

Engaging Residents In Coalition Building

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Coalition
Building
Tips

Many coalitions begin with institutional leaders and service providers at the table. Either at the outset, or more often as the coalition evolves, the group frequently decides that community residents need to be more directly involved in the development of community agendas and programs.

There are a myriad of reasons why the participation of diverse community members is important. Among these are:

- ♦ insights of more people in defining the issues and priorities
- ♦ community ownership and investment in issues and solutions
- ♦ broader networks of people to inform and involve
- ♦ more energy with which to tackle projects

The benefits are clear, but deciding on the best approach to achieving this result is more elusive. Some coalitions seek to involve residents fully in the life and work of the coalition. Others focus on getting community members to participate on specific committees that work on community issues of interest to them, perhaps having included them in an assessment process for selecting the issues.

A third approach, which we find increasingly compelling, sees provider coalitions as facilitators, both for the development of neighborhood/community coalitions (if they do not already exist) and for providing technical support to resident-driven groups. The provider coalitions can then build ongoing partnerships with these neighborhood coalitions to better apply the resources of each to community capacity building and problem solving. We are coming to believe that in most communities this approach will be more effective in yielding successful provider-resident collaborations. Through these partnerships, community residents can discover and exercise their power in naming the issues, defining the solutions and being integrally involved in implementing these solutions.

This Tip Sheet identifies a number of issue areas to consider in designing typical coalition activities that will enhance the possibility for real community engagement - with related barriers to success, and some potential strategies. These concerns and ideas cover an array of challenges, although not all will apply to a given coalition (particularly those that are neighborhood based). It is useful, however, to review them all (and others you may add) when planning to reach out to expand community participation.

The more socio-economically diverse the audience, the more of these will likely apply. The ideas may be applied to provider coalitions, to their committees, and to neighborhood/community-based groups.

□ ACCESS

Lack of transportation and mobility impediments are two common physical barriers to resident participation. Language can be an obstacle for those whose native language is other than English. When only certain people receive invitations to join, others may be denied access - whether by design or oversight.

♦ **Strategies:** Meet in central location ♦ Offer rides ♦ Meet in "barrier-free" buildings ♦ Provide translators, bi-/multi-lingual publications ♦ Have open membership with broad outreach ♦

□ AGENDA

Meetings that are focused on institutional or special-interest concerns - or that are formal, lengthy or disorganized - make it difficult to attract and retain community members.

♦ **Strategies:** Have clear agenda based on broad member input ♦ Maintain action focus, based on group-set priorities ♦ Keep meetings to reasonable length ♦

SCHEDULING

Finding a time when institutional, professional and community members can and will commit to meeting regularly is among the most difficult challenges. Monday through Friday, 9 to 5, works well for some and excludes others. Evenings are hard for most people with families - and for those who work, but do not live, in the community. Potential strategies for this issue are elusive; successful ones, rare. Most coalitions, at some point, face the choice of whether to lean toward the professional (daytime) and do the best it can to attract community members, or to lean toward residents (evening) and try to keep professionals involved. Another option is to establish parallel groups (provider and neighborhood) with open memberships, that maintain close communication and collaboration, as in the third option described at the beginning of this sheet.

COST

Out of pocket costs for participation, such as child care or transportation, can be a barrier to involving residents with low incomes. Lost wages due to missing work to participate in coalition activities is another.

♦ **Strategies:** Offer child care or reimburse for care if needed ♦ Short meetings before or after work ♦ Offer rides or reimbursement ♦

"ISMs"

Professionalism in various forms can intimidate potential community members. Structural discrimination (racism, etc.) and tokenism are barriers to a diverse membership.

♦ **Strategies:** Avoid jargon and "alphabet soup", value all types of input, use more informal meeting style ♦ Welcome diversity ♦ Outreach plan, don't ask 1-2 people to "represent" a sector ♦

INFORMATION

Unequal access to basic information about the group and its activities will impede the participation of neglected members. Inadequate background information about the group and its work can make it hard for new attenders to become full participants. Lack of knowledge about how the larger system works may inhibit the effective involvement of traditionally marginalized residents.

♦ **Strategies:** Newsletter, other media ♦ Orientation, "buddy system" ♦ Training ♦

SKILLS/EXPERIENCE

Many potential members lack experience, and related skills, in being part of an ongoing problem-solving group. They often have little or no experience interacting with community leaders and decision makers, and lack training in how to deal with them effectively. Many have no role models to emulate in taking on these new experiences.

♦ **Strategies:** Seek out/nurture existing or natural leaders ♦ Leadership training, mentoring ♦ Promote visibility of positive role models, job shadowing ♦

Implications for Coalitions

A number of these strategies involve changes in how many coalitions conduct "business as usual." This requires that groups carefully assess the unseen impacts of their normal practices on the participation of community residents and make needed changes.

Other strategies call for outreach efforts, which to be effective must be well-planned, targeted and ongoing. For most coalitions, it is unrealistic to undertake this significant outreach without the support of paid staff, at least part-time. For the resident members to be in a strong position to plan effectively and to negotiate from a position of strength with public officials and professionals, as many as possible should be representatives of specific community constituencies. Thus one outreach strategy, within any approach, is to recruit initial resident participant through direct, personal requests for representation extended to diverse neighborhood and community organizations (both formal and informal).

