

Preview the Action Guide to Community Engagement

[“Finding Unity in Community: How Building Consensus Can Shift the Dynamics of Support”](#)

is the third installment in the Guiding Collective Change series.



A hammer, some nails, and a saw could be all you need to build a simple table. But if you're constructing an entire dining set, or a whole house, you'll need blueprints, a team, and tools that match the work's more complex scope and scale.

Using a coalition building approach to engage a community in a change effort is a similarly complex operation. It's the difference between recruiting for a single meeting and creating continuous,

sustained, multi-sector engagement over time. The six communities that adopted the Evidence2Success® coalition building approach successfully convened a coalition using a set of specialized guides, knowledge, and tools. This Action Guide shares the stories of the benefits, supported by data, that communities experienced when broad sector community engagement was part of their change work.

What Are the Key Benefits of Using a Coalition Building Approach in Community Improvement Efforts?

First, we define what's meant by **community engagement** and a **coalition building approach**. Community engagement has many dimensions. Understanding what these dimensions are gives way to exploring how each one may be improved upon when bringing together leaders from across the community using the coalition building approach. Overall, the strategies led to changes in overall engagement and across dimensions, including community input and racial inclusiveness and participation.

Using these strategies benefited communities with **widespread improvement** in community engagement focused on youth well-being. This didn't just happen in one or two communities—it happened in all six participating communities. Multiple kinds of engagement improved. Critically, the positive impacts cut across race, ethnicity, education level, and work sector. Those from traditionally minoritized groups especially benefited from the coalition building approach: participation **increased 20%** over time among those **from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds**.

Data confirmed that the existence of a coalition is just the start; **how that coalition operates is vital** for creating an inclusive environment for change work.

Like in **Mobile, Alabama**, where establishing a set of shared norms and values prioritized mutual respect. And in **Memphis, Tennessee**, where a specialized tool called Milestones and Benchmarks helped a new coordinator understand the work and move it forward without reinventing the wheel. Operations impacted inclusivity—especially among coalition members of color.

Then, early and high-quality engagement meant **better funding and participation**. From the experiences of the six communities, we saw a relationship between operations and engagement that ultimately created a throughline to funding and program participation

Three years into Evidence2Success...

“There is big change, more communication, more of the neighborhood is involved, more youth involvement. People are trying to go back and get their GED. They want to support their kids.”

*Coalition member,
Providence, RI*

Read About a Coalition Building Approach

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Key Benefit 1: A Coalition Building Approach Improves Engagement*

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**Especially for People of Color*

levels that unfolded over time. Early attention to how the coalition works—like asking what the community needs and prefers for youth programs and using data to make decisions—connected to those later, sustained successes.

An Insider's View: Important Considerations When Building a Coalition to Facilitate Your Community Change Effort

Considering context and other complexities is key to embarking on a successful community change effort. When you decide to undertake this work, refer to this section. You will find tips and stories of success from the six communities and questions to help you think through how to use key strategies in your community.

In **Dallas County, Alabama**, officials took a coalition building approach when faced with rising referrals to the juvenile court system. They began looking at what was underlying the behaviors that brought youth to the justice system. Instead of routine detention, they began to prioritize diversion activities that supported youth and the families who supported them. Funding therapy, mentoring, and job-finding services contributed to a **71% reduction** in Dallas County's commitment rate—a huge change!

Reflect on the community's history and current context. Consider what could support, delay, or even discourage community engagement. Some efforts may rely heavily on a strong awareness of and skillful approach to local power dynamics. Other efforts may call for a straightforward approach with a proven track record. What does your community context call for? How have you been successful before? How will you move forward with those reflections in mind?

Engage and support community involvement. Taking a holistic approach to engage and support long-term community involvement recognizes the complexities in communities, helps to build a culture of accountability, and sparks the motivation to get and stay involved. When people want to help and be a part of something, their commitment and participation can be counted on long-term.

Data, data, data! Coalitions operated and made decisions using many sources of data. All used youth surveys; some actively engaged young people and adult residents to interpret those results. Youth program information collected across community sectors was another source. What emerged was a multifaceted, community-level view of youth well-being that exposed service gaps and illuminated priorities.

What's Next? Let's Think About Systems Integration

What if community engagement using a coalition building approach could be scaled to reach new neighborhoods or zip codes beyond the original effort? What if that collaboration could have an impact on how larger public systems interact with residents of neighborhoods as well as with nonprofit, business, faith, and other sectors? With trust, the right tools, the right people, and the right blueprint, it is possible to create and sustain long-term, positive community change.

How will *your* community use a coalition building approach to build out the next level? [Click the link to download the full Action Guide](#) to Community Engagement, "Finding Unity in Community: How Building Consensus Can Shift the Dynamics of Support."

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“It is going to take time, you know, to build this out. You've got to have commitment and a succession plan...”

*Former Board Chair,
Kearns, UT*

