

Lessons Learned: Difficult Community Conversations

Community-based organizations (CBO) dedicate considerable time to building trusted reputations and relationships with community stakeholders. These relationships are essential not only during CBO program implementation, but also during program evaluations when CBOs may serve as an intermediary between an outside evaluation team and school leadership and caregivers. Consequently, CBOs play a crucial role in balancing a community's cultural norms with the needs of the evaluation team and should be prepared to address difficult community conversations.

During Fall 2019, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), sponsored a formative evaluation to assess the impact and implementation of two sexual risk avoidance (SRA) curricula aligned with the Systematic Method for Assessing Risk Avoidance Tool (SMARTool; CRE, 2019).ⁱ OASH engaged an evaluation team to lead the study, and the evaluation team engaged two CBOs, Be Strong International (BSI) and Operation Keepsake (OK). BSI and OK partnered with a total of 14 secondary schools in 11 school districts to complete the evaluation.

Difficult Community Conversations – What a CBO Needs to Know?

The following examples demonstrate some situations a CBO may encounter during an outside program evaluation.

Community Norms

Depending on the community and the content of a CBO's education program, outside program evaluation materials, such as survey instruments and consent forms, may be written differently from what schools or caregivers are used to seeing. These differences can be important because the content of these materials can be a key driver of community, site / school, and parent buy-in. For instance, some communities may not be comfortable with surveys that contain anatomical descriptions of sex acts for definitional purposes. Although from a research perspective these detailed definitions help with standardization and precision, such definitions may pose challenges for a program evaluation to successfully include different communities.

Research Approval Processes

The research approval process may both affect the timeline and limit the CBOs' ability to tailor evaluation material, such as questionnaires and consent forms, to their community standards. While some approvals can be done in parallel, others require sequential approvals and finalized documents, which make updates or amendments difficult. Whenever these approval processes

and their requirements (e.g., legal-sounding language in parental consent forms) may seem unfamiliar, messaging and coordination become critical to maintaining both community buy-in and adherence to ethical and legal requirements.

Recommendations

OASH compiled the following recommendations for CBOs to better prepare for difficult community conversations they may encounter during program evaluations:

- **Handle as much of the communications with partner sites / schools as possible.** (Please refer to *Lessons Learned: The “Warm Handoff” Approach*). Because these conversations may not always be easy, it is important that the primary contact be a trusted partner for the schools and communities where the evaluation is conducted.
- **Maintain an approachable, open communications style** with the evaluation team and with sites / schools. Ask why a consent form is written a certain way, and whether it can be adjusted. If the consent form cannot be changed, ask questions to understand why not, to equip yourself to explain it to others, and ensure that you can easily explain why the document is important to collecting the required data. Flag potential challenges early and offer solutions to promote overall project success, such as a cover letter or Frequently Asked Questions document, to explain why forms are written a certain way.
- **Hold face-to-face meetings** early in the project to establish rapport and improve communication and relationships. In-person site visits or online kickoff meetings can strengthen preparations for evaluation logistics and are great opportunities to increase team cohesiveness. These meetings will benefit CBO staff and sites / schools as well as other team members like data collectors and technical assistance providers.
- **Use plain language and avoid jargon and acronyms** in verbal and written communications with communities. For instance, parents and sites / schools may misunderstand the terms “opt-in” and “opt-out.” Use plain language to describe what each term means. For example, rather than saying “a CBO uses an opt-in model”, try saying that “a parent, guardian, or caregiver must sign a permission form for their child to receive the curriculum.” Instead of saying “a CBO uses an opt-out model,” try using “all children will receive the curriculum unless a parent, guardian, or caregiver provides a written note that their child should not participate.” If a partner uses a jargon-like term, ask for clarification on what that term means to them.

Ask questions early and often in the planning and preparation process, and share recommendations. Although the evaluation team may not always be able to make the requested changes, the earlier they are aware of a concern, the greater the opportunity to find a solution. The lesson on the importance of difficult community conversations can inform a variety of stakeholders, from researchers and evaluators to sexual health education practitioners, as well as funding and oversight organizations. It will hopefully provide insight that facilitates successful completion of program evaluations in sexual health education and beyond.

ⁱ The SMARTool is a technical assistance (TA) guide for use by schools, youth-serving organizations, and other agencies interested in delivering SRA education to youth.