



How to Build a Community Coalition to End Hunger

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What is a Community Coalition?

For those that spend any time working or volunteering with organizations in the anti-hunger network, it is devastatingly clear that our efforts alone are not going to end hunger. We all understand that hunger is directly related to poverty and poverty is an issue too large and complex for any one agency or organization to tackle.

While each of you know that your abilities only touch a small portion of the hungry in your community, putting together a coalition of organizations in the same geographic area can be an effective strategy in bringing community resources together and getting everyone moving in the same direction.

While the Alaska Food Coalition functions on a statewide basis, bringing organizations together for state and federal advocacy and research, a community coalition can address hunger on a local level and involved organizations can work together toward a common goal. That goal can be as simple as creating better communication between service organizations or as complicated as implementing community-wide events or initiatives.

Why Does My Community Need One?

It is common in many communities that there is more than one organization addressing the needs of the hungry, which is an excellent reason to start a coalition. In general, coalitions concentrate community focus, create alliances, and keep strategies consistent. If several organizations in one community are all providing services to the hungry in different capacities, but are not communicating with each other, it can quickly become a situation where very little is accomplished on the large scale. When those organizations come together to share ideas and work cooperatively, they are more likely to make a larger impact on the needs of the hungry in their community.

Addressing the Barriers to Coalition Building

Anti-hunger organizations are as varied as the people they serve. From soup kitchens to pantries to shelters, there are numerous ways that organizations choose to address food distribution. These differences often breed barriers when it comes to building a community coalition for hunger. The most-often encountered barriers include:

- Territory: Organizations can sometimes be nervous about divulging information regarding their services, clients, strategies, and, most importantly, their funding. The most difficult work of coalition building is the effort it takes to convince all parties that the benefit of working together will be a stronger impact on efforts to eliminate hunger.

Strengthening Alaska's Anti-Hunger Network

- Historical Perspectives: It takes a passionate person to work in the anti-hunger world, and passionate people don't forget history. Individuals and organizations may have had a rough history working together and are reluctant to try again. Past issues must be brought to the table and addressed before some will consider participating. A clean slate is necessary for all involved to give the most they can to the new coalition.

- Small-Guy Syndrome: Smaller organizations often feel as though larger organizations with more money, more time, and bigger answers to solving problems take over coalitions. It is important to create an atmosphere that values participation above influence and emphasizes that everyone is working toward the same goal.

- Perceived Costs of Working Together: Many anti-hunger organizations are run by volunteers who stretch their limits to keep the program going. Coalitions take time and some organization leaders have trouble finding the time to commit to the project. In the recruitment process, it is important to address this perception and accentuate the idea that it will take everyone's participation for the community to reach their goals.

Getting Your Coalition Running and Keeping it Strong

The first step toward creating a coalition is recruiting your members. Addressing the above barriers will be a large hurdle, but if you have a clear idea of what you want the coalition to accomplish and give participants incentive to get involved, your recruitment should be successful.

Once you have enough organizations involved to be effective, it is important to create measurable initial goals that are within reach. Small successes will keep those already involved vested in the coalition and will help you bring on additional organizations.

With a few small accomplishments achieved, the most difficult task will be keeping organizations involved and motivated to reach long-term goals. Some general guidelines to keep the coalition running include:

- Communicate, Communicate, Communicate: Open communication is essential to ensure everyone has the tools to make the coalition successful.

- Network, Network, Network: Tell everyone you know about the work of the coalition and encourage member organizations to do the same. Continue to invite new stakeholders to the table and be as participatory as possible. You never know when a key person or organization will come across your path.

- Keep your promises: As a member of the coalition and as a group, if you say you are going to do something, work as hard as you can to get it done. Unmet expectations give people reason to reduce their involvement.

More Information

If you think your community is ready for a coalition, contact the Alaska Food Coalition at afc@foodbankofalaska.org to get more information and advice.

Next Month:

Planning a
Successful
Food Drive

