

# Streamlining Board Committees

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## Client Experiences with the “Three-Committee” Board Structure

In 2009, David La Piana penned an article arguing that “[Boards Should Only Have Three Committees!](#)” It resonated with many who appreciated the idea of streamlining, while others maintained that such a change would be too drastic and that a more robust traditional structure continued to serve their needs. Since then, we’ve heard anecdotally from time to time about nonprofits that have adopted the “three-committee” model — but this is the first opportunity we’ve taken to speak with some of them about their experiences for shared learning.

Some of the benefits of the streamlined, three-committee structure as we first championed it include:

- Each board member need only serve on one committee at a time;
- Staff have fewer board and committee meetings to schedule and prepare for;
- Committees are more accountable since a board officer chairs each committee; and
- Board meeting agendas are built around committee reports, reinforcing the value of their work.

In the following conversations with three nonprofit leaders, representing organizations of varying size and serving diverse communities, we sought to verify whether these advantages have been realized — and whether there are other lessons or insights they would share from their experiences implementing a streamlined board committee structure.

### Hale Makua Health Services

[Hale Makua Health Services](#) (Hale Makua) has provided residential elder care in Maui since 1946, and has since grown to include adult day and home health care, rehabilitation services, and long-term care. With two campuses in the Kahului and Wailuku areas, Hale Makua has a combined 344-bed capacity for providing quality nursing care, and serves approximately 1,000 individuals annually through all of its programs. The organization is currently transitioning to new leadership, as chief executive officer Tony Krieg is retiring after 35 years of service with the agency.

Hale Makua has operated with a streamlined board structure since 2009, adapting it over the years to address changing needs. The organization currently has a board of 19 and maintains three primary standing committees: Administration and Finance, Governance, and Development and Community Relations. In addition, it has a legacy special events committee that is working increasingly closely with the development and community relations committee, and a Professional Executive Committee (created to perform physician review functions unique to the health care environment) that reports to the Governance committee. Executive committee functions are limited and performed on an ad hoc basis rather than as an active standing committee.

Tony tells us that when he was first introduced to the three-committee structure idea, he immediately found it appealing because it addressed issues his board was experiencing, including board members being spread too thin across too many committees. This, and a related ambivalence about the relative value of board vs. committee participation, was resulting in challenges meeting quorum. He explains: “Some members were feeling like, ‘I’ve already gone to the committee meeting, so why is a full board meeting important?’”

Today, Hale Makua’s streamlined board structure has contributed to more efficient board meetings. Each committee has a charter, providing clarity as to roles and responsibilities, and new members are oriented to the non-traditional committee structure in their onboarding process so they know what to expect. Even so, Tony tells us (as have all of the leaders we interviewed) that board development and effectiveness continue to be a work in progress. Having a sound committee structure is just half of an important equation; there must also be a clear and meaningful role for the full board. This is especially important when the board uses a consent agenda, and it takes mindful planning to ensure that there is more for board members to do in regular meetings than carry a motion to approve. A well-functioning set of committees can advance, but should not supplant, the work of the full board.

### **UpValley Family Centers (UVFC)**

[UpValley Family Centers](#) (UVFC) was formed in 2014 through a merger of the Calistoga Family Center and the St. Helena Family Center. UVFC serves more than 3,000 people annually in northern Napa Valley, California. Like other family resource centers, UVFC serves as a one-stop-shop for services ranging from health and wellness to education and economic stability, as well as programs for youth, seniors, immigrants, and emergency assistance.

Jenny Ocón, executive director, was hired to lead the newly-merged organization in 2014, and its board committee structure was also defined at its inception as a part of the merger agreement. Having formed the board with five members from each of the merging organizations’ previous boards, in addition to two new community members (one from Calistoga and one from St. Helena), UVFC now uses Internal, External, and Governance committees, along with an Executive Committee.

For UVFC, which has a modest-sized board of 12 and serves a mostly rural community, having a small number of committees is particularly helpful. Jenny tells us that several of her board members serve on other local boards as well, and that the committee structure not only keeps their efforts for UVFC from feeling spread too thin, but “is an effective way to focus their energies with us.” It is also still a relatively new board, she says, and committee participation has proven an important avenue for board members “to step in, engage, and take action on behalf of the organization.”

Because the committees set goals at the start of each year, and are responsible to report out at each board meeting, there is strong continuity, follow-through, and accountability. The structure is also purposely accommodating to the creation of ad hoc committees as needed, and UVFC has done this, most recently with the formation of a strategic planning committee, which will dissolve once that work is completed.

One challenge has been that of identifying board leadership to fill officer positions, and thus, to serve as committee chairs. This is due in part to board member term agreements allowing commitments as brief as one year, which has led to turnover and time needed for new members to grow into board leadership responsibilities. Noting that 8 of the initial 12 board members have cycled off the board, Jenny says that new members want to get their bearings before assuming leadership, so UVFC has modified the board structure accordingly. There is currently no Vice President, but a President, Past President, Treasurer, and Secretary. The President, Past President, and Treasurer chair the Executive, Governance, and Internal Committees, respectively, and the External Committee is currently chaired by a board member who did not wish to serve as an officer. Now that board terms have been set at three years, Jenny expects that developing board leadership and succession will go increasingly smoothly. She is also quick to credit her board members for their willingness to engage: “All the new board members have been great about really getting involved, they’re just still in learning mode.”

## East Bay Agency for Children

[East Bay Agency for Children](#) (EBAC) provides community-based prevention and recovery services to over 20,000 vulnerable children and families in Oakland and throughout Alameda County. Founded as a day treatment program in the early 1950s by parents of children with special needs, EBAC expanded its vision significantly in the 80s and 90s, acquiring a number of related nonprofit service providers and programs to form a comprehensive continuum of services aimed at building resilience and reducing the incidence and impact of trauma and social inequities.

When Josh Leonard joined EBAC as its chief executive officer in 2013, the board had already adopted a streamlined committee structure consisting of Finance, Governance, and Development, with an active Executive Committee. As part of a major strategic planning process undertaken soon after Josh's arrival, EBAC retooled its committee structure, trading its Development committee for a Quality and Impact committee, right-sizing the role of its Executive committee, and reducing the number of both board and committee meetings. It currently has a board complement of fourteen.

For EBAC, committee effectiveness has been part of a broader set of considerations about how the board must change along with the organization as needs evolve. In growing from a largely parent-led, single-program nonprofit to an organization offering a broader, more comprehensive suite of services including early and upstream interventions, EBAC's board role and composition have shifted as well. Josh says that navigating this change has involved the board in "figuring out the level of conversations that happen at board level, moving toward the strategic vs. operational."

The board's committee work has mirrored this. Limiting the role of the Executive Committee to that of conducting executive performance reviews, organizing board meeting agendas, and addressing emergency needs has elevated the collective role and responsibility of the full board. Doing away with the former Development committee has served to differentiate the board's role in fundraising from that of staff, as well as to signal that this responsibility is that of all board members, not just a subgroup. Similarly, the creation of a Quality and Impact Committee, Josh explains, is directly related to "overall efforts of the organization to be more data-driven, to dig into what wellbeing means, what success looks like, and how the board uses that in charting a strategic course for the organization — as well as in their role as ambassadors in speaking about the organization's work with authenticity.

The streamlined committee structure also complements changes in board composition and meeting frequency that leverages the power of "less is more." Prior to Josh's hire, the board operated with 21 members, just over the minimum number mandated by its bylaws. But it was also meeting monthly (as were each of its committees), which put a large burden on board members and increased the difficulty of recruiting new members to maintain the required board complement. Seeing this as a source of board anxiety, Josh led a move to change the bylaws to allow for a smaller board. This, and reducing the number of full board meetings to five per year, has resulted in a leaner board that has been more selectively assembled to advance the work of the organization.

These changes have not been easy. Shifting the board's composition from members with a personal connection to the organization to more individuals with experience working within complex systems has been experienced by some with a sense of loss. Even reducing the number of meetings was met with some apprehension from longtime members who were concerned that important work wouldn't get done. But because these changes — including adaptations to the streamlined committee structure — have occurred not arbitrarily but in response to the organization's shifting strategic needs and priorities, the result has been a board that meets less frequently but in a more focused way.

Conclusion Based on these conversations with nonprofit leaders (only highlights of which did we have room to share above), the anticipated benefits of streamlining board committees do ring true: reduced demand on board members and staff, closer ties to board leadership, and more intentional links between committee work and board agendas. Other benefits include the clarity created by articulating annual goals for each committee, and the flexibility to form temporary committees as needed for intensive but time-limited projects like strategic planning or executive search. Most importantly, we heard that being mindful about committee structures was an important part of larger efforts around board development.

Does your organization use a streamlined committee structure? Share your experiences in the comments below, we'd like to hear from you.

See more at: <http://www.lapiana.org/blog/blog-detail/id/226/streamlining-board-committees#sthash.1fv3d5A0.dpuf>