Creating Effective Partnerships to Improve Behavioral Health Outcomes
Creating effective partnerships or collaboration is critical for the prevention of substance use and promotion of mental health. Sustaining partnerships and creating new ones can allow your organization or coalition to widen the reach of prevention initiatives while also providing additional support for your cause, mission, and community behavioral health outcomes. This simple systematic approach to partnership-building yields greater results than work done in silos.

The name of the game is “partnership.” Look for partners that have something to gain from an alliance with your program, as well as the ability to enhance your message. While the goal of partnership formation is the sustainability of your program, not every partnership will or should generate direct financial support. Nor should you approach only those partners who can provide financial support. Community recognition, public image, the opportunity to work with you and your other partners, and the idea of contributing to the issues of mental health and substance use can all be powerful incentives for a like-minded partner.

Steps for Developing Effective Partnerships

1. **Determine your needs**

   Identify what your organization wants (or needs) from a partnership. It can be as simple as access to a new mailing list to promote mental health awareness or increasing access to care by expanding referral options. You can also think about this in terms of areas of expertise or scopes of practice. What is your own agency able to do for a patient or client? More importantly, what are you not able to do and who in the community can fill those gaps?

2. **Create new relationships**

   Establishing new partnerships is a great way to grow, thrive, and make an impact with your agency initiatives. Look for or plan events, activities, or awareness days that could be presented to your community as an opportunity to introduce your work to other audiences. Using your event or activity as a platform to approach potential partners with tangible steps to get involved in important mental health, substance use and prevention issues in your community.
The following are steps for creating new relationships:

1. **Make a list of possible partners.** Consider the following groups, organizations, and individuals as you think about partners that may be valuable to improving behavioral health outcomes (this list is not exhaustive and should only serve as a starting point for you to brainstorm potential partners within your community):

   a. Community coalitions that share your group’s or organization’s ideals, goals, and causes and are also aligned with improving community wellbeing and health outcomes.
   
   b. Health care providers, including primary care physicians within group practices, school nurses, hospital staff (e.g., doctors, physicians’ assistants, nurses, and nurse practitioners) in your community.
   
   c. Addiction or mental health experts, including psychologists, peer counselors, researchers, social workers, members of your local prevention coalition, or state affiliates of NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals. You can also use SAMHSA's Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator to identify mental health and substance use clinicians in your area. Don’t forget your local community mental health center!
   
   d. Peer navigators and others in your community who are assisting individuals with accessing the health insurance marketplace.
   
   e. Community-based organizations, including Lions or Rotary clubs, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) posts, Kiwanis, homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, foodbanks, community centers.
   
   f. Organizations serving youth, including the Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, and 4-H.
   
   g. Local business people and organizations, including the chamber of commerce, local retail associations that represent local bar or restaurant owners, corporations and corporate foundations.
   
   h. Government organizations and elected officials, including members of the city council.
   
   i. Neighborhood associations, including neighborhood crime watch groups and homeowners’ associations.
   
   j. Faith-based organizations, including churches, synagogues, and other leaders.
   
   k. Local law enforcement, including members from the Fraternal Order of Police.
   
   l. First responders, including paramedics, firefighters, and other emergency personnel.
   
   m. Local school leadership, including principals and teachers at local elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as administrators and professors at local colleges and universities.
   
   n. Parents and caregivers.
   
   o. Young adults participating in youth groups, school organizations, sports leagues, and other community organizations that serve youth.
   
   p. Media organizations, including your local print and broadcast news sources.
   
   q. Local colleges or universities, including community partnership and research centers and student organizations.
2. **Research potential partners.** Identify areas in which your current goals, programs, or initiatives align. Reference this information when talking with potential partners to highlight areas in which a partnership would be natural and could have the most impact within your community.

3. **Choose likely candidates.** Consider the following as you plan for new partnerships:
   a. **Connections.** If you have a board member or other strong contact at a company or organization, see if that person would be willing to introduce your program to the group's decisionmakers.
   b. **History.** Has the group been involved with mental health needs or given resources in the past?
   c. **Ownership.** Your best corporate prospects are companies with local ownership, local franchises, or national organizations where charitable and/or media decisions are made at local branches or outlets.
   d. **Reciprocity.** Determine how the organization can benefit from working with your program.

4. **Identify contacts.** Take the time to locate someone who can introduce the most appropriate contact within the organization. If that is not possible, these tips will help you prepare a more compelling presentation:
   a. Find out who calls the shots. If you are looking for a governmental partnership, find out which entities, such as legislative committees or subcommittees, focus on mental health needs; then find out who sits on those committees or subcommittees. If you are approaching a specific school, you can approach the school's principal; if you are approaching an entire district, contact members of the board of education. If you are hoping to form a corporate partnership, contact the company's corporate contributions, community relations, or community investment departments. You can usually find this information on corporate websites or by calling the company and asking for the name, title, and address of the person or group in charge of community relations.
   b. Learn as much as you can about the organization. Find out what other partnerships or contributions the organization has, whether it has experience with mental health needs, and what it might hope to gain from an alliance with you.
   c. Choose organizations with similar missions to reach specific audiences. If your program serves an African American, Hispanic, Tribal, Hmong, or any other ethnic constituency, develop partnerships with organizations in those communities.
5. **Make your pitch.** Your goal is to arrange a face-to-face meeting where you can state your case to get their support. If you do not already have a connection, you should make your first contact in writing. Include:
   a. A brief statement on the status of mental health in your community, the goals for improving mental health outcomes, and what it can mean to that organization.
   b. How the partner will benefit: specifically, what you will provide in terms of recognition, linkages, or other items of value to the potential partner.
   c. Specific information about your local program.
   d. Options for how the partner can help, for example, by giving you a grant to sustain your program's annual operating expenses, featuring your program's success stories in a newsletter, or contacting media on your behalf to request public service announcements.
   e. General information about your program, including your nonprofit status.
   f. Contact information for you and your program.
   g. When you will call to follow up.

6. **Follow up.** **Give your pitch a week to arrive,** and then make the follow-up phone call. Be prepared to send your pitch again, possibly to a different person. Ask for a meeting where you can make your pitch face-to-face. When you meet with the prospective partner:
   a. Be clear about what you want the partner to do for you.
   b. Come prepared with good information on costs and other things the prospective partner might want to know, including facts about mental health.
   c. Be flexible: Have alternative ideas available for the prospective partner to consider.
   d. Listen to what the prospective partner wants in return. Decide how your program can create a win-win situation for all.

7. **Come to an agreement and put it in writing.** **Work with the partner** to specify exactly what you can expect from each other and when. For this to be accomplished, it is essential to have the right people at the table in the early stages of establishing a formal partnership. The "right people" are those who have authority to make decisions on behalf of their agency and are open to forming a collaborative partnership.

8. **Maintain the relationship.** Like any relationship, the partnership needs attention to grow. Maintain two-way communications with your partners and keep them posted on news from your program - even if it is a controversial issue or unflattering portrayal of your program (it is better for them to hear it from you than from the media). In addition, be sure to send thank-you notes to program partners, and make sure they receive evaluation data. Working together will likely increase the partner’s interest in your program and increase its commitment to it.
Enhance existing relationships

Your current relationships and partnerships are strengthened through continued appreciation, attention, and engagement. Start conversations with current partners about the successes you’ve had together to date, collective goals, ways to improve your partnership moving forward, as well as ways to strengthen your joint initiatives. Here are some considerations for building and/or strengthening an effective partnership:

1. **Be deliberate.** Establishing a representative partnership requires deliberate and strategic planning. When inviting new members, be clear about the purpose of the collaboration, determine how goals will be attained, and establish clear roles and responsibilities for all involved. Other tips for being deliberate include:
   a. Create a shared vision. For a partnership to succeed, it is important for everyone involved to have a shared vision for the collaboration that everyone can identify with and buy into.
   b. Allow time for communication. It is unlikely that all entities will have common values, philosophies, and ways of working. Therefore, it is important for each partner to be transparent in sharing their own expertise, agency mission, perspective and values in relation to client services. This can also include restrictions due to funding limitations. This transparency fosters respect and opportunity for innovative collaboration.
   c. Create shared language. As partners work to understand each other’s perspectives and values, they must be able to speak the same language in relation to the work to be done. For example, your definition or understanding of case manager, care coordinator, and service coordinator may not be the same as others. It is important to clarify terms (e.g., behavioral health), roles, and scope of work to assure there is a shared understanding. Also, avoid using jargon and try to use terms that everyone will understand. Where technical terms or acronyms are necessary, define them so that everyone around the table will feel a part of the discussion.
   d. Be solution-focused. Once partners understand each other’s agency values, mission, and perspective and have developed some shared language that is understood by all, the next step is to identify possible solutions to the problem which brought the partners together. Putting aside their own agenda, partners can work together to develop strategies which lead to positive outcomes. Remember, there are lots of paths to get to the same outcomes – it doesn’t always have to be your path.

2. **Build trust.** An effective method for building trust is an investment in developing relationships. This often occurs through frequent meetings, particularly in the beginning, as relationships are being formed. While not always feasible, face-to-face meetings are often noted as an integral component to building trusting relationships. Another way to build trust is to have a consistent individual who is the contact person for their agency and is at the table for all meetings. This helps demonstrate reliability and commitment to the collaboration.
3. **Be a good collaborator.** It is important to be open-minded and willing to hear and consider suggestions and feedback from other partners, without judgment. Being open-minded also requires that individuals are honest and transparent in their communication. Partnerships often take time to build and even greater time is needed to implement the work; having patience is another important characteristic within an effective partnership.

4. **Build knowledge.** A truly representative partnership means that each entity will bring diverse insights and experiences to the table, as well as varied knowledge and perspectives on the priority problem being addressed. For partnerships involving more than two entities, try using a variety of strategies—including guest speakers and group trainings—to increase the team's understanding of the problem and effective process and/or treatment practices.

5. **Monitor and improve group structure and processes, as needed.** Even the most well-informed group won’t be productive unless it functions well. To help the team work together effectively, discuss how you will share leadership, make decisions, divide tasks, resolve conflicts, and communicate with one another as well as with the broader community.

6. **Work through conflict.** It is important to actively address conflicts that may arise. This often requires partners to be courageous and ask why there is tension or why there are problems. Maintaining open, honest, and transparent communication is key to overcoming conflict. It can also be helpful to circle back to the shared vision of the partnership and focus on achieving mutual outcomes.

9. **Acknowledge and thank your partners.** Effective collaborations can be strengthened through continued appreciation, attention, and engagement. The following are some ways to acknowledge and thank your partners so that your partnerships continue to thrive:
   a. Invite staff from your partner organizations to play an active role in planning events, activities, and process improvements. Ask members to sit on the event-planning committee or other interest groups and have hands-on roles during activities.
   b. Describe your partners’ roles in your group’s or organization’s marketing materials or event promotion.
   c. Publicly acknowledge your partners’ support for your event by including their company logos in all printed materials.
   d. Hold an awards ceremony in recognition of your partners and present them with certificates or tokens of appreciation.
Determine levels of involvement

Potential community partners will have varying levels of interest and/or availability to participate in joint efforts. Some may be willing to help with specific tasks, while others may be willing to take on leadership roles. Some participation options for prevention stakeholders are included below.

1. **No involvement.** Stakeholders engage in separate activities, strategies, and policies. (e.g., “You do your thing; we’ll do ours.”)

2. **Networking.** Stakeholders share what they are doing during interagency meetings. They talk about community issues in which they all have a stake or communicate about existing programs, activities, or services. (e.g., “Let’s talk and share information.”)

3. **Cooperation.** Stakeholders publicize one another’s programs in agency newsletters, write letters in support of one another’s grant applications, co-sponsor trainings or professional development activities, and/or exchange such resources as technology expertise or meeting space. (e.g., “I’ll support your program. You’ll support mine.”)

4. **Coordination.** Stakeholders serve together on event planning committees and community boards or implement programs and services together. (For example, “Let’s partner on an event.”)

5. **Collaboration.** Stakeholders create formal agreements (e.g., memoranda of understanding or contracts). They develop common data collection systems; partner on joint fundraising efforts; pool fiscal or human resources; and create common workforce training systems. (For example, “Let’s work together on a comprehensive plan to address the issue. After all, our missions overlap.”)

This guide was developed using tips and other information obtained from the following sources:

- Mountain Plains ATTC. Substance Use Disorder Collaborations that Work: Findings from Providers in Region 8 (July 10, 2020). Available [here](#).
- SAMHSA. A Guide to SAMHSA’s Strategic Prevention Framework (June 2019). Available [here](#).
- SAMHSA. Identifying and Involving Local Program Partners (April 16, 2020). Available [here](#).