

# ABLE Change Case Study: Supporting a Resident Coalition

## How can local residents promote change in their community?

One community collaborative in North Carolina set out to answer this question by launching a resident coalition.

We conducted interviews with collaborative staff and reviewed local documents (e.g., strategic plans, meeting agendas) to learn about how they made this happen.

## What is a Resident Coalition?

A resident or family coalition is a group of local residents working together to address issues affecting their lives.

Resident coalitions can:

- provide and gather information on local community conditions and needs
- select local priorities
- design or co-design strategies
- take action
- provide input to local organizations
- build a network of local community leaders

## Background

The Down East Partnership for Children (the Partnership) supports a range of programs and initiatives, including a community collaborative working to reduce the obesity rate of children in nearby counties (<http://depc.org/>).

After engaging in the ABLe Change training, the Partnership decided to launch the **Families Involved Together (F.I.T.)** coalition in 2014 to achieve the two aims of gathering family input and supporting resident-driven action to promote children's health.

## Launching the Coalition

The Partnership helped to launch and support the F.I.T. coalition through the following activities:

- **Recruiting Parents.** The Partnership collaborated with local service providers to identify and refer parents to join the coalition. Over time, coalition members also started recruiting parents to join the group. They had first attempted to recruit parents through fliers, but abandoned this strategy as it was relatively unsuccessful compared to directly contacting parents through trusted relationships.
- **Convening Coalition Meetings.** Partnership staff convene monthly coalition meetings from 5:30-7:00 p.m. at a communal space, and provide licensed onsite childcare, dinner, and transportation assistance (\$5.00 gas voucher) to support families' engagement.

Partnership staff facilitated coalition meetings at first, but over time parents in the group built their capacity to take on facilitation and other leadership roles.

### Deeper Dive

The first coalition meeting was attended by 10 parents and included a live webcast panel of individuals who had launched similar coalitions across Michigan. The panel described how they got started, provided ideas for what a resident coalition could do and make happen, and answered the group's questions.

This panel helped spark the parents' imagination about how to design and run their own coalition, and eased some of their anxiety (as none of them, including staff, had ever done anything like this before).

## Promoting Resident-Driven Action

Through the coalition, parents took action to improve children's health by increasing local residents' health literacy and advocating for local policy and practice changes. The following are some example actions:

- **Developed social marketing materials:** The coalition co-designed billboards to shift local mindsets around physical activity as part of the Partnership's social marketing campaign. Coalition members' children were pictured in the final version.
- **Designed and distributed materials to increase access to local resources:** The coalition co-designed and distributed [materials](#) to help families understand how to access underutilized local resources including: parks, WIC resources, well-child pediatrician visits, and SNAP benefits. This was a powerful role for the coalition, as they had better access to local community groups than Partnership staff.
- **Advocated for local organizational policy and practice changes.** Coalition members advocated for changes within local organizations, such as shifting policies to provide more healthy snacks to children in afterschool programming and integrating health promotion practices into faith-based settings.



The Partnership supported these actions by providing ongoing capacity-building during and between coalition meetings to ensure parents had the skills and knowledge they needed to carry out action. Research suggests this capacity-building is essential to support effective action.<sup>3</sup>

### Example Capacity-Building

The coalition co-designed a resource map to help local families access community supports. To support this action, Partnership staff helped coalition members look at data on which local services were most underutilized (e.g., WIC, Well-Child pediatrician visits, and SNAP), and these services became the focus of the resource map.

## Partnering with Local Efforts

The following are some examples of how the F.I.T. Parent Coalition partners with local organizations and groups.

- **Meeting representatives.** One coalition member attends both the F.I.T. meetings and the Partnership's community collaborative meetings to give updates about what each group is doing and promote alignment across their efforts. This feedback is essential for promoting an integrated and aligned change effort.<sup>4</sup>
- **Shared decision-making.** The Partnership engages the coalition in making decisions about how to design and implement communications, programs, and strategies.
- **Expanded strategic plans.** The coalition's activities are now embedded within the Partnership's strategic plan, expanding the range of actions taken as part of this scope of work.
- **Resident board members.** Several coalition members were invited to join the board of directors for local organizations after being recognized for their leadership roles through the coalition.

## Advice and Lessons Learned

---

### Start with “low-hanging fruit.”

The coalition initially focused their actions on efforts that were already underway in the community to promote some quick wins and build momentum. For example, the Partnership already had funding to design a social marketing campaign when the coalition started. One of the coalition’s first activities was to help co-design this campaign so it would resonate with families. This quick win technique has been shown to support resident-driven action in other communities as well.<sup>2</sup>

### Don’t base success on numbers

Attendance at F.I.T. coalition meetings often fluctuates from month to month (e.g., ranging from 1 to 15 members), mainly due to demands on parents’ time and availability. Resident coalition leaders across Michigan note similar patterns in their groups as well. Partnership staff don’t get discouraged by this natural fluctuation, and instead focus on the core group of parents who consistently attend meetings and have anchored the coalition over the years. Partnership staff recommend working with coalition members to find times that work with their schedules and using ongoing recruitment to manage natural turnover as residents move or change job shifts.

### Be flexible

F.I.T. coalition meetings are designed to be responsive to members’ priorities and interests. As a result, sometimes the group doesn’t get through all their planned agenda items (or even any agenda items) because a member will raise local issues or community needs that the group thinks is critical to address. Partnership staff don’t force the agenda on the group and instead support discussion around the emerging issues the group feels are most important. Capitalizing on this energy has been key to the coalition’s success.

### Be patient and have fun

Partnership staff noted that while the group’s informal and responsive style is essential for promoting engagement, it also means progress can sometimes feel really “slow,” especially compared to other types of collaborative groups in the community. Despite this pace, the group has achieved some important wins over the years and continues to push themselves to work towards bigger change goals. Partnership staff recommend aligning expectations with the needs and purpose of the group, and celebrating wins along the way.

## Conclusion

---

Successful community change efforts engage residents throughout all phases of the work.<sup>3</sup> A resident coalition is an effective way to promote this type of engagement by:

- creating opportunities for residents to learn about local problems and how to solve them
- expanding the number and range of actions taken in the community to pursue shared goals
- building a network of empowered resident leaders to help reinforce new ways of engaging residents

For more information on launching and supporting a resident coalition in your community visit

<http://ablechange.msu.edu/>.

### References

1. Ulrich, W., & Reynolds, M. (2010). Critical systems heuristics. In M. Reynolds & S. Holwell (Eds.), *Systems approaches to managing change: A practical guide* (pp. 243–292). London: Springer.
2. Foster-Fishman, P. G., Fitzgerald, K., Brandell, C., Nowell, B., Chavis, D., & Van Egeren, L. A. (2006). Mobilizing residents for action: The role of small wins and strategic supports. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 38(3-4), 143-152.
3. Foster-Fishman, P. G., & Watson, E. R. (2012). The ABLe change framework: A conceptual and methodological tool for promoting systems change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(3-4), 503-516.
4. Burns, D. (2007). *Systemic action research*. London: University of Bristol, Policy Press, Sage.