

# How to Build a Community Coalition

A coalition is an alliance of individuals, groups, parties, or states that come together, join forces, or form partnerships usually for a specific or common purpose.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is a good example of an effective coalition. MADD began with one enraged mother and expanded to become a group of ordinary people who helped change the way society views drunk driving. Before that time, many people did not think seriously about having “one for the road.”

A broad-based coalition includes more than the traditional organizations that have a professional or personal interest in the issue. That is, it must include non-traditional partners.

## **Advantages of a Coalition**

### ***The number of people who are involved***

A broad-based, grassroots coalition enhances credibility

The more widespread support an issue can demonstrate, the more seriously the effort is perceived. When the issue demonstrates both widespread support and active involvement, opinion leaders, the media and the public begin to take the effort seriously and pay attention.

### ***Implementation of varied activities and programs***

Diverse participants provide diverse skills as well as access to important target populations, i.e., youth, the media, business, policymakers and others. Each coalition member or member organization can contribute their particular expertise or resources to facilitate activities by other members or by the coalition as a whole. By working together, members often find they solve mutual problems.

### ***Networking opportunities***

Many groups or individuals get involved in coalitions because they want to meet other professionals for business or personal reasons. 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.

### ***New ideas and energy to existing programs***

Any effort can get stale and die out if it isn't re-energized with new people and new energy. A fresh perspective on the issue may be just what it is needed to get things moving again.

### ***Good source of information and feedback***

If we want to change behavior or attitudes, it is important to know what is going on in that community. A grassroots coalition can be the eyes and ears

and provide important intelligence information. A wise coalition coordinator will solicit and coalesce the information received from individual members.

### ***Publicity for the program***

A coalition's members should be ambassadors for the effort, broadening the reach of our message and increasing the project's exposure. We may want to provide a sample article to coalition members whose organizations have a newsletter or other publication and request that they publish it.

### ***A distribution network***

One of the challenges in implementing public information and education campaigns is distributing materials in the community. Materials may be beautifully produced, but if they are unseen, they are valueless. Through their jobs and neighborhood connections, coalition members can serve as an effective network for dissemination.

## **How to Form A Coalition**

Forming a coalition sounds easy, but proper planning and knowledge can avoid problems in the future. Following are some suggested steps to follow in putting together a coalition.

### ***1. Search the landscape***

Before starting a coalition, determine whether similar organizations are already in existence in your community.

Ask yourself these questions before you proceed:

- Should our coalition become part of an existing coalition?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of becoming part of an existing group?
- Should the coalition operate separately and coordinate information, programs and activities with existing organizations?

### ***2. Brainstorm ideas on potential participants***

Ask three or four other individuals who are affiliated with the current organization or who are well connected in the community to participate in a brainstorming session. Consider inviting representatives from the target population to also participate. This session is designed to solicit names of individuals to contact. Who are the community's key leaders? Who are the obvious stakeholders in the issue? Whose participation will be critical to the success of the effort? Are diverse populations of the community represented?

Sometimes coalitions can attain visibility and recruit members more quickly if they have a powerful "champion." The champion may be a judge, political leader, business person, civic leader or member of the faith community, but they should be someone who is well respected and able to generate support for the new entity.

### ***3. Determine responsibilities, budget, and resources***

Who will lead?

The person who manages the coalition is critically important. Coalitions without someone dedicated to managing the effort often fail. Whether it is a newly formed

group or an existing organization taking on a new mission, coalitions need to be administered, programs need to be carefully implemented and coalition members need to be inspired to continue their work. Each coalition must determine how those tasks will be handled.

#### Where will entity be housed?

Another coalition resource question involves housing the entity. Is there sufficient funding to rent office space or will the coalition be housed at a coalition member's office location?

#### Are there additional costs? Who will cover?

Finally, there are costs associated with forming and maintaining the coalition. Expenses include furniture and equipment, postage to mail information, printing and copying and even refreshments for each meeting.

### **4. Invite people to join**

Draft a letter of invitation asking potential members to attend an organizing meeting. If you have recruited a champion, ask him or her to sign the letter. An elected official, a judge, the head of a government agency, the police chief, a prominent business person or some other prominent individual or group of individuals would be good choices. A personal invitation may be more beneficial for some of the more prominent individuals, rather than a letter. Assess what's in it for them and use this in your recruitment message.

### **5. Clarify expectations**

Develop a list of roles and responsibilities for coalition members. Include the number of times the group can expect to meet throughout the year, the time of the meetings, what is expected of the group, and what individuals may be expected to contribute. Decide what policies or criteria exist for membership.

Make a follow-up phone call two days prior to the meeting to remind individuals to attend. Include some basic activities in the list of roles and responsibilities. For instance, the first activity might be to conduct a needs assessment and individuals may be asked to distribute a market survey to people in their neighborhoods or their organization. *Appendix #2 is a sample list of Roles and Responsibilities.*

### **6. Do not assume everyone understands the issue**

- Don't use acronyms or jargon. Every profession has its own language.
- Sponsor a "show and tell." Once the coalition has been formed, spend the first meeting getting to know one another. Have each member of the coalition talk about their organizations, including the following:
  - What is the mission and goals of their organization?
  - How their organization is funded?
  - Who has the final say on policies and programs?
  - The type(s) of services or product(s) do they provide?
  - How their work can contribute to the overall mission of the coalition?
  - What they hope to gain from their participation?

- Request that each member bring a sufficient number of materials/brochures about their organization to distribute to the entire coalition.
- Require every coalition member to participate in the “show and tell” exercise, even when what their organizations do is obvious, such as the police department.

## **7. Define goals and objectives**

Once a coalition has determined its purpose through a mission statement, the next important task is to define goals and objectives.

### **Recruiting Participants**

- Target key community leaders

One of the easiest ways to attract people to join a coalition is to involve a prominent member of the community who commands respect and admiration from others. Within every community there are movers and shakers; people who are recognized, respected and who get things done. With any luck, a coalition will include several members who are movers and shakers.

- Involve people whose jobs relate to the work of the coalition.
- Reach out to non-traditional partners in the community such as service clubs, the media, and the faith community.

They can make the issue “come alive” for the public and policymakers by relating their own experiences..

- Identify people who may have a personal as well as people who have a professional interest.
- Keep the size of the coalition and number of participants to a manageable level.

Although a coalition should be as broad-based and inclusive as possible, the size of the coalition must be manageable in order for anything to be accomplished.

### **Maintaining the Coalition**

Success is the best way to keep people involved in a coalition. Everybody loves a winner.

Following is a list of ways to maintain an effective coalition.

- Celebrate victories. Recognition will go a long way, particularly when times get tough and the successes harder to achieve.
- Demonstrate what people can do and what’s in it for them.
- One of the best ways to maintain coalition members is to run effective, interesting, productive meetings. Following are some tips on running good meetings:

#### ***Before the meeting:***

- Determine the purpose and type. (Problem solving, decision making, reporting and presenting information, planning, reacting and evaluating, or a combination.

- Establish objectives and develop an agenda.
- Provide participants with a copy of the agenda, materials and any instructions.
- Confirm meeting room logistics (room set up, equipment).

#### ***During the meeting:***

- Establish a schedule and location of regular meetings early in the year so members know where and when they should gather well in advance and can plan their schedules appropriately.
- Follow an agenda.
- Begin and end the meeting on time (most meetings should be one to two hours, unless otherwise specified).
- Recognize new issues as they arise and agree on how to deal with them.
- Encourage participation of all members.
- Intervene when discussions go off point or are redundant.
- Summarize each agenda item as it is completed to insure understanding and consensus.
- Establish and assign action items.
- Determine whether a following meeting is needed, and if so set a tentative time, date and agenda.

#### ***After the meeting:***

- Prepare and distribute minutes or meeting summary.
- Act on or implement the decisions of the meeting.
- Plan any follow-up meetings or other activities.

### **Communicating With Members**

Communication to the coalition is critical. These updates do not have to be complicated or difficult. If the task of producing the update is too cumbersome, it probably will not be produced because other tasks will take priority. Keep it simple and effective.

#### ***Send meeting notes***

At each meeting of the coalition, a person should be designated to take notes so that a report can be compiled and sent to all the members of the coalition. This keeps every member informed and reminds him or her of what actions have been taken or proposed.

#### ***Send news clippings***

These informative, timely updates are among the reasons, will bring many people to attend the coalition meetings. Invite interesting and informative speakers to each coalition meeting.

### ***Produce newsletters/brochure***

A flyer about the organization and its mission, goals and objectives is a good way to educate people. Part of the brochure also can ask people to join or financially support the effort. A brochure can also be used to highlight a portion of your program.

An effective newsletter or brochure does not have to be an elaborate. A newsletter can be one sheet of paper, printed front and back as a self-mailer that can be folded and mailed.

### **Conclusion**

Coalitions are critical. Coalition building is the only way to participate in the common solution to problems. It brings different segments to the table and adds strength to any campaign.