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## Collaborations: Tools and Tips to Help Communities Work Together

The challenges facing communities today are complex, and can be too complicated for one organization or one sector of society to tackle on its own. Businesses, nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, and local, state, and federal governments are attempting to build collaborations with the intent of working more closely together to address community challenges. Collaboration, however, is not easy. It can be messy without proper planning and guidance. Who takes the lead? Who makes decisions? How do you get stakeholders involved without funding attached? How does the community know what is going on with the effort? With these critical questions in mind and based on the work Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) has done with government, non-profits, and philanthropic organizations across the country, we've included several stories that feature collaboration in this edition of the newsletter. Why not read it and discuss with your own collaborative partners this summer and [let us know](#) how ACS can help?

## Five Ways Workforce Development Boards Can Flex Their Collaborative Muscle

In 2014, President Obama signed the [Workforce Investment Opportunity Act](#) (WIOA) into law, ushering in a new opportunity for workforce development boards to become more strategic and deliver more impact within the communities they serve.

**Workforce development boards are local or regional organizations that serve as a conduit for federal, state, and local funding for job training programs and recruitment services for employers.**

In particular, WIOA enhances the opportunity for workforce boards to act as catalysts and build coalitions within their communities around workforce issues. This means that workforce boards must be willing and able to both work collaboratively and encourage collaboration in others. But how can a board ready itself to accomplish these new tasks? Here are five ways:

- 1. Communicate Clearly.** In many communities, the role and value of workforce development boards are not fully understood. In others, awareness of the board's existence and value is

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## Client Spotlight: Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health

The [Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health](#) (WI-AIMH) is a small organization with a big vision: for all Wisconsin infants and young children to reach their fullest potential through nurturing and consistent relationships within the context of family, community, and culture. To pursue that vision, WI-AIMH needed to elevate its presence in the state without stretching their limited resources too far. ACS was the natural choice.

“ACS really understood our needs and where we are as an agency,” says Phil Kerckhoff, WI-AIMH’s strategic operations manager. “They saw our financial and staff constraints, but they also saw our potential. We knew we were in good hands.”

ACS helped WIAIMH plan and prepare for an intensive, day-long planning session with the organization’s public awareness and communication committee. Preparation activities included the design and circulation of surveys to board members, one-on-one interviews with external stakeholders, and creation of a meaningful and focused agenda that set the expectation for clear outcomes to help WI-AIMH move forward. ACS facilitated the day-long discussion, combined this dialogue with the prep work and then drafted a comprehensive strategy report including goals, strategies, tactics and related communication materials.

“The strategy report was very well received,” says Lana Nenide, executive director of WI-AIMH. “Our committee was impressed by the depth of the report and the usability. This isn’t something I’ll put on a shelf. It’s actionable and provides a blueprint of tasks, a timeline and responsibilities. We have already implemented some of the pieces. It’s a solid support for our agency and a pathway for us to grow and extend our visibility.”

Since receiving the strategic recommendations, WI-AIMH has taken the first steps of creating a new one-pager with clear messages and appealing graphics, and is engaging a firm to help conduct a scan of likely funders to increase revenue. They also have a clear plan for what should come next, as funds become available.

“ACS understood that some boards have eyes that are bigger than their budgets,” adds Kerckhoff. “They helped us be very clear about what we can do now and what will come later.” ●

## Five Ways Workforce Development Boards Can Flex Their Collaborative Muscle (continued)

almost nonexistent. A first step for boards that want to step up is to clearly communicate to business, industry and other organizations about what they do, why they do it, and why it matters, and why that organization should care. When boards help others understand the value they bring, they can become desirable collaborative partners.

- 2. Learn The Lingo.** Boards that want to advocate more strongly for workforce development and attract partners will benefit from identifying key words or phrases that resonate best with target audiences. Conducting research and focus groups can help bring the most influential language to light and lay the groundwork for bigger and better advocacy and communication in the future.
- 3. Advocate Like Pros.** Board members and their support staff are uniquely positioned to advocate for supportive policies on behalf of those in need of skills and employment as well as the industries and businesses that hire them. Effective advocacy is both art and science, and workforce boards can benefit from receiving training on advocacy do’s and don’ts as well as how to create effective advocacy plans.
- 4. Plan To Succeed.** Workforce development messages are most effective and influential when they are delivered in a methodical, consistent way by a number of different messengers—from newly-employed individuals, to business and industry leaders, to educators, and economic developers. Getting all of these voices aligned requires an intentional, strategic communication planning, and workforce boards can be the catalyst to make that happen.
- 5. Bring Everyone Together.** Supporting a healthy labor market is a task bigger than any single entity, and workforce development boards can play a key role by bringing a variety of community stakeholders (such as leaders education, business, nonprofits, and philanthropy) together for facilitated discussions. During these gatherings, boards can present research, ask about shared challenges and potential solutions, and mobilize coalitions to address common workforce issues.

Sound like a lot? It can be, but it helps to take these recommendations one step at a time. ACS is here to help, with research, planning, and facilitation services to help any workforce development board become an effective and powerful catalyst for collaboration and change in their community. ●

# New Tools for Collaborators

ACS has added four new tools to its online library that are designed to help your organization create stronger collaborations and build powerful networks.

## 1. Assess Your Collaboration

ACS' [Assess Your Collaboration](#) tool will help you understand what makes your collaboration successful, how to continually improve or course-correct during implementation, and how to incorporate lessons learned to improve collaboration down the road. You can assess your collaboration at any time — create a baseline at the beginning, find areas where you can adjust and improve during implementation, or reflect on a collaboration after the fact to help identify next steps and communicate your achievements to others.

This tool, with 30 different measures, is designed to be used individually to assess your collaboration, or as a group exercise to spark conversation and formulate plans for improvement.

## 2. Network Mapping Tool

Networks are vital to tackling complex issues, but how do you keep track of who's a close ally, who's work is aligned with yours, and who needs to be kept abreast of your progress? Use ACS' [Network Mapping Tool](#) to plan out your network building and keep tabs on the multiple moving parts that are part of every network.

## 3. Collaboration Glossary of Terms

Use ACS' [Collaboration Glossary](#) as a supplemental document to help you cut through language barriers and jargon. For example, what is the difference between a coalition and an alliance? What is the appropriate role for a stakeholder versus a partner? This document will help everyone involved in collaborative activities get on the same page.

## 4. Tips for Engaging Your Community

ACS' [Tips for Engaging Community](#) can be used by nonprofits, private businesses, government, foundations, or any combination of these to help rally a community around a cause. Community engagement is a complex undertaking that requires both short- and long-term strategies and investments. But don't be intimidated. This tool highlights 10 key elements and 10 best practices that will ensure your community engagement efforts are as smooth and effective as possible. ●

## New Clients:

### Strategic Communication and Collaborative Community Conversations

ACS is helping a number of new clients across the country build their own capacity and networks to tackle issues ranging from affordable housing, to opportunities for boys and men of color, to preschool expansion, to community outreach.

- The [National Development Council](#) (NDC) does work throughout the country to increase the flow of capital for investment in low-income communities for affordable housing, job training, small business lending, and the advancement of livable communities through investment in social infrastructure. ACS is helping NDC develop internal communication capacity, identify and take advantage of short-term communication opportunities, and create a communication plan and a communication strategy to identify, collect and be able to easily use stories from the field to distribute the information to NDC partners nationwide.
- ACS is continuing its work with the national funder [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) (RWJF) and its boys and young men of color initiative. After providing technical assistance to several grantees working on collective impact collaborations, ACS is now working with RWJF to plan and help facilitate a convening with the nation's thought leaders within the boys and young men of color space to discuss violence, trauma healing and resiliency. This convening is a critical part of RWJF's plan to develop a strategy for the next phase of RWJF's grant-making moving forward.
- In the City of [Asheville](#) and [Buncombe County](#), North Carolina, ACS is helping local nonprofits; city and county government; city and county school systems, the Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders work together to create a plan to provide access to high-quality preschool for every 3- and 4-year-old in the city and county. This work was inspired by the nationally recognized [PRE4CLE](#) planning process that ACS designed and facilitated in Cleveland, Ohio.
- The [J. Marion Sims Foundation](#), a health legacy foundation in Lancaster, South Carolina, has asked ACS to work with its staff and board to design and implement a community engagement process to improve communication with citizens and enhance the foundation's understanding of the issues its community faces. Ultimately, the community engagement process will help the foundation further its mission of enhancing the health and wellness among the residents of Lancaster County, Fort Lawn, and Great Falls. ●

### Connect and Collaborate with Us!

ACS is now on LinkedIn and Medium.com! We are sharing tools, resources, and stories about our clients. Find us at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/advocacy-&-communication-solutions-llc>

and

<https://medium.com/@acslc>

**Contact one of our team members, call toll-free at 1-877-372-0166 or visit our website at [advocacyandcommunication.org](http://advocacyandcommunication.org)**

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