

ACSM  AMERICAN
FITNESS INDEX[®]
COMMUNITY *action* GUIDE



community action framework

Quantitative Data

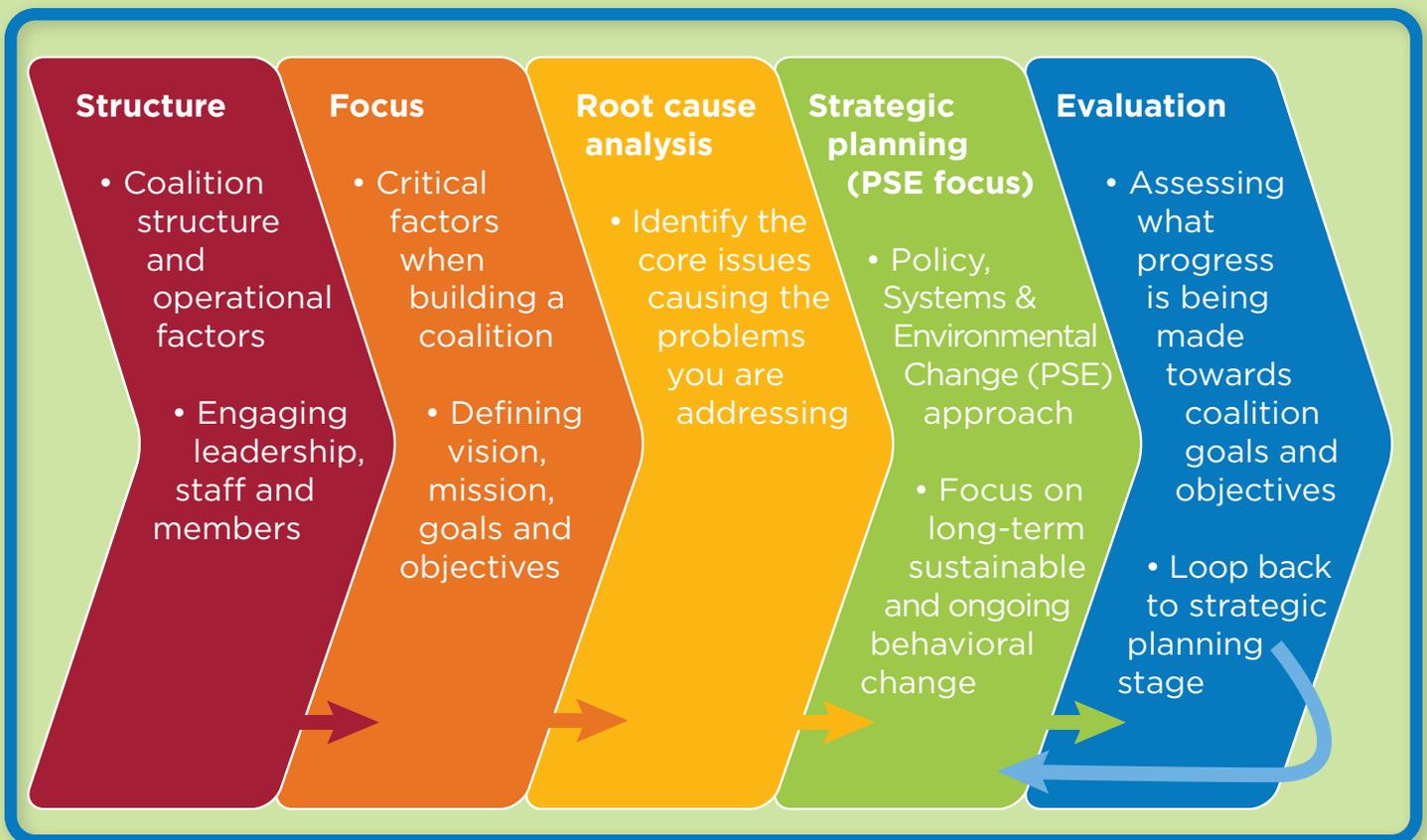
- AFI Data Report
- Other pertinent data

Qualitative Data

- Key informant interviews
- Case studies
- Focus groups, observations



COALITION



introduction

About the AFI Community Action Guide

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) American Fitness Index® (AFI) Community Action Guide is a companion to the AFI Data Report presented annually by ACSM and the Anthem Foundation.

Whether you are just getting started or well on your way to addressing health and physical activity in your community, the AFI Community Action Guide provides an overview of the critical decisions and factors related to effective community action.

One effective strategy for community action is forming a diverse coalition of goal-oriented individuals and organizations working toward the same outcome. The subsequent sections of this guide will outline organizational and planning considerations for effective coalitions.

In addition, you'll find practical tools, examples and resources on the AFI website at www.americanfitnessindex.org.

Intended Audience

This guide is for anyone interested in addressing the overall health, emphasizing the level of physical activity, in your city, town or neighborhood. Some audiences for whom ACSM has created this guide include professionals working in the fields of:

- Public Health
- Smart Growth
- Community Development
- Parks
- Education
- Aging Services
- Health, Wellness and Medicine
- Faith-based organizations
- Planning
- Zoning
- Transportation
- Recreation
- Youth Services
- Physical fitness
- Local government
- Businesses

About the ACSM American Fitness Index Program

With support and funding from the Anthem Foundation, ACSM launched the AFI program in 2008 to help communities identify opportunities to:

- Improve the health of its residents
- Evolve the community to a culture of health and wellness
- Expand community assets to better support active, healthy lifestyles

The AFI program revolves around an annual data report, a reliable measure of community fitness for the country's 50 largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). The report serves as a scientific, objective assessment of each MSA's strengths and challenges, and effectively informs local decision-making that can enhance the quality of life for its population.

For the purpose of AFI, the data report evaluates MSAs according to the U.S. Census Bureau. An MSA also can be referred to as a "community" and/or a "city." If referred to by city, the report is referencing the entire MSA or metro area, but uses the name of the largest principal city. For example, Atlanta is the principal city of the Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell MSA. The Atlanta community and the nickname Metro Atlanta refer to the Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell MSA.

The AFI Data Report reflects a composite of:

- Personal health measures
- Preventive health behaviors
- Levels of chronic disease conditions
- Environmental and community resources
- Policies that support physical activity

Benchmarks for each data indicator in the report highlight areas that need improvement.

In addition, demographic and economic diversity are included for each MSA to illustrate the unique attributes of each city. These description elements are not included in the data index calculation, but can be used for comparison purposes.

While the AFI Data Report provides detailed information for the 50 most populated cities at the MSA level, the My AFI community application tool integrates the components of the AFI program into a health promotion approach that can be used by other communities not included in the AFI Data

Report. Using this tool, leaders can understand the individual, societal and behavioral factors related to physical activity in their own community and implement culturally focused activities that are meaningful to its residents.

In recent years, the AFI program also has included:

- Technical assistance to low-ranking metro areas
- Trend reports that highlight the progress a city has made over a five-year period

The Need for Community Action

Being physically active is one of the most important ways individuals can improve and maintain his or her overall health.

Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of:

- Premature death
- Heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Breast cancer
- Colon cancer
- Risk of falls

Physical activity also can:

- Decrease body fat
- Improve bone health
- Improve muscular strength
- Prevent the development of chronic diseases⁽¹⁾

Emerging public health information suggests that to reach the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's goal to improve health and fitness, prevent disease and disability, and enhance quality of life for all Americans through physical activity,

we must create a culture that integrates physical activity into our daily lives.

coalition basics

A coalition is a group of individuals and groups working together to achieve a shared goal. Coalitions function best when its members represent the diverse interests of the community.

To help assure success, coalitions need:

- A shared sense of direction among its members
- Defined objectives
- A realistic action plan
- Consistent communication
- Agreed upon measures of success

The functions of a coalition might include:

- Community awareness, community engagement and strengthening knowledge
- Educating policy makers
- Influencing public and/or private policy issues
- Building support for improvements in infrastructure
- Improving organizational practices



tip

As you begin to think about bringing together a coalition, don't get stuck on what to call your group. Additionally, avoid the temptation to debate whether your group should be labeled a "coalition," "collaborative," "partnership," "collective impact" or similar term.

What the group is called is not likely to matter, especially as the work is just beginning. After the group is organized and functioning, you can revisit the "What do we want to call ourselves?" question. For the sake of simplicity, this guide will use the word "coalition."

Some practical benefits of forming a coalition include:

1. There is strength in numbers, but a small group of quality leaders may be more efficient when beginning the process of forming a coalition.
2. People and organizations that work together can leverage their resources and skills.
3. Coalitions often command more attention than individual members.

Collective Impact as a Model for Community Action

Transforming communities into healthier places isn't a simple process. Rather, the process of increasing physical activity and helping people live healthier lives is a complex issue that will require many moving parts and several organizations working toward a common goal.

To achieve this common goal, many communities have adopted the definition of "collective impact" to incite action. For the purposes of this guide, we consider collective impact and coalition work to be similar.

Collective impact involves the same recipe for successful coalitions including:

- Common agenda
- Shared measurement
- Mutually reinforcing activities
- Continuous communication

The primary difference is that creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and a specific set of skills to serve as the **backbone** for the entire initiative and to coordinate participating organizations and agencies.

In this guide, you will find that many coalitions may have staff as well. For coalitions and collective impact to work, the role of leadership and staff should be to balance the tension and keep all parties coordinated and accountable, while staying behind the scenes in order to establish collective ownership.

An excellent source for learning more about collective impact is FSG, a nonprofit consulting firm focused on discovering better ways to solve social problems. ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ ^(vii)

tip

Offering food and time for networking during meetings will entice new individuals to join and is an added value to membership.

- Who will chair meetings?
- How will the chair be selected?
- When, where and how often will the coalition meet?
- How will agendas be set?
- What is expected of members? Will the coalition use membership agreements to formalize commitments?
- Who is responsible for administrative functions such as meeting arrangements, agenda distribution, minutes, and follow-up?
- Will the coalition need a budget, and if yes, who will serve as the fiscal agent?

Coalition Structure

In order to be effective, a coalition should determine how it will be structured and how it will function from an operational perspective.

Questions to answer:

- Who will lead the coalition?
- Who should make up the membership?
- What staff, if any, is needed? Does the staff need to be full- or part-time?

Additional operational considerations that need to be addressed:

Leadership

Perhaps one of the most critical first steps in this journey is to identify and engage passionate, committed leaders. These few individuals are catalysts who can begin strategic planning, engage the community, recruit and develop a strong coalition, lead concerted public policy and advocacy efforts to create systems change in communities, and help assure sustainability of efforts.

There are two types of volunteer leaders that might be involved in community action – figurehead leaders and actively engaged leaders.

Figurehead Leaders

A figurehead leader might be an individual, or individuals, who lend his or her name and image to efforts, but who might not provide much hands-on involvement. This type of

tip

Be realistic in your expectations. Prominent individuals usually have extremely limited free time. They might appear at high-profile events such as kick-off meetings, ribbon cuttings, or awards functions. But generally they are not going to be available to take part in operational activities of your community effort such as committee meetings.



individual might be recruited as an “Honorary Chairperson” of a coalition or partnership. These individuals are typically celebrities, professional sports figures, CEOs of major businesses, or high-ranking elected officials. His or her position and other time commitments often preclude them from becoming engaged significantly in ongoing activities, but he or she can bring several important resources to the table. These include:

- The prominent status of some people is enough to attract others into a coalition or group.
- This type of leader is often able to facilitate networking opportunities and open doors to other resources that have value for the community initiative.
- If a community leader has significant resources at his or her disposal, he or she may be in a position to provide direct financial or in-kind support.
- Prominent community figures often are excellent spokespersons for your issue or cause, especially before policy-making groups, foundations and media.

Actively Engaged Leaders

An actively engaged leader is someone who has demonstrated leadership capabilities, is committed to improvement in the community, and is willing to give his or her time to be actively involved in your efforts. Initially you might identify a small number of these leaders to help your community initiative get off the ground. This type of leader is typically someone who is already engaged and passionate about your issue or cause. Actively engaged leaders might be an officer or senior staff member of an agency that shares common goals or missions with your community issues.

You might recruit several leaders who can function as an executive committee. The roles may transition as your coalition or group grows, though hopefully these leaders will remain involved and assume roles such as committee chairs.

Responsibilities for actively engaged leaders may include:

- Setting agendas
- Helping identify and recruit coalition members
- High-level strategic planning
- Facilitating meetings
- Identifying and securing resources (both financial and in-kind)
- Serving as a media spokesperson
- Building sustainability
- Making presentations to community and business groups

Questions to discuss during your leadership search:

1. Does it make sense to have a figure-head leader for the group?
2. Who are prominent figures in your community with a passion for health and well-being?
3. Who are the people in your community with a reputation of getting things done?

Staff Leadership

Some community-based initiatives are fortunate to have assigned staff members. Staff might be individuals from a lead agency or organization whose time has been allocated specifically to the initiative. Alternatively, a grant or other funding mechanism might enable an initiative to secure a staff person (or people).

Staff who are involved in community-based initiatives at a leadership level, usually require many of the competencies of volunteer leadership. In addition, they are likely to also have responsibilities such as:

- Managing finances
- Preparing reports and updates for funders and other key partners
- Assuring that plans are developed and appropriately monitored
- Ensuring smooth operational functions of activities
- Providing adequate communication with leadership and coalition members
- Keeping track of volunteer assignments and assuring follow-up is conducted
- Serving as the point-of-contact for media and policy makers.

tip

For larger coalitions, it may be beneficial to designate a leadership team or ad-hoc group to assist in key decision making and directing the coalition.

Members

When selecting the members of a coalition, it's important to ask which persons or groups have a vested interest in improving the physical activity, health and wellness environment within your community.

The following list is not intended to be a complete inventory of the types of organizations, but serves as a guide to help you get started. The actual organizations you engage for your local action should be representative of your community, and the diversity, talent and resources that are available.

Some examples are:

- Area businesses
- Chambers of commerce
- City and county health departments
- Community groups and organizations
- Developers/builders
- Environmental groups
- Exercise and rehabilitation professionals
- Faith-based leaders
- Farmers and community market groups
- Food/nutrition groups
- Government agencies
- Health agencies
- Health care professionals

- Health and fitness clubs
- Law enforcement or public safety
- Local universities and community colleges
- Neighborhood associations
- Parks and recreation department professionals
- Property managers
- Realtors/real-estate developers
- Retail establishments and shopping centers
- School districts
- Students
- Teachers
- Transportation experts
- Urban planners
- Zoning department

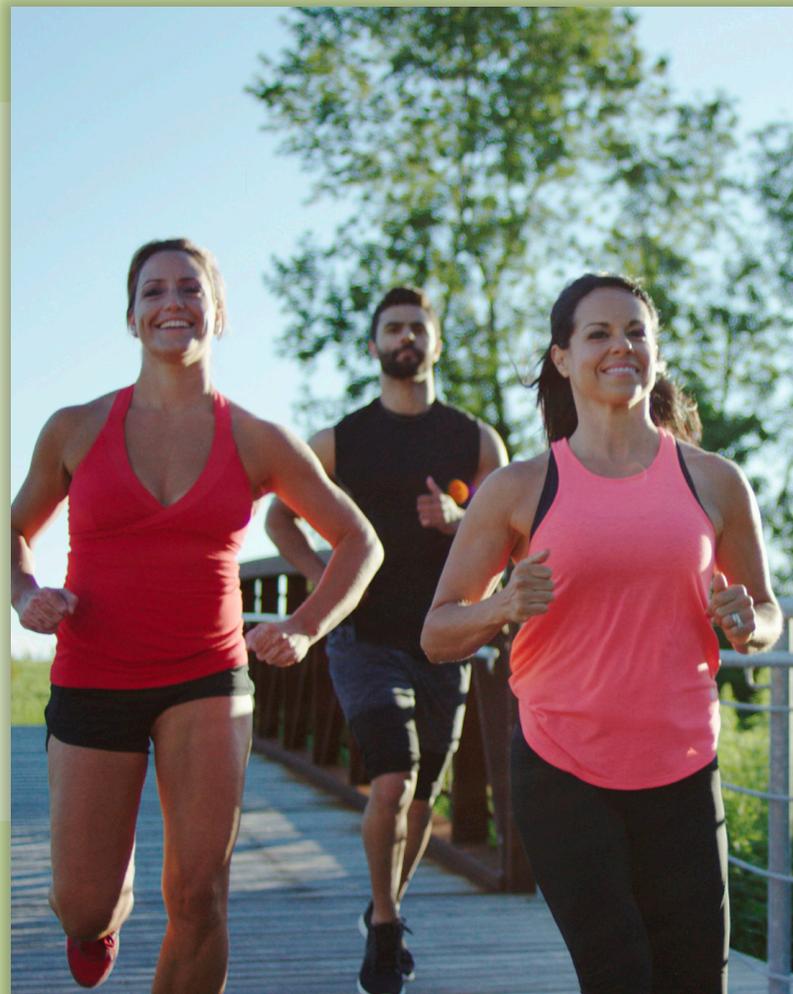
Coalition Building and Pitfalls

Coalition Building

There are excellent sources that outline approaches to coalition building – several are included in the Tools and Resources document available at www.americanfitnessindex.org. There are, however, a few factors that are critical to success that you should keep in mind, no matter what your coalition building process.

tip

Once a core group of stakeholders are engaged, you may want to consider being inclusive of anyone interested in participating, including community residents. Forming a coalition by only inviting members may overlook valuable partners that could provide long-term support and resources.



1. **Set clear goals.** Later in this guide, there is a chapter that addresses planning. A clear plan is vital to keep your efforts on track. This can be especially important if you have a diverse membership, since coalition members often bring their own organizations' goals and agendas to the table. As ideas and issues arise, continually ask the question, "How does this relate to the coalition's mission, goals and objectives?"
2. **Communicate clearly, adequately and regularly.**
3. **Listen to opposing points of view.** Often coalitions are comprised of like-minded individuals. But opposing views and opinions can provide insight and information that could be overlooked if it is not sought and valued. One way to gather this input is to talk with those who oppose your efforts. Find out why they oppose your efforts. What concerns do they have? Can you address those concerns? Are these individuals seeing potential problems that you are missing?
4. **Determine a decision-making process and stick with it.** It may be that decisions are made by a majority vote, consensus, or by sub-committees charged with making decisions on specific issues. Whatever process you have, stick with it and don't spend time rehashing or questioning decisions.
5. **Determine how tasks will be delegated and what the process for follow-up and reporting will be.**
6. **Recognize and celebrate successes and highlight members for his or her work in the coalition.** This provides momentum and helps eliminate burnout.

tip

Hosting training sessions may benefit a member's understanding of the coalition approach, while also adding value to the member experience.

tip

Under the Affordable Care Act, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) now requires hospitals with 501(c)(3) status to conduct community health assessments and adopt an implementation strategy. Many have dedicated staff organizing these assessments through the use of community coalitions. Research active coalitions in your community to ensure you're not duplicating efforts already underway. ^(v)

Coalition Pitfalls

Often efforts at building an effective coalition fail. Be aware of potential pitfalls. Go through this list with your group and talk about how you can deal with these issues. You might consider setting up ground rules or bylaws.

- Lack of clear leadership
- No plan, unclear goals/objectives, or lack of data to support objective outcomes
- Trying to focus too broadly, rather than on a few strategic issues
- No defined decision-making process
- Impatience expecting change to occur instantly
- Inadequate, infrequent, or irregular follow-up
- Inadequate communication – especially between meetings
- One agency having too much perceived or real authority
- Competition or conflict among members
- Too many meetings, meetings that last too long, or hard to get to meeting locations
- Holding meetings too frequently or too infrequently
- Not enough funding to cover basic operating costs
- Staff/member turnover and burnout
- Language and cultural barriers in multi-lingual and multi-cultural communities

coalition planning

“Begin with the end in mind.” This advice is the second “habit” from Steven Covey’s quintessential self-help book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The same is true for effective planning: a clear vision and agreement of the end goals is imperative for success.

Effective planning:

- Provides a clear focus
- Supports monitoring and assessment of results and impact
- Facilitates new program development
- Enables an organization or coalition to systematically look into the future

tip

Visit the AFI Community Action Guide resources page available at www.americanfitnessindex.org for more information on coalition sustainability and other topics mentioned throughout the guide.

Most organizations and coalitions understand the need for annual program objectives and a program-focused work plan. Funders typically require them and they provide a basis for setting priorities, organizing work and assessing progress.

Upon launching a coalition, there needs to be a discussion and eventually agreement on the vision, mission, goals and objectives of the coalition.

Once those details are established, the coalition should then address these critical questions:

- What needs to change in the community?
- What do we expect to accomplish?

- Who needs to be at the table?
- What are the various roles and responsibilities of coalition members?
- Will the coalition need sub-committees to address specific issues?
- To whom is the coalition accountable?
- What resources are already in place or available?
- What resources are needed?
- What is the intended timeframe for the coalition?
- What is the plan for sustainability?

Vision

Step one for successful planning is to define the vision. The vision states the ideal conditions for your community and how things would look if the issues were perfectly addressed.

An effective vision statement is:

- Easily understood
- Broad enough to allow for diverse perspectives
- Inspiring and uplifting
- Easy to communicate

In this age of social media, a good rule to follow is for your vision statement to be 140 characters or less. If that’s not enough, it should be brief enough to fit on a T-shirt.



Mission

Taking the vision a step further, the mission statement should convey what your coalition is going to do and why it's going to do it.

A well-crafted mission statement is:

- Concise
- Outcome-focused
- Inclusive

Root Cause Analysis

A root cause analysis is a strategic means of identifying the problem(s) causing the issues you are addressing. Without this step, your action plan may not include solutions that address the core issues.

To get to the root causes, it's important to create an exhaustive list of the underlying factors responsible for the problem. This process should involve a great deal of brainstorming and a wide variety of stakeholders.

It is not feasible or desirable for a coalition to target each of the factors identified during the root cause analysis process. To narrow down the factors to a manageable and appropriate list, each factor needs to be scored and ranked. The highest ranked factors will then be used to develop coalition goals and objectives.

Goals and Objectives

The next step in planning is to prepare goals and objectives. Goals are generalized statements describing the desired change or outcome. Ideally, goals answer these three questions:

- What is the problem?
- How will change be directed?
- Who is the target group?

tip

Allow for some flexibility with goals and objectives to be in different stages such as planning, implementation and evaluation.

Taking the goals a step further involves developing objectives. **SMART** is an acronym for the five components of effective objectives:

- **Specific** – target a specific area for improvement
- **Measurable** – quantifiable or at least suggest an indicator of progress
- **Attainable** – what can be realistically achieved, given available resources
- **Relevant** – supports or is in alignment with other goals
- **Time-specific** – specify when the result(s) can be achieved

Note: measurable objectives are essential for monitoring and evaluation.

Strategic Planning

Strategies explain how the coalition will achieve its objectives. Generally, coalitions will plan a wide variety of strategies that include people from all the different sectors of the community. An action plan will detail exactly how the strategies will be implemented to accomplish the objectives.

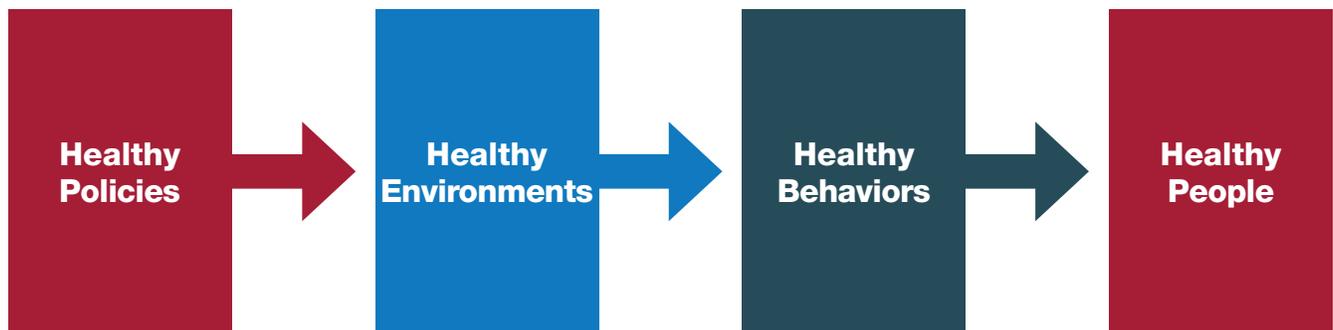
Many communities develop programs and events as part of its strategic plan, but a more sustainable approach to gain traction is known as “Policy, Systems and Environmental Change” (PSE). The major difference between PSE compared to traditional approaches such as events and programs is that the PSE approach is aimed at long-term, sustainable and ongoing behavioral change.

The reason PSE is useful for improving health in a community is because encouraging people to live healthier lives isn't just about changing individual behaviors and creating good habits. Communities need to be places that encourage and promote healthy choices. A PSE approach makes healthier choices a real, feasible option for every member of the community by looking at the laws, rules and environments that impact behavior.

PSE Definitions:

- Policy interventions are laws, ordinances, resolutions, mandates, regulations or rules (both formal and informal).
- Systems interventions are changes that affect all elements of an organization, institution or system.
- Environmental interventions involve physical or material changes to the economic, social or physical environment.

What is Policy and Environmental Change?



Advocacy is the act of supporting or recommending a cause or course of action. As a supplement to a PSE approach, advocacy focuses on educating the public, community decision makers and policy makers.

In the area of physical activity, governmental, business and community leaders need to understand the impact of your mission, using information that is credible and valuable.

Monitoring and Evaluation

A critical step of effective planning is monitoring and evaluation. The evaluation process helps form a clear understanding of what progress is being made toward your goals and objectives. You will be able to distinguish between what is working and what is not working.

Other benefits of evaluation include:

- Enables you to measure and celebrate success
- Builds trust within your coalition
- Assists funding partners in making future funding decisions
- Provides an opportunity for you to prioritize, revise or discontinue strategies.

Additional questions to consider when planning evaluation:

1. Who will use the evaluation information?
2. What is being evaluated?

3. What methods will be used to conduct the evaluation?
4. How will the data be analyzed?
5. How can the results be put to use?
6. Would the coalition benefit from a sub-committee focused on evaluation?
7. Does the coalition need outside assistance with evaluation?

tip

The impact of coalition efforts will take time before significant improvements are measurable in a community. Celebrate the small successes and look for both long-term organizational strategies and diverse, long-term funding in order to create sustainable change in the culture of health for a community.



moving forward

By reviewing this guide, you've taken an important first step in addressing community-level issues to improve health and fitness of your community. Now it's time to get moving!

As you lay groundwork for your efforts, one of the best things you can do is be a role model and advocate for good health and physical activity. Here are a few simple steps:

1. Make a commitment to gradually increase your aerobic physical activity to at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity a week. For additional health benefits, muscle-strengthening activities that involve all major muscle groups also should be included two or more days a week.^(vi)

2. Model healthy behavior by incorporating physical activity into the daily schedule and limiting sedentary activities.
3. Get a pedometer or physical activity tracker and start counting your steps and set targets to eventually accumulate 10,000 steps each day.
4. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper to educate the public and bring awareness to the physical inactivity epidemic in your community. Use data from the AFI Data Report to support your argument.
5. Join an existing coalition or create your own using the help of the AFI Community Action Guide!

For more information and resources on the topics mentioned throughout this guide, visit the AFI Community Action Guide resources page.

For more information on the AFI program, visit www.americanfitnessindex.org.

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