Nearly every effort to bring about social change in a community could benefit from the active participation of community members. Health promotion programs are no exception. Increasingly, the solutions to public health problems include change at the community level, as well as those directed at individuals. Many public health issues are the result of complex social problems which, in order to be solved, require commitment and input from many segments of the community. They call for previously unrelated interest groups to work together in order to improve health in the community.

One way to stimulate interaction and exchange among community leaders and interested groups is to form coalitions. Many communities engaged in health promotion have developed coalitions over recent years. In fact, coalitions are now sometimes mandated by funding sources as essential components of community based health promotion programs. While coalitions have been used to affect change in other human service arenas, they are a relatively new phenomenon to the public health community. This guide provides you with some basic information and guidelines about how to develop and maintain community health promotion coalitions. Because coalitions are complex entities which are unique to each community, this guide only addresses the fundamental, generic organizational issues.

WHAT IS A COALITION?

A coalition is an organization of individuals representing diverse organizations, factions or constituencies who agree to work together in order to achieve a common goal. This active involvement by many segments of the community significantly increases the likelihood of accomplishments which would be difficult or impossible to achieve independently. In this era of increasingly scarce resources, the need for coordination and collaboration on complex problems has become more apparent. Coalitions have emerged as effective vehicles for these activities to occur for the following reasons:

- Coalitions increase the "critical mass" behind a community effort by bringing together sufficient numbers of interested people and gathering necessary resources.
- Coalitions help groups learn to communicate and trust one another, and reduce the likelihood of duplication of efforts and the squandering of resources through unnecessary competition.
- Coalitions can bring together community leaders representing diverse constituencies, such as political, business, education, human services, social and religious groups, in addition to less well-organized grassroots groups and individuals.
- Coalitions can effect changes in different community sectors.

Not all coalitions are alike. They can vary in their composition, purpose, and the intensity of involvement. Coalitions can be temporary, such as those created for a limited purpose, or more permanent, such as those dedicated to a long-term, comprehensive program. For example, a temporary coalition may come together to pressure for the creation of a teen birth control counseling service; a permanent coalition may be created to reduce the prevalence of teen pregnancies in a county in the long term.

While coalitions usually form as a direct response to a community need, the impetus for their creation may vary. Here are examples of three major types of coalitions:

1. Grassroots coalitions

Historically, grassroots coalitions have formed in times of crisis to pressure political decision-makers to act. They are frequently organized by people who volunteer their time and energy to the issue at hand. These coalitions are usually very political in nature, are immersed in controversy, and disband when the crisis situation has been resolved. An example of this type of coalition might be the spontaneous gathering of different political or religious factions who want to oppose the establishment of a drug treatment facility or a homeless shelter in their neighborhood.

2. Professional coalitions

Coalitions of professional organizations may also form either in a time of crisis, or as a long-term strategy to increase their power and influence. The lead organizations usually contribute significant amounts of staff time and resources to organize the coalition, which may be beset by issues of "turf" control. An example of this type of coalition is Tobacco Free America which was organized by the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and the American Lung Association to address tobacco issues at a national level.

3. Community-based coalitions

More recently, broad-based community coalitions of professional and grassroots leaders have formed to encourage changes conducive to good health in local institutions, such as worksites, schools and regulatory bodies. These coalitions, which are usually initiated by one agency in response to a funding proposal, have their own staff and funds. Examples of this type of coalition can be found in the Community Partnership programs of the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

While these types of coalitions may differ in many ways, there are several characteristics they share, and which distinguish them from other types of community leadership groups:

- They maximize the power of participating groups through joint action;
- They minimize duplication of effort among groups that would normally compete with one another;
- They pool talents and resources;
- They develop and demonstrate widespread public support for issues, actions or unmet needs.

WHY START A COALITION?

Before starting a coalition, it is important to determine that this is an appropriate vehicle for the resolution of the problem you've identified in your community. A coalition is just one tool that can be used to accomplish community health promotion programs: it may be less appropriate for your needs than advisory councils, community boards or task forces, which generally do not require the same levels of involvement, but are still effective ways to get community input and participation. Also, the typical coalition structure and organization sometimes doesn't fit well with some community cultures. It is important to assess accurately what the needs of your community are and choose the most appropriate vehicle to meet those needs.

For example, if your organization has already charted a clear course of action for which staff will be primarily responsible, and requires only advice or validation from the community about strategies or interventions, then some type of advisory body should be considered. On the other hand, if the problem would best be solved by an array of community members working toward common goals, a coalition may be the most effective organizing mechanism.

If your group is seriously considering taking a leading role in establishing a coalition, answer the following questions to determine if this is indeed the best choice:

- Is there an organization already in place which could effectively and more efficiently address this problem?

- Would this problem be more effectively or permanently solved with the joint ownership and responsibility of others, or can our organization be just as effective working on its own?
- Are there gaps in community services that would best be met through collaborative relationships?
- Is this a problem that is perceived as a priority by other organizations?
- Are we willing to relinquish control of the project to a coalition or do we just want advice? (A coalition may be willing to concede lead responsibility to one agency after agreeing on goals and overall strategy.)
- Do funding sources or our own agency constraints make it impossible to give up or share control of the project?

The answers to these questions should lead you to a decision about the appropriateness of a coalition for this particular problem. The formation of a coalition is a time-consuming effort and, without careful analysis, might not justify what it contributes to the efficacy of your efforts.

Sometimes, coalitions are "required" by funding sources. However, fundors may often limit the extent of decision making authority of community-based coalitions. If all members of a coalition share a common goal, this need not be a problem. But it is important to have absolute clarity about the role of the coalition as you recruit members, so that they all understand the extent to which they will be decision-makers.

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL FUNCTIONS OF A COALITION?

Once you decide that a coalition is an appropriate and useful vehicle to address the health problem in your community, you will need to identify its potential functions. There are three major functions of a coalition: communication, coordination and collaboration.

Communication is the most fundamental function of a coalition—communication that is honest, clear and helps the group to focus on a sense of common purpose. What holds the coalition together is a common purpose or shared concern about the community problem or goal. A coalition provides members the opportunity to share information about their activities and become familiar with each other's programs and staff. It allows for members to express and resolve their fears and reservations about proposed activities. Open communication increases trust between members and is essential to the ultimate success of a coalition, and indeed to all other coalition functions. Note that the coalition need not preclude differences of opinion on action or methods, so long as the goal is served.

Coordination requires a fairly high level of involvement from all members and agencies represented on the coalition. It includes joint planning, the setting of objectives and the synchronization of services, which should all be accomplished without a loss of individual agency identity. An example of this function would be the coordination of local health promotion resource directories offered by several different organizations in order to avoid duplication.

Collaboration is the most complex function, as coalition members work together to help achieve *coalition* goals and objectives set jointly by the members. For example, coalition members may share the tasks of setting the agenda for community health promotion; writing proposals for funding; carrying out specific community projects; developing and working on public policy issues; and conducting various forms of evaluation. What distinguishes this level from that of coordination is that the activities are conducted on behalf of the coalition.

Not every member may be active in all aspects of the coalition's work; it really depends on their interests and skills. For a variety of reasons, some members may choose to dissociate themselves from some activities of the coalition. For example, some may opt to limit their coalition activities to joint planning and objective setting, while others may be additionally involved in coordinated delivery of services. Likewise, evaluation activities can be centrally planned through the coalition and carried out independently by one or more members, or by a special subcommittee of members designated by the coalition.

It is very important to identify the potential functions of a coalition so your expectations and those of the

people and organizations you are recruiting are clear. This should be done with a core group or a small steering committee who can assist with the establishment of the coalition. It is best to choose people for this activity who are committed to the resolution of the problem, who have skills in organizational or program development, and who are known and respected by other community leaders.

ROLES OF COALITION MEMBERS

If you've decided that a coalition is the appropriate vehicle to address an identified problem and you've defined its potential functions, the next step is to recruit members. However, before you initiate this process, you should clarify the roles of coalition members. This will help you identify the kinds of individuals and organizations you will need to recruit and will provide prospective members with a clear picture of what will be expected of them.

In order to define roles, answer the following questions:

- Will members be asked to develop programs?
- Will they also implement them?
- Will members be responsible for the development and monitoring of budgets?
- Will members need to bring a specific perspective or knowledge to the project?
- Will they be expected to contribute financially to the project?
- Will they be expected to raise funds for the project?
- Will they be asked to contact and work with the media?
- Will members be expected to provide feedback to their organizations and obtain support for program development by them?
- Will members be expected to "open doors" in the community?
- Will members simply be expected to attend coalition meetings or will they also be expected to spend additional time on the work of the coalition?

Once you have a clear idea of the roles of the coalition members, you will also understand the kind of expertise the coalition will need to carry out its functions. Take the time to develop a brief job description and a list of the kinds of expertise you will be looking for in potential coalition members. Generally, the contributions of coalition members fall into four categories — willingness to work, knowledge of the field, money or access to it, and community connections. Obviously, not all coalition members will be interested and/or experienced in all of these areas. However, if each of the coalition members you recruit can contribute in at least two of these ways, you will be well on your way to developing a successful coalition.

When you begin the process of pulling together a coalition, it is not only important to recognize the need the coalition will serve, and the contributions its members can make. It is also important to think about what the coalition will give back to its members. Incentives include: a chance to achieve successes that would not be possible without a coalition; an opportunity to network with key community leaders and to showcase professional skills; and an opportunity to be viewed favorably by the community.

RECRUITMENT OF COALITION MEMBERS

Once you've identified the skills and expertise you will need for coalition membership, you are ready to begin recruitment. Organizations and individuals that may be considered as potential coalition members should possess at least one of the following attributes:

- Interest in and commitment to the issue;
- Credibility in the community (as both formal and informal leaders);
- Contacts with other potential members or allies;
- Familiarity and experience with the political system;
- Materials or expertise in program development, promotion, implementation, or evaluation;
- Financial resources or fundraising ability.

One way to identify potential coalition members is

through the "snowball" method. Begin by arranging interviews with people who represent organizations, factions or constituencies that you know are respected in the community, telling them that you are gathering information on potential members of a coalition. At the interview, explain why you are creating a coalition, and how you expect it to benefit the community. At the end of the interview, ask your contact for the names of community members and organizations who could potentially contribute to the resolution of this problem. Focus not only on mainstream gatekeepers, such as professionals or agency people, but also on grassroots leadership. You will know you have a complete list of contacts when you begin to hear the same names over again. This "snowball" method of recruitment often yields important information about community leadership and begins to lay a foundation of support for the project.

Obviously, the next step is to interview those people recommended by your core set of community contacts. In the interview, be clear about the purpose of the coalition, the roles of its members and the benefits of being a coalition member. Also, take the time to get to know the person or the organization to determine if there is indeed a good match between their abilities and the needs of the coalition. When you talk to people who are affiliated with organizations, clarify that you are recruiting them not as individuals but as representatives of their organizations or constituencies.

When you are inviting the organization to join the coalition, be very clear about how much organizational involvement you expect (which could range from public endorsement by their board to the contribution of resources, or the appointment of a representative to the board of the coalition).

At this point, it is wise to be cautious. Just because an organization or individual has a strong commitment to the issue does not mean they should be invited to join. The image of the coalition, and the mix of its members, should be carefully assessed before you offer any invitation. It is important that coalitions not consist entirely of agencies, gatekeepers, and political power holders. You should leave room for grassroots community leaders and people who have the time to work on specific projects and other issues.

For the coalition to be maximally effective, each member must be committed to the problem and to the concept of working cooperatively with others. Each member needs to carefully weigh his or her commitment to the coalition and decide that the effort is worth the return, and the organization's mission is consistent with his or her own goals and objectives. Depending upon the structure of the coalition, members could choose to participate fully or in a limited fashion.

Participation agreements should be developed that specify a time limit for membership, or other conditions for organizational involvement in the coalition. Depending upon your community's style, participation commitments could be informal verbal agreements, or formal written contracts among the members.

YOU'VE GOT A COALITION, NOW WHAT DO YOU DO?

As with any new group, coalitions take time to coalesce. Community members with little or no experience in health promotion may not understand what they have to contribute, and may feel uncomfortable making decisions in an arena that they perceive to be outside their realm of expertise. Organizations may be concerned with protecting their "turf" and may be distrustful of working with each other. How do you go about welding this disparate group into an efficient, committed coalition?

Staff can play a very important part. Coalition organizers frequently are staff of a lead organization, and play a key role in its evolution as an effective entity. However, these staff members may not be appropriate coalition leaders—particularly if the coalition is a broad based one which will depend on community support for its success. In order to avoid a staff-dominated coalition and to enhance its potential for success, several critical issues must be addressed as early as possible in the coalition-building process. These include:

- Leadership;
- Clarification of staff/coalition relations;
- Development of decision-making processes;

- Development of organizational structure;
- Determination of the frequency and length of meetings;
- Development of a mission statement spelling out the goals and objectives of the coalition;
- Decisions about how to provide recognition for both the coalition and individual members.

Leadership. While staff of the lead organization may be responsible for organizing a coalition, it is important to establish early on a process for the development of leadership. If a chair will be elected by the membership, give members enough time to get acquainted so that people with strong leadership qualities may emerge. One way of assuring this is to appoint an interim facilitator for a period of several meetings (preferably one who isn't interested in the position of chair). Frequently, members will immediately look toward other members of prominence to fill this role. Ideally, someone will emerge who has the ability to set agendas and conduct meetings efficiently, while fostering communication and a clear sense of the coalition's direction.

Coalition/staff relationships. If there are paid staff, it is essential to clarify roles as soon as the coalition is formed. In many community-based health promotion projects, it is the coalition—not the staff—which has the authority to oversee the project's development and operation. However, staff still play an important part in the process of coalition development, particularly in the early stages when coalition members need to be educated about the issues that surround and influence a problem and its solutions. These early stages are obviously critically important, as the coalition begins to coalesce, and members take on their assigned responsibilities. They may need a lot of guidance from staff on how best to carry out their roles. But staff need to be very sensitive to the importance of balancing their role of providing technical assistance with the coalition's role of decision-making. This relationship should be clearly spelled out and reinforced as the coalition develops.

Decision making processes. By-laws or rules of operation regarding the structure, function and operations of the coalition should be developed early in its life. The coalition should agree on such practical matters as these:

- How they will make decisions (consensus or majority rule)?
- What constitutes a quorum?
- How the work will get done (by the full coalition or through task forces or committees)?
- Who has the authority to speak on behalf of the coalition?
- How are coalition members appointed?

These issues will inevitably emerge sometime in the life of the coalition and should be addressed early on rather than in a crisis situation.

Organizational structure. A variety of organizational structures can be adopted by the coalition, ranging from a highly centralized, authoritarian model to a loose model which accomplishes its work through consensus. The precise model selected by the coalition should again reflect the needs of the community and the makeup of the coalition, as well as the objectives of the coalition.

Frequency and length of meetings. Much of the work of the coalition is accomplished in meetings. Frequency and length of these meetings should be agreed upon at the first coalition meeting, and the decision reviewed periodically thereafter. It's a good idea to have a regular schedule of meetings, so members can put them on their calendars well in advance.

Remember that each coalition member will probably consider his or her time to be valuable and extremely limited. Generally, meetings should be held no more often than monthly, and should run no longer than two hours. It is very important to have well prepared agendas (distributed to members prior to meetings, if possible) and to stay within the allotted time of the meeting. The fastest way to lose members is to hold meetings that drag on and accomplish little. Structure them so members have opportunities for input, but be sure the chair keeps the meeting moving. Also, be sure that each agenda item is resolved before moving onto the next one.

Mission statement and coalition goals and objectives. Every coalition member should contribute to the development of a concise mission statement; to coalition goals and objectives which are clear, specific, and attainable; and to a workplan which emphasizes collaborative linkages among coalition members. These activities build coalition ownership in a way that few other activities can do, because they allow for members to shape and mold a project, and to reinforce their commitments through discussion.

Coalition vs. individual recognition. The coalition needs to deal with the very difficult issue of public recognition for accomplishments. As organizations seek some level of community support for their programs, they will hope to accomplish things in the community which will enhance their reputations. When they participate in coalition goals, they run the risk of losing their own agency identities. It is important to create an environment in which these issues can be discussed and resolved by mutual agreement.

The coalition should find ways to recognize individual organizations publicly without losing opportunities to advance the goals of the coalition. For example, you could mention in press releases the names of member organizations that are playing a major role in the specific project that the coalition is promoting. The issue of recognition should be brought forth regularly throughout the life of the coalition, because members' feelings and attitudes may change as they encounter different situations.

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL COALITIONS

For a wide variety of reasons, coalitions sometimes fail. The major barriers to coalition effectiveness include:

- Threats to the sense of autonomy that member organizations may perceive;
- Disagreements among the members regarding community needs;
- Lack of consensus about membership criteria or coalition structure;
- Inadequate participation of relevant community constituencies (e.g., only the "power elite" agencies are involved);
- Disagreements about which coalition members should provide services to clients;
- Lack of leadership and a clear sense of direction.

In addition, coalitions may be sabotaged by inadequate resources, an unclear mission, the absence of bylaws and policies regarding members' roles and responsibilities, and unspoken or inconsistent expectations about the exchange of resources or the awarding of credit. These barriers to coalition effectiveness can be avoided through careful planning, communication about issues as they arise, and sensitivity to how organizations develop and change.

EVALUATION

Once the coalition is established, its progress toward its goals and objectives should be evaluated on a periodic basis. Evaluations provide information and feedback on what's working, identify areas which may need to be improved or eliminated, and identify accomplishments to date. Three major areas should be evaluated:

1. Progress toward goals and objectives

You should evaluate both the process (the way you make progress) and the outcome (how well you succeed). This will provide the coalition with the necessary information to decide if goals, objectives and strategies should be redesigned.

2. Coalition effectiveness

Both the way the coalition developed and the way it is currently getting its work done should be evaluated through questionnaires which solicit members feedback on coalition effectiveness. This is a good way to get input on how the work is being done, and suggestions on how to improve it.

3. "Spin-off" successes

Sometimes, the greatest achievements of coalitions

come in unexpected forms; for example, community agencies may form new liaisons with each other, or develop new ways of looking at "old" problems in the community. It is not uncommon for coalitions to have many "spin-off" successes in the community, although they may not be very obvious at first.

Sometimes coalitions fail for reasons you cannot control. The timing may not be right for the community to address the issue you've identified, or other issues may divert attention away from yours. If your evaluation indicates that the coalition is not achieving its intended purpose and that the process is not contributing to the community in any identifiable way, it may be time to disband the coalition. If you find yourself in this situation, it is important to end the coalition promptly, rather than letting it drag on in an ineffective form. It is also important to realize what positive benefits you will take away from the experience. You can be proud in the knowledge that every effort to stimulate cooperation among groups is worthwhile because it helps to build local community problem-solving ability and leadership.

CONCLUSION

The development and maintenance of effective coalitions is an exciting challenge. They have tremendous potential to bring about changes conducive to health in communities, provided that they are built and maintained with sensitivity, flexibility and an appreciation for the time, care and expertise it takes to create a complex organizational entity.

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