

MUNICIPAL DRUG STRATEGY:

Sustaining Community-based Initiatives

Many Canadians are becoming involved in community initiatives to address local issues. One of the most difficult challenges facing those groups and individuals is finding ways to sustain their efforts.



Federation
of Canadian
Municipalities



Community initiatives are often difficult to sustain, whether in health care, social services or criminal justice, particularly when funding for specific community projects or programs ends.

This pamphlet looks at the experiences of nine communities that took part in the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Municipal Drug Strategy Pilot Project. This project was undertaken with support from the National Crime Prevention Centre, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Health Canada. The goal was to prepare and test materials for use in developing municipal drug strategies. Phase III¹ of the project was an evaluation of the experiences of the nine pilot communities. The evaluation study involved site visits to each of the nine communities, where key participants took part in interviews and focus group sessions.

An important objective of the evaluation study was to identify factors contributing to the sustainability of community based initiatives, such as the Model Municipal Drug Strategy. Sustainability was defined in this study as “persistence over time,” but a broader view was also explored. This meant focusing on issues such as community mobilization, the connections between people’s behaviour and their social contexts, and the processes through which private concerns become public community issues.

¹Tullio Caputo. *FCM Municipal Drug Strategy Phase III Report: A Summary Evaluation of Pilot Projects*. Prepared for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, November 2003

Community initiatives often begin when people come together to deal with common problems or issues. Typically, these problems or issues can be dealt with through local action. For example, parents may see speeding near a school as a problem. They then come together to discuss the problem and decide to take action. Community groups often seek help from local authorities, including municipal officials, the police and school representatives. A range of strategies can be identified and implemented. These could include restricting the speed limit and posting signs, launching a public awareness campaign, and stepping up enforcement near the school. If these actions resolve the problem, the group usually disbands because they have achieved their goal.

Not all community problems or issues can be dealt with this easily. Sometimes, the concerns that bring community members together are related to problems or issues with broader social implications or deep structural roots. Complex problems like poverty, unemployment, homelessness and substance-abuse require more fundamental social changes, which usually take more time and resources to achieve. They are not amenable to short-term “quick fixes” but require a concerted effort over time and are unlikely to be resolved through one project or program.

Community concerns influence community action and the likelihood that it will be sustained. Public support for an issue is an equally important factor affecting community action. In some cases, concerned citizens may find they cannot capture the community’s interest or generate support for their cause. The possibility of community action under these circumstances is limited.

Participants in the evaluation study were asked to reflect on their experiences and to compare them with those of others in their area who had been less successful at garnering community support. Respondents were encouraged to consider how successful they had been in mobilizing community support and why. They were also asked to describe those aspects of their community initiative that has contributed to its sustainability.

Not surprisingly, they identified a number of common elements. These included “lessons” the participants felt were important enough to share with others involved in similar types of initiatives. The findings from the evaluation study were collated and analyzed, and common patterns and themes were identified. These were used to develop questions to assist groups or individuals involved in community initiatives. The questions are presented on the next pages. They are designed to promote thinking and discussion about factors that can contribute to the success and sustainability of community action. For some, the questions will serve as a checklist that can be used to reflect on community plans, goals, objectives and strategies. For others, they will provide an opportunity to think about sustainability—and success—while benefitting from the experiences of others who have been involved in similar community initiatives.

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THE SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY INITIATIVES: KEY QUESTIONS

What are we trying to achieve?

People often come together to address a specific problem or issue. They may develop a variety of strategies, depending on the nature of the problem, and conduct different types of activities. In the speeding example used earlier, the group held meetings with key stakeholders and implemented several different types of activities. Each activity was part of the overall community strategy for dealing with the problem of speeding. All the activities were developed through the efforts of a core community group, working with several institutional partners.

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It is easy to see what the group in the speeding example is trying to achieve: to reduce speeding in the community. This has important implications for sustainability, because the objective is clear and those involved can determine whether they have achieved the objective. If speeding is reduced significantly or eliminated, the community group and their partners can decide to disband, since they will have achieved the goal. Or, the group could also decide to have one of the institutional partners (e.g., the police) monitor the situation to ensure that the problem does not recur. In this scenario, the group could continue to meet occasionally to determine whether additional action is required.

Those undertaking a community initiative must ask themselves what they want to sustain: the group created to deal with a problem or issue; one of the group's activities; or the partnerships and protocols developed as a result of the community initiative? Each of these elements differs in importance and requires a different level of commitment and resources. A group may continue to meet to discuss an issue or problem or to monitor responses that were put in place. This requires the ongoing interest and commitment of those involved, as well as a place to

meet. It takes time and effort to establish working partnerships and develop useful protocols that allow community agencies to work together more effectively, but these can then be maintained with relative ease. However, continuing an expensive public awareness campaign requires more effort and resources. Community groups have to make a conscious decision about which of these activities they want to sustain and how they are going to do it. This should be a conscious decision that includes a consideration of all the related factors.

Is the issue meaningful to members of the local community?

One of the lessons emphasized during the Phase III evaluation study was that initiatives were more likely to succeed if they addressed issues or problems that were important to community members. If the issues were meaningful to the local community, people would be willing to contribute their time and effort, and they were motivated to help the community initiative succeed. By contrast, less successful initiatives fail to generate community interest, since their issues seem less relevant to local community members.

The ability to generate interest and mobilize community support was a key factor influencing the success and sustainability of community initiatives. The development of an effective group to coordinate activity and mobilize support was judged an important part of this process. Unless the local community provides the necessary human and financial resources, these resources must be secured from outside sources. Those involved in community initiatives need to assess whether the issue is sufficiently relevant to the local community to attract the community resources needed to keep it going. If the answer is “no”, the group has little prospect of either success or sustainability.

Have collaborative community partnerships been established?

Local partnerships were an important factor contributing to the success and sustainability of the nine pilots. This typically involved bringing together local community groups, non-governmental agencies, various orders of government, service providers and resources. The most common participants in community initiatives consisted of the local authorities that form the institutional backbone in most Canadian communities: schools, the police, health care providers, social services agencies, volunteer agencies, service clubs and representatives of various orders of government.

While these groups and agencies may all be active in the same community, they typically do not work together. Some groups and agencies cooperate and share information or provide referrals, but they are usually responsible for their own programs or service delivery and administer their budgets independently. Community initiatives are more sustainable when collaborative partnerships are established in which groups and agencies share resources, make decisions together, and are accountable for the allocation of community resources. Collaborative partnerships ensure a coordinated and comprehensive effort in which various partners contribute what they can to address a locally identified problem or need. In meeting their own mandates, the various partners can help a community achieve some of its collective goals. Sustainability is enhanced if the local community is able to link its efforts to the existing institutional structure. If successful, the major partners will take some responsibility for addressing the problem or meeting the local need and allocate or redirect resources accordingly and on a long-term basis.

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Is there “buy-in” by key community leaders?

Evaluation study participants indicated that much of their success was based on their ability to secure the active support of key community leaders. Having these community leaders acknowledge the importance of an issue or concern lent credibility and support to the group. It also brought the issue into the open and prompted discussion among those involved, those affected and those providing services. This was especially important in the case of a model municipal drug strategy, since many respondents noted that having the support of a community leader, such as the mayor, gave their initiative legitimacy. It allowed the community to acknowledge a problem, such as substance abuse, and begin the difficult process of developing a community response. The groups that were able to enlist the active support of key community leaders experienced much greater success in mobilizing their communities and securing the resources needed to sustain their efforts.

Is there evidence that something has been accomplished?

One of the important lessons from the evaluation study was that most community members stopped attending meetings that failed to produce action. Community interest and commitment fades quickly if people cannot see results. In response, many of the groups in the study focused on a visible, short-term goal to demonstrate that something important was happening and that their community group was serious. Participants suggested that short-

term activities, such as prevention and public education, could be started quickly and would prove that something was happening. Such early and public demonstrations of success strengthened the support of those directly involved and helped mobilize resources from the broader community. Early signs of success also helped to secure outside resources, since it is easier for outside groups to back a “winner”.

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Is a communication plan in place?

Community groups should regularly demonstrate progress on both short- and long-term goals. This requires the development of an effective communication strategy. As well, many of the participants in the evaluation study noted that keeping community agencies and service providers informed was crucial to the long-term success of their initiatives. Several respondents indicated that they used local media to get their message out. Pilot-site groups also used newsletters and brochures to enhance their visibility. Others developed logos or sought high-profile locations in the community to raise public awareness of the initiative and increase community access. Finally, several respondents suggested linking their efforts to broader regional, provincial and even national initiatives. In the case of the Municipal Drug Strategy, this included relating local activities to those sponsored by Health Canada or the National Crime Prevention Centre. This lent credibility and generated support for local initiatives, since they appeared to be part of a larger, more important effort.

Are the necessary resources available to sustain the community initiative?

Long-term availability of resources is a major factor contributing to the sustainability of community initiatives. However, resources are not sufficient to ensure sustainability. Many important and useful projects or programs do not end when their funding runs out, and this suggests that something else is required for sustainability. The first five questions and answers highlight some of the other factors related to sustainability.

Securing long-term resources is a significant challenge for most community groups. Funding agencies, including those connected with provincial and federal governments, do not normally provide continuing funding to community groups. Project funds may be provided for specific issues, pilot projects or demonstration projects, but these funds are typically one-time, time-limited grants. The assumption is that local authorities will fund worthwhile projects once outside funding ends. Unfortunately, local authorities have their own priorities and little room in their budgets for additional expenditures. This leaves community groups on a funding treadmill, spending much time, energy and resources writing grant proposals and seeking funds.

The evaluation study identified a number of strategies to deal with resource issues. First, look to community support. A community has a variety of resources that can be mobilized. Most of the community groups had little difficulty attracting community support to deal with substance-abuse issues. In-kind resources—meeting space, access to office equipment (telephones, computers and fax machines) and supplies—were usually readily available. Financial resources were more difficult to secure. Groups should identify who in the community is already working on the issue. Bringing these people together provided an opportunity for community partners to develop new and more efficient ways to work together. In addition, community groups learned about resources already available in the community and how to access any unused capacity.

Many of the community organizations suggested using news media to publicize an issue and help mobilize community support. News media can also help raise community awareness of the issue. This does not require financial resources, since news media contribute their resources. Community groups were able to take advantage of the expertise and programming already provided to the community by existing service providers. By highlighting the need and facilitating access, the community groups were able to mobilize existing community resources to meet their objectives.

Community groups were most successful in securing financial resources when the problem or issue became part of the mandate of an institutional partner, such as the municipal government. For example, if a municipality accepts responsibility for developing and implementing a municipal drug strategy, it can make administrative and financial resources available to the community group concerned with the issue. The importance of administrative resources and, in particular, having a dedicated coordinator, cannot be overstated. Those communities with dedicated coordinators and administrative resources were much more likely to be successful. They were also more likely to be able to sustain their efforts. In most of these cases, the local municipality provided the bulk of the funding for the administrative resources, including the coordinator. The respondents suggested that this was within the mandate of the local municipality, especially when the issue affected the community as a whole. As well, providing administrative resources, including a coordinator's position, can make economic sense for a municipality if the resulting community activity improves the effectiveness or efficiency of existing resources. Better use of existing resources is a likely outcome of such a process, given the emphasis on partnerships and the development of protocols that typify many community initiatives.

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Is there a shared community vision that outlines common goals and objectives?

Each of the nine pilot sites expended a great deal of time and effort developing mission or vision statements. Participants found these extremely important, since they ensured that different points of view were expressed and explored. The entire group then had ownership of the resulting short- and long-term goals, making each member responsible for the success of the community initiative. Developing a common vision may be time-consuming, but many of the participants found it worthwhile. The process helped to control expectations and avoid misunderstandings once an initiative began. For example, mounting a public education campaign could be managed with existing resources in most communities, but adding expensive new services (such as residential care) was not possible for most communities in the short term. Understanding this helped community groups specify short- and long-term goals.

Has coordination and administration received sufficient attention?

Among the most important factors influencing the success and sustainability of community initiatives are dedicated resources for coordination and administration. Those who volunteer time and effort to local concerns do so in their time. Few resources are available for coordination and administration, leaving no one to do collective work, unless a coordinator position is created and adequately resourced. For many of the pilot sites, having a coordinator was key to their success and sustainability. A coordinator can help the group function effectively, as well as help secure future funding by writing grant proposals. The respondents suggested several ways to fund a coordinator. Most of the municipalities participating in the Municipal Drug Strategy were willing to contribute to a coordinator position. Respondents also suggested that some of the larger institutional partners could contribute to funding a coordinator, since this would enhance their service delivery. They also suggested drawing on existing resources for coordination services.

Is there a strategy that supports evidence-based planning and decision-making?

Many of the community groups recognized the importance of accountability for their long-term success and sustainability. Respondents said that timely information is required to support community meetings, consultations and decision-making. There is also a need for ongoing evaluation and assessment. This can be achieved through ongoing needs assessments, community surveys and resource inventories. Considerable time, effort and expertise are required for this research. Some communities have the capacity to do their own research through municipal social development departments or social planning councils. Others tapped into nearby community colleges or universities for assistance. However, in cases where existing resources are unavailable, external resources must be found to undertake the research needed for evidence-based planning and decision-making.