

Increasing Community Engagement

Building healthy communities and preventing substance misuse is a big job. It impacts everyone in your community in some way or another, so everyone has a stake in it—whether they know it or not. A job this big requires broad-based community engagement to bring about the environmental and systems changes that improve local conditions.

The benefits of broad-based community engagement include:

- ❑ **An increased understanding of the community.** There will always be ideas, issues, concerns, history and context that you don't have a good grasp on but can have a major impact on your programs.
- ❑ **Increased awareness and support for prevention.** High engagement helps build a stronger reputation within the community, helping to provide credibility to your efforts.
- ❑ **Shared resources.** Pooling expertise, skills and resources can make daunting tasks more manageable and achievable.
- ❑ **More power to influence community change.** When all voices are included, especially marginalized populations, efforts and messages are amplified. Strategies are more likely to be effective when they are culturally responsive.
- ❑ **Sustainability.** When more people are invested in the program and services there are more people working to ensure they remain in the community.

There are at least two main ways to engage your community in prevention: prevention promotion and collaboration with key stakeholders.

Prevention Promotion

One way to engage your community in prevention is through promotion. It's important to publicize the important work you are doing and the progress you are making in preventing substance misuse to build support for your efforts and sustain your programs. Develop an ongoing, targeted promotion effort to educate your community about prevention, raise awareness of your efforts and invite community members to get involved.

As you promote your prevention work there are many ways to invite community members to get involved. For example, ask them to:

- ❑ Sign up for your newsletter.
- ❑ Join a coalition or advisory group.
- ❑ Attend a townhall meeting.
- ❑ Participate in a focus group or interview or take a survey.
- ❑ Participate in a prevention program.
- ❑ Send in a donation for a specific need or program.
- ❑ Join or like a social media page and participate in the conversation.
- ❑ Spread prevention messages with their families, friends and coworkers.

Prevention Promotion Plan Template

1. Identify your goals.

What projects are you working on? What support do you need with upcoming activities? Which programs are strong in terms of community support, and which are lacking?

2. Develop key messages.

What prevention programs and activities are you implementing and what is their positive impact on the community? Why is your work meaningful and why does it matter? What assistance do you need to be more effective?

3. Select appropriate tools and methods.

What sources of information are considered reliable and credible in your service area? What message dissemination methods can you use to best achieve your promotion efforts?

4. Identify action steps.

What steps will you take to promote your prevention efforts in your community? Who will be responsible for each step? When will you complete each step?

5. Identify resources.

Who can help you implement your plan? What other resources are available to assist you (training, technical assistance, etc.)?

See our course “Promote Prevention Efforts and Build Support” to learn more about prevention promotion

Collaboration with Key Stakeholders

Community engagement also involves creating a system or network of collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders. Community stakeholders are valuable resources that can help you achieve your prevention goals and enhance program implementation.

For example:

- ❑ Ask the local government, faith-based organizations and community-based youth-serving organizations to help publicize an upcoming townhall meeting to get more folks to attend.
- ❑ Develop a plan for soliciting donations of food and incentives needed for effective programming from a broad range of local businesses.
- ❑ Ask a local printer to help design and print a substance use prevention resource for parents of students in your YPE program.
- ❑ Ask parents to help support the implementation of YPE or the IYS at a school where services currently aren't delivered.
- ❑ Convene a coalition of community members representative of all community sectors to engage in a strategic planning process to identify and address current prevention priorities.
- ❑ Engage the local health department in sharing local data relevant to substance use prevention to help identify substance use related problems and needs.

Key stakeholders are individuals or organizations who will be involved in, affected by, interested in, or have power over an initiative, program or service in some way or another.

The examples are endless. Just think outside the box and network with other prevention specialists to see what creative ideas they have!

Tips for identifying stakeholders:

- ❑ Identify your prevention goals and the prevention programs, projects and tasks you need help with.
- ❑ Identify who can help you achieve your prevention goals and enhance your programs. Identify organizations working towards similar goals and influential voices in your community that can have a positive impact.
- ❑ Do your research to identify stakeholders who will be receptive, willing and able to do the job. Start with the human service organizations and after-school programs you have listed in your Resource Guide. Share the list you generate with colleagues to ensure you have not missed potentially crucial partners.
- ❑ Broaden your network. A deep bench of stakeholders can really make the difference in your prevention efforts. They are ready when you need quick support and can help overcome barriers. Make sure you have allies and partners in all 12 community sectors: youth, parents, law enforcement, schools, businesses, media, youth-serving organizations, religious and fraternal organizations, civic and volunteer groups, healthcare professionals, state or local agencies and other organizations involved in reducing substance use. Employ your network when you need them most.

General tips for engaging stakeholders

- ❑ Use your existing connections. Think about who you (or your colleagues) know that can help you get your foot in the door and make an introduction.
- ❑ Identify manageable tasks and align them with the stakeholder's skills and schedule.
- ❑ Don't over-ask. Consider each stakeholder's existing commitments, restrictions and interests.
- ❑ Be specific about what you want them to do and what they can get out of it.

- Have a deep bench of stakeholders to avoid overtaxing the same few people with all your needs.
- Keep stakeholders engaged for the long-term through continuous communication, providing ongoing opportunities for involvement and providing gratitude and recognition for contributions made.
- Take advantage of every opportunity!

Tips for engaging specific stakeholders

Engaging Parents

- Convey the severity of the problem, potential consequences and the likelihood of substance-related problems—without creating fear or using scare tactics. Parents are more likely to engage in prevention if they believe their child is at risk for substance-related problems and that the risk is serious.
- Focus on how prevention and healthy behaviors will protect their children from health risks. Parents will only engage in prevention when perceived benefits outweigh perceived barriers.
- Tell parents that they matter and can make a difference—both for their children and the community.
- Use a wide variety of methods to reach and engage parents, such as flyers, memos, signs, door hangers, newsletters, report cards, post cards, letters, monthly calendars of events, websites, email, phone calls, text messages, radio public service announcements, local access television, parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, school concerts and sporting events, awards assemblies, other school events and meetings, and regular parent seminars.
- Create convenient opportunities for parents to share important aspects of their culture, needs and expectations related to substance use prevention, such as surveys, focus groups, round table discussions and interviews.
- Choose your words carefully—they matter. “Substance use prevention” might not be as compelling as “encouraging safe, healthy choices” or something else.
- Schedule mindfully. Parents juggle multiple jobs, multiple children and other obligations. Try to diversify the times that engagement opportunities are offered; mornings, afternoons, evenings, and weekends should all be considered.

Engaging Schools

- Connect with allies throughout the school, not just administrators. Counselors, social workers, student assistance programs, nurses, school-based health centers, school resource officers, administrative staff, and teachers can all be excellent allies.
- Draw strong, compelling connections between prevention efforts and academic success, as education’s primary goal is to educate students.
- Be aware of and accommodating to school schedules and procedures. Schools are busy places and school personnel have multiple responsibilities and priorities.
- Create a balanced relationship. Ask how you can be of help and provide support wherever possible. Participate in advisory boards or task forces, attend meetings, and coordinate school and community health efforts.
- Establish a personal relationship before asking for something. This may be as simple as initiating a telephone call to introduce yourself, arranging for an introduction by a mutual colleague or friend, or attending board meetings. People generally find it easier to collaborate with others when there is some level of connection.
- Do your homework. Learn as much as possible about existing programs and community partnerships, how the school operates, how administrators feel about your issue and how

decisions are made. Visit the school website and social media pages, read school board meeting minutes and talk with knowledgeable allies.

- Be professional and be prepared. When making a request, be as detailed as possible. Provide facts and data, articulate how your goals will impact academic achievement, and outline requirements, necessary time and staff commitment, costs, and timelines.

Engaging Local Government

- Identify potential allies and partners in municipal and county government, such as elected officials, the mental health board, liquor control commissioner/commission, the health department, parks and recreation, police, sheriff, judges and district attorneys.
- Learn how your local government works, such as how decisions get made and who makes those decisions, what agencies make up your city or county government and whether you have an elected mayor or city supervisor. You can find most of this information at your city or county's website.
- Attend government meetings that are related to your issues when they allow for public input and bring program participants and constituents with you.
- Meet with the agency managers and deputy managers relevant to your issues. Introduce your organization, let them know about the good work you do and explore ways you might help them meet their goals. Try to get as much background information about who you're meeting with beforehand—many of these managers have nonprofit backgrounds.
- Review the city/county budget. Learn about funding sources, where funds are distributed and how they are distributed. Most local governments have discretion about how money gets spent. Many nonprofit groups have conducted successful organizing campaigns around getting Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) dollars, both of which are federal pass-through programs in which federal dollars are given to states or counties for distribution.
- Create mutually beneficial partnerships and build trust. The number-one rule about politics is that it is all about relationships. Always be respectful. Never put them on the spot or try to embarrass them, and even though you may disagree on an issue, do not make personal attacks. If you are working with someone, don't go around them to their supervisor or someone else whom you see as more powerful. You may get what you need in the short-term, but you will break that trusting relationship you worked hard to build.
- Acknowledge support you get from government people. For example, if a manager or elected official attends one of your functions, make sure to identify them and thank them for attending. When doing an event where you are expecting an elected or appointed official to attend, ensure that they are properly acknowledged.
- Engage local officials in strategic planning, including data collection and analysis and long-range planning.

Engaging Youth

- Engage multiple youth, not just one token member, when engaging youth in boards and committees.
- Engage a diverse, broad spectrum of youth. Too often the focus is on involving high achievers, or youth that are already involved in a lot of activities, while overlooking the contributions that less involved youth could provide.
- Ensure youth are valued by giving them meaningful roles and responsibilities versus token involvement. Assign tasks that promote action, responsibility, and accountability.

- ❑ Focus on youths' assets—youth have capabilities and potential that rise to the surface given the right opportunities.
- ❑ Support youth development by providing growth opportunities that develop knowledge and skills such as orientation sessions, skill-building workshops and training, role-specific training and conferences.
- ❑ Provide real authority and decision-making ability. Make sure youth understand what authority and decision-making power they have – and don't have. All too often, youth appear to be offered power, but then find themselves with very little, as negotiation and decision-making takes place behind the scenes, or decisions are reversed by adult leaders/sponsors.
- ❑ Conduct engaging meetings and sessions to maintain youth interest and engagement. Select a comfortable location, keep energy levels high, build a community among members and empower youth action.
- ❑ Acknowledge and celebrate the achievements and efforts of youth. Celebrations, rewards and recognition let youth participants know how much they are appreciated and respected and help keep them engaged and motivated. Taking time to acknowledge members also builds community and empowers youth to want to do more.

Overcoming barriers to stakeholder engagement

So, what if a school in your service area doesn't have time to administer the IYS or implement YPE? Or, what if you are collaborating with the police department to implement alcohol enforcement strategies and now there's a new police chief who is not sure she wants to continue the efforts? What should you do? The first rule is: **don't give up.**

Here are a few key steps to overcoming barriers:

1. **Define your barrier and get to the root cause.** You need to have a good handle on the problem and what the issue is before you can productively act on it. Do your research and gather information about what the resistance is and why. For example, if your potential stakeholder doesn't want to collaborate because they don't have the time, that's very different than if they don't want to collaborate because they don't know or trust your organization. You'd need to approach each issue very differently.
2. **Identify the right solutions for the identified barriers.** Once you know the problem, identify potential solutions. There's typically not one right answer, but a series of actions you could take to improve the situation. Make sure to run your ideas past others and get their input so that you don't miss something that could really make an impact.
3. **Develop a strong case.** You'll likely need to build a case to convince your stakeholder to help you achieve your goals. Use the research and information you gathered in Step 1 to make a compelling case. Use data and facts where possible. Tailor your pitch to the person—show benefits and potential outcomes that matter to them.
4. **Enlist the support of allies to champion your cause.** Without going over someone's head or around someone's back, find other influential stakeholders who support your effort to help make your case. Your allies can be others who work with the stakeholder; for example, if you're at an impasse with the school principal, find others in the school that can help you make inroads. Your allies can also be your stakeholder's counterparts, for example, if you're at an impasse with the police chief, find another police chief in a neighboring community who is supportive and can speak to the benefits from a similar perspective. If you don't know a counterpart, reach out to other prevention specialists to utilize their contacts. Your allies are also your colleagues, coworkers, and other stakeholders that may know the person you're trying to engage and can provide information or an introduction for you.

I'm not sure I have enough time for this...

Community engagement doesn't need to take a lot of time. It can easily be infused into your daily work. Start by setting aside a few minutes each day to think about and plan ways to make connections, build relationships and engage the community and stakeholders in your work.

With 5 minutes you can:

- Develop a contact list of stakeholders you want to connect with.
- Write down a list of opportunities for stakeholder involvement.
- Identify your promotion goals—the projects and programs you want your community to be aware of and why.
- Post an article or message to social media.
- Send an email or make a phone call to a potential supporter to introduce yourself.

With 20 minutes you can:

- Write a PSA to inform your community about prevention.
- Develop an elevator pitch to concisely share who you are, what you do and what you need.
- Develop key promotion messages.
- Identify promotion tools and methods.
- Send a thank you note to a stakeholder.

With 60 minutes you can:

- Hold a meeting with a stakeholder or stakeholder group.
- Develop a survey to obtain input and feedback from stakeholders or a community group.
- Create a flyer or start a newsletter to tell stakeholders about your effort(s).
- Develop or start a stakeholder engagement plan.
- Develop or start a prevention promotion plan.

Stakeholder Engagement Plan Template

1. Identify your opportunities.

What opportunities are available to engage stakeholders in your prevention work? What are some ways you can involve key stakeholders/community members in your prevention work?

2. Identify stakeholders.

Think about your opportunities and existing partnerships. Who else can you engage in your prevention work? What sectors are missing?

3. Increase your cultural humility.

How can you be more inclusive of all voices, cultures and marginalized populations in your prevention work?

4. Develop a plan.

What steps do you need to take to engage the identified stakeholders in your prevention opportunities?

5. Identify resources.

Who can help you implement your plan (current partners, colleagues, connections)?
What other resources are available to assist you (training, technical assistance, etc.)?

See our course “Collaborating with Key Stakeholders” to learn more about strategies for engaging key stakeholders.

Sources

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