

Coalitions

Coalition Basics

A coalition is a group of individuals and groups working together to achieve a shared goal. Community coalition members should represent diverse interests (see list below).

Concrete, near-term benchmarks that change over time are also essential. Examples of these might be building or improving parks, creating walking trails in a community, or providing low-cost (or free) fitness classes at community centers.

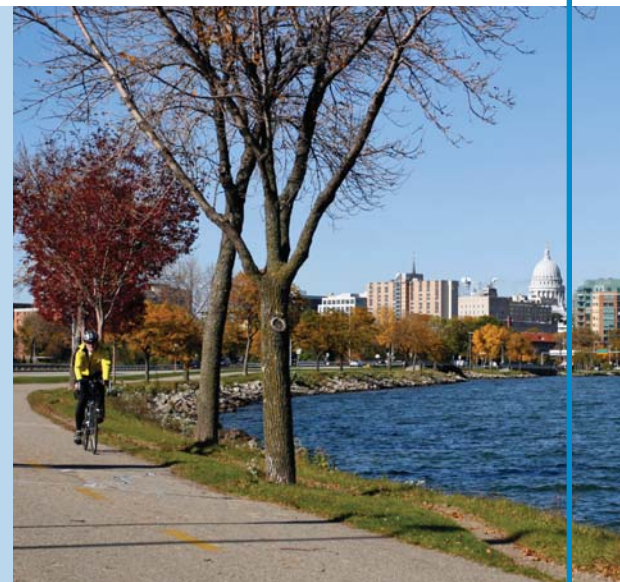
Functions a coalition might include:

- ◆ Community awareness, education, and strengthening knowledge.
- ◆ Educating policy makers.
- ◆ Influencing public and private policy issues.
- ◆ Building support for improvements in infrastructure.
- ◆ Changing organizational practices.

As you begin to think about bringing together a coalition, don't get stuck on what to call your group. Hours and days have been spent debating if a group should be labeled a 'coalition,' 'collaborative,' 'partnership,' or similar term. What you call your group is not likely to matter – at least as you begin your work. Once you are organized and functioning, you can revisit the "What do we want to call ourselves?" question, if you feel it is an important issue. For the sake of simplicity, this guide will use the word "coalition."

To change public policy at the local, state and national levels, multiple coalitions must form and work together collaboratively to produce systemic changes. Individual leaders comprise the coalition membership. Leaders (members) must adopt an attitude of understanding and respect for one another.

– *Applied Leadership for Effective Coalitions*
National Council on Disability



When launching a coalition, the vision, mission, goals, and objectives should be discussed and agreed on. Then address these critical questions:

- ◆ What do we expect to accomplish?
- ◆ Who needs to be at the table?
- ◆ What needs to change in our community?
- ◆ What resources do we have?
- ◆ What resources will we need?
- ◆ What resources are available to us?
- ◆ What are the various roles and responsibilities of coalition members?
- ◆ To whom is the coalition accountable?
- ◆ What is the intended timeframe for the coalition (will it be ongoing or are there date-specific goals that will be addressed, and then the coalition will disband)?

A coalition should determine how it will function from an operational perspective.

- ◆ When, where, and how often the coalition will meet?
- ◆ Who will chair meetings?
- ◆ How will the chair be selected?
- ◆ What is expected of members?
- ◆ How will the agendas be set?
- ◆ Who is responsible for administrative functions such as meeting arrangements, agenda distribution (ideally prior to the meetings), minutes, assuring follow-up? (This is especially important if there is not an assigned staff person.)
- ◆ Will the coalition need a budget, and if yes, who will serve as the fiscal agent?

Many communities have built coalitions with cross-cutting partnerships to address a variety of health and wellness challenges and opportunities. One example is the Tobacco Free Partnerships, which have been successful in addressing tobacco issues through community awareness, education, and policy change.

Who might you engage in a coalition to improve the physical activity health and wellness environment within a community? The following list is not intended to be a complete inventory of the types of organizations possible for a coalition, but serves as a guide to help you get started. The actual

organizations you engage for your local action should be representative of your community, and the diversity, talent and resources that are available. Some examples are:

- Area businesses
- Chambers of commerce
- City and county health departments
- Community groups and organizations (AARP, Urban League, YMCAs, bicycle clubs, running clubs, walking clubs, etc.)
- Developers/builders
- Environmental groups (Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, Sierra Club, etc.)
- Exercise and rehabilitation professionals
- Government agencies (National Parks Service; U.S. Fish and Wildlife; U.S. Forestry Department; USDA)
- Cooperative Extension state and county health educators, specialists, and agents)
- Health agencies (American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, etc.)
- Health care professionals (physicians, nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, pharmacists, medical students, nursing students)
- Health and fitness clubs
- Law enforcement
- Neighborhood associations
- Parks and recreation department professionals
- Realtors
- Religions leaders
- Retail establishments and shopping centers
- School districts
- Students
- Teachers
- Transportation experts
- Urban planners
- Zoning department

Forming a coalition provides several practical benefits. There is strength in numbers. People and organizations that work together can leverage their resources and skills. In addition, coalitions often command more attention than individual organizations. This is especially true when groups with different purposes collaborate on a common goal, as well as when coalitions strive for bipartisanship.

Coalition Building

There are excellent sources that outline approaches to coalition building; several are included in the Tools and Resources section. There are, however, a few factors that are critical to success that you should keep in mind, no matter what your coalition building process is.

- 1. Set clear goals.** Later in this guide, there is a chapter that addresses planning. A clear plan is vital to keep your efforts on track. This can be especially important if you have a diverse membership, since coalition members often bring their own organizations' goals and agendas to the table. As ideas and issues arise, continually ask the question, "How does this relate to the coalition's mission, goals, and objectives?"
- 2. Communicate clearly, adequately, and regularly.**
- 3. Listen to opposing points of view.** Often coalitions are comprised of like-minded individuals. But opposing views and opinions can provide insight and information that could be overlooked if it is not sought and valued. One way to gather this input is to talk with those who oppose your efforts. Find out why. What concerns do they have? Can you address those concerns? Are they seeing potential problems that you are missing?
- 4. Determine a decision-making process and stick with it.** It may be that decisions are made by a majority vote, consensus, or by sub-committees charged with making decisions on specific issues. Whatever process you have, stick with it and don't spend time rehashing or questioning decisions.
- 5. Determine how tasks will be delegated, and what the process for follow-up and reporting will be.**
- 6. Recognize and celebrate successes.** This provides momentum and helps eliminate burnout.

Coalition Pitfalls

Often efforts at building an effective coalition fail. Be aware of potential pitfalls. Go through this list with your group and talk about how you can deal with these issues. You might consider setting up ground rules or bylaws.

- ◆ Lack of clear leadership, goals or focus
- ◆ No defined decision-making process
- ◆ Impatience – expecting change to occur instantly
- ◆ Inadequate, infrequent, or irregular communication and follow-up
- ◆ One agency having too much perceived or real authority
- ◆ Competition or conflict among members
- ◆ Too many meetings, not often meetings, meetings that last too long, or hard to get to meeting locations
- ◆ Not enough funding to cover basic operating costs
- ◆ Staff/member turnover and burnout
- ◆ Language and cultural barriers in multi-lingual and multi-cultural communities

Coalition Building Tools and Resources

Applied Leadership for Effective Coalitions.

(<http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2001/pdf/appliedleadership.pdf>). This National Council on Disability guide is designed to assist those interested in promoting leadership development and coalition building.

Community Coalitions for Prevention and Health Promotion.

Frances Dunn Butterfoss, Robert M. Goodman, Abraham Wandersman. This article, published in *Health Education Research*. Vol. 8, No. 3, 1993. (315-330), provides useful coalition definitions, outlines various types of coalitions, and offers information on coalition development and function.

Creating an Effective Coalition: An Eight Step Guide

(<http://www.preventioninstitute.org/eightstep.html>). From the Prevention Institute, this guide suggests eight specific steps for coalition development.

Elevation: A Community Health Practice Guide

(http://www.communityhealthresource.com/Cultivating_Community_Coalitions.doc). From Community Health Solutions, Inc., this Guide outlines 10 steps for starting an effective community coalition and 15 strategies for sustaining a coalition.

Maintaining Effective Community Coalitions

(http://www.cchealth.org/groups/health_services/pdf/maintaining_effective_community_coalitions.pdf). Chuck McKetney and Julie Freestone. This report, from the Contra Costa County (CA) Health Services, provides useful, practical information on running efficient coalitions, evaluating coalition work, and knowing when to end a coalition.

State Coalition Handbook: Strategies and Techniques

(<http://www.ncppa.org/State%20Coalition%20Handbook%20Final.pdf>). The National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity (NCPA) developed this handbook to provide an in-depth look at the challenges, tasks, and solutions facing those who have committed to starting a physical activity coalition in their state or local community.

Sustainable Communities for All Ages

(http://www.viablefuturetoolkit.org/toolkit_tab.htm)

This guide from Just Partners, Inc. includes planning worksheets, issues briefs, community checklists, assessment tools, communication tips, coalition building tools, and information on resource development.

United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extensive System Offices

(<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html>)

Each U.S. state and territory has a state office at its land-grant university and a network of local or regional offices. These offices provide useful, practical, and research-based information on a variety of topics. Many state extension offices provide information on community coalition building.