

Top 10 Practical Tips for Health Departments Building Partnerships with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

1 Team up with trusted local leaders.

When conducting work within communities, health department workers may be viewed as outsiders. In order to initiate positive relationships within a community, work with CBOs that already have strong relationships within the populations you aim to serve, ensuring credibility and trust. These leaders know the most about their own communities and can be strong advocates and advisors in making their communities healthier.

2 Stay flexible: Adapt to changing CBO capacities and issues.

Be aware that CBO capacities may fluctuate due to factors like staffing changes or funding, and adjust support accordingly. It is important to be open and facilitate ongoing conversations about communities' changing needs. That way, when a new challenge arises, it can be met with the help of trusted partners.

3 Be crystal clear: Define roles and responsibilities.

Clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and shared goals in Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or contracts to ensure balanced, clear partnerships. Lay out the duties of each group so that the arrangement is not one-sided. Additionally, it can be helpful to have staff specifically dedicated to maintaining relationships with organizations and community members. With reliable points of contact, communication and planning can stay nimble.

4 Build a two-way street with truly collaborative partnerships.

Engage in mutual collaboration by creating community advisory groups where ideas are exchanged and both parties learn from each other. Map out key issues and goals and ensure that both parties agree on steps toward achieving them. Be willing to go through multiple iterations of review and change before settling on a plan. Listen to the feedback about what works best for a community and provide tailored support so that the relationship can be mutually beneficial.

5 Be flexible and supportive—the partner CBOs need.

Support CBOs with reporting and requirements, adjusting your expectations and providing assistance where possible to ensure smooth collaboration. Be patient and consistent, making sure that communication is open throughout the course of the relationship. Customize activities depending on the preferences of the CBO, as these preferences represent the core goals of the communities you are working to support.

6 Make new friends but keep the old.

Be proactive about meeting new organizations and getting involved directly in community settings. Stay engaged with communities regularly to remain informed about evolving needs and issues, ensuring that your interventions stay relevant. Key informant interviews can be especially helpful in co-developing strategies.

7 Learn and grow: Embrace feedback for continuous learning.

Be open to feedback from CBOs and communities, whether positive or negative. Learn from mistakes and adapt your strategies. Be humble about your approach to solutions and get creative in how you collectively approach problems. Again, constant communication and openness to change (and failure!) are excellent ways to improve how you serve a community.

8 Tap into existing networks: Leverage community engagement offices.

Utilize the connections and expertise of your health department's community engagement offices to identify potential partners and build stronger relationships. University systems, specialty clinics, human rights groups, and other organizations have resources that can help stretch your grant funds to get the most out of working with a community. Creatively employing their services can help you invest in the outcomes you hope to see.

9 Celebrate the wins: Strengthen collaboration through recognition.

Recognize both big and small wins with your CBO partners to motivate and strengthen your collaborative efforts. Appreciation for joint efforts builds positive rapport and recognizes the power of community. Remember that bringing services to even one additional person represents responsiveness that would not have occurred otherwise.

10 Step back: Let community champions lead the way.

Let CBOs or grassroots organizations take the lead when necessary, actively listening to their insights and recommendations. Sometimes the goals of the health department might not represent the most pressing issues within a community. Empower passionate local champions to drive initiatives. Be willing to be vulnerable, step back, and learn from the expertise of local leaders.

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