

Forging Partnerships

When it comes to improving health and health care, grantmakers are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of partnership. They are sharing information, leveraging resources, and engaging a variety of community stakeholders to generate lasting results. Such partnerships encompass “all types of collaboration that bring people and organizations together to improve health” (Weiss et al. 2002). While our partnerships have unique qualities, all are based on the notion that most health objectives cannot be achieved by any single person, organization, or sector working alone (Lasker et al. 2001). Partners can also achieve economies of scale by pooling resources.

Partnerships involve a range of players. Government, advocates, the health care delivery system, and philanthropy, for example, can all be engaged in collaborative efforts. Since multiple determinants influence the health of individuals and communities, partnerships may also go beyond medical care and public health systems to include the media, schools, law enforcement, businesses, and others. Developing cross-sectoral partnerships can bring new insights and experiences as well as create new pathways to reach out to key audiences.

Partnerships can take many forms and vary in their intensity. Lower intensity partnerships can be as simple as organizations and individuals coming together to share information. Community-based dialogues or town hall meetings, for example, can provide opportunities to make connections and share information. Such forums can also help build trust and strengthen relationships – essential ingredients for successful partnerships. Similarly, interested groups and individuals can

come together to form coalitions to address specific health issues. Coalitions can address short- or long-term goals and vary in their mission and scope. A more formal level of partnership is cofunding. In this scenario, funding entities may jointly seek out a strong individual or organization to bring together a package of funds aimed at addressing a specific health issue. Cofunding arrangements require established channels of communication between funders, joint planning, and frequent meetings among partners and grantees. The most intense form of partnership assumes a commitment to shared goals; shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability; and sharing resources, risks, and rewards. It requires that all parties understand and agree to the purpose of the partnership, the degree of commitment required, and the expectations of those involved.

Partnerships, however, can be difficult. They are time consuming and resource intensive, in large part because they require individuals and organizations to act differently than they do on their own. Partnerships also face the potential for conflict among members. Each participating organization has its own mission that it seeks to advance. To build trust and credibility, a new partnership must clearly define its mission and participants must use decisionmaking processes that emphasize negotiation and collaboration. Finally, before initiating a partnership, it is critical to examine whether the investment is warranted. In other words, the question of *why* the partnership is being formed must be asked and answered. This question must be asked from the perspective of the funders involved, the community, and other partners.

PARTNERSHIP CONTINUUM

Cooperation	Coordination	Collaboration
<i>Lower Intensity</i> → → → → <i>Higher Intensity</i>		
Shorter-term, informal relationships	Longer-term effort around specific project or task	More durable and pervasive relationships
Shared information	Some planning and division of roles	New structure with a commitment to common goals
Separate goals, resources, and structures	Some shared resources, rewards, and risks	All partners contribute resources and share rewards, leadership, and risks

Source: Winer and Ray 1994.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRANTMAKERS TO BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

Communities are the physical and cultural settings in which many actions take place to promote health and health care. Foundations can support and guide partnerships that embrace a variety of stakeholders and draw on the unique strengths and talents of each. Such strategic partnerships are essential to creating the conditions under which people can make appropriate health choices and live healthy lives.

► **Forming Coalitions** – Coalition building is one form of effective partnership. A community coalition can be defined as an alliance of organizations, groups, and agencies that come together to work towards a common goal (Florin et al. 1993). The goal can be as general as sharing information between organizations or as specific as advocating for a major health policy change. There is evidence, however, that coalitions are most effective when working on a specific, temporary issue.

Why build a coalition? Joining a coalition can create an opportunity for an organization to get involved in a broader issue. A coalition of organizations, assuming it reaches a wider constituency, wields greater credibility and legitimacy than a single organization. Coalitions can also foster cooperation between grassroots organizations by building trust within the community.

One significant component of a successful coalition is the commitment of a strong leader who understands the delicate art of negotiation. Because larger and more diverse coalitions tend to have a stronger voice, the leader must also be capable of managing a sizable group. Coalitions must be based on a clear understanding of each party's interest, intentional relationship building, and a shared vision for change. To achieve its mission, a coalition must agree on a set of issues to address. Yet, it is not realistic to expect organizations to abandon their own missions when participating in a coalition. Strength lies in the variety of perspectives, particularly if the coalition membership is reflective of the community it serves.

For all the potential benefits a coalition offers, building one is not an easy task. One of the most significant challenges a coalition may face is keeping its members informed. A solid communication policy, whether it be weekly meetings or e-mail correspondence, should be set at the outset so that all members are updated on the coalition's activity and processes. A solid organizational foundation and clear goals can help new coalitions overcome obstacles (Whitley 2003).

An example of successful coalition development comes from The Bingham Program, an independent foundation in Maine, that focuses its funding on start-up coalitions. The Bingham Program has supported the Healthy Community Coalition movement since 1992. The Healthy Community Coalition is a national model of rural coalition development. Over 20 coalitions have formed throughout the state

FACTORS THAT DETERMINE A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP

- Diversity of funding sources
- Involvement of multiple stakeholders
- Willingness to acknowledge and accept differences between partners
- Balanced participation and input from partners
- Aligned incentives

Source: Whitley 2003; The Bingham Program 2005.

and work on a variety of issues such as elder housing, access to health care, and substance abuse prevention. The groups gather citizens, determine their vision of health, assess the needs of the particular community, and develop action plans.

Although it is often difficult to evaluate the effect of a community group's efforts on a particular issue, The Bingham Program measured tangible outcomes such as additional fundraising and recognition of the coalitions by government groups. These findings also reinforced the need for general operating support and implementation assistance that The Bingham Program provides to the coalitions. The most significant success of the movement is that most of the members have secured additional public funding for community development, proving that foundation funding was a critical component of building the local community health infrastructure.

► **Cofunding Partnerships** – Grantmakers have the opportunity to exercise the power of partnerships to advance issues in the community and reap the rewards of pooling funds and resources. In July 2000, Northern California Grantmakers, a regional association of grantmakers (RAG), established AIDS Partnership California (APC) to specifically address the continuing crisis of HIV/AIDS in communities of color throughout the state of California. APC is a statewide public and private collaboration, with diverse funding from foundations, corporate philanthropy and the state office of AIDS. In addition, APC is working to increase HIV/AIDS grantmaking by providing information and technical assistance to California's private foundations and corporate funders. RAGs across the country have joined forces to build similar HIV/AIDS coalitions in their specific regions. With this partnership in place, during the first week of the Hurricane Katrina crisis, APC was able to identify and successfully provide services to over 50 individuals with HIV/AIDS in the Gulf Coast region. The APC's network and its association with its grantees and the National AIDS Fund made such quick action possible.

To achieve better outcomes in mental health, The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati and other local

foundations launched the *Youth Behavioral Initiative*, a funders collaborative that was created on the premise that pooling resources would be an excellent way to achieve better outcomes in the area of youth mental illness and substance abuse. The idea stemmed from conversations with over 350 community leaders about the region's greatest needs. The goals of the initiative include increasing youth access to behavioral health care and improving coordination and collaboration among service providers. The initiative addressed issues within the foster care system by working with a local service provider to implement a therapeutic, evidence-based model to assist foster families with caring for at-risk youth. Without the combined effort of local foundations and giving programs, the initiative would not have been successful.

► **Building Cross-Sectoral Partnerships** – Many factors contribute to health, including education, income, and environment. Developing cross-sectoral health partnerships can be a successful strategy to improve the health of individuals and communities. Lessons can be gleaned from ongoing and completed partnerships and be broadly translated to help assure the success of new collaborations.

Balancing the power of many partners is a key element of success. Partners bring different strengths to the collaboration, making it difficult to ensure that each partner's skills and resources are best used. Establishing a balance of power is made easier when each partner understands and appreciates the assets of the others. For example, local public health agencies and community groups participating in *Partnerships for the Public's Health*, a five-year \$37 million initiative of The California Endowment, learned that community residents needed to appreciate their public health department's broad responsibilities while public health departments needed to recognize the knowledge, skills, connections, and influence of community residents. As a result, memoranda of understanding were established to formalize each partner's roles and responsibilities. Attendance of senior managers of community groups and health departments at meetings helped to keep key decisionmakers at the table. Responsibility for conducting and hosting partnership meetings alternated between the health departments and community groups. Balancing power enabled *Partnership for the Public's Health* participants to build trust, equalize relationships, and work together more effectively.

Involving the media in partnerships can help convey public health messages to a wide audience. Whether educating the public about disease prevention or informing them of what to do in the event of an emergency, television, radio, print, and Web-based messages can help assure the public's health and safety. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation has a longstanding tradition of working collaboratively with media to get health messages out to the public. Recognizing the importance of entertainment media in shaping people's awareness of health issues, the foundation established its

Program on the Entertainment Media & Public Health in 1996. The program works with media writers, producers, and executives to help them convey health messages to the public. Health messages crafted by the initiative have appeared in many prime time shows including NBC's *ER* and UPN's *Girl Friends* addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. The foundation has also successfully collaborated with national television networks. Through a partnership with Black Entertainment Television (BET), the foundation produced a sexual health public education campaign aimed at young people. The campaign consisted of full-length news specials on sexual health, public service announcements, a toll-free telephone number for viewers to call for additional information, and a free booklet on sexual health. A similar partnership with Univision Network, the nation's premier Spanish-language network, resulted in a campaign to raise awareness of sexual health issues, including HIV and other sexually transmitted disease.

Aligning incentives among participants is another important element to successful collaboration, especially when communicating with policymakers, business leaders, and the community at large. After the events of September 11th, the Horizon Foundation in Howard County, Maryland spearheaded an effort to develop a communitywide disaster response plan. The foundation, county government agencies, and key community groups, including the public school system, the local community college, public libraries, neighborhood associations, and many others have joined the Community Emergency Response Network (CERN). CERN supports disaster planning through the coordination of emergency plans and resources of participating members. The group's functions include planning, inter-agency coordination, the development of tabletop exercises, disaster plan review, shelter planning, and communications enhancement. CERN members also work collaboratively to educate and inform Howard County residents about what to do in the event of an emergency, where to get information, and how to protect themselves and their families. Building this partnership required forging relationships between groups that did not typically interact. Yet, as trust among the partners grew, the groups were able to effectively delegate program responsibilities and resources to serve their community.

Partnership between the public and private sectors is an effective means of spotlighting issues within a community. After former Surgeon General David Satcher spoke at a conference about preteens in 2003, The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health formed the Preteen Alliance. The objective of the alliance is to promote the health and well-being of the important – but often forgotten – age group of children ages 9-13. The alliance is a cross-county collaboration on issues related to preteens and involves the Santa Clara and San Mateo counties in California. The steering committee represents a wide

spectrum of stakeholders and includes members from local nonprofit organizations; hospitals; human service agencies; and local departments of education, public health, and juvenile justice. To date, the alliance's most significant accomplishment is the publication of a study that examined the status of preteens in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. The study found that, although preteens in the two counties were faring better than teens across the state, there were great disparities among Latino and African American preteens. The study also indicated that data about emotional and behavioral health were inadequate and left many questions unanswered. Recommendations from the study include promoting public recognition of preteens as a distinct and important group and supporting the collection and dissemination of local preteen data (The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health 2005). As a result of these recommendations, the alliance will continue efforts to increase awareness among the public about the need to focus on and support the positive development of preteens. Future efforts also will include exploring policy opportunities and community activities to further promote the welfare of preteens and to fill gaps in the existing body of knowledge.

Funding can be a critical barrier to sustaining a partnership, especially because of the fragmented funding streams typical of the health care sector. Finding new and creative approaches to using funds for integrated purposes can be challenging, but can pay off in the long run. To battle the growing crystal methamphetamine (meth) epidemic on the island of Hawai'i, the Hawai'i Community Foundation partnered with Hawai'i County's Office of the Mayor. A three-pronged strategy involved funding for community awareness and education programs to prevent the use of drugs and to encourage users to seek treatment. Funding was also awarded to a variety of community-based treatment organizations and to law enforcement initiatives that focus on drug trafficking organizations. This approach was specifically designed to use foundation grants to enhance, not supplant, state funding for law enforcement programs, as well as government and other third party reimbursement for addiction treatment services.

SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships can be challenging to sustain. To be successful, they need to achieve consensus, identify and exploit resources, and establish needed infrastructure. Maintaining the engagement of the community is also important and may require technical assistance; acknowledgment of progress and success; and continuous identification, training, and mentoring of new leaders. Sustaining collaborations also requires partners to be committed to sharing resources, credit, and power, and they must be willing to work toward policy and systems changes that support community health improvement.

Health philanthropy is uniquely positioned to foster the partnerships needed to strengthen the nation's health, and

to reach out and include collaborators from outside the health sector. Funders can act as neutral conveners, providing matching grants or start-up funding, coordinating collaborators, and encouraging community engagement. Through partnerships, foundations can educate and inform the public about a wealth of issues, such as chronic conditions, healthy lifestyles, or environmental health. They can impress upon policymakers the value and benefits of good health, and can influence policies and the allocation of resources necessary to improve system capacity.

Successful partnerships take time to develop and grow. They are based on trust and an understanding of the assets each partner brings to the table. Once established, they can create and sustain the changes needed to build a health system fully capable of realizing its vision.

This article is part of GIH's portfolio, From the Ground Up: Improving Community Health, Inspiring Community Action. Each article focuses on an approach grantmakers are using to improve health in communities. The entire portfolio is available at the GIH Web site, www.gih.org.

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