

National Coalition Institute's **Research into Action**
Recruiting and Sustaining the Participation of Coalition Members

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Community-based coalitions rely heavily on the participation of their diverse members. Given this, researchers have identified factors that influence initial decision to participate in coalition activities such as group identification, a drive to lead and organize, direct or indirect monetary benefits, and the desire to improve community well-being. Knowledge is important in developing a member base, what becomes more critical is the level at which those members participate. A study recently published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* sought to answer this question, and provide insight on how to increase member participation within coalitions.

How did they do it?

The researchers two hypotheses information gathered from Web questionnaires. Drawing from previous coalition literature, they predicted that coalition members would participate at greater levels if they believed the following: 1) That they had the ability to influence coalition decisions and activities, and 2) That the coalition, as a whole, was capable of achieving stated goals.

They developed surveys to measure individuals' perceptions of their ability to influence coalition activities, their perceptions of its stated goals, their self-reported involvement in the coalition- both within and outside of scheduled meetings. They distributed the surveys to the top 25 most active members from 79 different community coalitions, resulting in 818 individual responses.

What did they find?

- Members were more likely to have attended a greater percentage of coalition meetings in the past year, and more likely to have spent a higher number of hours doing coalition work outside of scheduled meetings when they perceived the coalition board to be more inclusive of its members.
- Members of coalitions that had been around for a long time went to fewer meetings and were less likely to talk during those meetings.
- Older members reported more often than younger members that they talked during coalition meetings.
- There was no significant difference between the amount of time a member spent on coalition activities outside of meetings and whether that person belonged to a committee or organized taskforce.
- There was no significant support for their second hypothesis that coalition members participate more when they believe that the coalition, as a whole, capable of achieving stated goals. However, this factor may play an indirect role on the level of member participation and that more research is needed.

Source: Wells, R., Ward, A. J., Feinberg, M., & Alexander, J. A. (2008). What motivates people to participate more in community-based coalitions? *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 42, 94-104.

What Coalitions Can Do
www.coalitioninstitute.org

- o **Provide members an environment that creates opportunities to influence the community and coalition activities, and recognize their efforts** - It's beneficial to facilitate smaller group work and discussions during meetings rather than working as a large group. Small groups provide more opportunities to build interpersonal relationships, and they also create an environment where members may feel more comfortable about speaking out. Utilizing smaller groups promotes more active participation by everyone. Remember to show your members appreciation for their contributions.
- o **Demonstrate the importance of inclusion among coalition members by choosing leaders who value shared leadership, and work to develop those skills and attitudes among your existing leaders** - The authors cite a study which found that coalition members were not being as inclusive as they believed. Get feedback from all of your members about how much opportunity they feel they have in influencing the coalition's work. You can facilitate large or small group discussions, speak separately to individuals, or develop an anonymous survey. Do whatever works best for your coalition.
- o **Facilitate the formation of temporary workgroups** - Temporary workgroups can help you increase member's time investment and help the coalition accomplish specific tasks by involving the participation of members who do not sit as regular committee. Shorter commitments may be easier for some members who want to contribute but are unable to make multi-year commitments.
- o **Keep working to energize your coalition members and give youth members the opportunity to provide feedback** - The finding that long time members of coalitions went to fewer meetings and were less likely to speak at those meetings suggest that as a coalition ages, it should provide opportunities to re-energize members. Also found that older members spoke at meetings more often.

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CADCA's National Coalition Institute mission is to increase the effectiveness of community anti-drug coalitions throughout the nation.