **Minnesota Children's Fiscal Map** across ECE programs at the state level and identify resources within the tool that local communities can use to support program implementation and build mixed delivery partnerships. Determine if increased messaging or clarifications to the Children's Fiscal Map are needed to help improve usability of the tool. Also undertake cross-program and cross-agency review of how ECE funding is awarded to local communities and consider if any changes can be made that will incentivize and facilitate mixed delivery partnerships.

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[3] It should be noted that some of these existing investments have built-in barriers to leveraging them for mixed delivery purposes; for example, the statute authorizing Wayfinder specifies that it is to help people start, sustain, or expand *licensed* child care programs. As agencies and programs work to coordinate efforts, it will be important to identify those structural barriers to coordination and work to change them, which may require more than administrative action.

Provide Universal, Targeted, and Intensive Supports to Local Communities to Promote Minnesota's Vision for ECE Mixed Delivery

DCYF can promote and scale up Minnesota's vision for ECE mixed delivery using a tiered framework of universal, targeted, and intensive supports to local communities.

- **Provide universal supports such as:**

  - **Clear and regular communication of the vision for mixed delivery** in Minnesota that is inclusive of all ECE program types and settings. Given that the Mixed Delivery Action Lab communities struggled with conceptualizing mixed delivery in their work, and that there is often unawareness or misunderstanding of state efforts and initiatives, state leaders could **develop and implement a strategic communication plan** for use with local communities. In the words of one action lab participant, *"Get the word out about what mixed delivery is!"*

    - State leaders can work together to further refine a consistent state definition and vision for implementation of mixed delivery that is actively shared with ECE programs and other community partners such as early learning coalitions and industry organizations. This can be done using materials such as the existing mixed delivery one-pager. It can also be expressed through consistent messaging from staff across DCYF, MDE, and other agencies in their presentations, newsletters, guidance, and resources.

    - Part of these communications should be acknowledgment of the real and perceived challenges in implementing mixed delivery. It is especially important to be transparent about potential challenges related to funding. For example, acknowledge that partnerships between school districts, Head Start, and community-based child care have historically been difficult to form; in some communities, child care perceives VPK as having a negative impact on their businesses. DCYF could message that this concern has been heard and that local communities are invited to help unpack the issue and propose solutions.

  - **Identification and active sharing of examples of successful local mixed delivery partnerships.** Local communities may be more motivated to prioritize partnership and work through challenges when the benefits of doing so are demonstrated for them. They may also experience more success when there is a clear path laid by others to follow. Several Mixed Delivery Action Lab participants expressed interest in learning from communities that have experienced success with mixed delivery. They stated,

"I would like to see models from other places that are working. I would like the opportunity to do site visits or networking opportunities with successful mixed delivery communities."

"[I would like] examples of how mixed delivery is working, can't see how it will work in my community because I don't understand it. The school has a big building that could house a child care center, but there was historically a lot of clashing between child care and school district … Child care does not want to send families to screenings, they don't want to tell families about resources offered through the school district because they can't compete with free."

The state can invest resources in collecting and sharing examples that are varied and inclusive of rural, urban, and suburban communities. Examples could include:

- Partnerships between VPK-funded school districts and community-based child care (e.g., VPK seats being offered in child care settings)

- Partnerships between Head Start and community-based child care (e.g., family child care providers acting as Head Start contractors)

- Partnerships between Head Start and VPK-funded school districts (e.g., co-location of services in a school building)

- IDEA Part C and Part B services well-embedded across ECE settings (schools, Head Start, and child care)

- Existing funding streams well-leveraged to support mixed delivery, such as Early Learning Scholarships Pathway II used to support child care in partnering with other ECE programs

For each example, articulate the overall benefits, solutions to any funding or other challenges, and what may be unique to that community/partnership versus what can be transferred to other communities.

- **Provide targeted supports such as ongoing opportunities for groups of local communities to network and share learning as well as engage in feedback with the state about mixed delivery (e.g., communities of practice [CoPs]).** Mixed Delivery Action Lab participants overwhelmingly reported interest in this idea. They shared,

  "I want to continue to collaborate with other EC stakeholders. We want to build relationships so that we can encourage and support one another rather than view each other as competitors."

  "I am interested in networking with people where mixed delivery is already working."

  o Serving as a **feedback mechanism with the state**, these CoPs will enable ECE providers to have the most current and accurate information from DCYF (and other

state agencies) related to mixed delivery, and they will enable state leaders to hear directly from local program staff at regular intervals.

- o DCYF can also use these CoPs (and potentially other existing groups such as advisory committees) to **continue to engage with local communities to learn more about challenges to mixed delivery**. DCYF can collect information from communities about their specific challenges and barriers to cross-program partnerships, learn what supports or flexibilities with requirements communities need, and identify communication barriers such as lack of knowledge of the state's ongoing efforts (to support the child care industry, for example).

  - If needed, the state can do a **case study-like exercise** to deeply understand a particular challenge. For example, in the past 5 years across Minnesota, the number of spaces in licensed child care centers has increased while the number of spaces in licensed family child care homes has decreased. The decrease in family child care was larger and has resulted in a net decrease in available licensed child care spaces. Minnesota's rate of decrease in licensed family child care also exceeds the national average calculated by Child Care Aware of America (2023) using data from 39 states. In communities experiencing a decrease in family child care, the state can work with local leaders to unpack the issue and co-design potential solutions, including leveraging mixed delivery partnerships to help family child care businesses stay open and thriving so that families have choice in care.

- **Use information gathered through the targeted supports to identify individual local communities that could benefit from intensive support that is tailored to their needs.**

- **Work with communities to implement a pilot intended to scale up a previously identified success or solve a particular problem.** Example challenges include finding ways all ECE program types can access public funding; identifying and addressing specific gaps in state-to-local communication; and, as mentioned above, supporting community-based child care to stay healthy as businesses. ECE providers need to see what is possible, and it can be helpful to have the specific steps to take to reach a goal modeled for them. Successful efforts can then be scaled up in an iterative way and highlighted through the strategic communications plan. In the words of one Mixed Delivery Action Lab participant, community members would like to see *"funding mechanisms in place that would enhance the collaboration and integrated funding to sustain both school and child care centers so that the needs of children and their families are met."*

  - o **Additionally, create a process for communities to request intensive support.** It may be beneficial to communities to receive intensive support when they are in the

beginning stages of creating their first mixed delivery partnership or when they encounter a barrier they cannot address on their own.

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