
Step 1: Mobilize Your Community

Step 1 will help you to:

- Communicate with others why efforts to promote the use of folic acid among women of childbearing age are important in your community.
- Decide who will be able to help you plan your program and how to ask them to participate.
- Determine how the group(s) will work together to make an effective prevention team.

1.1. Know Why You Are Acting

State the reason why you want to do something about birth defects in your community. Answering some or any of the questions below might give you a reason to act.

- How many infants are born with NTDs in my community every year?
- How many women of childbearing age in my community know about folic acid?



- Are women of childbearing age in my community getting enough folic acid?
- Is a large population in my community at higher risk for having babies with NTDs?
- Are there people in this community who are committed to helping others have healthy babies?

If you do not know what the issue is in your community, **Section 1.2 “Involve Others”** will help you gather a group of people together who can help define your community’s issue(s). Also, in Appendix C, you can find a list of each state’s health department birth defects surveillance contact. These individuals may be able to provide you with the number of NTDs that occur in your state every year. Remember that compelling data isn’t the only reason people may want to respond. People who have personally experienced having a baby with a birth defect, who have known someone who has had a baby with a birth defect, or who simply want babies to be healthy may wish to participate in activities to promote the use of folic acid among women of childbearing age.



As you plan your program and develop partnerships, be sure to think about how you will evaluate the success of your efforts. More information about evaluation planning is on pages 55-56 and in section 4.3, starting on page 97.

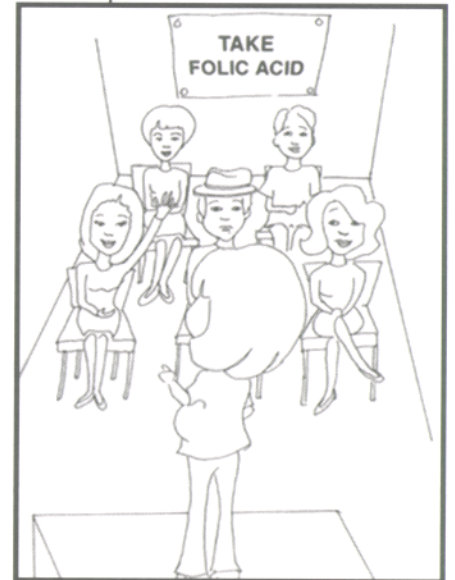
1.2. Involve Others

A diverse group of public, private, and civic agencies/organizations that can provide information about women in your community should be involved in your prevention program's planning, implementation, and evaluation activities. Successful prevention programs focus their efforts toward their target audience's knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors. Community partners can increase the quality of your prevention program—making it more efficient, effective, and accessible to women.

1.2-1 Identify Groups, Coalitions, Organizations, and Agencies that May Be Able to Contribute to Your Program

A detailed list of potential partners in your community is provided in Appendix C. Remember that women of childbearing age in your community—your target audience—are great sources of information. Ask those women who they think would be most helpful to your program's prevention efforts. Also, think about:

- Groups with whom you have existing relationships or have collaborated on past projects.
- Partners already involved in birth defect prevention or maternal and child health.
- Groups who have women as members, customers, employees, or clients.



- Community-based organizations such as youth centers and religious institutions (churches, synagogues, temples, and so forth). These places are especially important when trying to reach special populations.
- Market-research firms, news agencies, or advertising agencies.



Partnering Tip

- *Partners, especially women of childbearing age, should be involved as early as possible in planning the program. Be willing to adapt the program as new partners come on board.*
- *Groups that serve the health or educational needs of women in special populations, such as women of Hispanic origin, can provide valuable insight in planning, implementing, and evaluating your program. For instance, you may want to test the effectiveness of your prevention program's activity, ideas, or message at an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) class. In addition, ESL teachers may want to help you create materials understood by their students.*
- *Groups that provide nutrition information, free or low-cost vitamin supplements, fortified food products, and family planning services have been key resources in past campaigns.*
- *Market-research firms, newspaper agencies, or advertising agencies may be able to provide data on women in your community.*

1.2-2 Assess Potential Partners

The number of people who may be able to help in your community can seem overwhelming. Remember, more is not necessarily better. Think strategically about each organization, individual, or agency's contact with women of childbearing age and about how each might contribute to your program.

- How will they add to your capabilities?
- Do they have access to women in ways unavailable to you?
- Does their staff have skills you do not possess (for example, fluency in another language)?
- Do they have relationships or contacts with others who can expand your impact?

Aim to build a team of people who can share different perspectives about women of childbearing age in your community. Make a list of organizations that can reach many women and can have the most influence on women you want to reach. Prioritize this list, and make contacts in priority order. Following up with those organizations on your list is a good idea. You may also want to send an open invitation to agencies in your community and wait to hear responses.

Real World Examples



Puerto Rico's Partnering Efforts

The following "Real World Example" highlights a campaign's collaboration with many partners. This is not a description of the entire campaign but serves to demonstrate the importance of partnering in the creation of a successful prevention program.

Because state and local health departments usually have limited financial and personnel resources to initiate and independently maintain major folic acid health campaigns, collaboration with partners in the private and public sectors was crucial to the success of Puerto Rico's prevention efforts. The Puerto Rico Department of Health collaborated with other health care agencies and personnel, using a "train-the-trainer" approach to instruct approximately 1,000 health care professionals (pediatricians, nurses, obstetricians, nutritionists, social workers, and health educators) in three months. Some of these connections were already established; some were newly initiated for purposes of the campaign.

The private-sector partners included pharmaceutical companies, a cereal manufacturer, and a drugstore chain. These partners helped sponsor and fund a folic acid program through radio, television, and print media. A local pharmaceutical company manufactured tablets containing 400 micrograms of folic acid and supplied them at reduced cost. Another pharmaceutical company offered the services of its medical representatives to hand-deliver folic acid campaign materials to obstetricians and gynecologists. A public partner, the Puerto Rico Department of Education, agreed to incorporate folic acid information into the curriculum at the elementary, intermediate, and high school levels. A training program on folic acid for teachers was developed and used to train 800 teaching professionals.

The strength of community collaborations is that they facilitate communication in multiple areas and through multiple channels, increasing the reach and repetition of the folic acid message for women who need to hear it more than once, in more than one way, and from many different credible sources.

1.2-3 Invite Other Community Members

The process of introducing the prevention program to new individuals is time consuming. It involves telling people about the issue and convincing them to work with you to plan activities and recruit additional help. The benefits, however, are well worth the effort.

Real World Examples



Onondaga County in New York made extensive use of community partnerships to build channels for distributing health messages to women in the county. The campaign's objective was to raise awareness about the importance of folic acid and to increase the number of women taking folic acid. A series of advisory meetings with health department staff, community organizations that support women, area businesses, local medical providers, ethnic and minority groups, the local March of Dimes chapter, the local Spina Bifida Association chapter, and managed care providers furnished many different channels to distribute the folic acid message to women. These community coalitions and communication channels were established carefully and took time to develop. However, the Onondaga County Health Department now plans to use these same partners for other health campaigns such as teenage pregnancy prevention and sexually transmitted disease education.

The following is an ordered list of what you need to know to recruit partners for your prevention program:

1.2-3-a Plan ample time for partnering There are many ways to recruit partners and create collaborative relationships in your campaign, but this process takes time. Be sure to give yourself enough time to gather an effective group together to help promote folic acid in your community.

1.2-3-b Prepare to explain why others should become involved Following are some reasons applicable to a folic acid promotion program:

- Partners will be providing a useful public service.
- Volunteering improves a group's or a person's image and credibility in the community.
- The program may provide manufacturers of female products with useful information about certain female consumers' likes, dislikes, habits, and so forth.

Real World Examples



A local pharmacy provides store coupons for folic acid vitamin supplements. This gives potential customers access to folic acid by making vitamin supplements more affordable. By providing this as a public service, the pharmacy not only shows concern for their consumers' health but also has an incentive for the business. These actions may increase the trust and loyalty of their consumers for the future. In addition, pharmacies could reach groups of women that they would not normally reach. For instance, some women do not shop at pharmacies for supplements. Women who normally shop elsewhere may want to use the coupon and therefore shop at the pharmacy for the first time. This could be the first of many visits.

1.2-3-c Educate program staff and group members about partnering and its purpose

- *Some staff members may not understand why they cannot conduct the whole program themselves.* Explain that partnering with others might require modification of program goals, activity plans, time schedules, or even messages, but that these changes will most likely result in a greater impact on women in your community. This is everyone's goal.
- *Partnering requires respect for one another's opinions in making a decision, sharing responsibility and resources, and maintaining accountability.* Potential partners may not have the time or energy to be actively involved all the time in your program. They also may believe that the folic acid program takes away community resources they would have used for something else. Have your staff be aware of these possibilities so they are not disappointed if potential partners do not always put in a full-time effort toward your folic acid program. Remind the program staff that a little help is better than none. Also, a simple endorsement of your prevention campaign by an important stakeholder can open doors for you in the community.

1.2-4 Approach Potential Partners and Supporters Properly and Professionally

The way in which you approach various organizations and ask for help may differ, depending on the organization and how it does business. Some approaches include:

- **Contact people and organizations in person, if possible.** If time is an issue, plan a group meeting of representatives from potential organizations.
- **Solicit another group's involvement in a formal letter.** Letters written to a variety of potential partners can be found in Appendix D.
- **Ask for help on specific tasks.** Many people or organizations will assist if they know how they can make a realistic contribution. List a number of tasks that an organization could do for your program, along with a cover letter about your plan. Ask potential partners what they might need to implement such an activity or if they want to suggest any other activities that are not listed. Perhaps you have the resources to fill in their gaps. In addition, once a program gets underway, additional partners are often identified. Activity lists can also be used to identify activities that new partners may be interested in. In Appendix D, we have included other activity lists for specific groups that have helped in past folic acid promotion programs.

Following is a guide to writing your own cover letter and an example of a possible activity list for organizations. Adapt these examples or use those provided in the appendices to cater to the organizations and people in your community.



Soliciting Participation in a Folic Acid Promotion Effort

1. Introduce your project. ("We are setting up a folic acid promotion program to prevent birth defects.")
2. Briefly tell about the health issue you are addressing (e.g., NTDs).
3. Provide a brief outline of your proposed goals and objectives.
4. Let potential participants know why you want them involved, and in what way. (For example, tell them that you would like their help in setting the program's goals and objectives or in conducting audience research to ensure that your message is accurate and effective and that your time and money are well spent).
5. Propose a timetable for your program.
6. Tell potential partners that you would like their input on the program's plans and progress during periodic review periods. Tell them that their opinion is important to you.

Note: Before you approach foundations, corporations, organizations, etc., research them! Their guidelines and restrictions may often influence how and what you ask for. You do not want to ask them for something they cannot provide. You may have only one chance to speak with these groups and convince them to help. More details about foundations and corporations can be found in Appendix E.

Partnering Tip

Provide partners with a list of each others' names, addresses, e-mail, fax, and phone numbers to create a prevention network of contacts in the community.



Possible Activity List for Organizations

Name:

Address:

Phone:

Check anywhere you can help in the following:

Planning Stage

- Join a folic acid program development committee.
- Assess community health issues and other resources.
- Collect data to help target women for the program.
- Identify health and other organizations and media outlets in the community.
- Identify available and appropriate folic acid communication materials.
- Help pretest materials.

Partnering

- Recruit volunteers, organizations, and media to participate in the program and/or to provide "in-kind" contributions to printing, collating, mailing services, public service space, or media costs.
- Provide marketing data about women.
- Help raise funds.
- Contribute staff or volunteer time.
- Produce messages and materials.

Implementation

- Provide room space for meetings and activities.
- Join a program development committee.
- Organize or participate in attention-getting events, such as health fairs and press conferences.
- Prepare press releases.
- Prepare exhibits for public places, such as shopping malls, building lobbies, schools, and public libraries.
- Distribute materials.
- Write letters.
- Publish articles in newsletters.
- Sponsor presentations.
- Offer individual counseling.
- Provide a recognized, credible spokesperson.
- Provide media interviews.

Evaluations

- Provide technical assistance with program evaluation or data analysis.
- Provide computer or manual services for tracking the program.
- Identify and train other organizations interested in becoming involved.
- Follow up by telephone with participants to ensure their continued involvement.
- Serve on "thank you" committees.

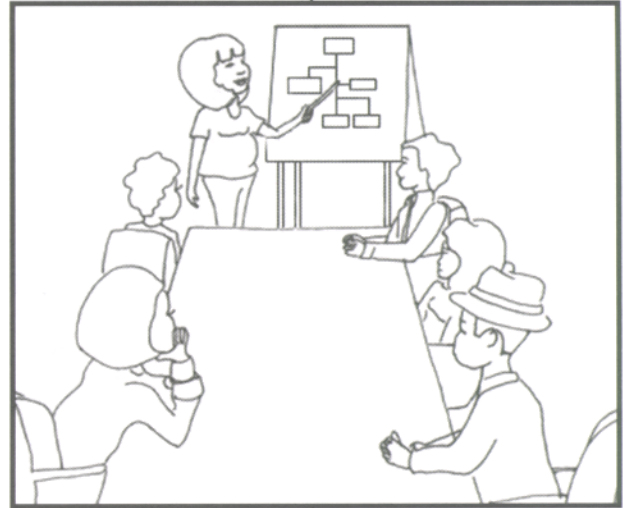
Other? Please tell us your suggestions.

1.3. Define the Roles of Participating Groups

Talk about the roles of the groups committed to the folic acid promotion program and the relationships among them. Establishing a committee whose structure allows efficient and productive communication and planning will mark the beginning of a successful collaborative effort.

1.3-1 Identify How the Group Makes Decisions and Communicates

A committee can play many different roles in a community's folic acid promotion program. The two examples follow: one committee served as an advisory board to a local health department, and the second committee worked together to plan their campaign. Regardless of the structure, the goal is to develop a committee that allows members with different perspectives to share their own opinions and expertise freely.



Real World Examples



A county health department established an advisory board consisting of the following people:

- * A clinical nurse specialist from the local hospital.
- * The local March of Dimes executive director.
- * The director of a women's and family organization.
- * The local director of education at Planned Parenthood.
- * A managed care coordinator for a local health center.
- * An obstetrics and gynecology doctor from the local hospital.
- * The president of the county pharmacist's society.

This advisory board discussed, revised, and approved goals, objectives, and activities that the county health department staff worked to plan, implement, and evaluate.

A different approach was taken in another state. There, a nurse practitioner, a public relations expert, and representatives from the following organizations formed a task force:

- * The state Spina Bifida Association.
- * The local March of Dimes chapter.
- * The state health department divisions of Family Planning, Women's Health, Child Health, Genetics, Perinatal Epidemiology, and Pharmacy.
- * The state chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- * Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies (a non-profit community group).
- * The regional USDA Food and Nutrition Service.
- * The Association of Women's Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses.

The group worked together, devoting time, resources, and skills, to plan and implement different components of a two-week spring campaign. This group plans to continue their efforts for the next five years.

1.3-2 Discuss and Determine Key Components of the Program

Topics to be discussed include:

- The program's goals and intended benefits.
- The roles and responsibilities of partners. For example, the need to report continuously on the partners' progress or plans to sustain folic acid prevention activities.
- The resources each partner can commit to the program.
- The contact person, address, phone and fax numbers, e-mail address and so forth for each organization.

This type of discussion will bring partners together for one common purpose, although they might be contributing resources and support in very different ways. Review the agreement reached as the result of your group's discussion and update it periodically.

1.3-3 Be Aware of Possible Conflicts So That You Can Be Prepared to Address Them

For example, some organizations may want to encourage women to get their folic acid strictly through natural and fortified foods and others strictly through supplements. Some may want to educate women about both options. Conflicts could arise over which options your program will promote. Also think about groups or

events that might increase the costs of your program or delay your timeline, and decide whether including those groups or events as part of your program is worth the possible delay or increased costs.

1.3-4 Identify Effective Spokespersons to Represent the Program

Spokespersons should be community leaders who are comfortable making presentations to various audiences, knowledgeable about folic acid and its role in preventing NTDs, and enthusiastic about your folic acid promotion program. Spokespersons also should be aware of special populations and their particular needs and approaches to health care.