

Community partnerships and coalitions can be a powerful tool in addressing local issues such as health promotion and chronic disease prevention, as well as for mobilizing individuals and communities.

There is often a compelling need or purpose that prompts community concern regarding issues that affect them. The establishment of a coalition is one response to address local issues with the support of the community's key stakeholders, resources, and assets.

COALITION BUILDING IS THE PROCESS BY WHICH PARTIES (INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, OR NATIONS) COME TOGETHER TO FORM A COALITION.

(Steve Spangler, Beyond Intractability)¹

By their very nature, coalitions offer great networking opportunities. Effective networking also means coalition members can identify organizations that can fill a specific need, answer a question, facilitate an introduction, or help to secure funds. A broad-based, grassroots coalition enhances credibility.

WHAT IS A COALITION?

A community coalition is an alliance or organization of individuals who are working together in a common effort to bring about community changes over time, across concerns and issues, to achieve a common goal. That goal could be as narrow as obtaining funding for a specific intervention, or as broad as trying to permanently improve the overall quality of life for community residents.

HOW COALITIONS CAN HELP A COMMUNITY

Purpose of Coalitions

A purpose or reason for starting a coalition may be as varied as coalitions themselves, but often contain elements of one or more of the following:

- *Influencing or developing public policy* (usually around a specific issue)
- *Changing people's behavior* (reducing smoking, increasing physical activity, etc.)
- *Building a healthy community* (improving a community's environmental, social, economic, and mental health)

Powers of Coalitions

Forming coalitions with other groups of people (i.e. key stakeholders, representatives of local non-profit organizations, policy makers) of similar values, interests, and goals allows members to combine resources and become more powerful than when they each acted alone. Coordinated efforts support coalitions in:

- *Creating and launching community-wide initiatives to address new / broader issues / identified needs*
- *Building and wielding political clout to influence policy*
- *Leveraging additional/new resources*

When to Develop a Coalition

A coalition often needs a purpose if it is to be successful. As discussed before, the purpose may be broad or narrow, but it's unlikely that a diverse group will come together unless there's a compelling reason to do so. Coalitions may form in response to:

- *Dramatic or disturbing events in a community*
- *New information or funding availability*
- *A need for significant change in the community*

Benefits of Coalitions

A coalition must be able to achieve goals and objectives that its individual stakeholder organizations would benefit from but would not be able to achieve on their own. Some benefits might include:

- *Communication and collaboration.* Members have a chance to share and learn from other members as well as become more familiar with others involved in the coalition.
- *Promoting policy, systems, and environmental change.* By supporting effective change to community standards, a coalition may increase the impact of its efforts concerning health-risk behaviors.
- *Coordination of efforts, community organization, and working relationships.* Community members working within the structure of a coalition generally have access to increased resources, support for planning tasks, and setting objectives.
- *Limiting duplication of strategies and services and increase access to resources.* Pooling resources allows coalition members to maximize their effectiveness.

Not everyone will agree with everything the coalition does or wants to do, and sometimes the minority opinion will be right. Make sure to take everyone's opinions into account and use diversity to spur discussion, rather than as a source of division.

EFFECTIVE STEPS OF COALITION BUILDING

1	Develop a shared vision and clearly defined mission, goals, and objectives.
2	Recruit a broad cross-section of actively involved members.
3	Ensure effective leadership and an equitable distribution of work.
4	Have clearly defined member roles/responsibilities and coalition structure.
5	Organized coalition meetings with formalized operating procedures.
6	Adopt activities and objectives suiting the needs, interests, strengths, and diversity of the coalition.
7	Develop budgets and have a planned approach to ensure the effective use of resources.
8	Evaluate for sustainability and monitor community change.

Source: *Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight-Step Guide*, written by Larry Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight-Step Guide, written by Larry Cohen, Nancy Baer, and Pam Satterwhite²

POTENTIAL BARRIERS

Anticipate possible barriers to starting a coalition; they may dictate the process the coalition will have to follow in order to begin successfully. Among the most likely:

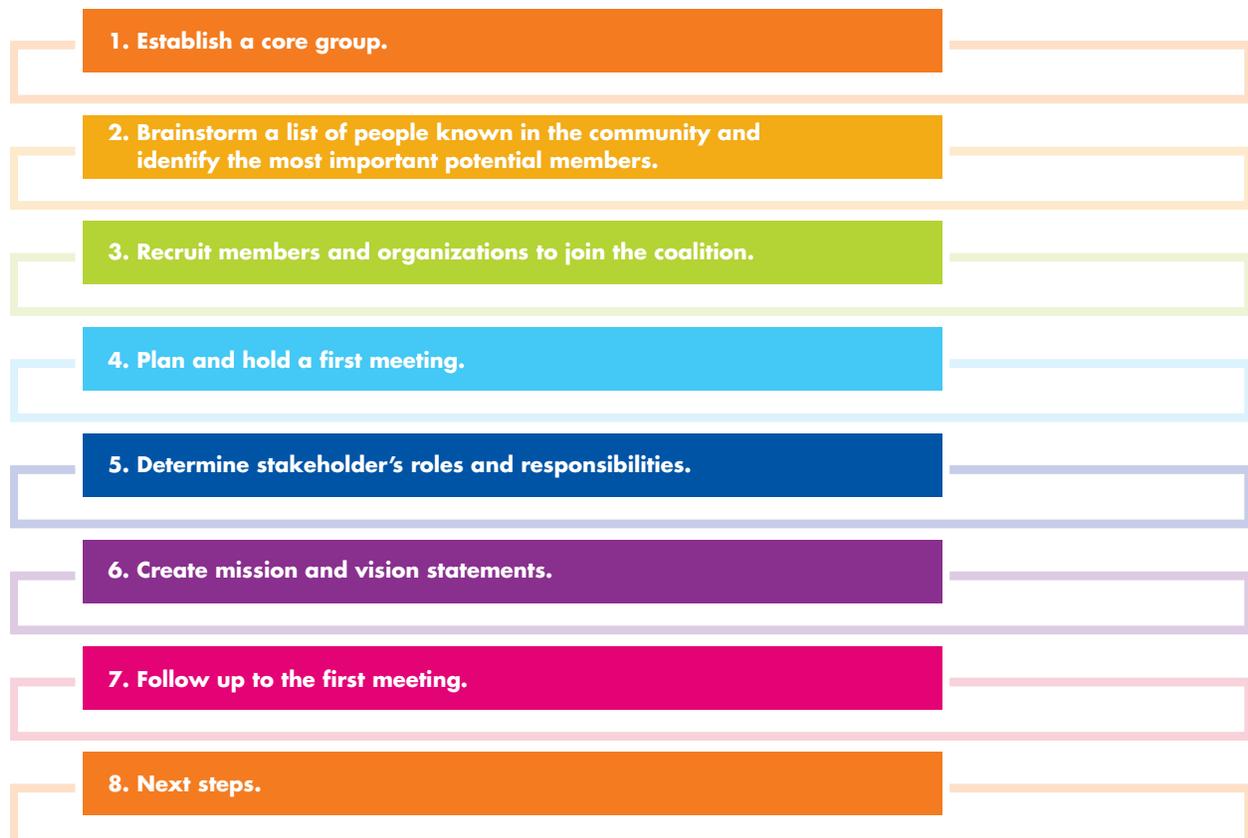
- *Turf Issues.* Convincing members and other organizations that working together will benefit all of them and better address their common issues.
- *Unproductive meetings.* Time is a very important contribution by coalition members; meetings should always have and follow an agenda.

- *Poor links to the community.* A first step may have to be the development of relationships among agencies and the community at large.
- *Funding.* The difficulty of finding funding is an obvious obstacle. Less obvious are the dangers of available funding that pushes the coalition in the wrong direction or requires it to act too quickly to address the issue effectively.
- *Leadership.* If effective leadership isn't available and can't be developed from within the coalition, it may be necessary to bring in an outside facilitator.

By understanding potential barriers to forming a community coalition, plans to solve them can be discussed in advance and the coalition's successfulness increases.

KEY STEPS IN STARTING A COMMUNITY COALITION

It is best to begin with a core group and work outward, pulling in the necessary members, as well as a more general membership from the community and from other, more peripherally involved organizations. Holding a motivating first meeting, at which real accomplishments are achieved and the work of the coalition is set in motion, will help it become successful. A successful sequential process might include:



See the section on *Building a Healthy Community Coalition* in the Toolkit for more information and a step-by-step guide to starting a coalition in your community.

CONCLUSION

A coalition can be a powerful force for positive change in a community. In situations with issues too large and complex for a single organization to address, a coalition of several groups and individuals working together may be the solution. A coalition can develop a coordinated response to an issue, and increase the efficiency of service delivery by pooling community resources to work effectively toward long-term change.

Regardless of how many issues it takes on or how long it is in existence, the success of any coalition fundamentally depends upon the dedication and organization of interested advocates. To be sustainable and have impact, the coalition needs to undertake a unified approach to increase awareness, support, improve, change, and make a difference in the health needs of the community.

Resources

Community Coalitions

Tools & Resources. CoalitionsWork.

Community Coalitions. MI Healthy Communities.

Coalition Building. They Beyond Intractability Project, The Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado.

Coalition Building for Healthy Communities. Tom Wolff & Associates.

Strategies for Sustaining the Initiative. Community Tool Box, University of Kansas.

References

1. Barbanti, Olympio. (1 Jun 2005). "Development and Conflict Theory." Beyond Intractability. Retrieved January 13, 2010 from <http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/development-conflict-theory>
2. Cohen, L., Baer, N., & Satterwhite, P. (2002). Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight-Step Guide. Retrieved from <http://www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-104/127.html>
3. Mizoguchi, Nobuko, Mia Luluquisen, Sandra Witt, and Liz Maker. A Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments: Experiences from Alameda County. Oakland, CA: Alameda County Public Health Department, 2004.

