

# TOGETHER **TO** LIVE .ca

## Worksheet: Building a coalition



Ontario Centre of Excellence  
for Child and Youth  
Mental Health



Waterloo Region  
Suicide Prevention Council  
[www.wrspc.ca](http://www.wrspc.ca)

This tool was created for youth suicide prevention however it can easily be adapted to suit other sectors of mental health. The Centre would like to acknowledge the support of the Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council in the development of this tool.

## Worksheet: Building a coalition

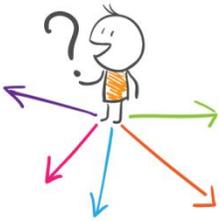
A **coalition** is a group of people and/or organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal. The goal is usually to tackle community issues too large and complex for any one person or organization to address alone. Coalitions are a great way to **do more with less**, and they help get everyone **moving in the same direction**. A coalition can help **empower** your community to take action to address an urgent situation.

### What's in a name?

While this worksheet uses the term **coalition**, you may refer to your group of community members as a network, working group, task force, alliance, partnership or any other term for a collaborative effort. Try not to get caught up in the terms - what's important is knowing how you'll work together so that everyone's on the same page.

## Who should use this worksheet?

You're likely here because youth suicide is an issue in your community. There's a **sense of urgency for change**, so you've decided to develop a coalition. Where should you begin? This worksheet will walk you through the **essential steps of building a coalition**.



### Not sure if your community is ready to build a coalition to address youth suicide?

Now is a good time to stop and reflect before you go any further. Check out the resources available on *Together to live* to [assess your community's readiness](#).

## STEP 1: Build a core group

Your first priority should be to mobilize the people in your community around the issue.

Build on your **existing networks**. You may have connections to groups or individuals already working in this area. Map out these established connections and use them as a starting point. Who do you know that's already working in this area? Consider how you can link your work. Does it make sense to bring everyone together to sit at the same table right now?

Make your list and ask yourself: Who is currently at your table and who *else* needs to be at the table? Develop an **inventory** of agencies and individual partners you would like to reach out to with an invite to join the coalition. Many **community stakeholders** have the ability to change policy or contribute their time, influence and resources to the issue.

Who's currently at your table?	Who else needs to be there?

Have you considered engaging these representatives? Note: this is not meant to be an exhaustive list.

**Tip: Think about having a cross-section of demographics.**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> addictions professionals                 | <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare providers                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bereaved/suicide loss individuals        | <input type="checkbox"/> justice representatives                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> child and youth justice advocates        | <input type="checkbox"/> law enforcement                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> community members                        | <input type="checkbox"/> local businesses                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> community outreach workers               | <input type="checkbox"/> media officials                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> coroner's office                         | <input type="checkbox"/> mental health professionals/organizations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> data collection specialists              | <input type="checkbox"/> policy makers                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> educators                                | <input type="checkbox"/> public health                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> elders                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> service clubs or sport team coaches       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> elected officials                        | <input type="checkbox"/> suicide attempt survivors                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> faith/cultural leaders                   | <input type="checkbox"/> victim services                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> family members (e.g. parents/caregivers) | <input type="checkbox"/> youth                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> funeral homes                            |  |

For your efforts to move forward successfully, you'll want to think about an **influential champion** (or small group of champions) who can advocate on behalf of your cause to the larger community. An influential champion will command the respect necessary to bring other leaders together and keep them actively engaged. Who should be the champions of your coalition?

Reach out to those community stakeholders who may be excluded. Ensure that you don't exclude certain groups, particularly those who may already experience social isolation. This may include LGBTQ groups, disability groups, homeless, rural, racialized and newcomer groups, as well as First Nations, Inuit and Métis populations. Who do you plan to reach out to? Remember, you can't expect these relationships to form instantly—building trust takes time. Make sure your inclusion efforts come from a genuine place, engage these key people in meaningful ways and be patient.

## STEP 2: Recruit coalition members

So you've assessed who needs to be involved in the coalition in order for it to be successful. The question now is: How are you going to communicate this and actually **get these people to the table**? Connections can be made in a number of ways. What **recruitment strategies** will you use to bring potential coalition members to the table?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> face-to-face meetings | <input type="checkbox"/> flyers and posters                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> phone calls           | <input type="checkbox"/> focus groups                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e-mail                | <input type="checkbox"/> social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> personal letters      | <input type="checkbox"/> other  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mass mailings         | <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100%; height: 15px;"></div> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> media advertisements  |   |

How can you **build on your existing connections** or the networking capacity of your current members?

**Engage those for whom it matters most.** In order to meet your goals, coalition members need to see collaboration as in their self-interest. Remember why you're bringing people together. How can you help others keep this in mind?

**Consider barriers.** What might prevent someone from joining you at the table or to support you to do this important work? Consider possible barriers such as language, geography, transportation, other commitments, turf issues (e.g. overlapping roles, region boundaries, etc.), conflicting interests or views, etc. How can you help others overcome these barriers?

**Be discerning.** The reality is that your table can only sit so many people. Make sure to recruit partners who **bring the right value at the right time** to the coalition. Effective communication can be hard in large groups. Is there anyone you can invite to join the coalition at a later time or who can be engaged in other ways besides sitting at the table (i.e. participating in a working group, planning a fundraiser, designing or printing brochures, etc.)?

**Tip:** *Establish a minimum number and maximum number of people you want around the table.*

**Tip:** *As you recruit new coalition members take inventory of their skills, talents or passions. What do they bring to the group that will add value?*

### STEP 3: Bring coalition members together

Make sure to take the time to **build relationships**, get to know one another and develop trust. Starting the relationship-building process early on can be useful. Otherwise, it may be hard to jump into the first meeting and determine a common vision. How can you facilitate this and make sure there is ongoing relationship and

trust building? For example, you might take the time for networking during meetings by introducing people and facilitating icebreakers or reflective exercises.

Plan the first meeting. What **logistics** do you need to consider? Think about the date, time, length and location of the meeting. Who will lead the meeting? It also helps to think about how you'll set up the space. Are there any other arrangements to be made such as transportation, child care, food and so on?

What will you discuss at the coalition's **first few meetings**? Be sure to follow-up on action items and next steps.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> introductions                           | <input type="checkbox"/> procedure for forming an action plan |
| <input type="checkbox"/> defining the issue                      | <input type="checkbox"/> communication mechanisms             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> structure of the coalition              | <input type="checkbox"/> next steps                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> common vision of the coalition          | <input type="checkbox"/> date of next meeting                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> recruiting new members to the coalition | <input type="checkbox"/> other                                |

## STEP 4: Establish a common agenda

Build on **what's already happening**. Take the time to review the work that has already been done or is already happening in your community. What can you build on? Start thinking about what supports are already in place in your community and where the gaps may exist.

**Tip:** Check out the tools in the [strategic planning worksheet for help on how to develop a comprehensive agenda](#). The tools can help you map out what's already happening in your community and establish goals and a plan of action that builds off of your community's existing strengths and resources.

In order to establish a common agenda, the coalition needs a shared understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed-upon actions. What is the coalition's **vision and mission** for change? What

will be different as a result of the coalition’s work? It’s very likely that your coalition already has a common vision, such as lower suicide rates and better mental health for your community. Keep the larger picture goals in mind here – everything you do will relate back to this. **Tip: keep it simple – it should be something all of your members can easily remember.**

What’s the coalition working to accomplish? Identify both short- and long-term **goals** – these should be linked to your [strategic action plan](#). Examples may include: to increase knowledge and awareness of issues related to youth suicide or to build strong community partnerships.

Be clear and concise about what you want to do (and what you don’t want to do). What are your **key objectives or guiding principles**? These guidelines will help keep you on track in day to day work.

What is beyond the scope of what the coalition is working to accomplish? What are your **boundaries**?

What is your **common language**? How does your coalition define the key terms that are important to your work? For definitions of key terms related to youth suicide, check out the [Glossary](#) on *Together to live*.

### STEP 5: Identify your structure

In order for a coalition to work together effectively, you'll need to explore the following key considerations specific to your community and coalition.

How **formal** will your coalition be? Some groups use terms of reference, a memorandum of understanding, a declaration of committee or a partnership agreement to outline how the group will work together. Other groups choose to formally establish themselves as a charitable organization.

Coalitions need dynamic leadership from someone who is passionately devoted to solving a problem and is willing to work as a team towards a solution.

- a) Who will lead the coalition's work? How will this be determined and sustained (e.g. succession plan, set term)?
- b) What **style of decision-making** is most appropriate for your coalition (e.g. majority vote, consensus)?

Who will do what? How will you outline the **roles and expectations** for various members within the coalition (i.e., attend meetings, be part of a particular working group)? Being clear on what the coalition needs will help get traction and reduce frustration.

Member name	Role and responsibilities

In each community, there are many people willing to **volunteer** for your community initiative, including family members and friends bereaved by suicide who want to help. Volunteers can be very helpful in getting projects and small tasks completed. If you choose to make use of volunteers, here are a few questions to think about:

- a) Who will volunteer for your coalition and where will you find or recruit volunteers? You can start by asking local mental health organizations, hospitals, counselling agencies, parent support groups or volunteer organizations. You can also advertise through social media and free listings in local media outlets.

- b) How will your coalition make use of volunteers? **Tip: Start small and grow this as little or as much as you want. Write a list of tasks you need help with and that you feel a volunteer can support.**

Some examples of how volunteers can be involved include:

- preparing resource packages or handing out resources at community events
- helping to create brochures or proofread material
- creating a newsletter for your community coalition
- taking part in planning for events hosted by your coalition
- providing peer support in partnership with a local counselling agency
- creating templates for tracking your coalition's work
- monitoring social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook

No two coalitions are alike. There's no one-size-fits-all approach for building a coalition because each community is unique. How will you **organize how you work together**? Is it logical to establish **sub-committees or working groups** within the coalition? If so, what mechanism will help link your separate efforts within targeted groups?

Do you have the capacity to **hire staff** to coordinate the coalition?

What's the **timeline of activity** for the coalition's next steps? How long does the coalition plan to work together?

How will the coalition document its work? Where will this information be held? How will it be shared among the partners involved? Keep track of what you've done, why it was done, when changes are made and why, what worked or didn't work. Often the main goal of a project gets lost because history is lost.

Consistent and open **communication** is essential within a community coalition. It helps members build trust and create common motivation. How will your coalition communicate? How do individual members prefer to communicate with each other? Take the time to establish a rich template for note-taking during meetings. If you can clearly summarize action items, you'll be able to keep coalition members informed and engaged even if they miss a meeting.

## STEP 6: Get going!

You're ready to start action planning. Check out the [strategic planning worksheet](#) for help getting started

## STEP 7: Evaluate and sustain your efforts.

If you're ready to **evaluate your progress** toward your common goals, check out the [evaluation planning tool](#) for help creating a plan for evaluating your community initiative.

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If you're ready to start **planning for sustainability**, check out the sustainability planning worksheet for help creating strategies to sustain your coalition and its activities.

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## References

Oklahoma Department of Mental Health. (2009). Oklahoma Suicide Prevention Toolkit. Retrieved from <http://ok.gov/odmhsas/documents/Suicide%20Prevention%20Web.pdf>

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