



## **All for One and One for All: Promising Practices for Consumer Health Advocacy Collaboration**

Since the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, consumer advocates have redoubled their efforts to ensure that the implementation of the new health law maximizes coverage and care. Expectations are high for consumer health organizations to be part of implementation decisions. As the watchdog, the expert, the organizer and the advocate in legislative and regulatory decision-making at both state and federal levels, today's environment necessitates consumer advocates work collaboratively toward common goals.

Community Catalyst's philosophy for building a "system of advocacy" is based on the understanding that no one organization has all the capacity or the expertise for effective and sustained consumer health advocacy on its own. The spectrum of capacities needed for effective consumer advocacy include:

- Conducting legal and policy research and analysis to develop winnable policy alternatives
- Establishing a strong grassroots base of support, and engaging people at the local level
- Building and maintaining coalitions and strategic alliances
- Using media and communication expertise to build timely public and political support and counter opposing arguments
- Developing and implementing proactive health policy change campaigns
- Generating resources for infrastructure, core functions and campaigns

**To develop a working system of advocacy, advocates need to link together the complementary skills and voices of a diverse collection of consumer organizations through a coalition, network or other alliance.**

As documented by Mathematica Policy Research (MPR) in a *Health Affairs* article last year, state advocacy organizations that worked in coalition together saw a number of mutually beneficial results:

- Increased and strengthened relationships among groups
- Greater visibility for consumers
- More interactions with policymakers
- Bolstered influence on health coverage policy<sup>i</sup>

But how is it done? Community Catalyst identified important lessons and promising practices for others who are developing their own collaborations and found four common factors that influence the successful establishment and maintenance of statewide health advocacy networks, or coalitions.

### **1. Find a structure that works**

The arrangement that is the most successful is the one that works for a specific environment and the partners in that environment.

- Assess the needs of your advocacy community and identify your goals and purpose.
- Be flexible: allow your collaboration style to evolve with the changes in environment, new relationships and shifting purpose.

### **2. Make it operational**

Having an agreed upon foundation for how your coalition operates can help alleviate potential anxieties about rules and power so consumer advocates can focus on the policy change goals they are working toward together.

- Reach agreement on membership criteria and establish understanding about working with other health care stakeholders.
- Reach agreement on principles and decision making.
- Promote regular communications to encourage greater collaboration.

### **3. Establish models for shared leadership and learning**

A network or coalition is as strong as its members. That means leadership, expertise, decision making, and public confidence should be cultivated and shared among participants.

- Develop the knowledge and skills of every member.
- Ensure decision making is participatory and collaborative.
- Provide opportunities for all members to be the public face of the coalition or network.

### **4. Find the funding to support and sustain collaboration and staffing**

The ability for any group to build, lead, or participate in a health advocacy collaboration is often influenced by the level of funding support available. To sustain financial support, make it clear for funders what the advocacy community is accomplishing together.

- Determine how or if resources will be shared among partners or members.
- Diversify funding sources to sustain the long-term support.
- Articulate and claim coalition accomplishments—relationship and positive process outcomes as well as policy change successes—to share with funders.

### **Outcomes: What Consumer Advocates Accomplished Together**

*Demonstrated expertise and credibility:* In Kansas, the advocate's health reform alliance used their expertise to make the case for and successfully secure a recommendation from the insurance agency that the Exchange governing board should have a majority membership of consumers. Their bolstered credibility on the issue helped establish regular monthly meetings with the insurance department staff.

*Rapid Response:* Health advocates in New York maximize rapid response through their coalition and add a consumer voice where one is needed. When an insurance company took actions to block the state from releasing requested rate information to a consumer, they acted swiftly to put out press statements, organize outreach to the state agency, and make sure the interest of the individual were heard over the insurance company.

*Increased capacity (knowledge, skills and expertise) to implement a multi-faceted campaign:* In Texas and Georgia, advocates pulled out all the stops in each state's medical loss ratio (MLR) fight. In Texas, they drew on the strengths of different partners to quickly put into action all the needed campaign components at the state and federal levels to accomplish an important policy win for Texas consumers. In Georgia, they launched a visible campaign to protect the ACA's MLR requirement and in doing so, strengthened the relationship between advocates and the department of insurance and helped to establish a precedent for effective collaboration among advocates in the future.

*Elevating a united consumer voice:* Ohio advocates work together to identify strong joint policy positions, emphasizing the coalition's commitment to speaking as a united voice so that the consumer perspective is not overlooked. By strengthening their united front, the coalition has become an established go-to participant in health policy discussions, which has proven particularly valuable through changes in the state's political leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Strong, D. Lipson, T. Honeycutt, and J. Kim. Foundation's Consumer Advocacy Health Reform Initiative Strengthened Groups' Effectiveness. *Health Affairs*, 30, No. 9 (2011): 1799-1803.