



# Prevention Collaboration in Action

Understanding the Basics

## Why Should We Collaborate?

Collaboration is exciting, but it can also seem scary—particularly for people unaccustomed to working in this way. Being able to articulate the value of collaboration is thus important not only for bringing new partners on board but also for building the readiness of current team members to connect and work in new ways—for the value of collaboration and its importance to prevention success.

Here are some important reasons to collaborate:

- **Collaboration can increase your access to local resources.** Prevention organizations face an uphill battle in finding and maintaining resources to fuel their prevention programs. Strategic collaborations can help you tap the resources available in your community—whether they are people (e.g., staff, volunteers), supplies (e.g., money, equipment), specialized knowledge and skills, or community connections. Collaboration can also extend the reach of your own resources by making them available to new audiences.
- **Collaboration can help you build prevention knowledge.** Thoughtfully selected partners can help you better understand critical prevention topics (such as the nexus of substance misuse prevention and suicide), provide an “inside” look at a unique prevention setting (such as how prevention operates on college campuses) or population (such as barriers that LGBTQ+ youth face accessing care), or help you build important prevention processes (such as knowledge of specialized data analysis techniques). Working with partners may also open the door to new learning opportunities that can strengthen and inform your prevention activities.
- **You won’t be able to implement environmental change strategies unless you collaborate.** Unlike strategies that target individual behavior, environmental prevention strategies focus on creating an atmosphere that makes it easier for people to act in healthy ways. These strategies do this by changing the culture and contexts within which decisions are made, influencing the community standards, institutions, or structures that shape individual behaviors. Ideally, the most effective prevention approaches are those

that include a blend of environmental strategies that align with and reinforce prevention strategies directed at individuals.<sup>1</sup> However, the success of these strategies relies on the involvement of multiple partners, working across multiple settings. In other words: environmental strategies require successful collaboration.

- **Collaboration will help to ensure that your prevention efforts are appropriate for those populations being centered.** The slogan "Nothing about us without us," made popular by the disability rights movement, reflects a core value of prevention practice: people should have a voice in matters that affect their health and communities. By working in partnership with community members and involving them in aspects of prevention planning, implementation, and evaluation, you demonstrate respect for the people you serve and increase your own capacity to provide prevention services that meet genuine needs, build on strengths, produce positive outcomes, and contribute to the reduction of behavioral health inequities.
- **Collaboration can increase your capacity to address related behavioral health problems, as well as the social determinants of behavioral health.** Many of the factors that contribute to substance use also contribute to related behavioral health problems, such as suicide and violence. By collaborating with the individuals and organizations that target these related problems, you will be better positioned to identify and implement prevention strategies that address these "shared" factors, and to produce outcomes in multiple areas. You will also be better positioned to address some of the structural and systemic factors that influence health. While addressing these social determinants directly made be outside of the scope of your prevention work, you can contribute by sitting at the tables of those partners who do address these factors, and inviting them to sit at yours.
- **Working with others will ultimately help you get more done.** Despite the initial "costs" of establishing new relationships, involving the right partners in your prevention efforts will bring more people and assets to the prevention table, allowing you to do more—and do it better—than you could on your own.
- **Working with local community members is vital to sustaining your prevention efforts.** Key community members care about your priority problem and/or the population it affects. They have the power to support and advance your efforts. By working together with these partners throughout the prevention planning process, you will build the connections and expertise needed to maintain the positive outcomes produced by your prevention programs, as well as the processes that contributed to those outcomes.
- **Collaboration is the only way to move the prevention needle.** Substance use and misuse are complex problems that require the energy, expertise, and experience of multiple players, working together across disciplines. Prevention practitioners need

diverse partners—from local residents to service providers to community leaders to people with lived experience—to share information and resources, raise awareness of critical substance use problems, build support for prevention, and ensure that prevention activities reach multiple populations with multiple strategies in multiple settings. Success can't, and won't, happen alone.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Gardner, S. E. & Brounstein, P. J. (2001). *Principles of substance abuse prevention*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Division of Knowledge Development and Evaluation.