

# PLAN PREPARE PRACTICE

## Coalition Building

The primary reason to develop a coalition is to accomplish a goal that may reach beyond the capacity of any individual member or organization.

### What is a coalition?

A coalition is a group of individuals and/or organizations with a common interest who work together toward a common goal.

Coalition goals are varied, but often contain elements of one or more of the following:

- Influencing or developing public policy, usually surrounding a specific issue
- Changing people's behavior (reducing smoking or drug use, for instance)
- Building a healthy community

### Why build a coalition?

- Bring together a wider range of skills, ideas, experiences, and connections
- Address large issues that demand a lot of public support
- Strength: you are stronger as a large group than as small isolated groups
- Better media coverage
- Easier to get funding
- Share responsibilities, resources, equipment, supplies, and space

### How do you start a community coalition?

#### 1. Put together a core group.

You are probably not alone in your concerns about an influenza pandemic, and you may already have a core group—a few individuals or organizations—ready to work at forming a coalition. If not, your first step is to find and make contact with those few individuals and organizations most involved with the issue.

**There are a few ways to approach assembling a core group:**

- Start with people you know. If you are a longtime activist on this issue, or if you have been living or working in your community for a while, you have many contacts, particularly among others with similar concerns. Use these contacts now, either to pull them into the circle, or to get the names of others who might be part of a core group.
- Talk to influential people, or people with a lot of contacts. These may be business or civic leaders, ordinary citizens with high credibility, or people like the United Way director, whose job it is to know nearly everyone.



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## 2. Identify the most important potential coalition members.

There are people or organizations you can't do without.

It is important to identify and target them specifically for membership.

## 3. Recruit members to the coalition.

Now that your core group is in place, you can start recruiting members.

## 4. Plan and hold a first meeting.

The first meeting of a coalition is important. If it's a high-energy, optimistic gathering that gets people excited, you're off to a good start. If it's depressing and negative, or just boring, it's a good bet that a lot of people will lose interest. It's up to the core group—in what may be their last official task—to plan a successful start-up meeting.

**There are a number of possibilities for the content of the first meeting. The agenda should depend on your particular issue and purposes, and on the needs of your community, but you will probably want to include some of the following:**

- Begin with a “show and tell.” Once the coalition has been formed, spend the first meeting getting to know one another. Have each member talk about his or her organization. How can their work contribute to the overall mission of the coalition? Request that each member bring a sufficient number of materials/brochures about their organization to distribute to the entire group.
- Define the issue or problem around which the coalition has come together. This might involve the group coming up with a consensus statement, or might involve an initial discussion followed by a smaller group being asked to draft a definition for the next meeting.
- Discuss the structure of the coalition. What kind of group will it be? How (if at all) will it be run? What kinds of things will it do? Start the process of creating a common vision and agreeing on shared values about the direction of the coalition. This is the first step toward developing the vision and mission statements that will define the coalition and guide its work.
- Discuss a procedure for forming an action plan. The discussion may lead either to the appointment of a smaller group to draft a plan or to the establishment of a procedure by which the larger group will generate a plan over a set period of time. Review the things to be done before the next meeting and who has agreed to do them. As mentioned above, it's important that people leave the first meeting with sense of accomplishment. If there are tasks being worked on and specific results expected at the next meeting—even if those results are simply statements or preliminary plans—coalition members will leave with a good feeling.
- Schedule the next meeting. It may be possible to develop a regular meeting schedule at this first meeting but it may make more sense to wait until membership grows and stabilizes before creating a long-term schedule.



## 5. Follow up on the first meeting.

**You've held a successful first meeting—terrific! However, the job of building a coalition has only begun. You have to follow up to make sure that there will be a well-attended second meeting at which work can continue.**

- Distribute the minutes of the first meeting and reminders about the next meeting to those who attended. Send invitations, as well as the minutes, to potential new members. Try to widen your network as much as possible. Get to the people you missed the first time or get contacts from people who attended the first meeting.
- Follow up with groups or individuals who are working on tasks assigned at the first meeting. Offer help, attend group meetings, and try to involve other people with relevant skills or knowledge. Do everything you can to make sure those tasks get accomplished.
- If there are committees or task forces forming, try to recruit new members for them. The real work of the coalition will probably be done in these small groups, so it's important that they have the right members. If you know people with expertise who could be used in particular ways, grab them. Most people will respond if they're asked, especially if they're asked because you value what they bring to the task.
- Keep track of the fundamental building blocks of the coalition that aren't in place yet. If the group hasn't yet decided on a structure or a coordinating body you need to make sure that decision is either in the works or is being actively considered. If there's no action on an action plan, you need to provide the push to get it going.

## 6. Next steps.

**There are a number of specific things—some of which you have already started in that first meeting—that need to be done to make sure that the coalition keeps moving forward:**

- Gather information. In order to plan for action, you need as much information about the problem or issue—and about the community—as possible. The more information you can gather, the easier it becomes to define the problem, to know if you're addressing something that is in fact a major community issue, and to plan a strategy that will address the problem effectively.
- Finish creating the vision and mission statements. These can be finalized in a small group after everyone has had input in a larger meeting, or you can try to generate them from the larger group discussion (perhaps by splitting people up into smaller groups then coming back together to reconcile differences). It's important that there be agreement on the wording and intent of these statements because they will be the foundation of the coalition, referred to over time as the group tries to decide whether to tackle particular issues.
- Complete an action plan. The coalition's action plan is intertwined with both its structure and its vision and mission. In practice, coalitions often start with a sense of what they need to do and their structures, visions, and missions grow from there.
- Finish the work of designing a structure for the coalition. Again, this has to be a shared task, with everyone having a chance to contribute ideas. There is such a broad range of possibilities here—from practically no governance to a very clear, formal hierarchy—it's crucial that the group come up with a form agreeable to everyone.
- Once a structure has been agreed upon there may still be the need for writing bylaws and formalizing it. Elect officers, or a coordinating or steering committee. Once there is agreement about the structure of the coalition, it's time for members to decide whether they want some sort of governing body, and to choose it so that the work of the coalition can go ahead.



## 7. Some general guidelines for getting a coalition off the ground.

In addition to the specifics above, there are some more general elements to starting a coalition:

- Communicate, communicate, communicate. Make sure that lines of communication within the coalition and among the coalition, the media, and the community are wide open. Open communication will ensure no one feels left out and that everyone has the information necessary to make coalition efforts successful. Good communication with the media and the community will increase your chances for publicity and support when you need them.
- Be as inclusive and as active as you can. Work at making the coalition a group where anyone in the community feels welcome, and continue to invite people to join after the first meeting. Try to involve everyone in the coalition in generating vision and mission statements, planning, and major decisions. The more people feel ownership of the coalition itself, the harder they'll be willing to work to achieve its goals, and the less likely they'll be to allow turf issues or minor conflicts to get in the way of the coalition's progress.
- Network like crazy. Try to involve, or at least inform, as many other groups in the community as possible. Let them know what you're doing, invite them to coalition meetings (to make presentations, if appropriate, or just to see what's going on), invite them to join if they're interested, educate them about the issue. If groups in the community are informed about your work they're more likely to be supportive and to tell others about what you're doing. They may also have better connections to policy makers than you have and may be able to help you approach them.
- Be creative about meetings. Community activists and health and human service workers often feel they spend their whole lives in meetings. If each coalition meeting can be different, and have some elements of fun to it, you will be much more likely to retain both membership and interest in the coalition.

### Some possibilities include:

- rotating the responsibility for meetings among the groups comprising the coalition.
- having only a small number of meetings a year, each with a particular theme.
- doing most of the work of the coalition in committees or task forces.
- regularly bringing in exciting presentations on the issue or in areas that relate to it.
- Praise and reward outstanding contributions and celebrate your successes. In addition to success itself, the celebration of success is a great way to cement the bonds among members of a coalition. Whether through individual or group awards, or through parties or other events, celebration of achievement will help your coalition thrive, and will give you a much-needed opportunity to remember the reason you're doing all this.



## Some Helpful Dos

- Be inclusive—don't limit the types of organizations and individuals to approach for membership.
- Understand the needs and concerns of each prospective member and organization. Make sure everyone understands what you are trying to accomplish and how you think they can help. Many larger organizations usually need time to plan and include coalition activities within their current work. Don't expect everybody to drop everything to join your coalition.
- Be patient—this seems to be a recurring theme, but a necessary one.
- Be very clear about the roles and responsibilities of the coalition. People need to understand what is expected of them. They can help develop a work plan, but that should be included in their roles and responsibilities. Ambiguity only leads to confusion and this can cause people to drop out of the coalition.
- Develop specific activities. The best way to keep people involved and motivated is to give them responsibilities to fulfill and make sure their tasks are short and sweet.
- Ask for ideas, suggestions, and help. When asking for help and assistance, the organizer or leader needs to be a facilitator, not a speaker. That individual also needs to make sure all coalition members offer their views, and that people who might be shy are called upon to give their opinions. Keeping track of every suggestion is also important—make sure everyone's opinions and views are counted. The facilitation process should lead members to buy into the coalition's goals because people feel their contributions are valued.

## Some Helpful Don'ts

- Don't just form a coalition for the heck of it—you should have a reason to build one, and the groups involved should be interested and, more importantly, committed.
- Don't be demanding—appreciate everyone's contribution.
- Don't be impatient—democracy works but it takes time.
- Don't be confusing—state plans clearly and concisely.
- Don't lecture—you are not in a classroom.
- Don't waste time—people's lives are too busy.
- Don't forget reminders—when sending out a meeting notice, follow-up with a phone call the day before the meeting to remind people.
- Don't forget newsletters, minutes, and regular updates.

## Summary

In situations where issues are too large and complex for a single organization to address, a coalition of groups and individuals working together may be the solution. A coalition can develop a coordinated response to an issue, increase the efficiency of service delivery, pool community resources, create and launch community-wide initiatives, build and wield political clout to influence policy, and work effectively toward long-term social change.

**The Community Tool Box Website: <http://ctb.ku.edu>**

Provides further detailed information and valuable tools and resources on how to form and maintain a community coalition.



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