



Building Support for Pre-Arrest Diversion Through Coalitions

Building a coalition is an essential early strategy in creating and sustaining a [pre-arrest or pre-arrest booking diversion program](#) to provide an alternative to incarceration for people who commit low-level crimes linked to drugs or alcohol. A well-organized coalition has more power and can exert more influence than an organization or individual operating alone. Bringing a broad range of diverse voices together and agreeing on common goals and strategies creates buy-in throughout the community. Drawing on the strengths and connections of coalition partners increases negotiating power and resources available for the initiative. Including representatives of the community you plan to serve will help inform design and implementation. All of this can help pre-arrest diversion programs overcome opposition, secure funding and smooth the path to implementation and sustainability.

Steps to Building a Strong Pre-Arrest Diversion Coalition

1. Create a coalition framework that works for your community

Currently there is a broad range of pre-arrest and pre-arrest booking diversion programs that incorporate coalitions as part of their structure and models. As these programs continue to become implemented in varying communities throughout the U.S. there is an opportunity to learn from best practices and bring together the necessary elements for culturally competent and community tailored initiatives. It is important to take into account your community's current political climate and established relationships as partners are brought together to create a coalition.

For example, the NC Harm Reduction Coalition (NCHRC) has been able to implement a Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) in Fayetteville and is currently expanding to other communities because of their ability to bridge relationships between law enforcement and the community. Due to the fact that NCHRC had previously developed strong relationships with and had provided trainings for law enforcement, while providing harm reduction services to the community, implementing a LEAD program presented itself as an organic next step and the coalition was uniquely positioned to convene the pre-arrest diversion initiative and drive it forward.

On the other hand, the Atlanta/Fulton County Pre-Arrest Diversion Initiative was able to launch a strong diversion program that eventually brought law enforcement to the table because of their longstanding trust and relationships within the broader community. Their pre-arrest initiative brought together groups that had not traditionally worked together on diversion in, but thanks to the trust given to coalition partners, by the community, law enforcement agencies were able to trust the legitimacy and potential success of the initiative. Both of these coalitions built on the strengths of their established relationships and created programs that met the individual needs of their communities.

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2. Strategic Recruitment

Strong coalitions are built through strategic recruitment and engagement. The recruitment process gives coalitions the opportunity to bring together diverse partners with differing perspectives working toward a common goal. Strategic recruitment starts with analyzing whose voices are needed at the table by identifying major supporters and opponents, informal and formal community leaders, key constituencies that can help you win over opponents. From there, coalition organizers can create a plan for bringing together all potential partners. Recruitment strategies can be a combination of individual meetings, emails, phone calls with potential coalition members, and informational sessions in order to answer questions and solidify commitments. It is important to keep in mind the value of incorporating potential program participant voices within the coalition, as their guidance provides a unique and noticeable perspective.

For example, leaders in Santa Fe were able to build a strong Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program by creating a task force that brought together over 30 partners, including service providers, educators, law enforcement, district attorneys, advocates, city officials and consumer voices. The program is going strong in its 2nd year. One of the leaders of the program, Emily Kaltenbach, the state director for the Drug Policy Alliance of New Mexico, says the task force was essential, and that through creating a liberated safe space where all voices were given equal value, the community was able to implement a successful LEAD program.

When bringing together a diversion coalition some key partners to consider include:

- Consumer groups and directly affected populations
- Social justice community groups Law enforcement
- Reentry organizations
- Religious and faith-based organizations
- Prevention organizations
- Homeless and housing groups
- Recovery organizations
- Health care providers and hospitals
- Social service providers
- Municipal officials
- LGBTQIA groups

3. Set goals and operating guidelines, and organize working committees

Establishing goals and operating guidelines gives coalitions the structure necessary to be effective, inclusive and respectful of the different voices of coalition members. Addressing the root causes of recidivism is no small feat, and given the broad range of partners needed for pre-arrest diversion, some of whom may have previously had their differences, operational guidelines are especially important. Not that it's ever easy, but having an agreed upon foundation for how your coalition operates can help alleviate potential anxieties about rules and power and allows the focus to remain on the goals they are working toward together.

Getting all of the impacted stakeholders to the table is only the first step, developing a truly collaborative initiative requires input at the planning level as well as at the implementation level.

One way to foster meaningful support on all sides is by developing committees to split up large logistical questions such as the “who”, the “where” and “how” the necessary tasks will be carried out. These committees are willing to undertake the necessary responsibilities required of a pre-diversion program because they represent those who have the most vested interest in developing the answers to these important questions. For example, the Atlanta/Fulton County Pre-Arrest Diversion Initiative has established leadership roles that delegate tasks and brings a variety of voices to the decision-making tables through their Design Team. This team has built a base of support for their program that represents community members, law enforcement, service providers, prosecutors, businesses, and a broad range of potential participants, and with this base they have formed official committees on Community Engagement and Communication, Criteria and Protocols, Services, Sustainability, and Assessment and Evaluation.

4. Develop messaging

Coalitions can frame the messaging surrounding pre-arrest diversion in order to create public awareness, buy-in and to build momentum. By creating uniformity in messaging, coalitions can positively shape public perceptions and create a counter voice to potential opposition and stigmatization of participants. A communications or other messaging focused committee within your coalition can lead the diversion program through mobilization campaigns and create tools for community education and awareness. NCHRC was able to work through some of the local business community’s concerns that the LEAD program would become a “catch and release” initiative, by creating messaging that provided program specifics, plans for intervention and methods for reducing recidivism. Through tailored messaging, NCHRC was able to gain the support of the local business community and have them represented as part of the coalition.

5. Preparing for wins and losses

One of the main challenges coalitions face is in their ability to evolve as the political, economic and social environment changes. Coalitions must prepare for changing political administrations, budget cycles, leadership within member groups, and transitions between new challenges. To help manage this uncertainty and keep up momentum, coalitions can build in mechanisms for celebrating small wins and have a plan ready for after the larger and systemic wins.

Another key component in establishing measures for success is incorporating markers for the small victories that pave the path to the systemic wins. Taking into account new partners brought to the table, important connections made, community impacts and positive changes in diversion perception, provides the continual reassurance that coalition partners need to stay motivated throughout the process. It is necessary to build in mechanisms for recognizing best practices and lessons learned in order to give coalitions a sustainable and potentially replicable framework.

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