

Getting Started:

1. How do we start a coalition?

Community groups, or coalitions, usually start because someone saw a need and decided it was time for change. If you are that person or have talked with others in your community about the need for change, then you have already taken the first step. Understanding the need for community change related to youth substance use, or recovery supports, or another behavioral health concern is so important. As you begin to think about forming the coalition or scheduling that first meeting, think about these questions:

- *What is currently happening in our community related to the issue of concern?*
- *What supports are in place now?*

Being able to articulate the issue and understanding the story of your community related to the issue will help you as you move forward. The next step is to start talking to others in your community. It is very likely that there are more people who feel the same way you do but are waiting for someone to get things started. YOU can be that someone. Considering the next set of questions will help you take the next step:

- *Who needs to be at the table? Who are the community “movers and shakers”?*
- *What is it that you are asking them to do? What is in it for them? Why should they engage?*

Note that you do not need a large number of people to get started. Find five people who are interested in helping to create change...and just get started. Host a meeting at a local library or community center or school. Talk about your concerns and give time for attendees to voice their opinions as well. Some of the first organizational meetings should include agenda items that help to define the following:

- *What are the coalition's purpose, goals, and desired outcomes? Why are we meeting, and what do we want to happen?*
- *What are the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for our members? What are we asking people to do?*

Discussing these topics early on will help to keep the focus on the issue your coalition is trying to impact. As your group continues to meet, you will want to start to develop a plan of action. Following a set of guidelines like the Strategic Prevention Framework (or SPF) will help keep your coalition on the right path as you begin to set measurable goals and develop a strategic action plan and timelines.

2. How do I know if I am qualified to launch this effort?

Do you want to do it? Do you feel passionate about the issue the coalition is trying to solve? Are you willing to learn what you need to know to make the coalition successful? If you answered “YES” to these three questions, you are qualified to launch this effort. It really is as simple as that.

You do not need to have all the answers. No one person has all of the answers to complex community issues. Successful coalitions are built through collaboration. Really successful coalitions are those who are willing to work through conflict to find solutions. You won't always agree, and that is ok. Be willing to learn from community members, partners, and existing coalitions.

It is helpful to understand your own strengths...and your own weaknesses. Do you have good communication skills? Are you skilled at relationship-building? Are you a whiz at organization? All of these are helpful when leading a coalition. If all of these are not your strengths, find someone who can help. Nobody expects you to do it all. Allow yourself to ask for help and focus on those things that you do really well. Collaboration makes the coalition run more smoothly.

Building Your Coalition:

3. How do I get people in my community to join our coalition?

The first step is to take inventory to determine if there are already groups working on similar initiatives in your community. If so, reach out to them to see if there are partnership opportunities. Show that you value collaboration and are not seeking to compete with the work they are doing. Invite them to your next meeting and work together to see how mutual support can positively impact both movements.

If there is not already a group working on similar initiatives, get out and start networking to bring people to the table. Consider these additional points:

- Develop an elevator pitch...a 1-2 minute explanation of who you are and what you are trying to accomplish. A good elevator pitch clearly communicates (in the time it would take to ride on an elevator with someone) the coalition's purpose and goals. Explain to the person why they are needed on the coalition and always end with an invitation to the next meeting.
- Start with a core group of committed champions. This group can connect with their networks, and slowly the group will grow and gain momentum.
- Be thoughtful when growing the group. Examine your current membership. Is it representative of your community's demographics? Every community is comprised of at least 12 sectors. How many community sectors are represented on your coalition? Develop a plan to reach any that are missing. There is more information on sector engagement in this toolkit.

4. How do we engage sectors who have been non-responsive?

Community engagement can be difficult. Most coalition leaders would tell you that there have been 2-3 sectors that have proven to be more difficult to bring to the coalition table. Which are those? Well...that is difficult to answer because it is likely different for every coalition and every community. One coalition leader may tell you they struggle to engage a particular sector while another may have two or three representatives in their group. The fact



of the matter is that each community is different, and you will need to determine which sectors to focus on and then consider the following:

- Connect the interests or work of the sector with the issue the coalition is working on. If you are struggling to engage parents in a primary prevention coalition, connecting the coalition work to the overall health of youth in the community may be a point of interest. What is it that parents want for their children, and how is the issue of preventing youth substance use important?
- Attempt to connect with a new contact related to the target sector. For instance, if you have been inviting the police chief to attend your meetings and he does not seem interested, is there someone at the Sheriff's Department who may want to attend? Remember that department leaders may not have ability to participate, but could they send a deputy or other staff? The same is true for other sectors. It is usually about finding out who could champion the cause with a particular sector.
- Understand there may competing priorities, specific barriers, or other reasons for non-participation. People are busy, and responsibilities get prioritized. Try not to get frustrated if particular sector representatives do not show up to meetings. Are they able to be helpful in other ways? Do they offer meeting space when you need it or forward out event flyers to their contacts? Do they show up for events? Sometimes people cannot make the meetings work, but if they are engaged in other ways...count that as a win.
- Use personalized outreach and relationship-building rather than mass communication. This is critical. Think of this in terms of group dynamics. If a mass email is sent, people are less likely to feel a personal connection to the invitation. If you really want someone to participate, it may take some time to get them there. Taking the time to build relationships can be a long process, but it is more likely to lead to successful engagement.
- Highlight coalition successes and the value their participation can bring to community outcomes. Everyone wants to feel like they are a part of something valuable. Make sure to help your members and potential members feel like their efforts will help lead to positive community change. Celebrate your coalition's successes. Share that widely with members and the community. Success often leads to even more engagement.

5. Why do I need so many different people engaged?

The work of a community coalition is difficult. Think about it...whether you are working on prevention of youth substance use or are attempting to increase access to recovery supports in your community...you are working to change community systems that have been in place for a long time. This cannot be accomplished by one person or one agency. Complex community issues require collective action, and that requires getting input and engagement from a wide array of community members and stakeholders.

Your community is made up of many different people, with different belief systems, education levels, family history, etc. All of these different people can share unique



perspectives and involving them in your coalition will help ensure that all parts of the community are represented when determining potential solutions.

Keeping Members Engaged:

6. How do I identify what people in each sector are interested in doing?

If your coalition is truly representative of the community, your sector representatives will likely have different interests and ideas for how to address the coalition's goals. One of the best ways to find out what they are interested in doing is to ASK them. This can be done in a variety of ways, including key informant interviews and surveys. A key informant interview is exactly what it sounds like. You (or another coalition member) will meet with a number of sector representatives and talk with them about the priority issue. Ask them what they see as the problem and how they envision a solution. A key informant interview is helpful because it allows you to ask the same set of questions to a number of community members and to get insight into both the issue and their ideas for potential solutions.

A member survey is a great way to determine what members are interested in doing. While a survey is not as in-depth or personal as a key informant interview, it can allow for wider distribution in a shorter amount of time. Whether you decide on a survey or key informant interviews, one of the things you will need to assess is how the goals and activities of the coalition align with the goals and mission of the member and their organization.

7. How do we keep coalition members engaged once they join us?

Coalition member retention is just as important as recruitment. Getting them to a meeting is one thing but keeping them engaged is quite another. Everyone wants to feel like what they do is important. People are busy and that sometimes means prioritizing what they spend their time on. Here are some simple tips for helping your coalition members know that you value their participation and see them as an important part of the solution.

- Make sure you are communicating clearly and regularly. This includes scheduling monthly meetings at consistent times, sending out meeting agendas in advance of the meetings (the recommendation is one week ahead of time), and keeping and distributing meeting minutes.
- Develop a new member packet. Include items like a brief blurb about the history of the coalition, coalition goals, mission and vision, and a talent and gifts survey. Use this survey to ask new members about themselves. What are their interests? Do they have any hobbies? What brings them to the coalition, etc. This serves a dual purpose. New members feel acknowledged and welcomed...AND...it helps you to learn about them. Maybe they have a talent or skill that they would love to share with the coalition. Someone who loves to write might be a good choice to help with social media or the strategic plan, for example.

- Assign a member to serve as the New Member Liaison. This person greets all new members at the beginning of the meeting. They make sure the person receives the new member packet and checks in with them afterwards to collect the talent and gifts survey and see if they have any questions or concerns. Again, this serves two purposes. The new member feels welcomed, and an existing member has an important role to play as the New Member Liaison.
- Offer a variety of roles and activities so members can engage in meaningful ways. This is one of the most important aspects of member retention. Most coalition members who stop attending do so because either their professional role changed OR they never felt like their participation in the coalition was all that important. It is critical that coalition leaders invest time into organizing the roles, activities, and responsibilities of the members. Many coalitions go so far as to develop job descriptions or membership agreements for members. This is a great way to make sure everyone is on the same page regarding what is expected of coalition members.

Leading Change:

8. How do I get people to care?

We cannot make someone care as much as we do about an issue. What we can do is educate them about the topic by sharing data, stories, and examples that demonstrate the impact of the problem. We can connect the issue to real community needs as well as personal experiences. Sharing our own stories...or encouraging other coalition members to share their stories can help community members to see other perspectives and viewpoints. Sometimes people just need to see what is in it for them. That is not to say that people are selfish, but rather, they may not understand how the issue connects to their lives, either personally or professionally. For instance, for a business owner to care about youth prevention efforts, he may need to be connected to how the issue could impact his/her own children or grandchildren...or how his business could be impacted by selling alcohol to minors. Providing this information to them in a way that is not shaming or disparaging their beliefs can help to increase their understanding as well as their willingness to be part of the solution.

9. How do I invite people to participate without making them feel threatened by new initiatives?

"What is wrong with how we are doing things now?"

"Why do we have to change?"

"Why is this person in charge?"

Some people are threatened by change. That is ok, but it does not mean that we should continue to let a situation exist that is impacting the health and wellness of our community members.

There are things we can do to invite people to participate in the work without feeling threatened by the direction of the work or by who is leading the movement.

- Meet people where they are. Understand that growth and change takes time. A coalition working on preventing youth substance use cannot expect people to change opinions, attitudes, and beliefs just because we say it is important. For example, community norms accepting of youth alcohol use are difficult to change. It is important to start small and to find ways that help create baby steps for change.
- Use data and facts to slowly start to see change. You cannot sway people to help change community systems by simply saying that the way things are done now is wrong. Find data to support your positions. Educate them about how the health and wellness of community members could be better if simple changes are made. The fact is that most community members want the best for their families, neighbors, and friends. Once they begin to learn the facts and understand the mission and goals of the coalition, they are likely to be much more willing to join the movement.

Managing Your Coalition:

10. How do we move someone from being an observer (attending meetings but not otherwise involved) to being an active participant?

Most people are not going to come to a coalition meeting and immediately start volunteering to help at events or with strategic planning or survey distribution. A lot of people want to “get the lay of the land” first as an observer or feel more comfortable waiting to be asked to participate more fully. There are a few ways to think about moving someone from a passive coalition member to an active one.

- Get to know the individual interests of your members. This can be done with a “talent and gifts survey”, a brief questionnaire asking new members about their interests, hobbies, special talents, etc. This can help determine what talents they might be interested in sharing with the group. If someone loves graphic design, they may be willing to help design flyers and logos, for example.
- Ask personally and start small. A quick phone call or in person meeting to ask for assistance with a coalition task will always work better than a mass email asking for “anyone who can help”. It is also helpful to start small, especially with new members. Asking them for assistance in proofreading flyer or helping to write postcards is a low-barrier ask, so to speak. It is a manageable task without a long-term commitment. Once they show a willingness to engage in this way, they may also be willing to increase their role. Provide them with support, encouragement, and leadership opportunities as their engagement grows.



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