

Community Networks are Vital

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So you barely have time to run your afterschool program, how are you supposed to become involved in a community network? We know it can be difficult, but we think this is one of the more important actions you can take to strengthen your long-term sustainability.

How Are Community Networks Important?

Networks give you:

- Access to information
- Knowledge about potential resources
- Suggestions for improving your programming
- Idea exchanges
- Brainstorming capacity
- Increased awareness of funding source
- Potential to influence policy at a local, state, and federal level.
- If a state policy is limiting your ability to run a program you can be sure it's affecting many others. A united front from a network has more impact than individual efforts

Also, community networks around your issues often provide access to state agency personnel who may have information about support opportunities. Exchanging information with those already running AMP can be great resource, that can support your efforts.

What Are Community Networks?

Networks can be called by many names – across the state there are numerous task forces, committees, coalitions and advisory groups dedicated to various issues. Your local County Health Department should have access to a wide network around particular issues related to youth.

The Department of Health and school districts will often have representatives participating in local efforts for youth development, and religious organizations and non-profits often collaborate on poverty issues.

Finding them may be a challenge at first, but as you engage with more people and organizations you'll begin to hear about other networks, efforts and organizations.

The Three Things to Look For In a Community Network

When considering community networks, we suggest it's important that they

- Be committed to strategic action
- Be somewhat diverse programmatically and organizationally
- Have a wide range of knowledge and experience within and across programs in your community
- Choose Your Network Carefully
- Do Some Homework
- When first scouting for networks, you'll have to do a little homework. Some networks have great success and others struggle to reach their goals.

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Your local Human Services Coalition, Children's Commission, Department of Children and Families office, United Way, or Chamber of Commerce might also have some ideas. Local school districts will often be engaged in supporting and expanding afterschool programming and child nutrition. Contact other afterschool programs in your area and ask what, if any, networks they know about or are associated with. Administrative staff at a local Salvation Army or Boys and Girls Club might be a part of a larger network or at least know of one.

Get the Ball Rolling

Once you get a few names you'll be amazed at how quickly you can get information and become involved. Once you've narrowed down a few options, you can contact them and attend one or two meetings. Ask for a history of their efforts over the last year to get a sense of how they interact with one another.

Be Diligent

Be diligent, your time is valuable, and there are several red flags to look for that can reveal a problematic network:

- Preoccupation with minutia
- Overbearing individuals who dominate and quell discussion or dissent
- Vague mission or purpose
- Unproductive dissent or arguing
- No clear action items arise
- Feel free to ask what they have accomplished towards your mission over the last 6 months? If they can't answer that question, it's probably best to keep looking. Of course the opposite of these red flags are usually good signs that you're in the right place.

No Networks In Your Area

If you're in rural Florida and not near a larger city, we realize your nearest network may be anywhere from 60 to 150 miles away. We know it's hard to connect, but we still feel it's worth your time to try – now more than ever.

Do some research, find out where your closest network is and try to contact someone to see how they might accommodate you. Even if a speakerphone is the only option, it's better to have more people know about you and your programming.

If you're in a rural town near one of the larger cities, you may feel pretty disenfranchised. You're not alone, and many people in urban or suburban areas don't like that reality any more than you do. They value and need your voice.

Rural Florida's voice is more important than ever, and your involvement will make your program and the overall network stronger. Traveling longer distances can be difficult, but we still suggest it's worth it as long as the network or organization meets those three basic criteria mentioned earlier.