

Collaboration

is a way of life

in rural areas

By Sarah Potter

It is inspiring for those who have been working in the trenches of coalition building to see that coalitions are a “buzz word” in the prevention field and a new trend in program development. As policy makers and funding entities increasingly look to coalitions as solutions to critical social and public health problems, it is important to understand how rural communities fit into this picture.

At the heart of community coalitions is collaboration... “a voluntary and strategic alliance of public, private and non-profit organizations to enhance each other’s capacity to achieve a common purpose by sharing risks, responsibilities, resources, and rewards”.¹ Collaboration is not a new concept in rural areas. In fact, it is a way of life. It is only by working together that rural areas are able to remain viable and strong.

There is an abundance of research highlighting the obstacles to effective and sustainable coalitions. For people living and working in rural communities, outlining the challenges and hurdles is like “preaching to the choir”. In the spirit of collaboration and building on each other’s strengths, rural areas are uniquely situated in many ways to foster effective community coalitions.

In contrast to rural areas being constantly held as disadvantaged, when it comes to coalition building these communities may be ahead of the game. Prevention research identifies several common characteristics of successful coalitions. Rural communities can boast many of these indicators, such as:

✓ History of Collaboration in the Community

Rural communities are built on a history of working together to tackle

local challenges. With limited resources and large service areas, agencies are often required to rely on each other to achieve their goals and effectively serve clients. This history of collaboration allows coalition members to rely on each other in their role as a part of the coalition building process.

✓ Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust

Members of rural coalitions are likely to share an understanding and respect for each other and their respective organizations: how they operate, their norms and values, limitations, and expectations.

✓ Members Have a Vested Interest

People working on rural coalitions are more likely to feel “ownership” in both the way the group works and the impact of the coalition. It is clear that coalition members are working with their neighbor, for their neighbor.²

✓ Team Spirit

Rural communities have a general belief that they are resilient and strong, that the community itself has the ability to find the solutions to its problems. The community pride apparent in small towns is central to the essence of coalitions.

✓ Inclusive Membership

Rural coalitions are adept at creating an environment of inclusion.

✓ Opportunities for Action

Group members interact often, update one another, discuss issues openly, convey all necessary information to one another and to people outside the group. This is an inevitable part of rural life!⁴

✓ Sense of History

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✓ Media advocacy

✓ Strong links to the community. (Citizen involvement)⁶

✓ Access to Legislators (Easier access to public officials)⁷

Potter is a training specialist at Prevention First. Before joining Prevention First she worked at the Illinois Attorney General’s office, working with rural coalitions.

¹ Himmelman, Arthur. 1992. Communities Working Collaboratively for a Change. Monograph. Himmelman Consulting Group. Minneapolis, MN.

² Mattesich, Paul; Monsey, Barbara. 1992. Collaboration: What Makes It Work. A Review of Research Literature on Factors Influencing Successful Collaboration. Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. St. Paul, MN.

³ Ridini, Steve, Ed.D., April 2003. Presentation materials. Northeast CAPT Associate and The Medical Foundation. Wilmington, Delaware.

⁴ Foster, David. *Engaging Residents In Coalition Building*. Coalition Building Tip Series. AHEC/Community Partners. Amherst, MA.

⁵ Wolff, Tom. *Coalition Barriers and How to Overcome Them*. Coalition Building Tip Series. AHEC/Community Partners. Amherst, MA.

⁶ Wolff, Tom. *Coalition Barriers and How to Overcome Them: Part II*. Coalition Building Tip Series. AHEC/Community Partners. Amherst, MA.

⁷ Wolff, Tom; Berkowitz, Bill. *Coalitions and Advocacy: Working with Your Legislators*. Coalition Building Tip Series. AHEC/Community Partners. Amherst, MA.