

Building and Sustaining Stakeholder Support

A Guide for Grantees of the Office of Adolescent Health and the Family and Youth Services Bureau

Building and sustaining stakeholder support are critical to running a successful program; they are also important assurances that a program or organization is sustainable. Outreach and planning that lead to successfully engaging community leaders—including the careful planning and time commitments needed to make them happen—should be essential parts of your day-to-day work to prevent teen pregnancy.

How does stakeholder support fit into your overall work?

Given the extensive demands on your time and resources and the day-to-day pressures of running a successful program, finding time to reach out to and engage the broader community can be difficult. However, it's important to remember that support from stakeholders is part of achieving overall sustainability—in other words, the future success of your program depends on it.

Experts have identified several key elements that sustainable initiatives have in common, such as having a clear vision and mission for the work, focusing on results, and providing strong financial accountability and management¹. Securing a broad base of support for your work and identifying community champions who care about and contribute to what you are doing are also important characteristics of long-lasting efforts. These important pieces of building sustainability can have implications for many aspects of your program, including recruitment, implementation, and future fundraising efforts.

How do you identify supporters and community champions?

Although you likely work most closely with individuals who understand teen pregnancy and its root causes, some members of your community will need to be convinced that this issue is important for them to work on or, in some cases, that a problem even exists. Be prepared to make the case directly and succinctly for why teen pregnancy matters and why *your* program successfully addresses this issue. Depending on the audience, you will want to tailor your messages appropriately and present your work in a way that resonates with the community's interests.

While it is important that allies and like-minded organizations be aware and supportive of your work, consider approaching those whose main focus is *not* teen pregnancy or reproductive health but who may have an interest in the issue given the work that they do. By exploring relationships with organizations and individuals interested in related but separate issue areas, teen pregnancy prevention professionals can find common ground, expand their reach, and build on the connection between teen pregnancy and a host of other critical social issues that may concern the community in which you're working. Engaging a broad range of partners can help you gain a wide range of supporters and add credible voices from outside sectors to your list of champions.

Who your stakeholders and champions are will depend largely on the community in which you are working, but as a general matter, you should focus your outreach on a few key groups:

- **Prominent leaders and organizations working on teen pregnancy and adolescent health.** These individuals and groups are likely to be natural allies in your community, and will need little to no convincing that your work is important and should be supported.
- **Prominent leaders and organizations working on social issues outside of teen pregnancy.** Individuals and groups working on issues like education, child welfare and well-being, gang violence, and poverty may not work directly on teen pregnancy every day, but with some education and outreach from you and your colleagues are likely to understand how their work is related to yours. Consider how your shared passion for young people in general could translate into action from these “unusual suspects.”
- **Leaders with influence over members of the community.** To whom is your community listening? Does your community trust a certain group of leaders, from whom they are willing to take direction? If so, it may be to your advantage to approach them and have them on board with your project. These key leaders may vary based on where you are working, but some influential people to consider engaging are: activists; faith leaders, pastors, or specific congregations; elders (tribal or within families) or parents; and trusted and well-known medical providers.
- **Local decision makers and policymakers.** Identify those individuals within the community that can actually change the rules to help your project succeed, such as school principals who can allow certain programs into the classroom. Some of these officials will be elected, so make sure your agency is aware of the rules about contacting these individuals and what activities you are allowed to support with federal dollars – you are not allowed to lobby with your federal funding.
- **Local media outlets and individual journalists, reporters, and media personalities.** The advantage of working with the media is that they reach more people in one broadcast than you could ever reach through a single program intervention. Most outlets will have a person who covers health issues, or you may find that an individual radio or TV personality has a personal interest in teen pregnancy. Find out which publications and shows your target population, including parents of youth you are trying to reach, consume most often.
- **Business leaders and other with a direct influence on the local economy.** From Chamber of Commerce members to individual shop owners, communities pay attention to those who are providing goods and services as well as jobs. Consider making the case for how teen pregnancy is connected to workforce and poverty issues to get these individuals on board with your work.

Five Tips for Getting Started on Stakeholder Education

1. Identify five key people with substantial influence and reach in your community.
2. Determine how teen pregnancy prevention relates to their work, and provide them with information that helps connect your issue to theirs.
3. Create opportunities for them to become involved in your work, such as inviting them to events, soliciting their feedback, or offering leadership positions on boards or task forces.
4. Continue to nurture the relationship through ongoing outreach and engagement.
5. Show your appreciation, and reciprocate their support when possible.

What should you do once you have their attention?

Consider using data to demonstrate the need for your program or to show how your program is already making a difference in your community. For example, during your needs assessment, you may have collected data about the rates of teen pregnancy, teen birth, sexually transmitted infections, and more in your community. This information may help remind leaders why your program is a priority. You might want to supplement that information with program-level data to show how your program is already making a difference in the lives of the youth who participate, such as changes in behavior, or information

from satisfaction surveys or focus groups. Telling the community how many youth you have served throughout the course of the program can also be an important way to demonstrate your reach. Consider creating short, easy-to-read fact sheets that describe the community's needs and resources and that highlight success stories from your program, including information on how you are addressing issues identified through the needs assessment. Quotes from youth and pictures of group activities are important contextual pieces that can make the success story stand out. Anecdotes can also be a powerful way of communicating how your program makes a difference in your community. Collect stories and testimonials from youth, parents, teachers, and others who have had positive experiences with your program and, with permission, share them with the community. Consider how you can use social media to spread these messages. You might want to video tape the testimonials and post them on YouTube, your organization's website, or your organization's or program-specific Facebook page. You can also share these testimonials during special events. In short, use both qualitative and quantitative ways to tell the story of your program's success.

Inviting parents, youth, leaders, and others in the community to tour your building, meet your facilitators and other program staff, or otherwise get a glimpse of your work can help establish rapport and help build excitement about your program activities. Consider courting the media, too; you might explore releasing a press statement about the kickoff or other events your organization is sponsoring related to the program.

It is important to demonstrate to your community that support is a two-way street and to show that you are providing it as well as expecting it. Support other related efforts in your community. For example, if you are partnering with schools or local organizations to deliver your program, you can show your appreciation for their partnership by attending relevant events and sharing information about those events with your supporters through newsletters, e-mails, or your social media outlets.

How do you keep supporters engaged?

Once you have raised awareness about your work to reduce teen pregnancy, it is important to keep supporters engaged in your work and, in the cases of some stalwart supporters, to provide opportunities for them to be meaningfully involved in your efforts. A helpful next step might be to identify which partners in your community are willing to be actively involved and the range of activities in which they would like to participate. Some individuals and organizations may want to show their support in more understated ways, such as attending community events you sponsor or including information about your program in a newsletter.

Other supporters will want to have more substantive involvement and, based on your outreach efforts, may feel some ownership of your program. For example, a local advocate may want to discuss teen pregnancy or highlight your program at a community meeting or town hall, or a member of the local media may cover your issue in a positive way, such as through editorials or feature pieces about your program. You might also consider spending more time and effort cultivating those potential champions whose vocal support could be especially influential in your community. Once you have identified the supporters who want to be actively involved, consider specifically how they can be most helpful to your program. These individuals may be appropriate candidates for special leadership positions. For example, some communities have formed action teams or task forces to support teen pregnancy prevention programs and to encourage participation from those who are interested in becoming involved and providing input; their efforts can also demonstrate external support for your work.

Also, consider exploring how partnering with other established, youth-serving organizations and agencies can expand your reach in the community. There are many ways to work with such groups, including

promoting and attending one another's events, partnering in outreach or implementation, or creating a plan with partners to recruit youth through these venues.

Above all, an integral part of keeping stakeholders engaged in your work is to keep them updated on your progress and to seek their input, particularly from champions and those who have shown an interest in being actively involved. Giving the community—or a small group of key individuals within the community—an opportunity to provide feedback can be a valuable way to build rapport and support. Consider various ways to seek this feedback so that people who cannot attend events can still be a part of the process. This might include seeking feedback through a comment box at a partner agency or through social media and other online venues.

How do you ensure a long-term investment?

By continuing to cultivate relationships with key partners and organizations, you can help ensure that the involvement of these supporters continues throughout the program and beyond. The job of providing updates and soliciting feedback never stops, and it is an essential part of meeting the community's needs. It is important to be responsive to the community when you do solicit input—take suggestions and advice seriously and adapt your efforts where it makes sense. If you have restrictions on your ability to make changes based on community feedback, be honest and clear about those limitations.

One goal of sustainability is to ensure that your efforts and program become a permanent part of the community, so consider how partner organizations can play a role in these efforts. For example, are you partnering with a group, such as a child welfare agency or a school that could make your curriculum a routine part of what is provided to all the youth it serves? Are local donors or foundations willing to contribute financially if federal funds are no longer available to support your program?

Consider how the media can help get the word out about your efforts. Building relationships with journalists and news outlets can take time—stories are easier to pitch when reporters know who you are and trust your organization. Take steps to get to know local journalists by setting up meetings with the editorial board of your local paper, inviting them to visit your program, or otherwise making a concerted effort to stay in touch with reporters who cover issues related to your program. Be sure to call reporters' attention to relevant national stories that might have local angles. For example, the release of new national data on teen pregnancy or births is a perfect opportunity to highlight the efforts of your intervention. Consider sending press releases about exciting new developments or data for your program. You might also consider writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed about your program or identifying champions in the community who are willing to do so. Even if the community is not hearing directly from you on a regular basis, working with the media can ensure that this topic and your work stay on the radar screen through articles, op-eds, or other campaigns. It is often very powerful for a voice outside your organization to sing your praises.

Additional tips for building stakeholder support

- **Recognize that relationships are key and it's your job to cultivate them.** Regardless of the sector or organization whose support you are seeking, building a relationship is the key to a successful partnership. It is not enough to hand out a pamphlet or to have one brief meeting—building the trust and accountability necessary for engaging potential supporters and champions in meaningful ways takes time and ongoing effort.. Be sure to take the time to identify relationships that are particularly important for the success of your program, and begin to cultivate them early.

- **Have a sustainability plan.** Consider drafting a plan that maps out how your program will continue in your community in future years, including those years when federal funding may not be available. A strategy for building support and engaging stakeholders should be an integral part of this plan, in addition to other critical items like accounting, management, measuring results, and sharing them with others.

ⁱ The Finance Project. (2002). *Sustaining comprehensive community initiatives: Key elements*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved March 7, 2012, from <http://www.financeproject.org/publications/sustaining.pdf>

Additional Resources

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