



The Board and CEO Partnership During the Current Public Health Emergency

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A critical pillar of effective governance is a constructive partnership between the board – which governs the health center – and the CEO who manages the day-to-day. Critical ingredients of an effective partnership include role clarity, shared expectations, trust, respect, open communication, and the ability to navigate difficult moments.¹

As health centers remain on the frontlines of addressing the current public health emergency of COVID-19, the partnership between the board and CEO is even more critical. While health centers are treating patients with COVID-19, they are dealing with many other challenges and changes that may include reducing dental and other services, rapidly introducing telehealth, navigating a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), among others. We know that many health centers have already had to make – and others will soon be making – extremely difficult decisions about finances, staffing, and the future.

Boards may wish to consider the following as they think about how to effectively support and partner with the CEO of the health center in the weeks and months ahead:

- **Reconsider the frequency of check-ins between the board chair and CEO** – It is common for the board chair and CEO to talk periodically to plan meetings and touch base on issues. At this time, chairs may wish to ask their CEOs how they would like to adjust the frequency of their ongoing communication. Some are opting for more frequent phone calls, which provide support for the CEO as well as allow for planning around major decisions that require board consideration and decision-making. Board chairs can also let CEOs know that they are available for unscheduled calls as urgent items emerge.
- **Proactively foster communication** – Health center CEOs are under immense stress. Boards can proactively open communication with a “we are here to help” approach; this may include:
 - Giving the CEO time to talk about challenges, struggles, or whatever is on their mind. Sometimes a board can help by just listening; other times, a CEO may want informal input on items that do not officially require board approval.
 - Encouraging creativity by promoting a mantra of “adapt.”
 - Asking the CEO where there may opportunities; in some cases, health centers may have an opportunity to rebuild and retool.
 - Being open to having discussions with the CEO about governance-level issues related to staffing, services, locations, and business model options (e.g., in-person, telehealth, etc.).
 - Talking about what support the CEO might need as they lead the staff during this unprecedented time and being prepared to make appropriate support available if possible.

¹ For additional information, see NACHC’s [Governance Guide for Health Center Boards](#), Chapter 7: CEO Oversight and Partnership and BoardSource, [Board-Staff Partnership](#).

- **Prepare for, attend, and participate in board meetings** – Given restrictions on public gatherings and stay-at-home orders in many states, boards are now meeting virtually.² Board chairs can continue to partner with CEOs to develop board meeting agendas that prioritize urgent items related to COVID-19 that require board deliberation and/or approval, and ensure continued focus on ongoing board responsibilities, including oversight of the Health Center Program. Board members can support the center by preparing for and attending virtual board meetings to ensure the board has quorum at its monthly meetings. Board chairs can open discussion with board members about common barriers related to board meetings, and the board may decide the day or time of board meetings may need to be adjusted in the short-term.
- **Consider additional support board leadership may offer to board members and in designing virtual meetings** – With so many difficult discussions occurring, it is important to recognize board members may be feeling a spectrum of emotions during this time. Board members may feel the weight of decisions surrounding possible furloughs, financial issues, and site closures, among other issues. Board chairs can embrace the opportunity to check in with board members.

Some board chairs may also find it helpful to consider a preparatory call with the executive committee (often comprised of the board’s officers), if the board has such a committee; that call can be used to gather thoughts, clarify available information, and make a plan to lead the virtual board meeting. Board chairs can also consider how to leverage other members of the board – including other officers – during virtual board meetings. A “team” approach can provide direction and facilitate productive discussions during the virtual board meeting. For example, consider assigning talking points among executive committee members or officers to keep the virtual meeting engaging.

- **Ensure clarity about decisions that require board approval** – Health centers are making difficult decisions regarding finances, services, staffing, and other issues. Ensure shared understanding around important decisions that require board approval including:
 - Altering site hours
 - Changes to the scope of project
 - Closing sites
 - New financial strategy and major adjustments to the health center’s budgets
 - Updates to major policies

Please refer to the Health Resources and Services Administration’s [Health Center Program Compliance Manual](#) for a comprehensive list of items requiring board approval in order to remain in continuing compliance with that program.

Additional Information and Questions?

- For additional resources from NACHC related to COVID-19, please visit <https://www.healthcenterinfo.org/priority-topics/covid-19/> and <http://www.nachc.org/coronavirus/>, or contact preparedness@nachc.org.
- If you have questions about COVID-19, please visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/>.
- If you have a general health center governance question, please contact Emily Heard, Director of Health Center Governance at trainings@nachc.org.

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² For additional information, see [Virtual Board Meetings: Tips for Health Center Boards](#) and other resources available on the [Health Resources Clearinghouse](#).