

PEER NETWORKING AND PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Community change doesn't happen successfully unless people and organizations in the community get involved. Peer networking can help, by building a shared space for people and organizations to communicate, plan and take action. To support its Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative and the communities that are part of it, The California Endowment did a study of peer networking, and this summary gives its results. The results can be used by communities to help shape their BHC efforts, including The Hubs - which will be the organizing points for peer networking in each of the 14 sites.

What is Peer Networking and Why Does it Work?

Peer networks help people with common goals (like improving children's health outcomes) exchange information, solve problems, and build unified leadership for change. Peers might be local residents, hospital medical directors, community service workers, or all of these. Often they live or work in a particular community which is the focus for change.

Community change is hard, and to succeed people have to work together and support each other. Peer networking helps because it creates a shared space, like a town square, where people can feel comfortable talking with each other, debating possible solutions to problems, and getting information that helps them with the work of change. Both online and in-person methods can be part of a good peer network, and it usually has somebody on staff to help coordinate everything. It saves time, builds good relationships, and gives a regular schedule for people to work together with others who "look like them."

What Helps Peer Networking Succeed?

A way to think about peer networking starts with its "bedrock" qualities and moves up to the ultimate outcome of community change - as shown in the simple Grid on the next page.

HOW CAN PEER NETWORKING HELP BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES?

PEER NETWORKING AND COMMUNITY CHANGE GRID	
Community Change	Ultimate Outcome
Learning • Capacity Building • Infrastructure	Immediate Outcomes
Good Practices • Challenges	Strategies
Communication • Space • Resources Problem-Solving	Foundation
Trust • Time • Truth	Bedrock

At the **BEDROCK** level of the Grid are three enduring qualities of successful peer networks, confirmed time and time again by research and community experience:

1 - Trust - peer networks are successful when they create a trusting environment, in which people feel safe saying what they think and having an honest discussion.

2 - Time - networking is successful when the peer network has the time to develop, find its own way of working, and to “mature” as a community organization.

3 - Truth - networks are successful when they operate “transparently,” and gather good information about how well they’re working and how they could be improved.

At the **FOUNDATION** level above this bedrock are the core components of peer networking:

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1 - First is a **communication system** that includes both in-person and electronic parts (these may be conducted in real time, like telephone conference calls; or virtually, such as e-mail exchanges or Twitter messages). In many cases, the electronic parts are cheaper to use, both in time and money. But getting people together face to face is also important, particularly to help develop trust when a network is new.

Some peer networks are English-only, which is simple and can save on costs. But especially in California, where some participants are likely to be Spanish-speakers, other options are needed - from traditional (e.g., translators) to innovative (e.g., handheld translation devices).

2 - Peer networking uses these communication tools to create a **space** (physical, electronic, and usually both) in which network members can interact. An orientation process is useful for new members, usually involving print or electronic information combined with an interpersonal touch - like a meeting or call with an established network member.

3 - Good peer networking includes a range of information, human and financial **resources** needed for support. Even when outside resources are available (to build information systems, hire staff, etc.), as is the case for the BHC Hubs, peer networks need to look frequently at how they're operating - in particular, to be sure they aren't taking on more than the available resources can support. A "resources assessment" can be done several times a year.

4 - And successful peer networking includes setting up a **problem-solving process** which helps its members, and the community, to identify problems that need to be solved, then work on solving them. For example, problem-solving can be an item on the agenda for each network meeting. Or a listserv can be created so that people can post problems and get input about how to solve them online. Peer network coordinators help both by setting up how these things will be done, and by keeping a record of what problems are raised and how they're

solved. That can include a more formal evaluation of the peer network at least once a year.

People in peer networks need ground rules for what they bring to the “town square.” For instance, while people stay involved with peer networking partly because it helps them with problems in their own particular lives or organizations, that needs to be balanced with problem-solving that’s focused on the bigger group goal.

Good peer networking builds on **STRATEGIES** that include both using **good practices** that other peer networks have found helpful, and responding to **challenges** that appear regularly for such activities. Among the good practices:

- Provide a safe, trustful place for participants to interact on topics important to them
- Encourage personal as well as professional interactions among participants
- Customize the peer networking structure to meet specific participant needs
- Promote opportunities for the participants and their organizations to collaborate
- Encourage participant feedback about the strengths and challenges of peer networking
- Build the activity’s initial success before broadening its range of participants
- Offer resources for participants to translate ideas into action
- Create sub-groups within the peer networking activity to focus on particular topics of interest

HOW CAN PEER NETWORKING HELP BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES?

- Shape the activity by analyzing the successes of other peer networking activities
- Level the playing field by sharing basic information about the focal area of peer networking

Some of the challenges are:

- Peer networking is costly in both time and money
- Participants in peer networking may find it difficult to take action on good ideas they've developed
- The goals of peer networking may be difficult to identify and to share with others
- Peer networking may be difficult to integrate with other activities of its sponsor
- It may be challenging to balance equality with expertise in selecting peer networking participants
- Organizational complexity and culture of a peer networking sponsor may limit chances for success
- It may be challenging to develop a good exit strategy for a peer networking activity
- Replicating peer networking activities may be difficult
- Participant turnover may limit the success of peer networking
- Individual and group psychological factors may limit the success of peer networking

HOW CAN PEER NETWORKING HELP BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES?

In thinking about how these factors apply to BHC sites and their Hubs, it's helpful to remember a principle from Peters and Waterman's groundbreaking book, *In Search of Excellence* - "simultaneous loose-tight properties." Good peer networking needs to be implemented both with structure and flexibility, so it works well but also responds to changing circumstances.

New technology can help with peer networking:

1 - technology platforms - like cell phones, to which voice or text messages can be sent, and smart phones which can receive e-mails, instant messages and documents, all managed by staff who serve as peer network coordinators, so the right messages get to the right people.

2 - new media - like blogs or webinars to help people connect and exchange ideas or concerns. Again, these methods only work well when their content is targeted to what people want related to their peer networking activities.

3 - social media - like Facebook and Twitter also can be important, especially for younger network members.

4 - social network mapping - can help network members understand their communities better, because these computer programs show graphically how people are organized and spread out in a community. This approach can be especially helpful as part of an initial planning activity to structure a network, looking at how it can best be set up to serve particular audiences.

There are three **IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES** of peer networking:

1 - **learning** by individual people and by the community organizations of which they're a part - good networks help people get educated about the area of change they're working on.

2 - **capacity building** for the peer network and for the organizations involved in the work of community change.

3 - development of an effective **infrastructure** for operating the network and maintaining it over time.

Finally, peer networking is focused on one **ULTIMATE OUTCOME** - helping community change happen. This outcome needs to be defined by the community as well as by the funder. The outcome a network concentrates on needs to be specific - goals that are too broad can waste valuable energy. The outcome also needs to be measurable, so peer network members can gather information (informally, formally by an evaluation, or both) and actually judge how much difference their activities are making.

The Endowment's study made several other suggestions for using peer networking to promote community change:

1 - Use the Grid and the 10 good practices and 10 challenges to make up a "planning checklist" for organizing The Hubs, and looking at their progress along the way.

2 - Select The Hub steering committee members carefully, choosing people willing to put the community above their own agenda - this is also true for selecting any network member!

3 - Integrate Hub and other BHC activities with other activities (such as related community change efforts) host organizations and communities are doing anyway, to get an extra boost of energy.

4 - Involve young people who have good skills in using graphics, social media or the arts to shape The Hub's activities.

5 - Get peer network members to talk about their community's past experiences with networking, good and bad, so all can learn from what's already happened in the community.

6 - Devote peer network sessions to looking at what rewards might be offered both to people and organizations for their involvement with BHC.

7 - Create a diverse membership for the peer network, and build in website content and networking events in languages other than English, as that is appropriate.

8 - Look at how the peer network can help its members build their leadership skills.

9 - Look for chances to create partnerships with other initiatives in the community - for example, several BHC sites also received Promise Neighborhood awards from the U.S. Department of Education.

A number of suggestions also were made in the study report for actions The California Endowment can take, such as hiring a full-time coordinator to support the 14 BHC The Hub peer networks as a group.

Want to Know More?

To learn more about peer networking and how it can help Building Healthy Communities, you can download a free copy from www.calendow.org of The California Endowment's report *Peer Networking and Place-Based Initiatives* (written by Thomas E. Backer, PhD and Janice P. Kern, MA, Human Interaction Research Institute, 2010).