

Pathway to an Effective Coalition

This tip sheet is intended to guide Second Chance Act grantees in understanding what it takes to transition a task force to a coalition, measure coalition success, and make sustainable improvements in the conditions for reentrants in their communities.

By definition, a coalition is two or more people working together (moving to action) to create or achieve the same result.

People come together in other types of structures:

- **Steering committee:** A designated group of people who decide on the priorities of an organization or initiative and manages the general operations
- **Task force:** A unit specifically organized for a task or temporary organization created to solve a particular problem
- **Network:** A group or system of interconnected people or things that interact to exchange information

In general, these structures are time limited: They exist for as long as the project exists, focus on a particular program or temporary issue, and/or exist to make sure that everyone involved “is on the same page.”

Core Characteristics

The dictionary definition of “coalition” identifies two of the primary ingredients for an effective coalition: “working together” and “the same result.” These ingredients imply an action agenda to which members of the coalition are committed and clarify that coalition members share a common goal to be achieved.

An effective coalition includes other core characteristics:

Authorized to do the work. Two levels of authorization are necessary. The first level is authorization from an entity that holds authority

in the community. Coalitions most often focus on a result at the population level. Therefore, the entity who is responsible for the population needs to publicly identify the targeted result as a priority for the community and commit to supporting the coalition as the body that is authorized to achieve the result.

This public commitment establishes the role of the coalition and the sense of urgency that is needed to address the issue. The authorizing body could be a governor, a mayor, the president of a nonprofit organization, or even a university. The key is that the authorizing body has some level of responsibility or oversight at the population level for the well-being of the community. The second level of authorization pertains to individual members of the coalition. Members must prioritize the work of the coalition by consistently attending and participating in meetings and activities. Members need to be authorized by their bosses so they feel empowered to adjust their routine work commitments when necessary to accommodate the work of the coalition.

Balance of power. Effective coalitions are “owned and operated” by the members. Although an infrastructure is in place to launch the work and support the ongoing operations of the coalition, the members identify the strategies, make commitments to action steps, hold each other accountable, and make the decisions on how the group moves forward. Every member of the coalition must have an equal voice. Effective coalitions do not conduct “votes” where the majority of the members “win.” Every member must move to action to

achieve the result, so every member must be committed to the decisions that are made. A consensus model is required so the members stay in the discussion until they all can support the ultimate decision. Consensus-building can often take more time than conducting a simple vote. It ensures that members stay connected to the work because now everyone—not just a subset of the members—owns the decisions.

Sense of urgency. Building and supporting an effective coalition is hard work and requires a significant commitment of time and energy from the members. Coalitions are not meant for “business as usual.” Instead, they are meant to address community-wide issues that are resulting in a poor quality of life for a population.

Accountability. Members of a coalition are accountable to the authorizing body and to the community. Members should report to those groups regularly (every 6 months). Members must hold each other accountable for moving to action. Documenting written commitments to action is a helpful tool. Updates to all commitments to action are made at each meeting of the coalition.

Building the Coalition

Targeted result. An effective coalition is rooted in a targeted result to which the authorizing body and the individual members are committed. The result statement is a condition of well-being for an entire population. It is not something that should be achieved for just a portion of the population (e.g., 75 percent of people will be ...). Result statements clearly identify “who” should achieve the result, the geographic scope of the targeted population, and the outcome that is the focus of the commitment. An example result statement is as follows: “All adults who are released from the department of corrections to NAME County

become reintegrated into their community.” The population is adults released from the DOC; the geographic scope is the named county; and the outcome is being reintegrated into the community.

The targeted result gives the coalition a laser-like focus and keeps the coalition from drifting to include another population (i.e., juveniles) or another geographic location (i.e., a neighboring county).

Indicators of success. The coalition will then need to identify the data and/or indicators that will serve as the primary measures of progress toward achieving the result. Only one or two indicators should be tracked for the outcome. The most common indicators in the criminal justice field are the rate of return to incarceration and the rate of rearrest. The coalition should have historical data on which to establish the baseline and then continue to update the data every 6 months in order to quickly identify whether the strategies being implemented are driving the data in the right direction.

As the coalition develops and implements strategies, it will want to track performance measures to inform those strategies. For example, if there are strategies around access to employment, the coalition will want to identify such performance measures as the percentage of people placed in employment and the percentage of people who retain employment. Data should form the core of all strategy development and seek to answer the following essential questions: “What impact will this strategy have on the targeted result?” and “Will this strategy result in anyone being better off?”

Members. The recruitment of coalition members should be a very intentional process. The first step is for the authorizing body to

convene a handful of people who are engaged in the issue to “map” the potential list of members by agency and by individual. The goal is to have participation from a full range of sectors that impact the targeted result. This could include criminal justice system agencies, community- and faith-based organizations, and education and employment intermediaries. After an initial list has been established, it should be screened to ensure that membership is diverse in race/ethnicity, age, and gender and that potential members have the ability to impact change in their organizations in service of the targeted result.

What will be needed from all members?

- Commitment to participation and consistent attendance at meetings and activities. Proxies are not allowed because these individuals will not have developed the same relationship with the other members.
- Commitment to the targeted result.
- Contribution of data from their organizations and/or systems to drive the development of strategies.
- Transparency in communication.

It is important to make sure that potential members fully understand the time commitment, the framework of the coalition, and the expectation that they will move to action with urgency.

After the coalition members have been identified, it is important to build relationships with each other. Many coalition members will not know each other, as they represent a broad spectrum of sectors. Spending time developing their norms as a coalition and having them participate in team-building tools—such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® or DiSC®—will help them get to know each other well enough so they can discuss, debate, and challenge

each other in a healthy way that will strengthen their work.

Infrastructure. Although the work of the coalition belongs to its members, the coalition needs an infrastructure for the members to function at their highest level. This infrastructure must be in place for the planning and development phase. A facilitator or project manager (typically brought on board by the authorizing body) will do the initial indicator/data development, facilitate the mapping process, and communicate with potential members and may continue that role and coordinate and convene the coalition meetings. This position could also serve as a neutral facilitator, but often that role is separate.

Structure of the meetings. After the ingredients of the coalition are put into place, the real work begins. For the first several months, members will review a myriad of data that surround the issue. Because the work is rooted in data, it is imperative that members understand what the data are telling them, know the story behind the data, identify gaps in the data, and discuss what the data tell them about disproportionate impacts of the system.

As members discuss what would it take to move the data in the direction they want to go, they will transition into strategy development.

Moving to action. The strategies that the coalition develops will be moved to action by the members. This is not about developing a strategic plan or telling others what they should do to achieve the result. Instead, members of the coalition will identify the strategy, develop action steps for implementation, and commit to actions that each of them will do before the next meeting. Every meeting will start with a review of the action commitments, and members will hold each other accountable for

the work moving forward. Members will leverage each other's work, which will allow the strategies to have a greater impact than if the members were doing the work as a single agency. As the members deepen their relationships with each other, they will naturally engage in collaborative work to achieve the result.

At each session, members will work on moving their strategies to the next level, review data, and discuss what else needs to be done to achieve the result.

When does the coalition end? That answer is up to the coalition; there is no preset timeframe. It will take a minimum of 1 year to begin to see an impact in the data. Over time, members should recruit additional members so the work constantly evolves. Members of a coalition often report that this different way of doing work requires time and commitment but the pace at which the group moves to action is what keeps them at the table; they can see the progress toward the targeted result.

Acknowledgments

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