Effective Community Prevention: Results from the PCCD Web Survey

EPISCenter Research Brief   **July, 2010**

Advancing the Science & Practice of Prevention

Over the past 30 years, prevention science has made significant progress in identifying proven-effective programs aimed at improving youth and family well-being. As a result, government agencies and local communities across the country are working hard to adopt and implement these evidence-based programs to address critical social problems like delinquency, youth violence, substance use, and school failure.

A growing number of effective prevention and intervention programs have been identified; however, communities still face significant barriers to achieving broad public health impact from these programs. These barriers include ensuring high quality program implementation, the collection and use of program impact data, and achieving long-term program sustainability. Recognizing these challenges, researchers have turned their focus to the study of processes, facilitators, and barriers to moving proven effective prevention and intervention programs and practices to widespread adoption and public health impact.

The EPISCenter is committed to advancing the science and practice of prevention by studying the factors that promote high quality implementation and sustainability of evidence-based programs in Pennsylvania. Since 2005, state-funded program sites have participated in an annual web-based survey focused on implementation, evaluation and sustainability. This valuable resource not only advances the science of prevention but also informs the technical assistance and support the EPISCenter provides to Pennsylvania communities as they strive to improve outcomes for youth.

> **PA's Evidence-based Programs Initiative**
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> - *Guided by a multi-agency steering committee, the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) has shaped a strategy informed by science to impact delinquency, violence, and youth substance use.*
> - *Through grants to local communities, PA has purposefully chosen to invest in evidence-based (i.e. proven-effective) programs with the ultimate goal of improving the public health and well-being of PA youth, families, and communities.*

The EPISCenter's Annual Web-based Survey

Since 2005, 166 programs (98% of all PCCD-funded evidence-based programs) have provided the EPISCenter with annual data on the following topics:

- Coalition Connection, Functioning & Support
- Implementation Readiness
- Stakeholder Buy-in & Support
- Training & Technical Assistance

- Implementer Characteristics & Skills
- Fidelity Monitoring
- Sustainability Planning
- Local Evaluation

> *This EPISCenter Research Brief addresses three key questions in prevention science:*
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> 1) *What characterizes effective community coalitions?*
> 2) *What factors promote program sustainability?*
> 3) *How and why do communities adapt programs to fit their needs?*

What characterizes effective community prevention coalitions?

State of the Science: Community prevention coalitions have long been viewed as an effective and efficient way to organize and deliver prevention services at the community level. However until recent research demonstrating the effectiveness of Communities That Care (CTC) nationally and in PA, there had been almost no empirical evidence to support the added value of a coalition model (Hawkins et al., 2009; Feinberg et al., in press). Even less is known about what characterizes effective coalitions.

What Does the Web-based Survey Tell Us?

- 94% of respondents said their program is affiliated with some type of community coalition

- Of those coalition affiliations, 63% were with Communities that Care (CTC) coalitions

- Programs connected to coalitions reported high levels of implementation quality monitoring, but also considerable adaptation

- Programs that reported greater implementation monitoring were less likely to report adaptations to their program

- Programs connected to a CTC coalition (vs. another type of coalition) reported higher levels of coalition connection and functioning, and more coalition instrumental and financial support of the program

Coalition Effectiveness in CTC vs. non-CTC Coalitions

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$
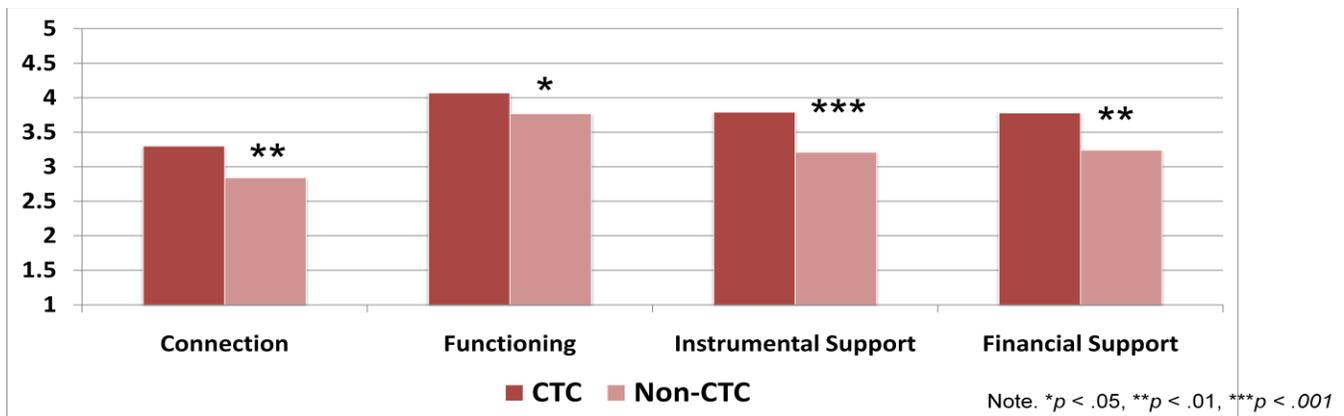
What Does this Mean for Pennsylvania Communities?

- A strong connection to a high functioning community coalition provides important instrumental and financial support for evidence-based programs

- Compared to other coalitions, Communities that Care coalitions appear to be more effective at provided this valuable support

What factors promote program sustainability?

State of the Science: The overwhelming majority of prevention efforts in the U.S. are funded by time-limited grants making sustainability a critical challenge for both researchers and communities. Currently, research in this area is mostly theoretical or anecdotal, differences in context are not considered, and very little is known about what happens in real-world contexts.

What Does the Web-based Survey Tell Us?

- When surveyed 2 or more years beyond their initial grant funding, 67% of PCCD-funded programs were able to sustain functioning

- However of those that sustained, 61% were operating at a lower level of functioning than during PCCD grant funding

- Several factors distinguished programs that were able to sustain from those that were not able to sustain:

    - Universal predictors of sustainability included: community coalition functioning, knowledge of the program's logical model, more frequent communication with the program's trainer or developer, outreach to community stakeholders, and early sustainability planning

    - For Classroom-based programs, greater student and teacher participation, stable staffing, and the absence of competing demands were characteristics that appeared to promote greater likelihood of program sustainability

    - For Community-based and Mentoring programs, connection to a well-functioning coalition was particularly important for sustainability

    - For Family-focused Intervention programs, more frequent communication with the trainer or developer, community outreach, and early sustainability planning were predictive of sustainability success

What Does this Mean for Pennsylvania Communities?

- The majority of PCCD-funded programs appear to have some success in achieving sustainability

- However, further support and guidance may be needed in order to maintain levels of functioning commensurate to when programs were financially supported by PCCD

- The characteristics that promote sustainability differ to some extent by program type

- Regardless of program type however, sustainability may be increased through greater community coalition functioning, knowledge of the program's logical model, more frequent communication with the program trainer or developer, regular outreach to community stakeholders, and early sustainability planning

How and why do communities make adaptations to programs?

State of the Science: A growing number of programs have found that higher quality implementation and adherence to the program model is associated with better participant outcomes. However, communities often face significant barriers during program implementation which can lead to program adaptation.

What Does the Web-based Survey Tell Us?

- Nearly half of all programs reported that they made some kind of adaptation to the program
    - 45% made changes to the program's procedures (e.g., location, time, data collection procedures, recruitment processes)
    - 40% made changes to the program's dosage or the amount of the program offered
    - 14% made changes to the population targeted by the program
    - 34% made changes to the program's content (e.g., added or removed lessons or activities)
    - 20% adapted the program for cultural relevance or to better match their community or targeted population
- The majority of these changes were found to be in conflict with the program's underlying theory and thus likely to have a negative impact on program outcomes
- The primary reasons for adaptation varied by program type
    - Classroom-based programs: time limitations and other competing demands
    - Community/Mentoring programs: participant recruitment and engagement
    - Family Prevention programs: participant recruitment and limited resources
    - Family Treatment programs: participant recruitment

What Does this Mean for Pennsylvania Communities?

- Program adaptations are often made due to logistical barriers like time limitations and participant recruitment challenges
- Unfortunately, the majority of changes conflict with the program's underlying theory and are likely to have a negative impact on the program outcomes
- Careful pre-implementation planning can prevent unanticipated implementation challenges, and may reduce the likelihood that reactive adaptations will occur
- Program implementers who are trained in the underlying theory (logic model) of the program will be better prepared to make adaptation decisions that don't conflict with the program's theory
- Consultations with the program developer and/or technical assistance providers should be sought before making any adaptation in order to assure program outcomes are not deleteriously affected