



# Coalition Start Up

by David Foster and Heather Danton, AHEC/Community Partners

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The impetus behind each new coalition - that spark or particular combination of concerns and people - is unique. No two coalitions begin or develop in precisely the same way. There is not a specific linear order in which this process evolves since a coalition's processes, its structure and its activities develop interactively. Still, there are common themes, elements and stages that most coalitions concerned with community issues go through in getting started.

## Context

First, it is important to be aware of the environment within which the coalition will emerge and function. Some key variables include:

- definition of "the community"
- social infrastructure
- history of collaboration and "political climate"
- nature of existing helping systems
- resources (human, organizational, and material)

In the early stages of any new coalition, it is valuable to consciously consider each of these elements and assess its potential influence on the emerging group and its process.

## Who, What, Where, Why?

At the outset it is useful to examine questions related to "why are we coming together". Some coalitions form when a history of working together on a common concern leads to a desire for a more formal, ongoing organization. Recently more coalitions have emerged in response to some external impetus, often from a funding source. These groups face a special challenge of not being driven, divided or distracted by these outside forces.

As a group comes together to initiate a coalition, the issue of "boundaries" will come up in several forms. Questions, such as, what are we about?; what do we want to do?; what geographic area will the coalition focus on?; and, who should be involved? will emerge. Preliminary answers to these questions will be developed in the beginning, but they will also resurface and get refined as the group reassesses its purpose and direction over time. It is critical to have a clear understanding of what the coalition's "community" is. It is best to define the community in a way that is meaningful in the minds of people who live and work there, rather than to simply rely on political or bureaucratic boundaries.

In this early going, there is usually a key person(s) who provides the leadership and supports the communication necessary to establishing a new organization. It is helpful for this person and her/his affiliation to be seen as "neutral" and accessible.

## Agenda

Early on, a coalition needs to consider the nature and scope of the agenda it desires, understanding that this is likely to evolve over time. There are four broad areas that coalition agendas generally encompass: 1- sharing (information); 2- relationships (support); 3- action (collaboration); 4- change (reallocate resources/power).

## Focus and Content

Coalitions must define their focus and content in order to facilitate the process of defining a mission and goals. A few key focus issues are discussed below:

- a) **Target population:** Some coalitions take a broad approach and include all residents of an agreed upon geographic area within its overall agenda. Others take a more specific focus related to a particular age, gender, racial/ethnic or economic group.
- b) **Agenda issues:** Community coalitions often embrace a broad issue agenda which addresses the community's quality of life, taking action on a series of priority issues over time. Other coalitions may choose to focus on a more specific agenda issue such as substance abuse, AIDS, or teenage pregnancy in response to members' experiences/concerns, community-derived needs assessments, or funding opportunities.

## Membership

The challenge for any coalition is to define its agenda so that it is both meaningful and "safe" for as broad and diverse a membership as possible. In considering membership, several questions emerge: will the coalition have a formal membership?; what does it mean to be a member?; what involvement or commitment (time, resources) will be expected?; who ought to be included as members?; and, what kinds of outreach are needed?

Encouraging more inclusive membership is recommended. A larger, more diverse membership allows the coalition to discover the interconnections among a variety of populations and issues which can lead to unanticipated new ideas and opportunities for strengthening the coalition, its members and the community.

## Leadership, Structure, and Communication

As groups develop, grow and become more active, most begin to feel the need for a more formal structure, including designated leadership and some staffing. Another key issue that comes up, particularly when funding is discussed, is incorporation. It is also important to point out that while good communication is a key element to the entire start-up process, clear and regular channels of communication are essential to defining and maintaining coalition structure.

## Planning

The final step in the start-up process is the development of a formal planning process. Definition of a clear mission statement, goals and work plan are prerequisites to maintaining focus, energy and productivity. A formal plan also helps to make the coalition's boundaries and direction explicit, thus supporting coalition members and committees in developing their ideas and moving them to action.

AHEC/Community Partners  
24 South Prospect Street  
Amherst, MA 01002

