Strengthening Partnerships

To keep involvement levels high, local health departments should facilitate numerous ways for partners and coalition members to participate in efforts to identify priorities and strategies, and have the opportunity to voice their opinions. Some local health department actions to involve partners include:

- Invite key partners to important meetings
- Solicit input of key partners on message development and plan outreach activities
- Encourage partners to take responsibility for specific tasks
- Attend partner-sponsored events
- Sign onto public statements

To keep partners informed, local health department communications staff should oversee the development, coordination, and coalition-wide distribution of the following communications products:

- Minutes or less formal summaries of meetings and exchanges of ideas
- Periodic reports, such as a brief, simple monthly or quarterly newsletter
- Announcements of meetings (including cancellations, delays, and relocations), events, and changes in personnel or plans
- Substantive external correspondence

Tip: Volunteer to Serve as the Group Secretary: The Secretary is responsible for producing minutes and reports, and has the ability to heavily influence the wording of messages, decisions, recommendations, policies, procedures, and reasons for action.

Normally, the group's secretary also maintains the roster of membership, including contact information. This puts the secretary in the favorable position of always knowing who is a member and who isn't.

Preventing and Defusing Tension

A common problem in local partnerships and coalitions is a feeling of alienation by some members who may want greater input into decisions made by the coalition's leadership. Local health department communications staff should guard against this by soliciting members' views before decisions—including the content of messages or the structure of events—are set in stone.
As the group evolves, one or two individuals may become particularly challenging—and routinely criticize leaders and plans. There are many diplomatic ways to handle this kind of tension. Some suggestions, listed from the friendliest to the most severe include:

- Schedule a time for these individuals to present their own proposal to the group, so they have to suggest something positive and see how the group responds
- Be very polite to them, to prevent any accusation of discourtesy and to disarm their negativity
- Ask them to assume some appropriate duties, so they will become more committed
- Summarize their comments in meeting minutes or summaries, so they feel acknowledged, even while their comments may strike most readers as unhelpful
- Privately ask them to adopt a more positive tone, because they may be unaware of the impact of their behavior on others
- Run meetings in a more formal way, to minimize interruptions and irrelevant comments
- Ask the head of an organization they represent in the coalition to rotate someone else onto the group

**Networking with Group Members**

Networking is also a large part of the communications role in a local health partnership or coalition. Communications staff network by establishing and maintaining contact with members, learning about the members' interests and talents, and building effective personal relationships. Some networking tips (intended mostly for less experienced communications staff) include:

- Be professional and courteous, not overly familiar or condescending
- Smile, showing you're glad to see or speak with the person
- Be confident, assertive, and upbeat—don't appear desperate for support
- Arrange some private time with the person, and use it to learn more about him or her by employing your interviewing skills
- Show transparency and impartiality, rather than playing one person off another
- Involve mutual friends, to strengthen the person's bond with you and trust for you (but avoid the impression of creating a clique)