

Neighborhood Leadership Key to Increased Community Involvement

By Andrea de la Flor, CSAP Fellow

Why is it so difficult to get local residents involved in coalition work? What factors might contribute to this problem? The answers are complex, but new research may help coalitions effectively plan to get and keep residents involved. A 2007 study published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* describes how three conditions: community capacity, community readiness and neighborhood problems, may affect the type and level of resident involvement in community-building initiatives.

Data were collected prior to launching a comprehensive community initiative in Battle Creek, Mich., called Yes We Can! Researchers used a random-digit-dial phone survey to gather relevant information within the seven targeted neighborhoods, resulting in 460 completed surveys.

The survey assessed community capacity, asking residents to report on interaction with neighbors (social ties) and the quality of leadership present in their neighborhood (neighborhood leadership). Community readiness was calculated with resident ratings on their neighborhood's ability to collectively address local problems (collective efficacy) and the degree that residents believed neighborhood change was possible (hope for change). Neighborhood problems were measured by asking residents about housing and crime issues in their area.

The researchers also asked residents to rate their own community involvement and that of their family. The researchers identified two types of involvement:

- ◆ Individual activism was defined by having engaged in the following activities in the past year:

- speaking with a local politician about a neighborhood problem,
 - talking with a group causing a problem in the neighborhood, and
 - talking with a local religious leader to help with a neighborhood problem or improvement.
- ◆ Collective action was defined by having engaged in the following activities in the past two months:
 - attended neighborhood or block watch meetings,
 - attended a citizens' committee or local political group,
 - attended a meeting of a neighborhood group, such as a neighborhood planning council, or
 - met with neighbors to solve a neighborhood problem or organize neighborhood improvement.

Results indicated that residents with greater neighborhood problems were more likely to have participated in individual and collective action activities, and to have engaged in such activities more than once. In terms of community readiness and capacity, those reporting greater social ties were more likely to have been involved in both types of community participation. Social ties did not appear to be related to level of either type of participation.

Results also indicated that residents reporting high neighborhood leadership, collective efficacy and hope for change were more likely to have participated in collective action activities. Of these factors, individuals reporting high neighborhood leadership reported greater levels of both types of community involvement. Finally, the study showed that a high score on hope for change was related to a high level of involvement of individual activism, but not collective action.

Source: Foster-Fishman, P. G., Cantillon, D., Pierce, S. J., & Van Egeren, L. A. (2007). Building an active citizenry: the role of neighborhood problems, readiness, and capacity for change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 39, 91-106.

What Coalitions Can Do

www.coalitioninstitute.org

Increase efforts to educate residents on the scope of community problems. This research tells us that when people perceive high levels of neighborhood problems, they are more likely to get involved. Reach out to underrepresented groups in your community and name and frame the issues for each group. Help them understand why they need to be concerned about specific community issues.

Work to increase social ties among neighborhood residents. Find creative ways to bring people together and help them form meaningful relationships. This effort is two-fold. The increased social ties may increase participation, and getting people together in one place, presents a wonderful opportunity to create awareness of community problems. Remember, don't just tell people about the issues, offer specific ways for them to get involved.

Focus on reaching out to those who are not at the table. Is there a group in your community that is consistently involved in coalition efforts? If so, try to determine why. Does this group have something in common that other groups in your community do not share? Making an effort to gain involvement of different groups can help increase perceptions of collective efficacy and hope for change. Don't be afraid to ask individuals what keeps them from participating.

CADCA's National Coalition Institute, 625 Slaters Lane, #300, Alexandria, VA 22314, 1-800-54-CADCA

Research into Action may be copied without permission. Please cite CADCA's National Coalition Institute as the source.

CADCA's National Coalition Institute is federally funded through a contract with the Office of National Drug Control Policy. The Institute's mission is to increase the effectiveness of community anti-drug coalitions throughout the nation.