Practical Coalition Building

A Community Heath Practice Guide from Community Health Solutions, Inc.

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The Model

Many community health problems require collaborative solutions. From health promotion to health care access, collaborative approaches involving multiple organizations can often yield better results than individual organizations working alone. Yet, collaboration is a struggle for many organizations.

Practical Coalition Building is an action-oriented model for developing and sustaining a community coalition. It is grounded in research and experience on what works in community coalition building. The aim of *Practical Coalition Building* is to help leaders conceptualize and cultivate a productive community coalition. The model helps the coalition builder begin with an understanding of the potential and challenges of community coalitions. The model then presents ten steps for starting a community coalition, and fifteen strategies for sustaining a community coalition.

Definitions

There is no single, standard definition of a community coalition. For this guide we define a community coalition as a group of individuals and organizations from a community who have come together to pursue goals aimed at bettering the community. Community coalitions are typically created when there is a need for a shared response to a community concern. A shared response is needed when the issue is serious and the existing community response is either nonexistent or insufficient to meet the need.

Fundamentals	Starting a Coalition	Sustaining a Coalition
1. What is a community coalition?	Step 1. Start with a core group	1. Provide champion leadership.
2. Why are community coalitions created?	Step 2. Develop an initial vision for the coalition.	2. Secure content expertise and process expertise
3. What can a community coalition do?	Step 3. Identify the most important additional coalition members.	3. Spread the Vision
4. Why do community coalitions fail?	Step 4. Recruit additional coalition members.	4. Focus on Results
5. Why do community coalitions succeed?	Step 5. Convene the first one or two meetings.	5. Hold quarterly meetings on sustainability
6. Who should be involved in a community coalition?	Step 6. Develop a Coalition Charter.	6. Maintain a strategic financing orientation
	Step 7. Recruit and orient additional members as needed.	7. View change as opportunity
	Step 8. Develop a strategic plan in the next one to three meetings.	8. Welcome new members
	Step 9. Execute the strategic plan.	9. Establish levels of involvement
	Step 10. Lead for sustainability.	10. Clarify roles
		11. Establish decision making processes
		12. Deal with conflict
		13. Build strong internal systems
		14. Communicate efficiently and effectively
		15. Celebrate and share credit

I. Fundamentals	Seven fundamental questions about community coalitions…
1. What is a community coalition?	There is no single, standard definition of a community coalition. For this guide we define a community coalition as a group of individuals and organizations from a community who have come together to pursue goals aimed at bettering the community.
2. Why are community coalitions created?	Community coalitions are typically created when there is a need for a shared response to a community concern. A shared response is needed when the issue is serious and the existing community response is either nonexistent or insufficient to meet the need. For example:
	a)When an urgent issue arises (e.g. upsurge in crime, closing of a plant, outside purchase of a hospital)
	b)When new information becomes available (e.g. on health, education, homelessness, unemployment)
	c)When policy changes occur (e.g. welfare reform, Medicaid reform, education reform)
	d)When new funding becomes available (e.g. foundation, government, corporate funding)
	e)When community organizations feel frustrated and exhausted with the status quo
	f)When community residents feel disconnected from the community
	g) When community members believe it is time for a new vision of community life."
3. What can a community coalition do?	A community coalition can do a number of specific things, including:
a)	Identify community needs
b)	Enhance community awareness
c)	Stimulate community involvement
d)	Develop community-wide vision and plans
e)	Foster networking and collaboration
f)	Mobilize neighborhoods and communities
g)	Change organizational practices
h)	Promote service integration
i)	Influence policy and legislation
j)	Pool existing community resources
k)	Develop new community resources
l)	Provide a community resource for information
m)	Sustain long-term focus on an issue."

5. Why do community coalitions fail?		Research and experience show that a community coalition may fail for a number of reasons. Common reasons for failure include:
	a)	Lack of a compelling issue
	b)	Inadequate leadership
	c)	Inadequate planning
	d)	Poor communication
	e)	Bad history between organizations
	f)	Turf issues
	g)	Narrow membership (not inclusive enough)
	h)	Perception of domination by elites
	i)	Poor links to the community
	j)	Inadequate staff support
	k)	Inadequate resources
	l)	Lack of content expertise (knowledge of the issue)
	m)	Lack of process expertise (leadership structure, committee structure, meeting structure, communication process)."
6. Why do community coalitions succeed?		Success factors in community coalitions include:
	a)	Strong, continuing leadership (champions)
	b)	Broad, diverse membership
	c)	Clear mission, goals, and roles
	d)	Diversified funding sources
	e)	Strong content expertise
	f)	Strong process expertise
	g)	Frequent communication
	h)	Use of groups within the group (subcommittees and task groups)
	i)	A bias toward action and advocacy
	j)	A bias toward community involvement
	k)	A bias toward hope and celebration
	l)	Regular self-evaluation
	m)	A process for dealing with conflict
	n)	Persistence and resilience over time
	o)	Adequate staff support
	p)	Adequate funding."
7. Who should be involved in a community coalition?		A community coalition should include representatives from diverse sectors of the community. The level of involvement and the vehicle for involvement may vary depending on the issue and the sector. These decisions should be made strategically in light of the coalition's goals. The priority sectors include:
	a)	The group of people most affected by the issue (e.g. youth in the case of youth violence).
	b)	The individuals and organizations that provide relevant services (e.g. schools, businesses, health care providers, public safety agencies).
	c)	Community opinion leaders (those people who can influence large numbers of others (e.g. business leaders, civic leaders, media representatives).
	d)	Public officials (local, state, and federal) if needed.
	e)	Potential funders (e.g. foundations, corporate funders).

II. Starting a Coalition	Ten steps for starting a community coalition…
Overview	From research and experience we have identified ten steps for cultivating community coalitions. There is more to these steps than can be effectively communicated in this single guide, but this should provide a basic overview and starting point.
Step 1. Start with a core group	Many coalitions start with a core group of people who share an interest in the issue. If it is a grass roots coalition it might be a small group of citizens with a vision for change. If it is an organizational coalition it might be a small group of people from the agencies and institutions most involved in the issue. Some of the best coalitions evolve to include both organizational and grass roots elements. The key thing is to get started.
Step 2. Develop an initial vision for the coalition.	The initial vision for the coalition should include the issues to be addressed, the populations affected by the issues, and some preliminary strategies for addressing the issues. Be as specific as possible about the issues to be addressed and the affected populations. Does your vision include a broad range of issues or just one or two? Does your vision include a broad range of the population or just a narrow sector? You will need a preliminary set of strategies in mind to proceed with coalition building, but these can be refined later with the help of the full coalition.
Step 3. Identify the most important additional coalition members.	Keeping your initial vision in mind, proceed to identify additional people who can help address the issue. Think through the five sectors identified earlier (the people affected, service providers, opinion leaders, public policy officials, and funders. Among these, which people have something to offer to the coalition in terms of influence, knowledge, skills, services, or resources? In particular, who might be the strongest leaders and champions for the coalition?
Step 4. Recruit additional coalition members.	Contact the people on your list and share your vision. Ask them to articulate their own vision and level of interest in working on the coalition. Be open to adjusting the initial vision in response to good ideas. If one of your recruits is a potential strong leader or champion for the coalition, ask them if they will be willing to play that role.
Step 5. Convene the first one or two meetings.	Five objectives are suggested for the first one or two meetings.
a)	Educate the group about the issues and the populations affected. Be as specific as possible with data and research. Allow participants to articulate their own concerns about the issues.
b)	Brainstorm strategies for addressing the issues. Examples from other communities can be helpful for kicking things off.
c)	Identify additional community members who should be part of the coalition
d)	Map out a process for how the coalition might proceed. A typical process might include creation of a strategic plan, engagement of the full community, development of resources, implementation of the plan, and evaluation of results. Also include a set of exit conditions under which people may leave the coalition
e)	Identify content experts (people who know the issues) and process experts (people who know how to facilitate a coalition process) who can help facilitate the coalition.
f)	Select coalition co-chairs and a coalition executive committee to provide core leadership for the project."
Step 6. Develop a Coalition Charter.	A coalition charter is a written description of how the coalition will proceed as decided in Step 5. Each member person or organization should be asked to sign the coalition charter. The charter can be used to recruit additional members and sustain the focus of the coalition over time. The charter can be modified as needed.

Step 7. Recruit and orient additional members as needed.	Based on the list developed in Step 5, recruit additional members to the coalition. Each new recruit should be given a personal orientation to the coalition based on the Coalition Charter.
Step 8. Develop a strategic plan in the next one to three meetings.	The next one to three coalition meetings can be devoted to development of a strategic plan for the coalition. The strategic plan should specify the issues to be addressed, the populations affected, the mission of the coalition, the goals of the coalition, the action steps to be taken, and how progress will be evaluated. The final plan should specify responsibility and accountability for each main action step of the strategic plan. The final plan should also specify any task groups or subcommittees needed to execute the plan. In addition, the plan should address the issue of exit; that is, under what conditions will the coalition close itself down. Staff support is vital for this process. The co-chairs and staff must work in concert to help facilitate the group toward shared agreement on a plan. Again, it is important to have both content expertise (knowledge of the issues) and process expertise (group facilitation) available to the coalition. Sometimes coalition staff have these areas of expertise, and sometimes consultants are needed."
Step 9. Execute the strategic plan.	Execution of the strategic plan should be directly overseen by the executive committee with accountability to the full coalition. Executive committee meetings should be scheduled to check progress and authorize adjustments to plans. Implementation results should be shared with the full coalition on a quarterly basis. Task groups and subcommittees should be used as needed to execute the plan. If funding is involved, special care should be taken to assure funders that resources are being used as planned.
Step 10. Manage the coalition for sustainability.	Sustainability is not an accident. It is consciously achieved not only by securing long-term funding, but also as a result of hundreds of small decisions and tasks completed on a daily basis.

III. Sustaining a Coalition	Fifteen strategies for sustaining a community coalition…
Overview	Once the coalition is started, is needs active cultivation to sustain itself. Here are fifteen strategies that can help sustain a coalition over time.
Strategy 1. Provide champion leadership.	A few strong champions must take responsibility for assuring that the coalition sustains itself over time. They must proactively build support, promote unity, identify problems, and seek solutions.
Strategy 2. Secure content expertise and process expertise	Effective coalitions need to have the right information and the right process to succeed. It is essential to secure staff or consultants who can provide the content needed for the coalition to make information decisions. It is equally important to get staff or consultants who know how to facilitate a group process in coalition with the coalition members.
Strategy 3. Spread the Vision	It is easy for members to forget the vision of a coalition as they return to their non-coalition responsibilities. The champion leaders, executive committee, and staff must constantly publicize the vision of the coalition among the other members.
Strategy 4. Focus on Results	Coalitions can get bogged down in local politics and turf tussles. The champion leaders, executive committee, and staff should sustain a focus on results in all that they do, and remind the other coalition members to do the same.
Strategy 5. Hold quarterly meetings on sustainability	Sustainability should be an agenda item at every quarterly meeting. Review plans for sustainability, execution of those plans, and new opportunities. Discuss whether the coalition should continue, and under what conditions. It is better for a coalition to make a decision to end than to slowly die of neglect.
Strategy 6. Maintain a strategic financing orientation	Financing is a challenge for every coalition. Coalition members should keep financing at the forefront of their work and constantly seek creative ways to leverage new resources into the project.
Strategy 7. View change as opportunity	Situations change, and so do plans. Coalitions that see social, economic, or political changes as potential opportunities are in better position to survive than coalitions which resist change.
Strategy 8. Welcome new members	People come and go over time. Coalitions that are always on the lookout for opportunities to broaden the base of community support tend to win more friends and find more creative solutions to problems.
Strategy 9. Establish levels of involvement	As the coalition grows it might not be possible to give everyone the same level of participation. Consider multiple levels of involvement, from executive committee, to coalition membership, to citizen advisory groups, to town meetings.
Strategy 10. Clarify roles	People come and go, and roles change over time. Periodically clarify the roles within the coalition so that there is no confusion about who is supposed to do what.
Strategy 11. Establish decision making processes	Coalitions often experience problems when decisions are either not made or made by the wrong people. Anticipate the types of decisions to be made, and establish a clear process for making those decisions.
Strategy 12. Deal with conflict	Conflict is inevitable in any group process. The question is not whether conflict will occur, but how to deal with it. Establish a process for dealing with conflict at the executive committee level.
Strategy 13. Build strong internal systems	Depending on its structure, financial management, accounting, information, and other internal systems. Establishing these systems allows the coalition to document its performance and demonstrate its soundness to potential funders.

Strategy 14. Communicate efficiently and effectively	Coalitions send and receive a lot of information. A good communications system is essential for success. At the very least, communicate with members on a frequent basis to let them know the status of the coalition. Also consider establishing a dedicated web site to house the coalition documents, contacts, calendar, and other relevant information.
Strategy 15. Celebrate and share credit	Coalition work can be exhausting and time consuming. It can also be invigorating and life changing, Take the time to celebrate accomplishments and share the credit with everyone involve. This will build goodwill to get you through the tougher times.

Community Coalition Checkup Tool

	Use this tool to periodically check the status of your coalition. Consider passing it out to key coalition members to gather their perspectives too.	4 – We are very good at this 3 – We are good at this but need a little work 2 – We need a fair amount of work on this 1 – We need a lot of work on this	
1	We have champion leadership in place		
2	We have content expertise and process expertise in place		
3	We have a clear and widely shared vision of success		
4	We are focused on results and not getting bogged down in local politics and turf issues		
5	We talk about sustainability at all of our strategy meetings		
6	We keep financing at the forefront of our work and constantly seek creative ways to leverage new resources into the project		
7	We are proactive and positive in responding to change		
8	We are broadening our base of community support through strategic expansion of our membership		
9	We have established multiple levels of involvement so that people can contribute according to their ability		
10	We are clear about roles so there is no confusion about who is responsible for doing what		
11	We are anticipating decisions to be made and we have a clear process for making decisions		
12	We have an established process for dealing with conflict		
13	We have strong internal systems for financial management, records management, and other administrative processes		
14	We are communicating efficiently and effectively		
15	We are taking the time to celebrate accomplishments and sharing credit with everyone involved		

Coalition Support Planning Tool

Use this tool to plan what levels of membership and support you would like to have in your coalition.

	Individual Coalition Members	Advisory Groups	Task Groups	Steering Committee	Standing Sub-Committees	Executive Committee	Co-chairs
Job Requirements	Promote the goals of the coalition in the community	Advise coalition on issues from particular perspective. May or may not be coalition member.	Complete specific tasks on behalf of coalition. May or may not be coalition member.	Review and approve direction proposed by executive committee	Execute recurring coalition business; advise steering committee and/or excom on important issues	Provide executive decision making on strategy and financial management; oversee coalition execution on behalf of the coalition members	Ex-com duties plus run coalition meetings and represent the coalition at key community meetings
Level of Support Needed	**Individual Members**	**Advisory Groups**	**Task Groups**	**Steering Committee**	**Standing Sub-Committees**	**Executive Committee**	**Co-chairs**
Self-directed Website Contact	As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed
Group Email Contact	At least monthly	At least monthly	At least monthly until complete	At least monthly	At least monthly	At least monthly	At least monthly
Group Contact	Face to face annually	Telephone or face to face no more than quarterly	Telephone or face to face at least monthly until complete	Face to face quarterly	Telephone or face to face quarterly	Telephone or face to face bi-weekly or monthly	Telephone or face to face bi-weekly or monthly
Individual Email Contact	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Initiate or respond as needed	Initiate or respond as needed
Individual Telephone Contact	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Respond as needed	Initiate or respond as needed	Initiate or respond as needed
Individual Face to Face Contact						Initiate or respond as needed	Initiate or respond as needed

Notes: