

The Strategic Prevention Framework

Community coalitions are often under pressure to respond quickly to emerging drug trends. It's common for community leaders to call for immediate programs or campaigns to warn against the latest substance of concern. However, prevention science reminds us that lasting impact begins with understanding the problem and the community it affects.

Jumping straight into action without this foundation of understanding can lead to ineffective efforts or worse, unintended harm. That's where the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) comes in. The SPF offers a structured, evidence-based process to guide communities in addressing substance misuse and related challenges.¹ Through its seven interconnected elements, the SPF helps coalitions build the infrastructure needed for sustainable, community-driven public health strategies that truly make a difference.



The Five Stages & Two Principles of SPF

Combined, these five stages represent a cycle.

1. ASSESSMENT

A community assessment provides a clear, comprehensive picture of the community your coalition serves. It involves gathering and analyzing data to identify local challenges, strengths, resources, and the community's readiness to address issues. Regular assessments help coalitions stay in tune with shifting demographics, emerging trends, and evolving needs, ensuring your efforts remain relevant, effective, and responsive over time.

Ask: What is the problem?

2. CAPACITY

Building capacity ensures your coalition has the people, skills, partnerships, and resources needed to effectively address your community's prevention needs. This includes strengthening the knowledge and abilities of coalition members and partner organizations, as well as expanding relationships, funding, and infrastructure to support your efforts. Strong capacity lays the foundation for developing and implementing a comprehensive, sustainable plan to reduce substance misuse in the community.

Ask: What do we have to work with?

3. PLANNING

The planning stage is where your coalition transforms assessment findings into action. This involves creating a strategic plan that outlines how your coalition will address the community's prevention needs over the next three to five years. A strong strategic plan reflects both current priorities aligned with available resources and future goals that may require additional funding and partnerships. Through strategic planning, coalitions identify key problems, set clear objectives, select evidence-based strategies, and map out the steps needed to achieve meaningful, long-term outcomes.

Ask: What should we do and how should we do it?

4. IMPLEMENTATION

During the implementation stage, your coalition puts the strategic plan into action by delivering the evidence-based programs, policies, and practices selected during planning. Coalition members work together to carry out the plan, hold each other accountable, and monitor progress. Successful implementation means moving beyond planning to actively mobilize resources, strengthen relationships, and organize both internal and external support to get the work done.

Ask: How can we implement this plan?

5. EVALUATION

Evaluation is a critical part of the Strategic Prevention Framework—it helps coalitions measure the effectiveness of the programs, policies, and practices they've implemented. More than just data collection, evaluation ensures that coalitions are learning from their work, making informed decisions, and demonstrating accountability to stakeholders and the community. It provides accurate, meaningful information that can guide improvements, support funding efforts, and tell the story of your coalition's impact. Regular, thoughtful evaluation not only confirms what's working but also strengthens your coalition's credibility, adaptability, and long-term success.

Ask: Is our plan succeeding?

★ **After evaluating the effects of your efforts, you'll go back to assessing for your next initiative.** ★

In addition to the five stages, there are two principles that must be reflected throughout the entire process:

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Every community is made up of different groups with distinct values, lifestyles, and traditions. To be effective, coalitions must engage all populations represented in their community throughout every step of the SPF. For example, during the community assessment phase, it's essential to identify which groups make up the community and to understand their specific strengths, needs, and perspectives. Equally important is ensuring that coalition membership reflects this diversity, so that initiatives are informed by the lived experiences of those they serve.

Do our coalition and its initiatives reflect and respect the values, lifestyles, and traditions of all populations within our community?

SUSTAINABILITY

Creating lasting change in a community doesn't happen overnight. Coalitions must be prepared to sustain their efforts over time to achieve population-level outcomes. A sustainable coalition is both adaptable and resilient, able to maintain momentum, secure resources, and respond to emerging challenges. Successful coalitions don't just focus on immediate goals; they also plan for the future, anticipating internal and external factors that may impact their work.

How can we ensure our efforts continue and evolve amid changing conditions and community needs?

Source: CADCA Community Coalitions Handbook

About Us

Prevention Action Alliance is a 501(c)3 nonprofit in Columbus, Ohio that is dedicated to leading healthy communities in the prevention of substance misuse and the promotion of mental health wellness. Learn more about Prevention Action Alliance at preventionactionalliance.org.