



Learning Tool 3



Building a Faith-Based Network

The well-being of every community is dependent upon the contributions of its citizens working independently and together. Important partners in strengthening communities are the more than 300,000 congregations that bring people together for worship and community engagement. Stepping outside their congregations, faith-based organizations have the capacity to participate in public/private partnerships that serve their communities. They have the ability to develop and implement programs whose effectiveness is extended by the trust they have already earned in their own neighborhoods. Direct service to individuals is critical; immediate need is often what draws faith-based organizations into partnerships with other community organizations.

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This learning tool highlights steps to create and sustain a faith-based network to reduce child abuse and neglect. Its purpose is to expand the knowledge, skills, and strategies of churches and faith-based institutions so that they can partner with families and communities. It is based on work done in Detroit, Michigan, by the Urban Families Program. (UFP). The program trained a network of ministers, lay ministers, staff, and volunteers; linked them in clusters based upon geographic location and interest; and provided them with customized technical assistance. The experience in this community has much relevance for faith-based collaborative work to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Recommendations based on UFP's work with this faith-based network are on the following pages.

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Steps to Building a Faith-Based Network

1. Conduct a needs assessment.

The needs assessment process should detail the problem(s) to be addressed, the target population, and the supports and services that would be available. Another component of the needs assessment should be asset mapping. A community's resources include not only its economic assets, but also the talents, skills, and expertise of individuals, agencies, and organizations within that community. A needs assessment can be as simple as sitting down with your faith-based partners and having a dialogue about assets and needs that they see within their communities. You might also want to ask church leaders for input, develop a simple survey that would be administered to community stakeholders, or convene a focus group.

Turning to other faith-based initiatives can be helpful. Word of mouth is one of the best ways to recruit.

2. Recruit.

A variety of methods can be used to recruit individuals interested in participating in a faith-based network to reduce child abuse and neglect. Letters can be mailed to churches and other faith-based organizations within an identified community. Follow-up calls help to make contacts more personal and encourage participation. Key community leaders can help identify potential participants. Turning to other faith-based initiatives can be helpful, too. Word of mouth is one of the best ways to recruit.

Cluster meetings help to combine and consolidate program topics and increase networking.

3. Establish goals.

Establishing goals should answer questions such as, Why are we here? Where do we want to go? and How will we know when we are there? Objectives, the measurable indicators of your goals, must be linked to, or derived from, these goals. Another important tool, a program logic model, can serve as a blueprint for implementing the program, monitoring the activities that occur, and eventually evaluating the effort and its achievements.

4. Develop a collaborative framework.

The most critical aspect of bringing members from the faith community together is providing training and technical assistance while forming a supportive network. There are usually many individuals who are interested in doing similar work but are unaware of the efforts and resources others have to offer. A program strategy comprised of separate but related activities works well. Numerous supports should be provided:

- > Training should be provided based on identified topics using adult learning theory. Also, interactive sessions based on life experiences help to build skills and enhance knowledge.
- > Cluster meetings help to combine and consolidate program topics and increase networking based on geographic location, topic of interest, and target population. Cluster meetings must be flexible in terms of times of meetings and agenda items and should rotate among different sites.
- > Community seminars, open to the community at large, help increase the base of knowledge being shared about child abuse prevention.

> Technical assistance is most effective when it provides practical, realistic methods for addressing the specific needs of faith-based partners. It is most useful when it reflects the priorities established at the onset of the partnership. Technical assistance can help improve the quality of programming, development, implementation, and evaluation.

5. Evaluate

Evaluation helps to increase knowledge, guide decision making, and demonstrate accountability. Data can be collected through participant surveys, focus groups, or case studies.

Although working with faith-based groups can be very rewarding, there are challenges when building a network, in particular, communication, commitment, and follow-through. Members of the faith community do volunteer work frequently; they may be volunteering for the program after a full day of work or attending to other commitments.

Resources

Web Sites

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services:

Center for Faith-based and Community Initiatives:
www.hhs.gov/fbci

Administration for Children and Families,
 Compassion Capital Fund: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccf

Publication

Primer for Developing and Sustaining a Faith-based Network (2004) (Detroit, Mich.: Urban Families Program, Skillman Center for Children, Wayne State University).
 Download at www.skillmancenter.culma.wayne.edu

Lessons to Guide Your Work

- > Be flexible. Always reevaluate current program activities as you proceed.
- > Recognize participants' time commitments. Scheduling and the stress of time constraints are real for faith-based initiatives. Participants often play multiple roles within their churches or faith-based organizations along with having other responsibilities such as employment and family.
- > Understand that most of the information is new. It is essential to help participants develop their assessment mechanism and walk them through the process. Use the simplest methods available.
- > Use current participants in program activities. Build from existing successes by asking participants to assist in the training activities and to serve as mentors to others.
- > Provide training in the identified topic area. Continually reevaluate training needs and topics as the project continues.
- > Establish cluster groups based on length of time as a participant. Learning should be geared to unique needs, with consideration given to longer-term participants.
- > Emphasize the need to develop participants' capacity to evaluate their progress.

Reinforce the fact that evaluation is important to program sustainability.



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Adapted from the **Primer for Developing and Sustaining a Faith-Based Network**, Urban Families Program, Skillman Center for Children, College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs, Wayne State University. May 2004.