

Establishing Groundwork by Building Relationships

Summary

As a new TPEP coordinator, beginning in the midst of a staffing shortfall at the health department and without the opportunity for orientation from the previous coordinator, I felt ill-equipped to immediately begin working on specific program policy goals. Rather, utilizing resources available through the TPEP program and health department colleagues, I opted to begin by meeting and building relationships with community partners who represent a broad array of sectors and who could help me better understand the needs of the community in general, and the local climate with respect to tobacco use and prevention in particular.

Challenge

In the last half of 2013, there was a rapid and significant staffing shortfall at Malheur County Health Department. The director quit, and the TPEP coordinator, Kelly, stepped into the interim role. One month later she also left. Another nurse became interim director and maintained attendance on required TPEP calls. Two more nurses quit in the following two months. At this time, I was working in the Family Planning clinic. About three months after Kelly left, I decided to take on the TPEP coordinator. Until that time, I had worked primarily in the clinic, where the day's schedule is determined by client appointments and there is minimal opportunity to participate in community meetings and coalitions outside of the office, so my network was relatively limited. Also, while Kelly had made significant efforts toward TPEP goals and had communicated with stakeholders in a variety of sectors about program efforts, I had no opportunity to receive orientation or introductions from her. In early conversations with my TPEP liaison, and in review of the plan Kelly had written for 2013-14, it became quite clear that having good relationships with a broad range of community partners would be key to moving the work of tobacco prevention forward. The challenge was how to establish those relationships.

Solution

Fortunately, I had a number of advantages and resources to draw on. Kelly had been a reliable and well-respected participant in several community meetings and coalitions. Additionally, my liaison provided insight as to some of what Kelly had done specifically towards the TPEP plan as well as great suggestions for strategies and resources that could be of use in my efforts. I was able to attend two in-person trainings, one in Pendleton and another in Astoria, which allowed me, in addition to learning about the specific training topics, to meet others working in TPEP, hear about some of their efforts and challenges, and ask for advice from more experienced coordinators about how they approached relationship building when they were getting started. Our interim director has worked at the health department for several years, and in the community for even longer, so she is familiar with many community resources, stakeholders and partners, and was able to suggest groups that would be important for me to participate in. Also, I did have a bit of prior contact with some outside agency partners through my work with the Family

Planning Community Participation/Advisory Board and a brief period of working as a home visiting nurse, during which time I established a positive relationship with a long-standing community member who is very active in promoting community vitality efforts. So, utilizing these resources, I began attending meetings of community coalitions and resource groups, at first simply showing up consistently and introducing myself and my role, and gradually beginning to present information about some of the goals of my work.

Results

Starting in January of this year, I have regularly attended meetings of the following groups: Four Rivers Healthy Community, a broad-based non-profit coalition to promote health and vitality in Malheur County and two neighboring Idaho counties; Malheur Community Services, a meeting of representatives from various social service organizations where information about current efforts and programs is shared; Cradle to Career coalition, which serves as the coordinating group for the regional education hub, the former Early Childhood Team, the Drug Free Community Coalition, and licensed child care agencies; and the local Community Advisory Committee for the regional CCO. I have presented TPEP program efforts at both the Malheur Community Services meeting and the Community Advisory Committee. Through consistent attendance at these meetings, I am working to become a familiar face and reliable participant. Collectively, these groups comprise representatives (some with leadership roles) from private and public sectors including physical and mental health care, emergency services, child care and education, parenting education, financial assistance, child and family benefits programs, migrant services, law enforcement, crisis intervention, and business. As this is a small community, many of the same people attend several of these groups; additionally, quite a few have lived and worked in this community for many years and have a strong motivation for working toward a thriving and healthy community.

Sustaining Success

Now that I am an established attendee of these meetings, I will continue to present to more groups about the status of tobacco in our county, including results from the recent tobacco retail assessment and other local data, and try to draw connections about how tobacco prevention efforts tie in to other agencies' objectives and the overall goal of a healthy community. I have gathered from discussions that several of these groups would like to have more participation from local elected officials and business leaders. Representation from these sectors is somewhat lacking currently, but seems extremely important for achieving change. To continue with my efforts thus far at building relationships, I hope to be able to meet with city and county department heads and officials to introduce myself and my role, and become known to them, as well as begin attending city council meetings and county court to familiarize myself with those processes. In addition, I was well-received by tobacco retailers during the survey, and hope to build on that initial positive interaction by following up with them, sharing survey results, and including them in further assessment of factors that affect the local tobacco environment.