September 2020

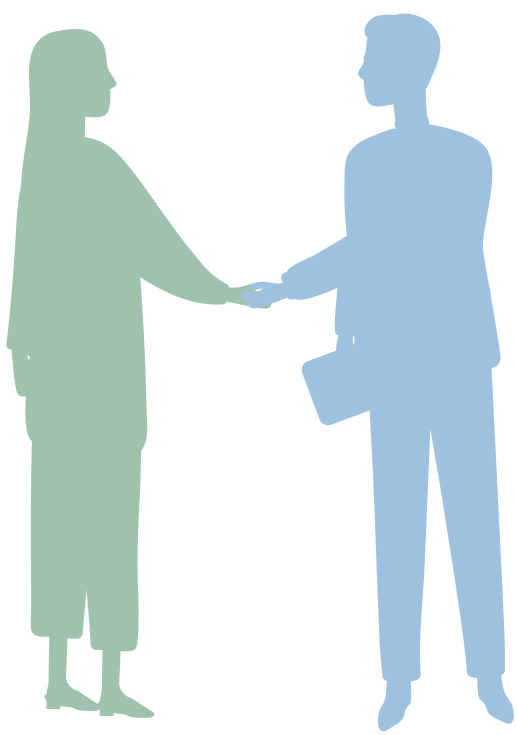
OPA EVALUATION TA

Building and Retaining Partnerships Tip Sheet

The key to a successful program is creating strong partnerships and maintaining them, especially when conducting an evaluation. Strong partnerships can establish your program within the community, helping sustain it throughout the grant period and into the future. When partners drop out or are unable to commit, valuable programming and evaluation time is lost. This tip sheet gives Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) grantees some best practices and strategies for retaining partners in programming and evaluation throughout the grant period.

Best practices for building partnerships

A successful partnership begins with a shared mission. Both sides should understand the goals of the other side, have clear expectations about roles and responsibilities, and maintain open communication. It is important to invest the time to build cohesiveness, trust, and clear communication processes. You will probably have many competing demands at the start of programming, such as training staff, working with curriculum developers, and finalizing materials. However, spending time in the beginning to build relationships with partners is equally important and makes communication easier if an issue arises later. Sometimes it takes creative thinking and going back to the drawing board multiple times to get it right.



Research potential partners

Before approaching potential partners, spend time researching their organizations. This shows that from the start of the relationship, you are serious about a partnership and value quality work.

Learn the potential partner's mission and goals. Start by looking at the websites of potential partners. Spend time evaluating whether your goals and mission are compatible with theirs and be able to articulate your goals and mission and how they align with the partner's mission and goals before you reach out to them. Compatibility increases the likelihood of a sustained commitment. If you discover that your mission and goals do not clearly align, this step will save you the time of pursuing a partnership that is likely not a good fit.

Clearly define your target population and make sure it aligns with your partners' population. Before outreach, make sure you have a detailed definition of your target population and that your population is similar to the population your potential partner serves. For example, you might define your target population for a potential partner as: "We are looking for pregnant adolescents, ages 14 to 19, who speak English or Spanish and are eligible for Medicaid."

Document the other services or programming the potential partner offers to assess compatibility. It is important, especially for your evaluation, to understand the other programming your potential partner offers. Not only will you be knowledgeable when you reach out, but you will also understand if your program is compatible with the partners' other services (and what youth in the comparison might get, if you are using an experimental evaluation design). Learn what you can about the programming beforehand and be prepared to discuss it in detail during early conversations. For example, when working with schools, it will be important to know what they cover in health classes and whether they offer any other programs similar to yours.

Determine who the leaders are and the roles of other key staff. Figure out who your points of contact will be once you do reach out. You should determine (as best you can) who serves in leadership roles along with other potential points of contact. Depending on how many potential partners you reach out to, consider developing a template to record this information and document your outreach attempts. We include an example of a Partner Development Worksheet as Appendix A.

Be clear about what you want from a partner and how they will benefit

Once you have done your background research on potential partner organizations, take time to write out precisely what you are going to ask them to do—for example, help recruit your target population; provide staff to be trained to help deliver your program; provide a physical space for programming; or offer the program, such as to students in a health class. For recruitment partners, make sure that you know what your total enrollment targets are, and what target you have in mind for their organization and have a general sense of how feasible this will be based on your background research. Be ready to explain how the organization may benefit from the partnership and how you are planning to make things easier for them. For example, your program may fill a core curriculum requirement, address a long-standing need, or help them reach a service target. Showing up prepared conveys that you are serious about a partnership.

Communication is crucial

Start your partnership strong with clear communication. Here are some best practices and things to keep in mind during these first interactions.

- **When you are ready to reach out, be prepared with information about the prospective partner organization.** If you used the Partner Development Worksheet (Appendix A), make sure you have it out during the call. This shows potential partners that you understand their organization.

> You might not have a detailed discussion on the first call, but you should have everything you need available in case things move quickly.

- **Be ready to share information about your organization.** This includes your organization's mission, a short description of your program, and information about similar work you have done in the past, if applicable. If you have a flyer that describes your organization's background or any letters of support—for example, from community leaders—you may want to share this ahead of time or once you connect with a main point of contact. A letter of support can help stress the importance of participation and communicate that key stakeholders support your program.

- **Plan an in-person meeting or phone call.** Emails and letters can open doors or work as a first step in communication. The next step should be having an in-person or phone meeting to share the details of your program and a partner's potential role. This will ensure that details are not missed, and all questions are answered. If meeting remotely, consider a videoconference.

- **Your initial outreach may vary by the type of organization you are approaching.** Your research will guide whom you reach out to first, and initial conversations may focus on discovering who needs to be included in future meetings. For example, if you are working with schools, you will need to determine where to start your outreach, whether it is with someone at the district- or school-levels. Remember, you may need to reach out to more than one person at the organization, but they might not all be decision makers. Make sure you keep a log of the people you talked to and the result of your discussions. Plan on sending a follow-up email summarizing your discussion.

- **Communicate clearly your expectations of what a partner's role will be.** When expectations are clear from the beginning, you will limit surprises to the partner's staff, which will lead to better relationships and help sustain the partnership. When there are surprises or changing expectations, partners may scale back their role or even pull out of the project.

- **Clearly define what your role is and highlight what your team will do to reduce the burden on staff and youth.** For example, if you're working in schools, your staff may be responsible for delivering the intervention, but will need to meet with classroom teachers to debrief after lessons. For evaluation activities, to reduce burden, your team may collect the data such as program observations and surveys, and the length of the survey should be short enough to be administered during one class period.

- **Develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU)** with the appropriate person on behalf of the organization. An MOU provides a list of responsibilities, such as data collection activities, that you and your partner agree to. It can also include performance benchmarks (for example, for recruitment) and terms for payment, if applicable. It is not a legally binding agreement, but it can be used to ensure a common understanding of roles and responsibilities (Thomas, 2015).

Setting up the MOU is a necessary step. However, you should not rely solely on an MOU as the backbone of your relationship. The other work you do building a partnership will be more meaningful, especially if problems come up later.

- **Discuss benefits with partner of participating, including incentives for the partner or participants.** If you are offering programming to the youth served by your potential partner, describe the merits of the program and the benefits it can offer youth. Make sure you are able to tie the program to the partner's mission and work. Come prepared with evidence on the benefits of the program's benefits, whether from your own work or research, or the work or research done by others.
  - In some cases, you may need to offer partners a monetary incentive. Based on your research, you should have a sense of the organization's capacity to take on what you ask and the type of incentive you need to offer.
  - If you plan to collect data from youth as part of your evaluation, be clear about what you will

Examples of clear expectations

- **For evaluations**, tell your partner how many times you will need to come in for data collection before programming for pre-tests, during programming for activities such as program observations, and after programming for post-tests. Plan on sharing any data collection instruments with your partner in advance so they are aware of the types of questions that may be asked of youth.

- **For recruitment**, share your enrollment targets, when you expect recruitment to take place, and how long you expect it to last. Be sure to differentiate between target numbers for eligible youth and target numbers for enrolled youth, because consent procedures will likely mean that not all eligible people enroll.

offer youth for their participation, such as small incentives to complete follow-up surveys or participate in focus groups.

- **Solicit feedback from the partner organization staff on the feasibility of your ask.** It is important to ask the right questions about what is possible and what is not possible during your initial conversations. Do not assume that partner staff will raise all concerns during your first exchanges, especially if they are new to the type of program you are offering. Try to include staff at varying levels during the initial conversations; staff in administration may raise different concerns compared to front-line staff. Important questions should probe on issues like partner staff's knowledge of the local context, administrative constraints, schedules, core class/credit requirements for youth with the goal of assessing feasibility of partnership and alignment with the program's design.
- **Remain professional and collaborative in all communications.** Take time to reflect on your shared missions by thinking about a potential partner's priorities and mission and how they relate to your work. When taking a collaborative approach, make sure you allow space for feedback from the partner. A partner's suggestions might not always be feasible for your program and evaluation design. If they aren't, be clear about why you can't take that advice. You don't want to over-promise, which could lead a partner to walk away later.

Although there are many important details to convey in your first meetings, be cognizant that your potential partners will have many competing demands. Giving them a **well-organized overview of their roles and responsibilities along with a timeline for the work** will help if they need something to reference later. Figure 1 is an example of an overview template, which is included

Figure 1. Roles and Responsibilities Overview Template

[FILL PROGRAM NAME] Data Collection Activities for 2020-2021

1

In the 2020-2021 school year, there will be two primary data collection activities: (1) Enrolling a second cohort of students into the study (those students scheduled to take health[1] in fall 2020), and (2) administering a 12-month follow-up survey to Cohort 1 youth (those who enrolled in the study in fall 2019).

2

Activity	Start	Finish
Cohort 2 Enrollment: School provides class rosters for students enrolled in health in fall 2020	August 2020	September 2021
Cohort 2 Enrollment: Study team and school collaborate to obtain parental permission for study	August 2020	September 2020
Cohort 2 Enrollment: Study Team administers baseline survey	September 2020	*Baseline surveys must be completed before PROGRAM or other similar health programming begins
Cohort 1 Follow-up: School provides enrollment information on youth who participated in the study in fall 2019	September 2020	October 2020
Cohort 1 Follow-up: Study Team administers 12-month follow-up survey	November 2020	December 2020

3

Cohort 2 Enrollment

Enrolling a second cohort of youth into the study involves the following steps:

1. Collecting rosters of students enrolled in health in fall 2020

The first step is for your Data Collection Liaison to request a copy of your school's fall health class rosters.

- Rosters should include student name, date of birth, district ID, grade, health teacher, and class period.
- We will use the rosters to create personalized parental permission forms for each student.

2. Obtain Parental Permission

- Your Data Collection Liaison will work with your school contact to schedule a date/time for our staff to conduct an initial visit to your school to distribute the permission forms to students in health classes.
- After their initial visit, our staff will work directly with the school contact to coordinate dates and times when they can return to collect and redistribute permission forms. This process will continue until we receive at least 90% of the permission forms back. It does not matter whether the response is "yes" or "no" – we just need at least 90% of the forms signed and returned. Each student receives a $5 gift card for returning a signed form.

3. Confirm Plans for the Baseline Survey Administration

- Your Data Collection Liaison will work with your school contact to schedule a date and time and confirm logistics for the baseline survey administration.
- We will also work with you to determine the day and time for make-up sessions so that we can survey youth who were absent when the survey was first administered.

[1] In this example, the TPP programming will be offered during health class

4

Your Data Collection Liaison

Name: ______________________________

Contact Info: ______________________________

in full in Appendix B. In this example, the program is working with schools to enroll students in an in-school TPP program, administer a baseline survey, and administer a follow-up survey for a group that enrolled in an earlier year.

The following are key pieces of information to include in your overview (as shown in Figure 1):

1. A short introduction that clearly states the planned activities. If your program will be working with the partner over multiple years, consider creating an overview for each year (or, for schools, each semester, trimester, or quarter).
2. A summary table that provides a timeline and brief description of planned activities.
3. A bulleted list that explains what each activity with the partner entails. Be clear about who is responsible for each activity and what your expectations are, such as data points needed on rosters and target consent rates or survey response rates. This is an opportunity to restate the expectations you discussed in your initial outreach. Include information about any incentives you are giving to the target population.
4. Contact information of the person on your team who the partner will be working with.

Table 1 provides other strategies to keep in mind during your partner development stage.

Best practices for maintaining partnerships and resolving problems

Starting the project with a strong partnership will allow you and your team to anticipate issues before they become a problem that could lead to a partner dropping out of the program. The grantee director should check in regularly with internal staff who are working with partners to ask the following:

- ✓ How is communication going? Do they receive responses promptly?
- ✓ Do they anticipate any issues? If so, what can you start doing to address the issue?
- ✓ What are they hearing from partners about how satisfied they are to be a part of the program or evaluation?

Remember to remain flexible and adapt to changing needs. It is very important to have a dedicated liaison at the partner organization for communication, but at later stages you may need to cultivate relationships

Table 1. Additional strategies for developing partnerships

Strategy	Description
Maintain one point of contact on your side	✓ Partners such as schools and community-based organizations have many competing demands so you should take this into consideration when communicating with partners. ✓ Emails and calls coming in from different people might lead to nonresponse. Having a dedicated person on your team to work with each school or organization will help build a strong relationship. ✓ If you need to transition staff, make sure you introduce your partner to the new staff.
Ask the partner organization to provide a staff member to be your liaison	✓ Strive to build a strong, collaborative relationship with your partner's liaison. They can help raise issues up within their leadership team if needed and can provide you with important context on how the partner organization operates. ✓ When working with schools, it is essential to get the principal's buy-in. You should work with the principal to determine who the right person is to talk to going forward, such as an assistant principal or counselor, because principals are often busy and hard to reach.
Set up expectations and desired methods of communication early	✓ Is it best to reach your point of contact by phone, email, or text? ✓ Are partner staff at their desks at a certain time (or never)? ✓ Clarify how often you will be checking in and needing information. Remember that there will be competing demands, and think of what you really need. ✓ Standing check-ins work well and are important right before and during data collection phases. These can be biweekly or monthly, and can always be canceled when you don't need them.
Plan a formal check-in with the partner after programming begins	✓ Use the meeting to discuss how the partnership is going and allow for minor modifications to original agreements after both sides gain some experience with the program. ✓ Explain the purpose of this check in during initial partner development to demonstrate the importance collaboration and flexibility. ✓ Schedule the meeting after the first cohort or semester of programming.

for different program needs. For example, your main point of contact may be an administrative person at the school, but you will also need to form relationships with classroom teachers who your staff will interact with on a more regular basis.

A common complaint may be that staff at the partner organization do not feel invested in the program or with their roles. This can be a minor issue that leads to a partner not meeting its responsibilities or even dropping out. To get in front of an issue like this, consider ways to keep partner staff invested at the start and as programming continues. Have an in-person meeting to introduce the program and their roles. Once programming begins, consider small gestures such as dropping off coffee or snacks to staff during an in-person meeting or sharing study “newsletters” that show how they are progressing. If your project uses a partner for recruitment, consider entering staff who meet targets into a lottery for a small prize or offering a pizza party to classrooms that meet targets.

Investigate problems by collecting data

Despite all of the steps you take to develop and maintain strong partnerships, retention issues, such as partners not responding to calls or emails, not meeting expectations, or wanting to drop out of the program, may arise. When they do, you will want to identify the cause of the problem by collecting data, just as you do for continuous quality improvement for other aspects of programming. Here are a few things to keep in mind during this information-gathering phase:

- ✓ Have someone senior, such as the grantee or program director, step in to signify the importance of this issue to the partner.
- ✓ Make a personal connection. Try to schedule an in-person meeting or, when that is not possible, reach out by phone. Email may be helpful for quick exchanges, but it should not be the only connection you rely on, especially when issues arise.
- ✓ Follow your collaborative approach to communication by asking what you or your program could do to improve the situation.
- ✓ Be empathetic to the partner’s concerns. Keep in mind that organizations rarely have enough time or resources.

In the end, you will need to determine if the relationship with this partner is salvageable. If it is, you will want to use the information you collected about the problem to move forward with co-creating solutions. Unfortunately, there are times when even with all the right steps in place, a relationship with a partner cannot continue. If that is the case, be sure to document the lessons learned over the course of working together to use for outreach to potential new partners.

Co-create solutions based on data gathering

After the initial step of collecting information with your partners about what caused the issue, work with them to create solutions. Partners know the local context they are working in and can give you valuable feedback on why targets are not being met or why staff may be unhappy. Including them in the strategizing effort will help them feel invested. Be responsive, and make sure you are tailoring strategies to the identified problem. Some promising adjustments may seem minor on the partner’s side but may actually have larger implications for your program model, curriculum, and evaluation. For example, a partner may suggest changes to the curriculum to address concerns from staff that would lead to fidelity issues. Make sure you discuss proposed changes with your project officer. As with any adaptation to your program, make sure to document the change in strategy and consider what data may be helpful to collect to see if the strategy is successful.

Table 2 has a few strategies to address different types of issues that you may encounter with partners.

Table 2. Potential challenges for partnerships, and strategies to overcome them

Retention challenge	Potential solutions
Partner is unable to meet recruitment or enrollment targets	✓ If parents are not returning consent forms, consider implementing a verbal consent process (with approval from an institutional review board). Staff on the grantee side could take some of the burden of this on and lessen the load on the partner. ✓ If youth are not interested in the programming, work with partner staff to discuss ways to sell it better. What are they hearing from the youth? Is there a way to improve delivery based on this feedback? ✓ For out-of-school partners, if they are having trouble identifying eligible youth, discuss other recruitment strategies such as using social media, flyers, mailings and email blasts. ✓ Bring on a new partner to help boost counts. Your partner may have suggestions for other organizations who serve your target population, and could be able to facilitate a conversation.
Partner staff are not invested or are unhappy	✓ Have a meeting with all relevant partner staff to make sure everyone knows about the study, why it is important, and why their role is important. ✓ Have a partnership meeting for all partners to get together. This will give them an opportunity to feel invested, be part of the larger effort, and share their successes and challenges. ✓ Consider adding an incentive if you are not already offering one or reevaluate what you are offering. Work with the partner organization to understand what type of incentive may promote better buy-in from their staff.
Partner activities are too burdensome	✓ Strategize ways that your team can take on work that might help relieve some of the burden. ✓ Discuss adding or modifying incentives with the partner organization to help reduce the burden on staff or the organization.

Gaining new partners from existing partners

Build off the strong relationships you have developed. Ask your partners about other organizations that do similar work, and the kinds of programming those other organizations can provide. Ask your partner for a referral or a letter of support that you can share with other potential partners.

Additional resources

Bruursema, T. (2015, June) *Recommendations for Successfully Recruiting and Retaining District Participation in a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Impact Evaluation* (Brief 9). Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief for OAH & ACYF Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Grantees. https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/assets/tppe-val-tabrief9.pdf

Thomas, M. (2015, June) *Recommendations for Successfully Recruiting and Retaining School Participation in a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Impact Evaluation* (Brief 10). Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief for OAH & ACYF Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Grantees. https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/assets/tppe-val-tabrief10.pdf

Suggested citation

APPENDIX A

Partner Development Worksheet

Date: ______________________________

Contact Person Name/Title: ______________________________

Organization Name: ______________________________

(Other Key Staff/Leaders): ______________________________

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Organization Mission Statement: ______________________________

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Type of Service Provided: ______________________________

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Target Population: ______________________________

Service Numbers: ______________________________

Primary Partners: ______________________________

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Who We Know in Common: ______________________________

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Shared Values: ______________________________

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Meeting Goal (Measure of Success): ______________________________

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APPENDIX A

Notes:

Next Steps/Action Items (Deadlines):

APPENDIX B

Roles and Responsibilities Overview Template

[FILL PROGRAM NAME] Data Collection Activities for 2020-2021

In the 2020-2021 school year, there will be two primary data collection activities: (1) Enrolling a second cohort of students into the study (those students scheduled to take health[1] in fall 2020), and (2) administering a 12-month follow-up survey to Cohort 1 youth (those who enrolled in the study in fall 2019).

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Cohort 2 Enrollment

Enrolling a second cohort of youth into the study involves the following steps:

1. Collecting rosters of students enrolled in health in fall 2020

The first step is for your Data Collection Liaison to request a copy of your school's fall health class rosters.

- Rosters should include student name, date of birth, district ID, grade, health teacher, and class period.
- We will use the rosters to create personalized parental permission forms for each student.

2. Obtain Parental Permission

- Your Data Collection Liaison will work with your school contact to schedule a date/time for our staff to conduct an initial visit to your school to distribute the permission forms to students in health classes.
- After their initial visit, our staff will work directly with the school contact to coordinate dates and times when they can return to collect and redistribute permission forms. This process will continue until we receive at least 90% of the permission forms back. It does not matter whether the response is "yes" or "no" – we just need at least 90% of the forms signed and returned. Each student receives a $5 gift card for returning a signed form.
- It is very important that school staff do not tell students and parents about the availability of PROGRAM NAME while we are collecting parent permission for the study. Students and parents should be providing permission for the study independent of whatever health programming the school will offer in 2020-2021.

3. Confirm Plans for the Baseline Survey Administration

- Your Data Collection Liaison will work with your school contact to schedule a date and time and confirm logistics for the baseline survey administration.

[1] In this example, the TPP programming will be offered during health class

APPENDIX B

- We will also work with you to determine the day and time for make-up sessions so that we can survey youth who were absent when the survey was first administered.

Cohort 1 Follow-Up Data Collection

The preparation for and administration of the Study 12-month follow-up survey for Cohort 1 students involves the following steps:

1. Collect school enrollment information for Cohort 1 youth

The first step is for the study team to understand whether students who participated in the study last year are still enrolled in your school, and if not, where they may now be enrolled (if known).

- Your Data Collection Liaison will send the school contact a worksheet listing all of the Cohort 1 students who participated in the study last year and request updated school enrollment information. We will use this information to determine which students are still enrolled in the school and which students have moved out of the area.

2. Plan for 12-month follow-up survey administration

Your Data Collection Liaison will work with the school contact to schedule a date and time and confirm logistics for the 12-month follow-up survey administration for Cohort 1.

- Our staff will work directly with you to determine the day and time for make-up sessions so we can survey youth who were absent.
- Each student who completes the follow up survey will receive a $10 gift card.

Your Data Collection Liaison

Name: ______________________________

Contact Info: ______________________________

Thank you for your time and efforts—we look forward to another successful year together!