

Caregiver Coalition Research Project

Executive Summary

12 Keys to Building Caregiver Coalitions – Training Guide

Background

Family caregivers are the backbone of the nation's caregiving system, providing the bulk of support for family members who need help to remain in their homes and communities. Family caregivers assist relatives who are suffering from illness or disability and grandchildren or other relative children who need a supportive environment. However, millions of these caregivers function in isolation, unaware of help they might find or available supports.

Family caregiving coalitions can help develop new partnerships at local and state levels and present a coordinated approach to responding to the needs of family caregivers. To facilitate this process, the AARP Foundation in cooperation with the Administration on Aging conducted research on existing caregiver coalitions to determine "best practices" in coalition formation, and there were 12 actions identified in this research that were key in developing and sustaining caregiver coalitions. A training program, *12 Keys to Building Caregiver Coalitions*, based on these keys is available to assist organizations interested in forming caregiver coalitions. A brief description of each of these keys follows:

Key 1 – Planning

Planning is essential to forming and sustaining a caregiver coalition and continues throughout the existence of the coalition. An important part of planning is gathering information about the needs of caregivers in the community. Has a needs assessment been done? If so, is it still relevant? A needs assessment does not have to be formal, and the extent of the assessment may vary based upon the budget and the areas identified as containing the greatest gaps in knowledge.

Defining the community and geographic scope to be served can help identify those gaps. Also important in the planning process is determining the purpose of the coalition – advocacy, outreach, raising awareness, and/or service delivery. This information will then help define which organizations should be invited to participate in the coalition.

In addition to assessing the needs of the caregivers, it is important to assess the internal capabilities of the coalition. This is usually done after the first organizational meeting of the coalition and will assist the coalition as it continues to plan how it will function.

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Key 2 – Vision Statement

Coalition partners need to develop agreement and have a clear understanding of why the coalition exists and their role in the coalition. A clearly stated vision helps all partners feel vested in coalition activities. A vision is a global concept of the partners' dream of the way things ought to be. It must be shared by all the partners in order to move the coalition forward.

Key 3 – Mission Statement

The mission statement is the coalition's declaration of purpose. It is what the coalition is going to do to accomplish the coalition's dream. A clear mission statement also lets outside people know what general activities the coalition will undertake. It communicates the essence of the coalition and what makes it unique. The coalition's mission must be committed to and shared by all the partners.

Key 4 – Goals and Objectives

The goals of the coalition will define the achievable actions agreed upon by the coalition. The goals help prioritize the actions that will be taken. The goals must be within the capabilities of the coalition and consistent with the coalition's vision and mission.

Key 5 – Commitment and Focus

The activities on which the coalition has committed to focus should be described in its action plan. An action plan lays out the steps necessary to ensure efficiency, accountability and success for the coalition and includes the following:

- Goals
- Objectives
- Actions/Tasks
- Responsibility
- Timeline
- Resources Needed
- Communication (Who should know what)

Key 6 – Structure and Communications

The structure and operation of the coalition contributes to its success. Important factors in developing a structure include considering leadership options, decision-making strategies, meeting administration, communications methods, and staffing. Adopting a regular meeting schedule and continually keeping the vision and mission in view are important to sustainability. Similarly, regular and consistent communications is important. Most coalitions use email on a regular basis. Staffing may be paid or through in-kind contributions of the partners, but regardless of which kind of staffing is available, having the resources to take care of coalition administration is important.

Key 7 – Leadership

Coalition leadership can vary depending upon the needs of the coalition. Some rotate leadership. Others train leaders so that successors are ready to lead when the current leader's term expires. Still others share leadership through a committee structure. Regardless of the leadership style adopted, coalition leadership should be evaluated periodically to make sure that is collaborative. Inspired commitment and action and broad-based involvement by coalition partners are signs of effective leadership.

Key 8 – Decision Making

There are various ways to make decisions within a coalition, and each has its uses. It is important to ensure that the decision making option is appropriate for the issue. According to Ingrid Bens in *Facilitation at a Glance*¹, options include the following:

- Spontaneous Agreement (when full discussion not critical)
- One Person (one person is the expert and willing to take sole responsibility)
- Compromise (when consensus improbable because positions are polarized)
- Multi-Voting (to sort or prioritize a list of options)
- Voting (trivial matter if division of group is okay)
- Consensus Building (important issues when total buy-in important)

Key 9 – Recruiting

Changes in partner interest and the creation of new objectives make recruiting an ongoing issue. Inviting new partners to fill areas of deficiency and looking for the right individual within organizations to join the coalition can assist the coalition in meeting its goals and objectives. Some coalitions target the umbrella organizations of large networks. Others do not limit the invitations, but the key is to match recruiting with the coalition's vision, mission, and goals.

Key 10 – Fundraising

There are several fundraising issues coalitions should consider:

- When – Fundraising should be ongoing.
- Who – Some coalitions assign fundraising to a paid staff. Others assign it to a partner organization with fundraising experience. Still others may share the responsibility based upon the project.
- 501 (c) (3) – Many grant opportunities are only open to organizations that have a 501 (c) (3) status.
- Grant Writing – Grant writing can be time consuming and difficult for those who do not do it on a regular basis. Becoming familiar with common grant formats can be helpful.

Developing a funding statement can be the foundation for developing individual funding proposals. By going through the exercise of putting down on paper the reasons

¹ Ingrid Bens, M.Ed., 1999, *Facilitation at a Glance!* AQP/Participative Dynamics, Cincinnati, Ohio/Sarasota, Florida.

organizations or individuals should give the coalition money is a good first fundraising step.

Key 11 – Projects/Activities

It is important to have a project or activity to keep members interested and involved. While meetings are important, there needs to be a project or activity that the group can work on together in a collaborative way. Each project or activity may have a separate budget, funding source and committee structure.

Key 12 – Evaluation and Sustainability

Evaluating the work of a coalition is a process that helps measure the success of the coalition in achieving its goals and objectives, and it can suggest ways to improve over time. The coalition's vision, mission, goal statements, and action plans are obvious starting points for developing questions to be answered through an evaluation. Evaluation is an ongoing process of learning what works for the coalition and what does not. It should be used to keep on track, improve performance and perhaps choose new goals.

Sustaining the coalition requires continual commitment of its members. Some coalitions are established as ongoing structures, while others may be established for a specific purpose and dissolve upon completion of its objective. For coalitions that are ongoing, it is important to continually revisit and refine goals and objectives. However, regardless of which type of coalition, the following “best practices” are suggested for sustainability:

- Keep members involved
- Maintain a level of activity by planning and hosting annual or semi-annual events, defining roles for partners
- Expand stakeholders if necessary as they relate to the mission
- Rotate leadership and administration of the coalition
- Gather input from those served by the coalition and utilize feedback with the coalition
- Invite outside experts as speakers
- Provide technical assistance gained during projects to coalition members
- Keep the focus realistic
- Connect the topic with the needs and mission of existing or potential partners
- Have a project or product which the coalition can work on together
- Celebrate victories
- Gain political and community support
- Give recognition