



Working With Citizens to Set Priorities and Move Forward

Who are Your Community Members?

Safe Communities requires motivated citizens to become actively involved in injury prevention and to obtain acceptance and buy-in from the general citizenry, local government, and community organizations. So where do you start? Before jumping in and mobilizing, you need to define your community.

A community consists of people and organizations who live and/or work within an area. This could be as general as the United States of America or as specific as the parameters for a Neighborhood Watch. Does your Safe Community include everyone in the county? City? Neighborhood? By determining your boundaries, you will also define the members for your community. Keep in mind that a community may be delineated around an issue or area, such as a community defined by the local law enforcement division, rather than by geographic location. Community members include public and private businesses and organizations, residents, and people who work in the community.

How to Reach Community Members

Community Focus Groups

Meeting in small groups, or focus groups, is one way to assess community feelings about a topic, campaign, or project. The groups meet in different locations across the community to offer opinions about, for example, motor vehicle injury and to identify perceived needs. This works best if each of the groups has a similar format and is run by outside facilitators who do not share their opinions or positions. Any indication of preference by a facilitator might make group members uncomfortable sharing their opinions, especially if they differ.

Group rules should be explained. First, no “put down” of ideas is allowed and no one is right or wrong. This is an opinion sharing session. Each group should be presented with the same material in the same manner. No one focus group should, for example, receive additional materials or explanations.

Community focus group testing, when done correctly, is a great way to gauge community reactions and opinions. Focus group findings may be used to bolster existing public support. Group members can first host focus groups in places like houses of worship, community centers, and public meetings. You can capitalize on their acceptance of a program already in existence. Additionally, ideas

gleaned from the group may help you when identifying a particular program. For example, focus group members, when shown a draft educational letter for parents, stated that it was difficult to understand and that pictures or an accompanying brochure would be helpful. You can improve that aspect of your program because of your focus group findings. When the program is unveiled, you are armed with the knowledge that the community wanted the program and their ideas were appreciated. This may be especially useful if there is an unexpected public backlash.

Town Meetings

Town meetings are less structured than focus groups and a great way to put your hand on the “pulse of the community.” Host your own meetings or participate in ones already set. Often, it is not hard to get your coalition on the agenda. In addition to fielding opinions about specific projects, town meetings are an avenue to recruit members into your Safe Communities effort. Town meetings can be used to help educate community members about the need for traffic safety education and injury prevention. Often, those who attend town meetings are local leaders whose opinions are seriously considered by their neighborhoods and communities. Take the ideas and opinions expressed very seriously. In an effort like Safe Communities, progress may be impeded by lack of popular support.

Membership of Local Organizations

Sometimes there are local organizations whose membership may already be interested in your messages. With Safe Communities for example, members should go to Parent-Teacher Association meetings and involve the local American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). These organizations may be able to offer in-kind support, such as postage or printing. Perhaps by having them lend their name to your Safe Communities program, credibility will be gained in the community. For more ideas on organizations to include, please look at the Safe Communities folio piece entitled *Tips to Coalition Building*.

Neighborhood Advisory Groups

Community health centers, neighborhood organizations such as residence councils, and local advocacy groups should be invited to the table. Often, people who are involved in local advisory groups are local leaders. Not only would this be a good way to check out opinions, but also a source for recruiting members into Safe Communities efforts. Use these groups as a way to “educate the leaders” about traffic safety and injury prevention.

The Role of Citizens in Safe Communities

Membership

As with any community effort, the chairperson will need active members to serve

on committees and participate in designing solutions as well as planning and implementing projects. As discussed in “Tips for Coalition Building,” a strong local effort requires leadership and membership on a number of levels. Citizens can participate without actually becoming members. This may be beneficial to the citizen and the coalition.

Keep a multi-disciplinary focus that includes citizens, educators, law enforcement, safety professionals, and policy makers. Most importantly, include community members who have a personal interest in the project, not just those who can fit it in their job description.

Identification of Problems, Priorities, and Interventions

When a coalition forms, there may be a difference between perceived needs and data-driven needs. If coalition members don’t agree with the data-identified problems and recognize them as valid, the coalition may be able to work on the problems perceived in the community as priorities. However, a Safe Communities coalition, as with other coalitions, should always look at injury data to define the problem and look for solutions.

When deciding on what your priorities should be, compare the data and examine the perceived needs of the community. Therefore, priorities should reflect both data-driven and perceived needs. One way is to do a community needs assessment. Similar to focus groups, a needs assessment asks what community members identify as needs and priorities. Once priorities are used to develop programs, focus groups may be used to see if the program is popular, feasible, and desirable. Community members should not have to be a part of the coalition for their opinions to be heard. Keep your ears open and invite guests to attend meetings. Often it is a good idea to have open meetings and encourage people to bring guests.

Keep the community informed about the progress and plans of your programs and priorities. With Safe Communities, for example, alcohol-related traffic injuries are identified as a priority in the community and by injury and death data analysis. The coalition develops an injury prevention proposal that is screened through the community. Analysis of this screening indicates a strong desire to see the project come to fruition, except they are strongly opposed to the idea of limiting billboard advertising of alcohol on major roadways. The coalition should seriously consider deleting or altering that section of the proposal. Let the community, especially those who participated in the community screening, know the results and how you will work their opinions into the final project.

Keep members active by routinely encouraging recruitment of additional members and recognizing the work of members during the coalition meetings. Members are important, so treat them that way by being willing to listen to their needs (such as meeting times) and wishes (are they interested in a particular campaign such as child safety seat use). For more details please see Tips for Coalition Building.

About the Author

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