

Strategic Planning and Implementation Key to Coalition Success

Strategic planning—and more importantly, complete implementation of a strategic plan—are key to creating community change, according to a study that tracked two urban neighborhood coalitions in the Kansas City, Mo., area. This study specifically examined whether increases in rates of community change were related to a community strategic planning process.

This study helps fill a gap in the research on key processes, such as planning, that may play a role in a coalition's ability to bring about important community change. Earlier research has focused on the characteristics of effective coalitions, such as leadership and member participation.

This study followed the coalitions over a two and a half year period. The coalitions were funded by a local foundation and received training and technical assistance from the University of Kansas Workgroup for Community Health and Development (KU Workgroup) on how to carry out a local strategic planning process. The specific strategic planning process used was the VMOSA, a 5-phase method that emphasizes:

- Establishing a clear **VISION** for the coalition
- Developing a clear **MISSION** that states the overarching aim of what is to be accomplished and why
- Determining measurable **OBJECTIVES** as indicators of success
- Defining **STRATEGIES** for reaching the objectives
- Developing **ACTION PLANS** that specify the targeted change and state what will be done by whom

The study also tracked community and systems changes which provide tangible evidence of the implementation of the strategic plan and document real community action. Community changes are new or modified programs, policies and practices targeting coalition goals and objectives. Effective coalitions need to determine how they change the community context to improve prevention efforts.

Coalitions foster change among community institutions and policies, such as helping police better enforce underage drinking laws or developing and passing a social host ordinance. Specific changes fac-

ilitated by a coalition vary from community to community. The VMOSA strategic planning process helps groups develop a plan that is specific to the context of the community, so that they target appropriate and necessary changes to affect population-level decreases in substance abuse rates.

The strategic planning process unfolded overtime in the two communities and the researchers could map the cumulative number of changes facilitated by the coalition with information on the timing of the each element of the strategic planning process. This allowed researchers to assess the effects of planning on rates of community change.

Researchers also compared the rate of change for each community. The findings suggest that the timing of the strategic planning process needs to be sensitive to factors at the community level. In the neighborhood where the strategic planning process coincided with board problems and struggles with power and political maneuverings, the strategic planning process was less successful at increasing rates of community changes.

However, in the community where the planning process was better timed with coalition interest and ability for action, greater rates of community change occurred. The process of developing and implementing a strategic planning process seems to be related with increases in the rates of community change.

Key factors that served as catalysts for more community changes included: action committees involved in the implementation of the community changes, periodic feedback for the action committees on the progress they are making to accomplish community change, and reports that provided updates on changes that may support partner accountability. Additionally, greater increases in the rates of community change were related to the completion and more complete implementation of the strategic plan.

Source: Watson-Thompson, J., Fawcett, S.B., & Schultz, J.A. (2008). *Differential effects of strategic planning on community change in two urban neighborhood coalitions*. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 42, 25-38.

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- Review your coalition strategic plan**—There are many different types of strategic planning tools to use. The VMOSA process has been used with success in many types of environments; however it is not the only tool available to coalitions. What is critical is that coalitions engage in a strategic planning process and review and update their current plan if it does not lead them directly to action targeting new and modified programs, policies and practices.
- It's all about turning planning into action**—Make sure your coalition strategic plan is detailed and lists specific strategies and interventions the community needs to implement and the role member organizations must play to implement the plan.
- Track the actions of your coalition**—This is a key measure often overlooked by coalitions. Most coalitions track things like membership involvement, collaboration within the coalition and rates of substance abuse in the community. However, what is missing is the measure of dose—how many community changes the coalitions helped bring about over time. This is a key factor to helping coalitions understand their contribution to population-level outcomes.
- Document and report frequently on the progress the coalition is making**—This keeps members motivated and helps coalitions track if the rate of community change is sufficient enough to make a difference in impacting long-term population-level outcomes.

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