



AHEC/Community Partners

Building Healthy Communities

Monitoring and Evaluation of Coalitions: Lessons from Eight Communities

The work described in this paper was done in collaboration with Stephen Fawcett, Vincent Francisco, and Adrienne Paine-Andrews of the Work Group On Health Promotion and Community Development at the University of Kansas. The paper was presented at the American Public Health Association's Annual Meeting in San Francisco, California on October 25, 1993.

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MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF COALITIONS: LESSONS FROM EIGHT COMMUNITIES

Background

Across the health and human services arena, from the federal to local levels, coalitions are rapidly becoming the strategy of choice. Policy makers and local professionals are moving in this direction because of the growing necessity for better coordination and more collaboration. All coalitions are not, however, created equal. There are a variety of factors that influence the impact a coalition has on a health/human service system or on a specific problem (e.g., access to primary health care).

The mission of the AHEC/Community Partners program is to support the development of successful coalitions that can define, develop and implement their own agendas. We have done that primarily by providing consultation, facilitation and training. We work under the auspice of the Massachusetts Area Health Education Centers (AHEC), with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The coalition development process through AHEC has grown over the past ten years through the work of Tom Wolff in helping to create new community health and human services coalitions in five very different locations across the state. Two and a half years ago with the grant from the Kellogg Foundation, we began a process of developing relationships with new communities that has expanded the focus of our coalition building work.

Development of Coalition Monitoring and Evaluation

Until recently, the development of coalitions was a process of collaborative problem solving, consuming relatively few financial resources. Given this, little time or energy was invested in monitoring or assessing their process or outcomes. As a result, the conceptual frameworks and tools available for coalition evaluation have been extremely limited.

With the resources of the Community Partners Program came the opportunity and challenge to take a thoughtful look at several questions about the development and support of our affiliated coalitions. We started, based on a conceptual understanding and our collective prior experience, with some hunches about those questions, but we were looking for a monitoring and evaluation process that would take a **systematic** look at our new experience.

Our monitoring and evaluation system was developed in close collaboration with, and drawing on the earlier work of, Steve Fawcett, Vince Francisco, and Adrienne Paine from the Work Group on Health Promotion and Community Development at the University of Kansas. Three principal components of this system are: logging of actions and outcomes, analysis of critical events and survey of member satisfaction. These provide a variety of perspectives on the growth and development of coalitions and the impact of the technical assistance intervention by Community Partners.

Through the monitoring and evaluation process that was developed, we wanted to be able to answer four basic questions:

- 1) Are multi-sectoral, multi-issue community coalitions an effective way to produce community change?
- 2) Will successful coalitions evolve through predictable patterns of development, where success is at least in large part, collaborative community change?
- 3) What barriers or risk factors can be shown to impede coalition success?
- 4) Will our consultation and facilitation intervention be effective in supporting coalition development?

Monitoring and Evaluation Methodology

Logging

Community action and outcome logs were designed to capture all incidents of five variables of coalition work: planning products, community actions, community changes, services provided and resources generated. (Operational definitions of these are listed in Table 1.) With the exception of community actions, each of these areas focuses on a coalition's products and accomplishments rather than its activities. Information for the logs is gathered bimonthly or quarterly from key informants within each coalition.

Table 1: Operational Definitions

Planning Products include accomplishments within the coalition of organizational plans and goals, such as: completion of a mission statement, adoption of by-laws, establishment of a committee, completion of an annual report, etc.

Community Actions are coalition actions which engage directly with the "target" of a desired community change, pursuant to a coalition goal. This "target" may be an individual or an organization, and may or may not be a part of the coalition. Examples would include: meeting with the newspaper editor to discuss improving media coverage of human service concerns, meeting with the police chief to support adoption of community policing in a troubled neighborhood.

Community Changes are those changes in policy, practice or programs in the community that are, at least in part, the result of the coalition's pursuit of one or more of its goals. These include: changes in the rules by which, and/or the way in which, things are done; changes in the services and resources available to the community around a particular need or issue. Examples would be: a change in hospital policy regarding the provision of interpreters for non-English speaking patients; the development of a new information and referral guide to assist people in finding services; the establishing of a new neighborhood organization to promote community development.

Services Provided are products and activities completed by the coalition that provide an educational, or other type of, service to individuals or groups outside the coalition, such as: a resource directory, an education program on immigration rules, a community forum on affordable housing, etc.

Resources Generated are resources secured for use by the coalition to support its own development, to provide a service, or for the use of others in the community. These resources may be either financial resources or services donated by individuals or groups for which they would normally be paid or reimbursed.

Graphs

The accomplishments recorded for each of the five variables are quantified on graphs showing the cumulative number of "units" over time. By graphing the cumulative incidence of each over time, we get a picture of how the coalition is developing. We also have the capacity to provide feedback to coalition members so that they can assess how they are doing. Each started at a different point in time and has a very different context in terms of urban/rural, degree of culture and economic condition, etc. As a result, it was important for coalitions not to feel like they were competing with each other, but rather using the graphs to measure against their own expectations.

[See Figure 1]

In Figure 1 is a five-variable composite graph of an actual coalition, one that in many respects is also coming to be seen as conforming to the developmental model. We are finding that a healthy coalition will have fairly steady growth over time, but that the slopes of the lines (measuring the rate of growth) will vary. There is also a logical sequence in the development among the variables. Coalition planning precedes community action, which precedes community change. For this particular kind of coalition's work, the services provided and the resources generated are generally secondary.

[See Figure 2]

Figure 2 shows a coalition that we would categorize as less healthy; in fact, in some jeopardy. Clearly the pattern among the variables is much more erratic, and resource development is leading planning. While that might seem a joyful situation for many, in fact it may not be as wonderful as it appears.

[See Figure 3]

Figure 3 reflects a somewhat more ambiguous situation. Here planning is progressing at a great rate, at a constant slope, but the other variables are developing at a much more slower pace. This suggests that the coalition (and the consultants) need to pay extra attention; not to panic yet, but

to carefully use this feedback to be clear that they are staying on target with what they really want to accomplish.

Through these logs, we derive visual clues which provide opportunities to offer feedback to the coalition for their use. The data are also analyzed to increase our own understanding of how coalitions develop.

Critical Events

Table 2 outlines the structure of the critical events report. This focuses on capturing significant events in much greater depth through key informants from the coalition (in contrast to the logs which gives a quick view of all the different products). Among other things, this tool provides us information about barriers and resistance and key resources.

[See Table 2]

Integrating the Data

In Figure 4, where selected critical events are overlaid on a log graph, we observe some interesting relationships. Following the special half-day planning meeting in August of 1991, there was a rapid growth in planning products. As the result of a similar planning meeting a year later, planning products increased even faster, and have continued to climb.

[See Figure 4]

Following these planning accomplishments, an increase in community actions occurred. Following the 1991 planning meeting for Coalition "C", one of the committees that was formed orchestrated a very interesting process that resulted in something called the "St. Paul Team". That "Team" was effective in producing many of the community changes over the next 6-9 months. Thus from the planning came the committee, from which came actions, leading to specific community changes. From its 1992 planning meeting came a commitment to reaching out into the community. Some of the subsequent 1993 community actions were a series of community focus groups organized and led by coalition members.

Putting the Data to Use

Overall, we are using the results of these monitoring and evaluation tools to give feedback to the coalitions for use in assessing their own development.

As seen in Figure 5, the results of the monitoring and evaluation process are useful in coalition marketing and fundraising purposes. This one-page graphic captures important data from the logs and critical events reports, with review and refinement by coalition members. This specific sheet was used to distribute to members of their town meeting when the Coalition went to say, "We need some money to help sustain our staffing for the next year so that we can continue to make the accomplishments happen, and to make sure that the important works in progress don't get lost. (As a result, the town meeting granted the Coalition the money they asked for.)

[See Figure 5]

Community Partners staff are using this data collected over the past two and one-half years to increase our conceptual understanding of how coalitions develop. When we look at all the different graphs, at the coalition critical events reports - and the depth that they provide, at the member satisfaction data, and so forth, we get a picture that is much more complete than any one of these would have afforded us. We are beginning to recognize some patterns that suggest there is both art and science to the process of coalition development.

Applying Data to Initial Questions

Let us revisit the four initial questions. What lessons or hunches have we derived from our monitoring and evaluation data that offer answers?

Are multi-sectoral, multi-issue community coalitions an effective way to produce community change?

Our monitoring and evaluation system is yielding some of the first available data that tracks coalitions over an extended period of time. Our findings show that many of the coalitions studied were effective, when defined as bringing about community activation and change. Thus, within the Fawcett framework, coalitions can bring about intermediate community actions and community change outcomes related to the coalition's mission. In the public health model, these can affect potential risk factors associated with a defined health status outcome.

Will successful coalitions evolve through predictable patterns of development, where success is at least in large part, collaborative community change?

Our data suggest that coalitions do develop in predictable sequences. Although there are important individual differences, our observations, combined with those of Fawcett et al., suggest the following generalizations.

- 1) Planning is essential as an ongoing part of a coalition's development, occurring throughout the coalition's life cycle. The log charts show that planning continues beyond the initial six months if a coalition is going to be successful at increasing community changes.
- 2) Community actions lead to community changes. You don't generally see a jump from planning to community changes. The coalition has got to learn to act outside of itself. Active outreach to influential agents leads to increased community changes and, over time, it seems that fewer actions may be needed to create community change. As coalitions get more effective, they gain greater credibility with decision makers - so the decision makers respond the first time they are asked, as opposed to taking several tries.
- 3) Possibly as the result of current and historical experiences of oppression, coalitions in communities of color may develop community actions more slowly and more cautiously.
- 4) Further, the sequence of coalition development seems to have a predictable time frame. Although there are important individual differences, several patterns appear to emerge in successful coalitions:

- the onset of regular planning products occurring in the first 3-6 months;
- a regular pattern of community actions developing during the initial 8-10 months;
- the emergence of regular community changes beginning at 10-12 months.

When looking at those coalitions that were successful - where the community changes kept on climbing, this pattern was very consistent. The presence of this pattern suggests that coalitions which do **not** develop in this way during the first year may be at risk. This can provide an alert to the coalition leadership and members, and technical assistance providers, to prompt a reassessment of whether the group is progressing in ways that it believes are on course.

What barriers or risk factors can be shown to impede coalition success?

Coalitions have many choices to make in how staff and membership should spend their time. Certain directions can create diversions and interfere with coalition success. A focus on delivering services seems to be a trap that reduces a coalition's capacity to take the actions in the community necessary to create community change.

The acquisition of large amounts of resources early in the coalition's history can also be a diversion. Those coalitions that choose to focus on the acquisition of resources at the expense of comprehensive planning and community action, may be less effective in bringing about community change. (The more these resources are focused on coalition development itself, as opposed to service development, the less problematic funding is likely to be.)

Leaders have a critical role in reinforcing wins. They are significant cheerleaders and the departure of a leader or leaders may result in a significant decrease, at least temporarily, in the rates of community change. The degree of this impact will depend, in part, on what the coalition has done to promote leadership development.

Will our consultation and facilitation intervention be effective in supporting coalition development?

The question is can you help this process? We found that, in fact, purposeful intervention can help coalitions succeed. The facilitation of annual planning sessions can have a strong influence on coalition growth (as can be seen in Figure 4). For example, at a planning intervention, the coalition determines that it wants better media coverage for human service issues. It establishes a task force (planning product), which then meets with the publisher of the newspaper community action). The newspaper subsequently starts better coverage of the coalition and its concerns (community change). The sequence is very clear, and the planning intervention - which we help plan and facilitate - is often the catalyst that makes it go.

Rates of coalition progress may decline as the facilitation intervention ends or becomes significantly less intense. We are finding that when we start to pull back, coalitions do not die at the end of the consultation process, but there is often a less consistent rate of the growth.

Community Readiness

Finally, we have been examining the question of community readiness for coalition development. This issue emerged as it became clear that several factors are essential in making the choice of where to intervene, if we were to build a successful working relationship. Among these factors are:

- 1) Diversity of coalition members, including key influential and grassroots leadership - both the most powerful and the least powerful;
- 2) Cross-section of agencies and groups involved, without one dominant organization;
- 3) Neutral, facilitative and dispersed leadership; and
- 4) An appropriate match between the intensity of our model intervention (one day a week over 18 months) and the complexity of the environment (probably be too limited for large, urban areas).

Conclusions

In reviewing the four questions, our data and experience suggest that:

- effectively organized coalitions can work,
- successful coalitions evolve in a predictable manner,
- certain barriers will interfere with development, and
- technical assistance interventions can help.

Our experience in building and using this monitoring and evaluation system, designed and implemented with Steve Fawcett, Vince Francisco and Adrienne Paine, has persuaded us that it is very sensitive to the issues of real life coalition building and captures that experience. What it lacks in "scientific rigor" it more than makes up for in adaptability and usability - it is a practical and productive set of tools.