



## **Coalition Formation— How to Create a Coalition on Disaster Recovery Before a Disaster**

### **What is a Coalition and How Can It Help?**

A disaster recovery coalition is an organization of concerned citizens that advocates for services, policies, and programs to accomplish specific goals that impact disaster recovery and prevention. A coalition monitors, analyzes, and mobilizes community efforts. A local coalition may assume several roles. Among these are:

- Monitoring existing programs, services, and policies.
- Providing information and advice to decision-making officials in the community.
- Undertaking special projects or activities.
- Increasing public awareness and providing the community with ideas on addressing problems.
- Initiating policy ideas and programs.

Concerned citizens, as individuals or as representatives of existing groups, are encouraged to take the initiative to mobilize community disaster prevention coalitions. Starting the process requires the commitment of at least one organization or person to do some preliminary work related to defining the problem, specifying the location for coordinated efforts, and making the initial selection of key people and groups to involve.

### **Forming Your Coalition**

It is important that the group has broad representation from professional, community, and school leaders. Churches, PTAs, shelters, food

pantry groups, social service agencies, the legal and medical systems, and the news media should be represented. Young people should also be involved.

The staffs of schools, churches, recreation centers, social service centers, civic groups, social welfare agencies, etc., can suggest people who might serve. These individuals may then be invited to an organizational meeting.

In order to form a representative group of people, try to determine who is missing from the group, which population groups are most likely to be interested in the group's goals and issues, what motivation can be provided to get these persons to join the effort, and what steps should be taken to achieve balanced participation.

Publicize the first and all general meetings. Use existing communication networks within schools, churches, neighborhood organizations, businesses, and the media.

At your meeting, you might want to discuss problems caused in your community by a past disaster. These problems could be documented through data available from your local officials, health departments, schools, and shelters. Statistics on the number of people affected by the disaster can help you assess the extent of possible problems in your community.

Establish well-defined goals that include services, public awareness, and advocacy activities. Methods for evaluating group progress should also be well-defined.

Designate a chairperson to facilitate the operations of the coalition, or let leadership be

assumed by the lead organizer. That person should chair the meetings, designate responsibility, and coordinate the group's community efforts.

To sustain involvement in the coalition, you will need to emphasize creative efforts directed towards a solution. Feelings of group progress and success encourage participation. Possible approaches include establishing a timetable of needed steps and achieving these deadlines, and setting up small accomplishments and working toward the success of these.

A mission statement will help define your coalition. It can explain what the coalition is, why it exists, and what it does. Since the coalition is made up of many organizations and people, a mission statement can help provide an identity for the coalition and clarify its role in disaster services and prevention. There should be a direct relationship between the coalition's mission statement, its definition of the network with other groups in your community, problems to be solved, its goals and objectives, and the steps it will take in reaching the goals.

### **Structuring Your Coalition's Operating Process**

- Describe the problem, including scope, causes, previous attempts to solve it, people affected, and consequences if it is not solved.
- List possible solutions, projected dates for various steps, possible community support, etc.
- Set goals and objectives for each solution.
- Describe your activities to implement your solution. What tasks need to be done, who will do what, which tasks need to be done first, what skills are needed?
- List the resources you will need to carry out your activities: people, materials, money, political support, etc.
- Develop a timeline and prioritize tasks.

- Anticipate possible obstacles to your activities. What could go wrong, what risks can you foresee, who else has ideas about the problem, what is being done now and by whom to meet the need (and will they feel threatened by your proposed changes)?
- Develop evaluations of your progress: how much will be done by a target date, how well are the activities progressing, etc.

### **Organizational Issues in Forming a Coalition**

- Your group should establish a name or title, mailing address, and phone number. This information should appear on all group material and correspondence.
- Establish one or two contact persons to receive all correspondence and calls.
- You will eventually need funds for stationary, postage, and printing unless these items and services can be in-kind contributions.
- You will need a neutral meeting place where you can hold regular meetings.
- You must decide how often you want to meet.
- Your group should identify specific goals and objectives that reflect the organizational direction of the task force.
- Coalition members involved or invited should represent a broad base of the community.
- It is important that professionals are included, but strong leadership should come from private citizens.

### **Possible Coalition Activities**

- Public awareness
- Local forum
- Film festival
- Speakers' bureau
- Television and radio public service announcements
- Posters

## **Direct Services to Disaster-affected Children, Teens, and Parents**

- Support groups
- Play groups
- Volunteer cleanup efforts
- Rebuilding efforts

## **Pitfalls to Avoid**

- Neglecting to involve or at least advise key people in the community about the coalition.
- Spending 6 months or more trying to define your purpose.
- Starting a study or survey that takes a year and prevents other decisions or actions until completion.
- Failing to reach a balance between process and task issues.

- Developing wonderful plans, but neglecting to assign responsibility for completing them. Neglecting to establish deadlines or at least target dates.
- Failing to deal with hard issues like group leadership and agency turfism, and local conservative or liberal attitudes.
- Turning into a discussion group rather than an action group.
- Failing to build in a process of self-evaluation.
- Losing sight of the people that the coalition should be assisting.

Successful programs are based on community needs. Gaining support takes time, effort, and a willingness to see all community segments as critical stakeholders in disaster services and prevention.



Adapted by North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service Specialists, NC State University, from University of Florida/ Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences' *Disaster Handbook*