Coalition Building

What is a coalition?

A coalition is a group of individuals or organizations working together toward a common goal. Goals can range from very specific action items to broad objectives. For victim services, this could be creating an intervention, such as a domestic violence response team or even aligning the systems of care in a community to bridge gaps in services (which is the purpose of Linking Systems of Care). Coalitions can be formed locally, in a specific state, nationally, or internationally. Coalitions can disband once the established goals are accomplished or become stand alone, lasting organizations.

Why are they important?

There are many reasons coalitions are important, such as creating partnerships to focus on an important issue, however, one primary reason is that coalitions allow for consistency in the approach to a specific issue. For example, if multiple agencies in your community provide different aspects of victim services without a coalition, there may be pieces of necessary services that are missing, or services that are duplicative. Coalitions are also a great way to increase communication, pool resources, plan, address urgent problems in your community, and create change.[1]

When should a coalition be created?

There are many reasons to create a coalition. Coalitions can be formed when (1) there are multiple stakeholders who share a common purpose and need, and (2) when it's possible to start a successful coalition in your community. Some of the factors that can help you decide when it's possible to start a coalition include:[2]

- When there's a threat to your community
- When new information is available
- When circumstances or rules in your community change
- When there's new funding
- When a group wants to create broad, significant change within your community

When deciding to build a coalition, it is important to consider whether or not the problem you are addressing can be clearly defined, so that all prospective parties can unite

around the problem and have a basic level of trust among those in the coalition. While there is likely to be some amount of mistrust between certain groups/individuals, in many cases working to solve a common problem may help increase trust and camaraderie.

How are coalitions created?

You can start building a coalition by using these steps as a framework[3] :

1. Examine the objective and determine if forming a coalition is the best response:
   - As addressed above, forming a coalition may not always be the most appropriate option for addressing a community issue. Before starting the process of building a coalition, carefully examine if a coalition is the best way to approach the issue.[4]

2. Organize a group of core members:
   - Not only does a coalition need members, but a core group with contacts in the field and community knowledge is essential for a coalition to demonstrate support, to help recruit new people, and to ensure that critical action items are completed. To find core members, use your professional and personal network. In addition, reach out to other people doing similar work in the field, get in touch with people in agencies that are affected by the issue, and always reach out to influential people who have significant social and political capital. In many cases, there is an anchor organization that leads the committee and is responsible for structure and governance.[5]

3. Recruit members with lived experience:
   - It is important to be as inclusive as possible when considering whom to recruit as coalition members. This will help the coalition to be diverse and provide different aspects of the issue through varying perspectives. Another aspect of a diverse coalition is to engage those with lived experiences when appropriate. Use this resource to understand the different aspects of engaging those with lived experiences in your work. You can recruit people by holding face-to-face meetings, sending personal or mass emails, making phone calls, and distributing flyers/posters. When recruiting coalition members with lived experience, be sure to have a concrete task for them, like calling representatives.

4. Plan and hold an initial meeting/create preliminary objectives and activities:
   - The two most important things to consider for a first meeting are where and when the meeting should be held and what content will be discussed.

It is important to make sure that meetings are accessible to all members. This could include a time outside of work hours (evening and weekends) and should take into consideration childcare and other aspects. Without thinking through these types of logistics, many people will be left out of these meetings, decreasing diversity. [6] Some agenda items for the initial meeting could include introductions, explaining why the coalition has come together, the structure of the coalition, discussing vision and shared values, reviewing action items for the next meeting, and scheduling the next meeting. Focusing on a mission statement and the coalition's values and objectives is an important beginning step that will require input from all members.

5. **Follow up with members that attended the meeting:**
   - After an initial meeting, it is imperative that there is some sort of follow up so that the enthusiasm, momentum, and turn out does not die out. [7] Some ways to follow up are by disseminating minutes from the meeting, sending reminders about the next meeting to those that attended or those that you think would like to attend, following up with specific people about tasks they are supposed to complete, forming committees and recruiting new members to committees, continuing recruitment of new members, and keeping track of fundamental purposes of the coalition that have not yet been realized.

6. **Next steps to keep the coalition moving forward/maintaining vitality:**
   - After starting a coalition, some next steps should include gathering information about the issue the coalition was created to address, continuing to finalize goals and the mission of the coalition, creating an action plan, finalizing the structure of the coalition, electing officers or organizing a steering committee, adding professional staff if necessary, determining resources that are needed and planning how they will be used, and working to maintain the coalition over time. This can include active communication, networking, being inclusive, being creative with meetings so they don't get stale, being realistic, keeping your promises to coalition members, and praising hard work.

7. **Evaluate coalition and goals to improve efforts:**
   - In order to better understand different aspects of your coalition and its effect on the community, create an evaluation to be completed by its members and other stakeholders regarding the coalition's processes and goals and also outcomes tied to the coalition's efforts. If the results of

these evaluations are positive, this might help the coalition's reputation in the community, while also allowing the coalition to make necessary improvements and find additional areas of focus.

Who should be involved in the coalition?

When considering who to reach out to for recruiting, focus on[8]:

- Those that are directly affected by the issue (those with lived experiences, domestic violence, lack of care for victims, etc.);[9]
- Those that work in the community related to this issue (victim service workers, other service providers, the court system, etc.);
- Influential members in the community (religious leaders, business owners, other credible community members);
- Policy makers; and
- Community members that are not directly affected by the issue, but are interested in the subject.

It is important to engage these individuals when building a coalition, but remember that having a diverse coalition will ensure that more people are served by the coalition's efforts because different perspectives will be incorporated. There are varying opinions on how many people to include in a coalition; some say that the more people in a coalition the better, while others state that if a coalition is too large it will require more resources and be more difficult to identify a common purpose. [10] The key to any coalition is to have a strong structure, so if your coalition feels too big maybe you need to make some structural changes in order to make sure everyone has a voice and a seat at the table.

What are the potential barriers and solutions to creating a coalition?

Every community and coalition is unique and will face their own unique barriers. This table lists some of the common barriers and solutions to create a coalition.[11]

Barrier	Potential Solution
Finding a time to meet[12]	Many coalitions meet every other month or quarterly. It is unlikely that you will be able to find a time that works for everyone. In order to ensure as many people can attend meetings and events as possible, utilize tools, such as Doodle polls and other polling methods to see when people are available. For those that cannot attend meetings, encourage other ways of involvement, such as taking part in events, being a part of a committee, and staying informed by reading

Barrier	Potential Solution
	coalition emails. Having a coalition website may help with keeping people informed and involved.
Low productivity during meetings[13]	It is imperative to be respectful of coalition members' time in order to keep them engaged and make them feel like the coalition is worth their time. Creating structured meetings with an agenda and assigned speakers can help keep the meeting on track. Other ways of engagement could include polling members for the topics they would like to include in the meetings and having different members speak at each meeting. After a strong committee structure is built, much of the work can be done in committee meetings and the larger coalition meeting can be used to report what the committees discussed and decided upon, and reserve time for important discussions. When recruiting new members, consider creating an orientation process so that meeting time isn't used to catch people up.
Turf issues	Remind members that working together benefits everyone.
Bad history	Address this before the actual work begins. Remind members that they are working toward a common goal that will improve the community/experience of victims.
Domination by professionals/elite members	Support members that aren't used to professional meetings and guide professionals to include others' opinions by having different members speak at each meeting and having member spotlights at meetings. An outside facilitator may be useful.
Poor links to community/lack of engagement	Develop new relationships with agencies and the community. Many community members may have learned to distrust these kinds of groups because of bad experiences. In order to improve this trust and build relationships, pay attention to where you hold meetings so that everyone feels safe and that they can be included. Avoid government buildings and other triggering places because many community members may not feel safe in that environment.[14]
Minimal organizational capacity	Find a coordinator or have different organizations share organizational duties. It may be helpful to have an anchor organization that has the resources and experience to take on the organizational role.[15]
Funding	Be alert to new funding opportunities, but be careful not to accept funding that will push the coalition in the wrong

Barrier	Potential Solution
	direction. If the goals of the funder are not the same as the coalition, the group may end up focusing more on the funder's goal than on their original one.
Failure to provide/create leadership	Use an outside facilitator, anchor organization, or provide training regarding collaborative leadership.
Costs of working together outweigh benefits	Find creative ways to increase the benefits and decrease the perceived costs.

Coalition Examples

Some existing coalitions related to victim services are:

- Trauma-Informed Care Network
- The Arizona Coalition for Victim Services
- Office of Victim Services Northeastern NY Coalition
- Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women: New Directions for Victim Assistance and Allied Professionals

Additional Resources:

For more information about creating a coalition or maintaining an existing coalition, visit:

- The National Coalition Building Institute
- The Community Toolbox
- Prevention Institute: Developing Effective Coalitions: The 8-Step Process
- Society for Community Research and Collaborative Solutions: Coalition-Building and Collaborative Solutions: A Practitioner's View Webinar
- Your state's victim assistance provider's website in order to see what coalitions already exist.

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[1] Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas (2020). Community Toolbox, Chapter 5, Section 5: Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition.
[2] Id.
[3] Cohen L, Baer N, Satterwhite P. Developing effective coalitions: an eight step guide. In: Wurzbach ME, ed. *Community Health Education & Promotion: A Guide to Program Design and Evaluation.* 2nd ed. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers Inc; 2002:144-161; Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas (2020).
[4] Greater Richmond SCAN, 2019.
[5] Id.

[6] Homer, A. (2019). 10—Engaging People with Lived/Living Experience and Poverty: A Guide for Including People in Poverty Reduction.

[7] Greater Richmond SCAN, 2019.

[8] Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas (2020). Community Toolbox, Chapter 5, Section 5: Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition.

[9] Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (2013). Systems Approach Workbook: Valuing People with Lived Experience.

[10] Cohen L, Baer N, Satterwhite P. Developing effective coalitions: an eight step guide. In: Wurzbach ME, ed. *Community Health Education & Promotion: A Guide to Program Design and Evaluation.* 2nd ed. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers Inc; 2002:144-161; Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas (2020). Community Toolbox, Chapter 5, Section 5: Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition.

[11] Id.

[12] Greater Richmond SCAN, 2019.

[13] Id.

[14] Id.

[15] Id.