

Developing a successful coalition

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Creating and maintaining a successful coalition is a key element in any state or federal advocacy campaign, but what makes a successful coalition? Coalitions have many components, and it's important that you determine what type of coalition is best for achieving your legislative goals.

Membership

It's important to keep in mind the key reasons people participate in coalitions. These reasons are also commonly known as the six R's: recognition, role, respect, reward, results, and relationships.* Keeping the six R's in mind will not only help you recruit your members, but also keep them happy.

Don't forget to think outside the box. There are nonphysician organizations that may be interested in supporting your position. Consumer groups, unions, disease-specific associations, church groups, chambers of commerce/business groups, AARP chapters, hospital associations, and others could be approached to request their support and participation in a coalition.

Take trauma, as an example. Local businesses, chambers of commerce, and community service organizations may not be thought of as traditional "stakeholders" in trauma issues, but they can be an important part of your coalition. These business leaders can discuss the "cost" of trauma as it relates to their businesses and communities.

Patient groups are also vital to coalitions; they put a face to the issue. The more personal the story can be made, the more it will resonate with legislators. Also, recruiting new members for the coalition is not something that just happens once, but should be an ongoing goal of any coalition.

Preplanning

After identifying the groups you would like to engage, it's important to define your mission state-

ment. What *exactly* is the coalition hoping to accomplish? Is this a short-term goal or a long-term effort? Is your goal to better the overall medical liability climate in your state, or to pass "I'm Sorry" legislation? Often, successful, short-term coalitions will evolve into more formal, long-term groups, and a well-planned structure will make the transition easy.

Structure

You will also need to determine your organizational structure. Is this an informal group, or do you need or want a more formal structure? Some coalitions exist merely as networking groups. They exchange information, but do not share resources or collaborate on projects. Will the group have an executive board or a rotating chair? Who will administer the group, plan the meetings, arrange locations, keep minutes and agendas, and file necessary legal paperwork?

It's important to determine each group's responsibilities. Identifying each individual group's resources, and what they are willing to share, is vital to the long-term planning and success of your coalition.

Decision making also should be discussed early in the formation of the coalition. Does each group get a vote? Will action be taken by consensus only, or will a unanimous vote be required on every item? How will disagreements be resolved?

In his article, "A practitioner's guide to successful coalitions," published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Thomas Wolff points out that "the existence of collaboration will not eliminate conflict. Coalition leaders need to model conflict management and create settings where conflict can emerge and be handled productively."[†]

It is important not to forget to periodically review coalition goals and successes. Studies have shown that documenting successes, even if the larger goal is not achieved, will help people stay positive and focused. Planning formal feedback sessions is a great way to keep coalition members energized and focused. If your coalition is large enough,

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*Kaye G. *From the Ground Up: A Workbook on Coalition Building and Community Development*. Amerherst, MA: AHEC/Community Partners; 1997.

[†]Wolff T. A practitioner's guide to successful coalitions. *Am J Commun Psychol*. 2001;29(2):187.

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newsletters and end-of-year reports are an easy way to facilitate this.

Barriers

Industry experts stress the importance of avoiding turf battles. Remember the members of the coalition are there for a common goal, a common

purpose, and it may be necessary to modify the organization's activities in order to achieve what is best for the group. However, be prepared for handling conflict among disparate positions; consensus building can be difficult, but the eventual outcome will be worth it when the governor or President signs a bill into law. Ω