

Coalition-Building Primer

A highly functioning coalition is critical to achieving your State's heart disease and stroke prevention goals. In fact, a coalition is the foundation of your efforts and can help you on several fronts, including a core program need to amass community and leadership support for your State's heart disease and stroke prevention program. How effective the coalition is will be directly related to the members' commitment to the shared vision and to the collective actions they take. The more diverse and influential the membership, the stronger the coalition will be. And the more creative it is, the more attention your heart disease and stroke prevention program goals will receive. If you don't have a coalition in place, or if the one you have could be improved upon, you will want to review and apply the following information. First, however, it is important to understand what a coalition is and just why coalitions are so crucial to achieving your goals.

What Is a Coalition?

A coalition is an organization of diverse interest groups that join their human and material resources to produce a specific change that they are unable to deliver as independent individuals or separate organizations.

The Power of a Coalition

Here's what a coalition can do:

- Strengthen the core program power base, enhancing your potential to gain attention and affect change.
- Provide talents, skills, and resources that can be shared to achieve program goals.
- Propel a strategic and concerted resolution of the problem.
- Allow coalition members to own, embrace, and commit to the program goals and enroll others in their particular organizations to personally commit to them.
- Ensure that community heart disease and stroke prevention approaches and materials are culturally sensitive for targeted audiences (because the coalition members themselves represent the community).
- Provide a forum for open discussion and mutual support of a common goal, with a ripple effect for the organizations that the coalition members represent. This broadens your base of support and trust.
- Reduce the chance of duplicating efforts, eliminate competition for resources, and improve communication within the community.
- Advocate for community environment and policies that support heart health.

The Key to Successful Coalitions

Coalition building is an art. More than anything else, it requires individuals and groups to be willing to rise above their feelings of separateness and to actively collaborate in a spirit of mutual understanding, patience, and flexibility. When members share responsibility, goals, decisions, and leadership and energetically and enthusiastically work toward a common goal, the coalition has the potential for great success.

Functions of the Coalition

In developing the coalition, keep in mind that the purpose of convening it might vary according to what you are trying to achieve. Depending on your State, this might be (1) obtaining State funding for heart disease and stroke prevention programs, (2) advocating for policy and environmental changes to support heart health, or (3) implementing specific heart disease and stroke prevention programs or activities. Depending on which of these goals is your principal priority, coalition members should be recruited accordingly. However, you may want to expand or form a second coalition at a later date if the primary goals of the coalition shift into another area. Initially, coalition members can support the following tasks:

- Identify key policymakers and decision-makers who can help achieve goals.
- Determine how best to approach them.
- Introduce coalition members to policymakers and decision-makers.
- Write to and/or visit policymakers and decision-makers to educate them about heart disease and stroke.

These tasks demand communication, coordination, collaboration skills, and a high level of participation and commitment.

How the Coalition and Your Agency Work in Concert

As the agency organizing the coalition, you will be responsible for providing it with the initial direction by identifying the goals and objectives of the coalition. You and your staff will act as facilitators—moving the coalition forward and wearing a number of hats, including that of organizers, educators, counselors, mediators of conflicts, strategists, coalition builders, and visionaries. You will need to share responsibilities with the members of your coalition, including those involving decision-making and leadership. In facilitating the coalition, you must have good interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills. To convene a successful coalition, you must do the following:

- Develop a one-to-one relationship with every coalition member.
- Resolve conflicts.
- Enlist members' active support.
- Comprehend each group's self-interests and help translate them into solid programs.
- Communicate positions on difficult, controversial issues.
- Get recommendations from every member and unite them in common goals.
- Maintain the coalition's forward momentum, even after a setback.
- Show your appreciation of the work that coalition members are doing.
- Train successors.

The Kinds of Organizations To Recruit—Thinking Outside of the Box

Coalition members should share at least one or more of the following qualities in order to be effective participants:

- Be committed to the coalition's objective.
- Be a credible, reputable member of the community.

- Have strong links with the community and with decision-makers.
- Be politically savvy or at least understand politics.
- Have a special expertise that is complementary to those at the health department and will be helpful in achieving goals.

The more diverse, nontraditional, and creative the group, the better its chances of succeeding with its goals. So although some of the following groups might not share your precise goal or might appear to be “odd,” “unusual,” or “atypical” partners, they share the common goal of wanting to improve the health of their employees, residents, and/or communities. For example, **businesses** want healthy workers to maintain their productivity and to curb health care costs. **State and community leaders** want to attract residents, tourists, and new businesses to a “health-conscious” or “healthy” State. **Nonprofit voluntary organizations** focusing on a particular disease such as diabetes, cancer, or osteoporosis want to reduce the incidence of these diseases and promote physical activity and good nutrition. By joining together, these groups can pool their resources, boost their power base, and substantially raise the volume of their message to policymakers. As members are recruited, look for individuals who “think outside of the box,” people who are innovative, unafraid to take risks, and dedicated to solving the challenge before them.

Potential Members of the Coalition

The following groups, organizations, associations, and businesses can be called upon to join the coalition and advocate for State-funded heart disease and stroke prevention programs and/or policy and environmental changes to create heart-healthy communities.

- Businesses (pharmacy and grocery chains, pharmaceutical companies, restaurants, and manufacturers of bicycles, roller blades, athletic gear, and exercise equipment)
- Universities, community colleges, public and private K–12 schools, and medical schools
- Urban planners and planning groups (affiliates of the American Institute of Architects)
- Child advocacy groups
- Parenting groups
- Nonprofit groups such as the American Red Cross, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, American Cancer Society, National Osteoporosis Foundation, American Diabetes Association, and Healthy Mothers/Healthy Babies
- Community service groups (Elks, Jaycees, Junior League, Kiwanis, Lions, Optimists)
- Community associations
- Hospital and factory workers
- Elected officials—legislators, the governor or lieutenant governor, mayor, council members, and school board members
- Ethnic groups
- Federal Government agencies and programs (the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s “Team Nutrition,” Food for Families, WIC, Head Start, Medicaid, Minority Health, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency)

- Nonprofit groups such as Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the Bicycle Federation of America, National Safety Council's Partnership for a Walkable America, and the National Crime Prevention Council's "Crime Prevention through Environmental Design"
- Law enforcement agencies
- Labor unions
- State tourist offices (developing walking tours and other activities to link physical activity with tourist activities)
- Parent-Teacher Associations
- Educators and professors (of medicine, urban planning) and associations of school professionals (State associations of elementary, middle school, and high school principals, State affiliates of the National Education Association)
- Associations whose members include health insurers, family practitioners, cardiologists, pediatricians, physicians, physical therapists, hospital administrators—i.e., State affiliates of the American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Cardiologists, American Association of Family Practitioners, State hospital associations, and State medical associations
- Religious organizations
- State government agencies and programs

How Large Should the Coalition Be?

The coalition should be large enough to accomplish the various tasks but not so big as to be unmanageable. Use your own judgement in determining the number of members who will sit on the coalition or explore other successful coalitions to determine what number of members worked for them.

How To Invite Members

Once you have identified potential members, meet with the organization's representative and explain your agency's goals and the role and tasks of the coalition. Offer the organization multiple levels of commitment. This allows the "overworked" groups to participate, adding to the coalition's diversity. Let each organization know the kind of involvement required as well as the time and effort expected, depending on the commitment. Determine the organization's level of interest, enthusiasm, commitment, and any obstacles to its participation. Ask each group to suggest other organizations that might be able to serve on the coalition. If it is determined that an individual has the power to act on behalf of his or her organization, invitations to join the coalition can be made at that meeting, in person. But be sure to follow up your invitation with a written one, asking that the interested organization respond to you in writing. This is for your records and theirs.

The Coalition's Structure

The coalition's structure should be outlined at the first meeting. A viable governing structure might include a small executive committee that works closely with a well-functioning staff. Or a coalition might operate better if it has a democratically elected body of delegates that meet on a regular basis.

The First Meeting

Here coalition members have the opportunity to learn more about their role, tasks, the mission, goals and objectives, how they will interface with each other, and the decision-making process. They can also be advised of what expertise is expected of them, where the meetings will be held, and for what period of time. Members can vote on what day and how frequently they wish to hold meetings. Once a regular meeting day and time are established, members should be provided with meeting dates for at least the next 6 months.

Emergency Meetings

Be open to holding meetings by teleconference or communicating by e-mail to address emerging opportunities that might be missed if you wait for a scheduled meeting.

Selecting Leaders or Directors

At a later meeting, after members have had a chance to get acquainted, they can elect leaders or a directorate. The latter can be a small executive committee that is advised by and works closely with the staff, or a coalition may choose to function as a democratically elected body of delegates. Decisions can be made by a working consensus or a two-thirds majority.

How To Ensure That the Coalition Is Effective

- Ensure that all members understand, agree on, and support the goal of establishing heart disease and stroke prevention programs statewide and that they understand that it will take environmental and policy changes to pave the road for such programs. If potential members favor intervention over prevention measures, they don't belong in the coalition!
- Confirm that members understand that their roles will include educating and convincing decision-makers about the need for prevention programs.
- Appoint strong leaders to facilitate the group.
- Treat members with dignity and respect, and develop a one-to-one relationship with each group member to address individual concerns as they arise.
- Invite members to volunteer to take on tasks.
- Make sure that members understand that they are working toward common goals that will be mutually advantageous. For example, proper diet and exercise can reduce the risk not only of heart disease and stroke but also of some cancers and other diseases.
- Encourage members to identify common ground and recognize that they will not agree on everything.
- Help them understand the necessity of temporarily subordinating their individual identities to that of the coalition to ensure that the coalition is effective.
- Keep meetings short and goal-oriented by closely following agendas.
- Ensure that members deliver on promises.
- Keep reports of each meeting and note successes.
- Have in place a conflict resolution process and a clear decision-making process.
- Keep communication open and frequent (through mail and discussion).

Effective Management of a Coalition

A coalition is just like any other organization: it requires management and a staff to carry out various functions and day-to-day activities. In some cases, one staff person might be sufficient to handle the initial phase of the coalition's objectives. This staff member can be "donated" by one of the members, but the donor must realize that his or her organization cannot dictate or control the staffer's activities. Generally, it is prudent to hire an outside staffer, if funds allow for this.

Other tasks the management needs to perform include the following:

- Creating a timeline.
- Determining functions and responsibilities.
- Setting policy about functions and responsibilities.
- Creating an action plan based on goals and sharing it with members.
- Ensuring that there is enough time to perform tasks within the legislature's time schedule.
- Ensuring that each member is adequately organized.
- Determining which groups have the most clout with which policymakers and decision-makers.
- Outlining resources needed from each member organization.
- Developing strategies for each member to make contact with policymakers and decision-makers and focusing on the desired outcome from these contacts.
- Monitoring and evaluating the members' implementation of strategies and progress.
- Consulting with individual members to avoid hurried decisions.
- Encouraging genuinely open discussions, making sure that everyone voices his or her opinion to prevent a member organization from privately disagreeing and subverting the eventual decision.
- Creating a decision-making process based on a working consensus or two-thirds majority.
- Anticipating difficulties that might arise among members, including opposition to a policy or decision and issues of power and control, and resolving them immediately.
- Negotiating and resolving conflicts by enrolling everyone in the resolution.
- Fostering intergroup sharing and defusing stereotypical treatment and group resentments.
- Praising diversity and cooperation.
- Keeping all members informed at all times of new opportunities or situations.
- Ensuring that your members are clear about their tasks and that they complete them.
- Putting their tasks in writing and requesting briefings concerning their progress.
- Praising members for their efforts. (A pat on the back goes a long way to building rapport and morale and maintaining commitment.)
- Offering meetings that are followed by parties, picnics, and other social events, which allow members to bond and shows appreciation for their participation in the coalition.

Creating Heart-Healthy Communities

In addition to advocating for State funding for heart disease and stroke prevention programs and/or environmental and policy changes that support heart-healthy communities, you may choose to convene a coalition to help implement your heart disease and stroke prevention programs. Coalition members can support the program by helping with planning or by providing different types of resources, such as manpower, access to facilities, funding and/or fundraising, and others. This effort will include budgeting and fundraising, a review of the population groups to be targeted and the community needs assessments, heart-healthy activities, a timeline, action plans and strategies, event planning, media relations, and activities to create heart-healthy communities. For more information on these activities, refer to the resources listed at the end of this document.

Supporting Other Coalitions

As you move forward with your coalition, it is important and even advisable to support and join others' coalitions. This will afford you the opportunity to get the heart disease and stroke prevention program agenda out to many other groups, especially those with a history of success such as environmental groups, youth groups, clean neighborhood coalitions, and other organizations relevant to your goals.

Coalitions—A Working Partnership

Coalitions are tremendous agents of change. They can make the difference between succeeding at goals or being stalemated. Choose to make the coalitions you develop effective partners, working together for the good of the public. Good luck!

Resources

Although the following resources provide valuable tips and guidelines for building and maintaining coalitions, many are written with a focus on their own issue. So keep that in mind as you review these resources, and pull from each entry the items that will be helpful to you in attaining your particular goals.

Internet Resources

EPA/DOT Toolkit—Outreach Materials: Coalition Building and Maintenance.
<http://www.epa.gov/orcdizux/transp/traqpedo/italladd/coalit.htm>

“Coalition, Collaboration & Empowerment” (Source: AHEC/Community Partners [1997]. *From the Ground Up! A Workbook on Coalition Building & Community Development*).
http://www.med.usf.edu/~kmbrown/Coalition,_Collaboration_&_Empowerment.htm

“A Guide to Coalition Building,” Janice Forsythe, former executive director, Canadian Council on Smoking and Health, Cypress Consulting, March 15, 1997.
<http://www.cypresscon.com/coalition.htm>

“How to Be Heard: A Guide to Advocacy for Community Organizations,” Center for Community Change. <http://www.communitychange.org/howheard.html>

Books and Booklets

The Children's Advocates Campaign Strategy Book

Although its focus is on children's issues, this guide includes good coalition-building techniques, strategies for reaching candidates and public officials, ways to become involved in your community, and approaches to working with the media. It also includes checklists, legal considerations, and resources. \$15. To order, write to National Association of Children's Hospitals and Related Institutions (NACHRI), Attn: Publications, 401 Wythe Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Include the name of the book, your name, address, and a check for \$15.

To order the following publications, check first with www.amazon.com for availability and a lower price, or contact the National Coalition Building Institute, which currently has these books in stock at the following address: 1835 K Street, N.W., Suite 715, Washington, D.C. 20006; phone: (202) 785-9400; fax: (202) 785-3385; e-mail: nabiinc@aol.com.

The Art of Coalition Building, by Cherie Brown. Published by the American Jewish Committee, 1984, 46 pages, \$10 (includes shipping).

Healing Into Action: A Leadership Guide for Creating Diverse Communities, by Cherie Brown and George Mazza. Published by the National Coalition Building Institute, 1997, 99 pages, \$14.95 (includes shipping).

The following items are available through the Area Health Education Center/Community Partners, 24 South Prospect Street, Amherst, MA 01002; phone: (413) 253-4283; Web site: www.ahecpartners.org.

From the Ground Up: A Workbook on Coalition Building and Community Development, edited by Tom Wolff, Ph.D., and Gillian Kaye. Offers a "toolbox" for building coalitions and developing healthy communities and includes hands-on worksheets. 200 pages, \$30.

"Coalition Tip Sheets" includes 28 tip sheets, each covering a single coalition-building topic. \$10.

Coalition Building: One Path to Empowered Communities, by Tom Wolff, Ph.D. Explores coalitions that lead to healthy communities and includes case studies and coalition-building strategies. 37 pages, \$10.

Training Classes and Consultants

The Support Center is a nonprofit organization that provides trainings and consultation for the nonprofit community on coalition building, fundraising, board development, and financial management. Classes in the Washington, DC, center range in cost from \$60 to \$100 for half-day classes and from \$80 to \$130 for full-day classes. The Center can be reached at (202) 833-0300.

There are Support Centers in many major cities throughout the United States. For more information about classes or consultations, contact the Washington, DC, branch or the support centers in Atlanta or New York City.