Across the country, pioneering health care leaders are committing their organizations to transformative work outside of their walls, with a sharp focus on community engagement, health and wellness.

"Aha" Moment

These "aha" moments vary, but generally involve recognition that an existing system or practice is not adequate. Consequently, communities are not healthier despite enormous cost. Health systems, therefore, must consider their role in the health of the broader community.

EXECUTIVE: "We always use phrases like "it's the right thing to do," but in communities where there is a very high prevalence of a disease, how can you wait around and see if the market will do something about it?

BOARD MEMBER: "The role of the health care provider is to be expected, the role of the community, we believe, more than that, to take leadership.

"Getting Started"

Health systems select issues to work on and community partners are identified—this first initiative is awkward. Often this involves simply taking the plunge to get started on anything at all, involving steps that are not under careful coordination, but simply a path to engaging with the community to improve health and wellness. The path is not easy—hiccups, steps that are parallel, steps that are learned—but it involves the key steps and sequence as depicted below.

Feedback and Course Correction

Despite best intentions, health systems often make missteps in the early stages, in terms of misunderstanding health issues as the community sees them, or trying to control the process rather than asking for feedback, or where the feedback for intention is misunderstood. Success in continuing to engage in community feedback and taking corrective action.

EXECUTIVE: "The toll on people who are actually doing it is very high. How can you do something about a disease when you're dealing with the board, staff and financial resources, and developing the internal frameworks and capacity to ensure we really do make a difference?"

BOARD MEMBER: "Dialogue is extremely important. People areashington of the idea of dialogue is conceptual, but we know what we're doing. There must be dialogue, coming to conclusions together.

Internal Alignment

In this initiative, everyone must begin to practice results. Organizations align internal systems to better support community goals and recognize that this is different work that involves aligning the board, staff, and financial resources, and developing the internal frameworks and capacity to ensure we really do make a difference.

EXECUTIVE: "We work from a theory of change that involves showing courage enough to tell us, we wanted to do something, we started to correct and ask—what do you think happened?"

BOARD MEMBER: "Dialogue is extremely important. People areashington of the idea of dialogue is conceptual, but we know what we're doing. There must be dialogue, coming to conclusions together.

Recalibration and Role Clarification

Once the value system is in place, the governance structure starts to change, and that's how new things start to change in other parts of the system.

EXECUTIVE: "It financially sustainable? I think it involves a better model when you think about how you can grow health and getting paid for that. Long-term it's the key to it.

BOARD MEMBER: "The hope of people see our commitment, they will turn to us as they turn to others, the values, the culture, the community will help keep you in the game, the insurance will begin to see.

New Business Models

The sources of funding for community initiatives vary, depending on the health system, but an underlying business model that rigorously supports the work has yet to emerge. Depending on the health system, but an underlying business model that rigorously supports the work has yet to emerge.

EXECUTIVE: "For these projects, we have to keep it doing, there are big, big issues with lots of steps. Just get moving. We have to keep doing it.

Recalibration and Role Clarification

Health systems go back to the drawing board to reexamine clarity and relationships, and to practice more authentic collaboration, from planning and prioritization to execution.

EXECUTIVE: "You're asking about the tension—the desire between go and do, and time to understand.

System Transformation

Although a business model has yet to emerge that can underpin widespread adoption of community-based practice, the work continues because it is seen as at the heart of future health care and positions health care systems for that future.

EXECUTIVE: "If something happens in a city, if someone doesn't like it, is it going to be easy to build that?"

BOARD MEMBER: "You have to build the change, change everybody's psyche.

As the path suggests, working with the community is a lengthy process, requiring humility, unwavering commitment, perseverance and courage. Cultural transformation is required in both health care systems and communities, including new relationships among systems, clinicians, citizens, and other stakeholders. But the health care leaders would suggest that if you truly believe that the mission of health care is to improve health (and not just treat sickness), then you have no choice but to jump on this path.