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### **PRINCIPLES: COMMUNITY-BASED COALITIONS (using affordable housing as an example)**

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens  
can change the world: indeed it is the only thing that ever has.  
-- Margaret Mead

#### **Description:**

A coalition is an alliance of individuals, groups, or states that come together and join forces for a specific purpose or common goal. At the community level, coalition-building is the means by which a wide range of community representatives come together to identify, define, and address community needs.

Increasingly, communities are using coalition-building as an effective strategy for comprehensive community planning; but the same principles are often used to address a specific problem, issue, or project. This strategy is particularly useful for affordable housing development because of the high stakes involved. Affordable housing projects are costly, resources are limited, and projects must be carefully designed to successfully address the specific needs of the population they will house. In addition, projects must also be suitable for the community in which they are located. When properly done, affordable housing projects can help stabilize a community and increase property values. However, in order for this to be achieved, there must be a feeling of community "ownership" and support.

Too often, the first time a community hears about an affordable housing project is when it is brought before a zoning or planning board for approval, which often results in disagreement about the need for the project, its size, location, and/or impact on the surrounding neighborhood—with the community reacting as if an anonymous "they" were trying to impose a project on the collective "we." Such a truncated process too often results in negative results, long periods of arguments, or bad feelings.

Since the development of affordable housing (for older adults, people with disabilities, or families) has an impact on all sectors of a community, an alternative strategy is to create a coalition of community members who will feel the impact of addressing a particular housing need before proposing a specific housing project (see a suggested list of coalition members below).

This newly formed coalition can then begin a community assessment process that involves input from the persons to be housed and from the community as a whole. The coalition can then focus on necessary tasks and activities (see list below), including documenting the need for the housing, identifying possible alternatives to meet the targeted population's housing need, understanding the suitability of various alternatives for the community, and narrowing its focus to one or two

projects for which implementation seems feasible. The information gathered and activities performed will form the basis of the coalition's decision-making and discussions with a housing sponsor. During this process the coalition will have had the opportunity to identify and address community concerns well before a specific project is proposed—thus, making it more likely that the project will go forward and be supported, and creating a greater likelihood that the project will be claimed by the community as something it chooses to do rather than something imposed on it by forces outside of the community.

Such a process is essential, not just to gain zoning and other approvals for the project, but to create an environment in which the future residents of the housing development will feel valued and accepted by the larger community.

### **Suggested Members for Community-Based Coalitions**

- Individuals who represent the development's target population—ensuring to include a range of persons with different cultures, backgrounds, preferences, and needs.
- Representatives from agencies that serve the target population.
- Family members/caregivers of the target population.
- Housing developers—both nonprofit and for-profit.
- Representatives from:
  - Affordable housing programs.
  - Public housing authorities.
  - Real estate brokers.
  - Banks.
  - Chamber of Commerce and local businesses.
  - County/city governmental agencies providing services to the target population.
  - County/city government community development, planning, and zoning agencies.
  - Community agencies providing services to the target population.
  - A range of faith communities.
  - The library and schools.
- Foundations and other philanthropic organizations.
- United Way and other community service groups.
- The community's human services planning council.
- Transportation providers.
- Elected officials from all levels of government—federal, state, county, local.
- Other community leaders with formal or informal influence.
- Local universities and colleges.
- Representatives from coalitions that have already been formed to address other needs related to the target population—such as homeless coalitions, neighborhood associations, food pantry providers, social justice coalitions, etc.
- Any other organization that may have an interest in housing, economic development, or the quality of community life.

### Steps for Forming a Community-Based Housing Coalition

- One person, or several individuals, or an agency feels there is a need for affordable housing in a specific geographic region (neighborhood, city, county, region, etc.).
- This initial group determines who might be willing to provide:
  - Initial leadership for the coalition.
  - Initial administrative support (convening meetings, developing meeting agendas, writing and distributing minutes, facilitating meetings).
- This group reaches out to relevant stakeholders (see above list of potential coalition members).
- An initial meeting is convened to determine community interest and begin the coalition-building process.
- Regular meeting times and protocols are established.
- A work plan and a timeline are developed for completion of tasks.
- The coalition determines who will assume responsibility for:
  - Ongoing leadership of the coalition.
  - Ongoing administrative support for the coalition's activities and tasks.
- A needs/preferences assessment methodology or a community-evaluation methodology is created. Possible methods include: formation of sub-committees to explore particular types of needs or those of specific sub-populations; review of census and other existing data; creation, dissemination, and analysis of surveys; conducting a community evaluation process, using one of the tools described in the *Resource Manual's* "Tools and Guiding Principles" section; or conducting focus groups and/or individual interviews of consumers and other community sectors.
- Needs/preferences assessment or evaluation findings are documented.
- Issues/problems to be addressed are prioritized by the coalition.
- Best practice alternatives, or effective innovative strategies, that have been successfully implemented by others to address similar needs/issues are identified, studied, or visited—as a basis for replication or adaptation.
- The coalition:
  - Selects one or more projects for development.
  - Determines which entity in the community is best equipped to act as a project sponsor.
  - Develops a strategy for project development, taking into consideration: the target population, needed capacity, and appropriate location; funding availability; anticipated community support and opposition; time needed for development.
  - Selects a project developer.
  - Determines which role each coalition member will play in implementing the development strategy.

#### Benefits:

- The initial focus/activities of a community-based coalition is to identify and address needs in a "big picture" sense, creating community-wide consensus

about how housing needs should be approached without having to worry about "NIMBY" (not-in-my-back-yard) issues related to a particular project.

- Input from a variety of community sectors (community-driven development) is more likely to result in more appropriate and successful housing projects, because community members from a range of disciplines will have had a chance to contribute their expertise and input.
- A coalition includes local politicians, who are more likely to lend support to the projects because they have been involved from the beginning—and because they can identify and hear from supporters; all too often, elected officials hear only from detractors.
- Projects that come out of a community-coalition planning process are more likely to truly meet the needs and preferences of those for whom they are designed, because of the input of members of the target population in the planning process.
- Projects are less likely to be opposed in the zoning/planning board process, preventing developers from making costly investments in projects that are ultimately scrapped.
- A successful coalition-building process results in a sustainable across-community approach to problem-solving and long-term planning, providing a viable context within which new projects emerge as needs evolve and are collaboratively defined.

**Impediments or barriers to development or implementation:**

- Creating community-based coalitions takes time and patience, both of which are often in short supply.
- Skillful leadership is needed to ensure that the coalition truly is inclusive—there is an ingrained temptation to only include people with whom we already agree.
- Because the coalition is likely to comprise people who have had little prior experience in working together, the members may sometimes find themselves struggling to understand the values, perspectives, and vocabulary of fields or disciplines with which they have little familiarity.
- Some coalition members may come to the process already committed to a particular project and may be reluctant to go back a few steps to go through an objective coalition-building and needs/preferences assessment process, which they may fear will decrease support for their own preferred project or perspective.
- It is challenging to find ways to obtain meaningful input from the target population to be housed so as to ensure that their voices are not drowned out by "experts" who "know" what their needs "should" be.

- The success or failure of community-based coalitions most often depends on the quality of their leadership, as well as clear delegation of administrative responsibilities.
- While coalitions can be best initiated by recognized leaders in different sectors of the community joining together to achieve a common goal, they can only be successfully sustained by maintaining consistency in carrying out process tasks—scheduling meetings, taking minutes, setting meeting agendas, facilitating meeting discussions, assuring input by all, and consideration of all perspectives and ideas.

**Resource—written and web:**

- *Continuum-of-Care coordinating coalitions:* Since 1994, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has promoted the use of local Continuum-of-Care coordinating bodies to identify and address the housing and services needs of homeless individuals and families in communities across the United States. These local community-based coalitions are the mechanism through which HUD identifies and funds needed projects in each community. For information about the Continuum-of-Care concept: [www.hudhre.info](http://www.hudhre.info). Contacts for Continuum-of-Care coordinating bodies throughout New York State can be obtained from the local HUD Field Office ([www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov)) or from the Supportive Housing Network of New York (<http://shnny.org/> or (518) 454-3233).
- *Community-based coalitions:* The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, in conjunction with the National Alliance to End Homelessness, has initiated a process to create local plans to end homelessness; this process makes use of community-based coalitions that identify needs and explore solutions for addressing them. These collaboratively developed plans have been responsible for the development of numerous housing projects across the country. Copies of these plans, which include narratives about the community-based planning processes through which they were developed, are available on the National Alliance to End Homelessness website: [www.endhomelessness.org](http://www.endhomelessness.org). A step-by-step description of how to create community-based coalitions focused on ending homelessness can be found on the Interagency Council on Homelessness' website: [www.usich.gov](http://www.usich.gov).
- "Guide 1—Coalition Building," *Community How-To Guides* (March, 2001), developed by the U. S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; Zero Tolerance; Safe Communities; and the National Association of Governors' Highway Safety Representatives , #DOT HS 809 209. Comprehensive information, guidance, examples, and resources on all the steps necessary for successfully building a community coalition and using the process to identify a problem and implement a solution:  
*Community Guide on Coalition Building:*

[http://www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/alcohol/Community%20Guides%20HTML/Book1\\_CoalitionBldg.html](http://www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/alcohol/Community%20Guides%20HTML/Book1_CoalitionBldg.html): scroll down below the cover graphic to select content text.

- Many communities throughout New York State have local housing plans, some of which were developed through a collaborative, community-based process. These can often be found on the websites for the respective municipalities.
- The *Livable New York* resource manual's section on "Tools and Guiding Principles—for inclusive planning; for building sustainable community coalitions; and for community evaluation, capacity-building, and decision making" provides an extensive list of successful tools for creating and sustaining community coalitions.