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Increasing Diversity in Your Coalition

Achieving and maintaining a strong coalition that reflects the diversity in the community is one of the essential components of a successful program. One very important strategy to increase diversity in local program coalitions is the inclusion of African American faith congregations. As simple as that may seem, program directors often discover this is an enormous challenge.

In many instances, the challenge exists due to a lack of understanding of cultural differences. However, it is very clear that African American congregations and *volunteer caregiving* make a great match. Many of these congregations are in constant touch with their frail, elderly and/or homebound members. Members and other people in the community with chronic health needs turn to these congregations for assistance.

It is important to note that no two congregations are alike. Even some that are members of the same denomination maintain their own autonomy.

What do you need to know and do to recruit African American congregations for your coalition? First, there is often a misperception on the part of these congregations about groups that want to offer services to their elderly members. In some cases a lack of trust exists on the part of the congregation. The idea of strangers going into the homes of their senior members raises a red flag. It must be made very clear that your program will not exploit the members in any way, particularly as it relates to health care delivery or drug experimentation.

Second, you must identify the key contact person who will make the decision in this matter. It is usually the pastor, bishop or lay leader. Or there may be a special committee or ministry that has the responsibility of determining if this relationship should be recommended to the congregation. Also, getting your foot in the door may mean getting the approval of the senior mother or deacon of the church who is a long-time member and has a great deal of unwritten authority and influence.

It is important to understand the various approval processes of the congregations. It may be informal but effective, and centered on the clergy. Or it may be more formal, with the dissemination of information being more time consuming.

It is imperative to develop an understanding of the clergy's scheduling and availability. It may not be best to schedule meetings or special events to introduce your program at certain times of the week (for example, Wednesday nights). It may be helpful to ask a busy pastor or bishop to identify another leader in the congregation to attend a special event as his or her representative.



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What are some things you can do to bolster your recruitment efforts? Seek the support of other clergy whose congregations already belong to your coalition. Many times, in the eyes of prospective recruits, these clergy add credibility to your coalition.

Identify any of your care recipients or board members who are members of the congregations you are trying to recruit and enlist their support.

Many African American congregations are members of local, state and national organizations. Find out to which organizations your potential coalition members belong, and obtain the contact information for the local, state and national leaders. These organizations host state and national meetings for their members. Introduce your program to the leadership and ask to make a presentation at one of their meetings or to participate in a health fair if they offer one.

Include the African American congregations on your mailing lists for your newsletter and other information about your program. Invite their members to attend health fairs and other community events.

Finally, it is important that you are genuine in sharing the *volunteer caregiving* goals, objectives and mutual expectations and emphasize how both parties benefit by having the congregation as a member of your coalition.