

COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION GUIDANCE NOTE No. 6

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIPS

‘Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country’.

(John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Inauguration 1961)

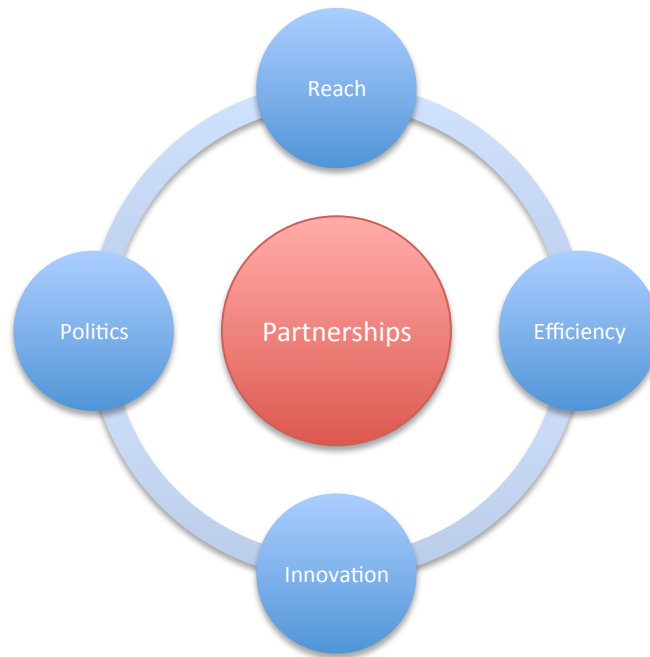
Partnerships operate well on respect, mutually beneficial intent and a shared vision of what is achievable. Fire Departments can accomplish much by using their own resources wisely and well. But they can accomplish much more by recognizing opportunities to work alongside others. By analyzing risk geographically, as well as demographically, the various agencies with responsibility for the safety and welfare of the citizens can see common users of services, areas of overlap as well as areas of under-provision. And by sharing and integrating data, patterns of use and demand become more apparent; this is now deploying the Acuity model on a different level.



The analysis done in many areas of the UK revealed some very interesting results. This not only looked at and compared what different organizations knew about risk levels, it also used lifestyle and demographic data to understand who the main users of services were.

WHY WORK IN A PARTNERSHIP?

There are many reasons why partnerships are formed and understanding the particular dynamics in your area will help you to assess the most powerful drivers for partnership working.



1. Extending Our Reach

There are practical limits on the ability of a Department to reach everyone it needs to when it needs to. Mostly this is about time and money but it can also be about knowledge and awareness. Once a Department has made the strategic commitment to reducing risk, learning as much as possible about that risk becomes of paramount importance. Tapping in to “what others know” is critical, but partnerships take this a stage further. Other agencies have an existing “clientele” – people who use their services, often for reasons of vulnerability or dependence. Accordingly they can be said to have a “relationship” based on knowledge of circumstances and need. For a fire department to extend its reach and contact those who, as a result of that vulnerability or dependence, are at risk, they need to work closely with these other agencies.

Put more simply, when it comes to different organizations working to reducing risk, the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts.

This can also be a question of “access”. A pre-existing relationship with a citizen may enable a partner organization to gain physical access to a person thought to be at risk. For example, experience in the UK has shown that the access that fire and rescue services have, based upon their generally trusted reputation with the public, can be a significant advantage for partners trying to reach people at risk or who may benefit from their services.

Sometimes the opposite may play out as well. Fire Departments in the UK have often found that charities and agencies working with older people provide a well-established channel to a group who are traditionally wary of unsolicited contact. One agency can effectively open the door for another.

2. Efficiency

In times of financial constraint, most agencies are required to demonstrate cost effectiveness, efficiency and economy in their use of taxpayers’ money. Effective partnerships will often reveal areas of considerable overlap or duplication – two or more services visiting people at risk when one agency potentially has the ability, as well as the capacity, to provide a range of services.

For example, in a number of UK fire and rescue services, a formal partnership with the local health authority has enabled and trained District Nurses (who make home visits to provide health care in the home) to also conduct a survey to assess the patient’s risk of having a fire, and to offer specific safety advice.

Often the key to creating and unlocking efficiency is to identify the shared advantage that comes from activity. To do this well it’s important to be able to identify a root cause that leads to a set of problems or risks both agencies are seeking to solve. For instance poor diet associated with excessive fried food has implications, both for health services in relation to obesity and fire departments as a cause of fat related cooking fires. Both are united in tackling different problems that have the same root cause.

3. Innovation

Partnerships can offer a fresh perspective on an old problem. Agencies, like people, can get into familiar patterns of thinking and miss opportunities to innovate and improve. A partnership based on respect and shared intent should allow for more experimental and innovative approaches to “wicked” issues.

4. Politics & Reputations

In the modern world, only a naïve organization ignores its public and political reputation. A more “personalized” approach to services to citizens has created a lack of tolerance for organizations that cannot “play well with others”. Although the main reasons for engaging in partnership working are undoubtedly to improve outcomes for citizens and improve the effectiveness of the organization, the political benefits are also worth considering. Demonstrating a willingness to work with others and collaborating to create more capacity, faster response and greater public access generates considerable regard and goodwill from those who make the ultimate funding (and rationing) decisions.

It’s also important to recognize that aligning with high profile political priorities is likely to attract funding and public support. Spotting how the fire service can contribute to such a priority whilst meeting its own aims is not Machiavellian but merely a recognition that it works in the political domain. Many high profile youth engagement programs in the UK sought to draw down funding designed to tackle anti-social behavior; of which petty arson was an element.

In the UK, funding departments of Government were so convinced of the benefits of partnership working that they created substantial funding streams with shared reward mechanisms for improved outcomes. However, local agencies need to recognize the value for themselves and sustain the momentum long after the central funding agencies have moved on to other issues.

WHAT CAN GET IN THE WAY?

Don’t necessarily expect partnership working to be easy. It requires an investment of time; time to understand and appreciate the needs as well as the offers of other agencies, time to invest in personal relationships (especially at the top of the partner agencies) so problems can be sorted out quickly, and time to listen and reflect on how it’s going. But there are some things that can get in the way;

- a) Egos depending on the personal integrity and character of the leaders of prospective partner organizations, partnerships can be anything from great to impossible. Effective partnership working will usually require, at some stage, leaders to subordinate any personal ego issue with “running the ship” to working collaboratively and for shared credit.

- b) Rewards Where agencies are working together on specific programs or projects and there are financial or other incentives involved, it is vital to ensure that expectations are clear in advance. Similarly, credit will often need to be shared, even if the balance of effort on a particular

issue is unequal. Becoming comfortable with sharing rewards and credit is important if partnerships are to work properly.

- c) Evaluation Joint programs undertaken by partnerships can be very difficult to evaluate in terms of the relative contributions of partners to the outcome. Again, this has to be accepted in advance and worked through together.

WHAT MAKES FOR A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP?

The most important prerequisites are, arguably, trust and clarity. Trust is based on the assumption that all parties are working for mutual benefit rather than in their own interest. Clarity of purpose is vital from the outset and it is always worth investing the time at the beginning to ensure this happens.

Clarity and trust should also be evident in the governance arrangements agreed at the start; who does what, how communications work, how information will be shared and how success will be measured. This also helps to overcome the usual cultural, language and other minor difficulties that can seriously undermine partnership working if not dealt with positively. Typically, good partnerships will have the following characteristics;

- Clarity and a shared purpose
- Trust from top to bottom
- Resilient and committed leaders
- An approach capable of being scaled up or down as required
- Investment of time and energy
- Clear governance and a willingness to share or even cede control
- Safe systems of data sharing
- A determined focus on the outcome and doing the right thing
- Paying attention to the small things that can get in the way

Above all, even if there is a disparity in size or prominence between partners, it must feel like a “partnership of equals”; if one feels marginalized or patronized, eventually the partnership will come to grief.