

# COMMUNITY BUILDING

## HELPING ACTION GROUPS SUCCEED

### *Best Practices*

Being part of an action group working on a community-defined project can be extremely rewarding. It can also present many challenges, including those related to leadership, communication and/or coordination, resource development and planning. In light of all the challenges, the following are important points to consider:

- **Choose meeting spaces carefully.**
  - Facilities may set the tone for meetings. Community members who don't attend church may decide not to participate if meetings are held in churches. Government offices such as town halls may be intimidating to others. Discover from the start what sites would be favorable to members.
  - Select a meeting space large enough to accommodate the group with room for movement. Have extra chairs on hand. Make sure participants can see each other. Make sure any needed materials and equipment are available.
  
- **Provide structure for the action group members.**
  - Determine the charge of the group. Why are we here and what are we going to accomplish?
  - Set aside a meeting to discuss expectations, roles and responsibilities of group members so everyone understands what is expected of them.
  - Determine how often the group will meet (first Monday of each month? Bi-weekly?).
  - Ensure that the group is well represented by a diverse population of community members.
  
- **Ensure group meetings are effective and organized. This includes:**
  - providing name tags if people don't know each other.
  - establishing a specific purpose for the meeting.
  - starting and finishing on time.
  - having an agenda and keeping on track, with some flexibility for appropriate discussion.
  - not allowing members to dominate the discussion, argue, redirect the discussion off the topic, or follow personal agendas.
  - keeping the meeting lively, positive and moving forward.
  - having adequate breaks, with refreshments if possible.
  - at the end, making sure everyone knows what has been decided, what actions are needed before the next meeting, and what the focus is of the next meeting.
  - distributing minutes/notes to participants in a timely manner, with a reminder of assignments and details of the next meeting.



- **Use action planning as a tool to set and prioritize realistic goals.**
  - Setting goals people feel are important and developing ways to achieve those goals are key to getting people involved and keeping them involved.
  - It is important group members understand the goals and objectives of the group as well as their individual roles and capacities in helping accomplish them.
  
- **Utilize all possible networks.**
  - To identify all the local capacities and resources – human, financial, physical and community-wide that could be used in your project, conduct an asset mapping activity in your community.
  - Develop and/or enhance coalitions among individuals and organizations in the community to provide support for the group’s work.
  - Develop linkages outside the community to support the group’s work.
  
- **Keep group members motivated throughout the process.**
  - It’s very important to recruit, inspire and motivate volunteers effectively to get a job done.
  - Visible change keeps people involved. On long term projects, ensure there are short term achievements that keep volunteers inspired and motivated to continue.
  - Make jobs doable. If a job grows too large, divide the tasks into manageable pieces and distribute the responsibilities among more people.
  - Encourage frequent celebration of accomplishments in the project. Celebrate small as well as big successes. They don’t have to be elaborate or expensive.
  
- **Spread the word about what your action committee is working on.**
  - Develop a community-wide communication network to let everyone know about the group’s efforts. Use multiple access points for people to obtain information; newsletters, newspapers, bulletin boards, websites, library, schools.
  - Always communicate positively about volunteers and their activities if you expect others to show interest.

**Resources:**

Building Communities from the Grassroots - Community Development Academy, University of Missouri.  
 The Community Tool Box, Kansas State University, (<http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/>)