



Health Promotion for Youth

Coalitions are popular as a vehicle to tackle challenging issues ranging from substance abuse to obesity to physical activity participation.

While significant time and energy are often expended, these community-based health promotion efforts meet with varying degrees of success. Many factors are at play, and it's important to capture the right mix to realize the desired objectives.

Belinda Reininger and colleagues considered the important ingredients in a recent issue of *Family & Community Health*. Their findings can guide practitioners working on a wide range of health and community issues.

Study Setting

Their report focuses on the Houston (Texas) –Harris County Community Partnership, a five-year project funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. It involved eight community-based health initiatives, all aiming to prevent substance abuse in youth. Common elements included program resources, training, and evaluation procedures.

During the course of the project, core differences in the eight communities became evident. Three particular dimensions accounted for many of the core differences in the success of the Partnership coalitions.

Important Dimensions

Key dimensions identified during the project were

- the level at which problems are addressed (i.e., the scope),

- the willingness and ability to identify local skilled leadership, and
- the formality of relationships within the group.

Scope. A broad scope encompasses what has been called an “ecological model” for health promotion. It includes intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes and primary groups, and environmental determinants such as institutional and community factors and public policy.

Difficulties can arise when coalition members don't clarify the scope of their efforts at the outset. “Without clearly defining how and at what level the problem will be addressed,” the authors note, “members may become frustrated with the leadership and with one another and may think the coalition is not accomplishing its goals.”

Leadership. Competent leadership has been cited in several studies as an essential dimension for success in coalition-based health promotion. In the current study, finding leaders within the community was deemed crucial; training was provided to ensure they had the necessary organizing skills.

It was also felt that getting communities to identify their own leaders would heighten enthusiasm for working on this crucial youth initiative.

Relationships. Effectiveness is decreased when there are differing expectations or lack of clarity about the formality of relationships within a group. Coalitions (with more formal relationships) and alliances (network-based relationships) must operate differently.

The authors wisely note: “Up-front and ongoing discussions about group structure must occur to set expectations for an agreed-upon course of action. Leaders should not assume that building another coalition will be the answer to addressing a new concern.”

Case Studies

An evaluation examined the ecological changes in the intervention communities. The results were presented in the form of community case studies, with three representative cases included in the summary article. These communities ranged in population from 20,000 to 50,000, were dominated by Hispanic and African Americans, and were in the lower socioeconomic strata. Drug abuse, poor housing, unemployment, and juvenile delinquency were among the problems they faced.

One was a “3+” community—scoring well in environmental scope, local-based leadership, and formal relationships. The second community batted two for three (it lacked formal relationships). The third community lacked in all three areas.

In the end, agreement on the key causes to focus on and strong local leadership helped set the stage for “a successful working coalition with burgeoning mobilization.” Both community one and two created important changes for their community, in part because they implemented a leadership approach (one formal, the other informal) that worked for them.

In summary, the authors note, “Improving the health of their youth motivates people from all cultures. Understanding each community's past efforts and customizing community-based health promotions to fit their needs and desires are essential for the success of programs to improve the quality of life for youths.”

More Info ...

Reininger, B., Dinh-Zarr, T., Sinicrope, P.S., & Martin, D.W. (1999). Dimensions of participation and leadership: Implications for community-based health promotion for youth. *Family & Community Health*, 22 (2), 72–82.

Getting the Job Done

For successful community-based health promotion, practitioners should

- take the time to establish a clear scope of activities,
- ensure that groups are effective in identifying local leadership,
- focus efforts on communities that are ready for change.

In communities not yet able to clarify their scope or identify appropriate leadership, efforts should be made to increase awareness and motivation.

