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Youth, Families and Community Members: Strategies to Recruit and Retain Program Participants in Public Health Programs

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Introduction

Recruiting and retention are at the heart of any successful public health program, but successful recruiting is a more involved process than many programs anticipate—or budget for. **Research shows that the children and families most in need of human services are the least likely to receive them and 40-60% of recruits to human service programs drop out after a few sessions.** (Barnes-Proby, D., Schultz, D., Jaycox, L., & Ayer, L. 2017). Recruiting and retention efforts must be ongoing if they are to be successful. It's not enough to develop and offer a program; you must actively and consistently work to recruit and retain participants throughout the duration of the program.

To support ongoing recruitment efforts, programs must dedicate resources to this goal, including planning time and protected, paid staff hours exclusively focused on recruitment and retention work (LENA 2020). The planning group will tackle logistics and messaging, identify potential barriers to participation, and make a list of potential community partners who are already serving the target population and most importantly. Engaged, enthusiastic community partners can be valuable and effective recruiters for your program; a thorough recruitment plan will include concrete steps to nurture relationships with these potential allies, from initial contact to in-person meetings, to collaboration on recruitment, and follow up on program outcomes (LENA 2020).

Effective recruitment planning does not happen at a one-and-done meeting. **Instead write your plan to be a “living document” that can respond to the changing recruitment and retention needs of your program** (Y4y.Ed.Gov. n.d.). A good plan will outline what your recruitment message is, who you're communicating with, and when and how you're making these communications—but a good plan will build in the flexibility to adapt to data on outcomes and attendance, and input from clients.

When recruiting for youth programs, pay special care to responsiveness and authenticity. **Youth need to see themselves authentically represented at every level of a program, from planning to sharing success stories** (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, n.d.) . Authentic representation in a program, along with positive relationships with friends as well as program staff are as significant to youth retention as any logistical barrier (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, n.d.) Programs need to be especially responsive to youth feedback and careful to hire program staff who are sensitive to and respectful of the unique developmental needs of youth.

Article 1: *Recruiting & Retaining Program Participants (RAND)*

Summary

The authors created this toolkit as a starting point to help public health programs recruit and retain participants. Recruitment efforts must be ongoing; without active recruitment and retention efforts, as many as 60% of families will withdraw from programs after the first few sessions. The authors have outlined five strategies for effective recruitment and retention, along with the underlying principles for each. Each strategy can be used independently or concurrently.

- Raise awareness of the program through **outreach and marketing to potential clients**. Marketing messages should quickly answer “what’s in it for me?” for potential clients, while acknowledging clients’ strengths and celebrating their interest in improving their outcomes. Gain-framed messages (e.g., “improve family communication skills”) and loss-framed messages (e.g., “stop the family drama!”) can be equally effective; do your research and determine which approach is more culturally sensitive and relevant to your target audience.
- **Conduct direct outreach to potential referral sources**. Community groups, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, schools, medical facilities, and current or past program clients can be valuable recruiters for your program, if carefully cultivated. These community partners can be protective of their client relationships at first and may be reluctant to refer to your program until you’ve convinced them of the benefits of the program. Take the time to build trust with these potential allies.
- **Consider families' needs when designing public health programs**. Services must be respectful and responsive. Match program staff with similar cultural backgrounds to participants, whenever possible. Logistical challenges like meeting time, location, child-care, and transportation may be easy to identify; consider also invisible barriers like stigma, cognitive difficulties, or even past negative experiences with care providers.
- **Supporting current participants and earning their trust is critical to retention**. There are many reasons families drop out of a public health program before it finishes; they don’t think the program is serving them, they do not feel connected to program staff, they see initial improvement and decide not to continue. Ongoing, two-way communication, both informing clients about what they can expect and learning from clients what they need allows public health programs to build trust and adapt services on the fly.
- **Continuously monitor enrollment, retention, and program quality**. Service quality is critical to a successful public health program. Careful record keeping can tell you which

families might be at risk of dropping out and need reminders or more outreach, or which areas of the program are not meeting client needs and require adjustment and improvement.

Implications for practice

- Take care that intake forms and materials do to create barriers.
 - Non-clinical terms such as emotional well-being or stress relief are less stigmatized than “mental health.”
 - Create program materials in clients’ native language.
 - Simplify intake forms and program materials. Time and attention are limited resources for all of us; simple forms speed the process and can also alleviate multiple barriers such as low literacy, cognitive limitations, and language comprehension.
- Build trust with outreach partners through communication. Invite these partners to tour your facility or program, collaborate on intake forms and program materials, and deliver regular program updates and thanks.
- Resolve logistical barriers for your potential clients with on-site childcare, transportation assistance, flexible meeting hours or meeting times outside of regular working hours.
- If your participants have immediate needs such as housing or food assistance refer them to a partner! This not only builds trust with potential referral partners, it can free
- Hire program staff from similar cultural backgrounds to the families you aim to serve.
- Provide healthy snacks and meals before or during sessions to incentivize participation, create a welcoming environment, and alleviate food and time-related barriers to attendance.
- Solicit direct feedback from clients to identify and address invisible barriers (such as past negative experiences with care providers) and to learn where your program could improve.

Citation

Barnes-Proby, D., Schultz, D., Jaycox, L., & Ayer, L. (2017). Five strategies for successful recruitment and retention of children and families in human service programs. RAND Corporation. Available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/tools/TL200/TL242/RAND_TL242.pdf.

Article 2: *LENA Guide to Recruiting Families for Community Programs*

Summary

Effective recruitment and outreach are at the heart of every successful public health program, but effective outreach is also a major time commitment. Plan for consistent, thoughtful follow up with all participants. These authors have identified three phases for effective recruitment planning.

Phase 1: Get Organized Before your public-facing recruiting efforts begin, make sure your team is organized and your program logistics are ironed out.

- **Choose a recruitment team lead.** Specifically hire a recruitment specialist or earmark a percentage of employee time, specially designated for recruitment efforts. This person should be mutually selected with partner organizations; outline other roles as well at the initial team meeting.
- **Choose a convenient location for the program.** Choose a location that saves participants time and travel expenses. A location where families are already being served, e.g., an Early Head Start center or a neighborhood school is ideal. An inconvenient program location is a barrier to participation; a convenient site can be an effective recruitment tool.
- **Identify obstacles to enrollment.** Location, time, and cost can be obstacles to enrollment. Partner organizations, teachers, family liaisons, program staff, and past participants can help identify obstacles so you can make better choices about logistics.

Phase 2: Connect with Community Partners Trusted community members can help you recruit for your program. Here's how to identify and engage these groups:

- **Brainstorm a list of recruitment-focused partners.** Set up meetings with between 3 and 5 of these partners in the first month. Look for partners with access to and influence on your target audience. E.g., childcare centers and libraries have access to families with

young children, while teachers and clinicians at schools and doctor's offices might have influence.

- **Develop an "elevator pitch".** This is a quick summary of the basics of the program to share with your recruitment partners. Answer the what, when, where, and why: the nature of the program, time commitment, the location, and the benefits and incentives for participation. If you can include endorsements from past participants, do so.
- **Leverage existing groups.** Community groups with active memberships are a great resource to help you reach families. Consider new parent groups at hospitals and clinics, family resource centers and parenting support organizations, childcare centers, playgroups and story groups.

Phase 3: Communicate with Potential Participants Market directly to your target audience.

Bear in mind that your potential clients have many demands on their time and attention, so a consistent, multi-pronged approach is necessary.

- **Multiple outreach methods.** Reach out to families directly using multiple means of communication. Print ads, direct mailings to your own contact lists or lists provided by your community partners, digital marketing, and in-person (like tabling at a farmers' market) can help you reach different members of the community.
- **Host an orientation.** An in-person or virtual session allows participants to meet your staff and have any questions answered.
- **Recruit more participants than you need.** LENA found that only 60-80% of families who verbally committed to participating actually showed up the first day. Expect people to drop out due to scheduling conflicts, forgetfulness, or other issues.
- **Reach out. Then keep reaching out.** Remind participants about the first meeting and encourage them to attend with a phone call and a postcard if you have their mailing address. Make at least three attempts to call (and leave a voicemail.) Follow up with no-shows within 24 hours of the first meeting to let them know that they are welcome to join late (and provide information about makeup sessions if applicable).

Case Study 1: Diversifying Program Participants

LENA looked at two sites that successfully employed these recruitment strategies. First, a LENA Start site in Iowa took a multi-pronged approach to getting the word out: fliers, story time and advertising on the online library catalog. While they also approached other community groups and agencies in town, the bulk of their efforts were centered around the library. This approach was successful at recruiting and retaining participants, but the organizers realized the participants were made up almost exclusively of regular library users. **They realized they needed to diversify their recruiting strategy in order to meet their goal of serving more families.**

For the second round of the program, they partnered with health care clinics and childcare centers. They also hired a coordinator who was specifically charged with boosting recruitment. She helped the organizers see that informing partners about an initiative is not enough. The program staff of these partner organizations need to be not just knowledgeable, but enthused. Building this enthusiasm takes trust and time, but it pays off; the site saw significant enrollment increases from families who are not regular library patrons after cultivating these new partnerships. **The initial recruitment strategy focused on the one-way dissemination of information about the program; it evolved to focus on building stronger relationships and getting full buy-in from recruitment partners.** That evolution enabled them to meet their recruitment goals.

Case Study 2: Leveraging Community Connections

Another LENA Start site in Georgia successfully recruited and enrolled families for a new program by offering incentives, performing direct outreach to potential participants, leveraging existing connections, and highlighting the testimony of past participants. The Start site, organized by a Georgia public health department, reached out to organizations it had previously partnered with. The local University Extension Office and a local public library offered meeting locations convenient to potential participants. These partners also recruited for the programs at their respective sites.

The health department incentivized participation by hosting a community baby shower for new and expectant parents, enrolling 15 participants from that single event. Organizers sent direct emails to every parent they'd previously served inviting them to join the class themselves or become recruiters and invite a friend. At the local military base, two alumni parents shared how the LENA Start program had positively impacted their families, influencing more families to join. This site's ongoing and multifaceted recruitment strategy proved a success.

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FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: 3 TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS

Virtual Engagement presents unique opportunities to remove barriers to participation:

- Weather won't cause problems. Online programs don't suffer from attendance dips in bad weather.
- It's easier to create flexible scheduling. Participants can view program content at their convenience; make-up sessions are easier to schedule (without the added challenges of booking a location.)
- Small breakout sessions can be randomized, allowing participants to interact with people in the group they might not interact with in person. This promotes group cohesion and collaboration.
- Geographic diversity: when location is not a factor, time and money spent on travel is no longer an obstacle for participants. Programs can recruit and reach people outside their in-person range.
- Programs are less costly to run and administer. Programs often cover childcare, parking validation or transportation vouchers to remove barriers for participants, but these expenses are costly. A virtual program removes the needs for these expenses.

Problems/Solutions/Ask Recruitment Strategy

- **Outline the problem** in a concise and compelling way. Try to connect with parents and caregivers in the area where parents' hopes overlap the service being offered (e.g., reading enough at home or a child's future academic achievement).
- **Introduce a solution:** Share how the program can help address these problems you've just mutually identified. Include information about the program logistics, as well as data supporting its effectiveness.
- **Ask them to join.** Let them know when the next meeting is and other pertinent logistical details. If they're still unsure, stay in touch and answer any questions that may come up.

Social Media Strategies for Community Engagement

- Use a hook! This can be a shorter version of the "problem" you've identified previously.
- Start gradually. Keep program descriptions brief, and include an invitation to find out more, a link to an orientation session. The orientation sign-up should capture contact information (email, phone, name) and several choices of times to join.
- Build excitement about your incentives. Post weekly challenges, photos of past and current participants, and new incentives.
- Harness the FOMO. Fear of missing out (FOMO) can be a motivator. Wording like "only a few spaces left" can motivate people to register.

- Video shares well on social media platforms. Create a 1 -2 minute video that explains your program (and makes it look like fun!).
- Digitize recruitment tools: Include QR codes on printed material (fliers, signs, posters) directing people to your digitized form. Use these forms to identify potential barriers. (I.e., Ask about language spoken at home and comfort using Zoom or other online meeting tools.)
- Reach out to niche groups that meet on social media: father groups, grandparents etc. social allows you to hone your targeted audience.

Citation

Guide to Recruiting Families for Community Programs. (2020). LENA. Available at <https://info.lena.org/parent-recruitment-guide>.

Article 3: *Recruiting High School Students (You for Youth)*

Summary

Recruiting is an ongoing, collaborative process. Treat any plan as a living document that can grow and change as your program’s recruiting needs change. Convene a planning team with good representation of all stakeholders including care providers, community groups, and especially youth—ideally youth from the target population you aim to serve.

The Planning Process: Key Questions to Ask

- **Define recruitment goals** and target populations with your planning team. What strategies will you use to meet your goals?
- How will you pitch your program to your target audience?
 - Make sure you can answer: “What’s in it for me?”
- What materials need to be created?
 - Print?
 - Digital?
 - Bilingual?
- **What communication methods** work best for your audience? Outreach materials should:
 - have a clear message of vision, mission, and values.

- Include logistical details like eligibility requirements, time commitment, incentives, etc.
- What relationships do you need to build to **spread your message**?
 - For in-person or print communication, partner with community organizations that already serve high school students: Libraries, schools, community centers, churches etc.
 - You want to inform staff at these locations about your program, but more importantly, gain their trust and buy-in.
- **What physical location** to be used for recruiting? Choose a location where:
 - Youth and teens are already being served
 - Location staff have knowledge and enthusiasm about your program and will eagerly spread the word.
- How will **program staff and ambassadors identify themselves** at recruiting events like open houses and orientation sessions?
 - Badges or T-Shirts are great visual cues; they often need to be ordered well in advance of recruiting events.
- **How and when will students enroll**?
 - What obstacles may prevent students from enrolling?
 - Can students enroll in person, at orientations and open houses, or at partner sites?
 - What digital enrollment forms need to be developed?
- How will you **maintain and foster strong relationships with partners**, the school, the community, and especially the youth directly involved in the program?
 - Student surveys can capture program ideas.
 - Engage youth in formal and informal program decision making.
 - Communicate program success via newsletter, bulletin boards and social and conventional media. (Ask the youth in the program for ideas about what to feature.)
 - Hold quarterly meetings with referral sources.
 - Attend community events to build program awareness.
- **How will you monitor attendance**? What barriers are limiting attendance?
 - Collect data on tracking, referrals, enrollment and attendance and review this data at regular meetings with stakeholders.
- How will you **share the program's story** and communicate its impact? How can you celebrate and communicate the story of young people in the program? Consider end-of-program events and initiatives like:
 - Youth-designed and led presentations

- Social media posts highlighting success stories
- School assemblies and meetings to share information about the programs' offerings and success stories
- A showcase event like a graduation or end-of-year celebration.
- How do these stories help **connect new program and recruitment partners**?
- **How will you incorporate youth voices** at every stage of the planning process?

Citation

Recruiting and retaining high school students. (n.d.). Y4y.Ed.Gov. Available at <https://y4y.ed.gov/y4yclickandgo/recruiting-and-retaining-high-school-students/3812>.

Article 4: Recruitment & Retention Youth Development Programs (Texas A&M Extension)

Summary

In addition to the gamut of logistical challenges encountered recruiting any demographic, public health programs aimed at youth face specific challenges for recruitment and retention. **Youth are more likely to stay in programs that authentically represent and serve them and that give them opportunities to grow and develop their identities.** Youth remain in programs that offer them the opportunity to experience a new range of goals, attitudes and beliefs that foster positive and self-directed identity development.

A developmentally and socially safe and welcoming environment is also key to youth retention. These authors have identified eight components of developmentally appropriate spaces: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts. In socially safe environments, strong friendships form, youth return because their peers return, and retention is high. Conversely, socially unsafe environments lead to high drop-out rates. Negative peer dynamics like cliques can be off-putting; poor adult staff behavior, such as choosing favorites or disrespecting youth, is also a reason for youth to drop-out of a program.

Implications for practice

- Authenticity is key for youth. Make sure your program is serving needs youth have identified for themselves.
 - Design programs with direct input from youth to reflect the needs and wants of the youth to be served.

- Actively solicit feedback from participants during and at the end of the program and incorporate it as soon as possible, and for future iterations.
- Use incentives carefully; incentives are great for initial meetings but plan to transition to less frequent use of incentives as participants' motivations for attendance evolve. (In other words, if the youth want to be there, it can feel patronizing to incentivize them.)
- Word-of-mouth program promotion is particularly effective for youth who respond more favorably to reviews from peers versus written materials. This can cut both ways; reports about negative interactions with staff or a low-quality program can travel just as fast as news about a positive program that aligns with youth interests.
- Hire carefully! Program staff need to be supportive, caring, and relatable, with a genuine interest in nurturing and listening to youth voices.
- Create opportunities for meaningful social connection, not just with friends and program staff but other sections of the wider community. Community service projects are a great way to make these community connections.
- Logistical challenges are just as important for this demographic as any other. Make sure meetings are conveniently located and scheduled.

Citation

Recruitment and Retention in Youth Development Programs. (n.d.). Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Retrieved April 24, 2022, from <https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/library/4-h-youth-development/recruitment-and-retention-in-youth-development-programs/>.

Conclusion

This review of research provided an introduction into effective strategies to recruit and retain program participants. For prevention providers, it is absolutely crucial to learn “field tested” approaches that have been efficacious at helping organizations reach their goals.

The first resource, developed by the Rand Corporation, is a toolkit that outlines five strategies to aid in recruitment and retention. A number of these strategies suggest the importance of aligning program mission with community needs, in regard to generating interest in the program as well as sustaining it. Additional keys include maintaining trust and ensuring high-quality over the life of the initiative.

The second resource was developed by a national nonprofit (LENA) focused on language acquisition in early childhood. This guide offered strategies to attract families to community

initiatives through a three-phase program: getting organized, connect with community partners, and communicate with potential participants. LENA provided two, “real life” examples from on-the-ground efforts that demonstrated the power of leveraging working relationships across the community in order to bring in a range of program participants. Finally, this resource offered tips on how to recruit through “virtual engagement” strategies.

The third resource provides guidance on how to recruit youth participants, specifically by asking a number of relevant questions to encourage intentionality and follow-through. Some of these directives involve defining recruitment goals, considering communications methods, fostering relationships, and sharing the program’s story. This resource provides useful, concrete questions that prompt reflection and thoughtfulness.

The fourth resource also addresses youth participation recruitment and retention. The authors remind us that, “Youth are more likely to stay in programs that authentically represent and serve them and that give them opportunities to grow and develop their identities.” The authors center authenticity as a key factor in maintaining healthy relationships with youth participants– this can ensure that the program is serving the needs of youth and may work well to invite other youth to participate in the program. Finally, the authors remind us that the seemingly “little details” (i.e., logistics) are often just as important as abstract notions like program mission and goals.

Overall, these four resources offered a range of strategies and “field tested” approaches to recruiting youth, families, and community members to join prevention initiatives. Please take a moment to visit the primary sources for additional information.

Author Biography

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