
BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

What are the first steps?

Laying the Foundation

Throughout the United States, in communities struggling with illegal drugs and the problems they cause, conditions are right for a Major Cities Initiative to take root. Most of the ingredients are already in place; what's needed is the spark of leadership to set the process in motion.

The first step is to identify the nature and extent of the local drug problem and to summon the will to address it. Understand from the outset that you are not alone. Many others in your community are already working hard to combat substance abuse on various fronts. Seek out these people. Learn who they are and what they are doing. Work with them. The key to a successful Major Cities effort is positive relationships across sectors. Local leaders must constantly reach out to form alliances with those in the area who have a stake in, or the ability to influence, the wellbeing of the community. This is a dynamic, ongoing process fueled by interaction and dialog. Partnerships are the program's lifeblood.

Becoming familiar with the activities of relevant government agencies and concerned citizens will provide a good overview of the substance-abuse picture in your area. Some activities may need refinement or redirection. But keep in mind that the primary goal of the Major Cities Initiative is to connect and coordinate, not to reinvent the wheel or duplicate valid efforts already underway.

Reducing drug use in your community must be an ongoing endeavor. Before you can take meaningful action, however, you must carefully determine exactly what you hope to accomplish during the initial 12-18 months of the initiative.

First, evaluate the situation thoroughly to fully understand the threat. Then use that data to identify the target, making sure your efforts are tailored precisely to that goal and to achieving measurable outcomes. Be realistic, and be specific. Let common sense and logic guide you.

Substance abuse is a complex, ever-evolving threat, so don't expect to address all of your community's drug woes in one fell swoop. Keep the focus narrow, at least in the beginning, concentrating on a part of the overall problem that can likely be addressed using the resources available. Later, as the program gains momentum—or in a subsequent initiative—the scope can be expanded to include other targets.

KEY POINTS

- Make it known that an effort is underway to mobilize the community in the fight against illegal drugs.
 - Determine what others are doing to combat drug use, and maintain an active recruitment process to secure the participation of dedicated, action-oriented people.
 - Identify the target and the desired measurable outcomes, and tailor the effort accordingly.
 - Be realistic and keep the focus narrow.
-

What is the best way to organize the program?

Creating a Structure

The next step is to design an operational structure that will guide the work of the initiative. The structure, generally, should reflect the size, population, demographics, and character of the community it serves. But keep it simple, flexible, and straightforward. Just as there is no such thing as a “typical” city, there is no right or wrong way to organize a citywide anti-drug initiative. Cities are made up of many communities, which are often competing rather than cooperating elements.

The best organizational framework is one that best meets the needs of the community. However, experience has shown that a good working design organizes the program membership into three basic components: a Steering Committee, a Working Group, and three or four mission-specific Task Forces (figure 1.) These groups have overlapping membership and work together to develop, implement, and evaluate action strategies for achieving real and measurable outcomes.

Steering Committee. At the core of the program is the *Steering Committee*, a group of 10 to 12 key individuals who have the contacts and skills needed to assess the local drug situation and to design, guide, and monitor efforts to address it. The Steering Committee (sometimes called the Coordinating Committee) should include experts in substance abuse as well as influential people representing government, law enforcement, public health, business, parents, schools, youth, and the faith community. The Steering Committee functions like an advisory panel within the larger membership and makes major decisions regarding the initiative. It is the driving force of the program, keeping participants on track and serving as an advisory body to the mayor and other leaders. Ideally, though not necessarily, the group is chaired by a high-ranking community official, such as the mayor, director of public safety, or county executive.

Working Group. An important function of the Steering Committee is to recruit others from the community to participate in the initiative. Those who agree to devote their time and energy to the effort become part of the second main pillar in the organizational structure: the *Working Group*. This group of about 50 people consists of substance-abuse experts and others from all sectors of the community. Once the Steering Committee has secured a commitment from an appropriate number of volunteers, it calls the full Working Group together to kick off the initiative with a day-long strategy development session.

Task Forces. At the strategy development session, the Working Group breaks into three or four separate *Task Forces*, which collectively form the third main structural component. These smaller groups are organized by specialty—Prevention, Treatment, Law Enforcement, and possibly others, such as treatment issues in the criminal justice system.

The job of each Task Force is to identify substance-abuse targets within its field of expertise, then come up with specific action plans for addressing those concerns. As part of the Major Cities Initiative in Detroit, for example, Task Forces developed activities involving aftercare and recovery housing, school-based programs, and local businesses in an effort to reduce sales of alcohol, tobacco, and drug paraphernalia to youth. To look into street-level prostitution and drug use, program leaders created a Task Force that included representatives from the police and sheriff's departments, as well as several judges, probation and parole officers, health department staff, and local drug treatment providers.

Figure 1: Suggested Organizational Structure for Major Cities Initiative



KEY POINTS

- Design an organizational structure that allows for representative and community-wide membership.
- Make the structure simple and flexible, and stick to it.
- Basic elements of an effective structure:
 - Steering Committee
 - Working Group
 - Task Forces

How do communities learn the facts about local drug use?

Identifying the Threat

Surgeons do not perform operations without a thorough assessment and a good idea of what they hope to achieve. Similarly, you should not launch a drug initiative without a clear understanding of the incidence, prevalence, and impact of drug use in your area.

One of the Steering Committee's first and most important tasks is to study and document the local drug problem as precisely as possible. Find out everything you can about the supply and demand of drugs in your area. Who are the users? What drugs are involved? Where do the drugs come from? How are they sold? Who sells them? Where are your community's major trouble spots? The picture that emerges from this assessment will help define the threat and orient the work of the Task Forces.

When collecting data, do not rely on hunches or assumptions about drug use. Instead, make every effort to gather solid, documentable facts. Collect data from across the spectrum, using local sources whenever possible, such as area crime statistics and school drug-and-alcohol surveys.

Some data collection centers provide threat-assessment support to local law enforcement. These sources include:

- National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC)
- High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) Program
- System To Retrieve Information on Drug Evidence (STRIDE)
- EPIC's Clandestine Laboratory Seizure System (CLSS)

Contact your local, State, and Federal law enforcement agencies to obtain specific information about your area.

You can also get useful information about local drug use from government-funded surveys and other data sources, which include:

- Monitoring the Future
- National Survey on Drug Use and Health
- Youth Risk Behavior Survey
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN)
- National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS)
- Community Epidemiology Work Group (CEWG)
- Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS)
- The American Association of Poison Control Centers
- Parents' Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE)

(See the "Resources" section for more information about surveys and data sources.)

Look at indirect evidence as well, including police reports and overdose statistics in the aggregate, school dropout rates, and teen pregnancy data. Local hospitals, clinics, poison control centers, and treatment centers can also provide useful information on the impact of drug use and emerging trends. A number of states, as well as several private, non-profit organizations, offer support and survey materials designed to measure drug use among students. These surveys can help you pinpoint which drugs young people in your area are using, and they provide critical data for measuring progress both during and after the initiative.

Anecdotal evidence, such as observations of behavior or activities that suggest drug use, may alert you to possible problem areas. Remember, however, that theories and impressions go only so far; they also can be wrong or misleading. Assessments built on objective, measurable data offer the clearest, most reliable and most comprehensible picture of the threat. This information, in turn, helps to ensure vital agreement among program participants on what actions are needed.

How can local leaders get a “big picture” view of the threat?

Mapping Out the Problem

Much of the evidence collected during the initiative will involve numbers—measurements, percentages, rates, averages, and so forth. While statistics are necessary for sizing up a drug problem, it’s not always easy to grasp the significance of figures displayed row after row on a spreadsheet. A map, however, gets the message across almost instantly.

Using data gathered during the assessment phase, you can create a detailed geomap that gives an easy-to-understand visual representation of the substance-abuse situation in your area, simultaneously showing both the problems and what is being done about them. Mapping can help you track trends and identify trouble spots, thereby enabling you more quickly to move resources to areas where they are needed. Patterns visible on a map can also provide important clues about which projects are working and which are not.

Your map is like a snapshot, revealing at a glance the various drug-related forces at work in your city. For example, it might show major centers of drug-dealing activity and their proximity to schools, as well as areas in town where certain drugs are known to be a problem. Or, using information from local police, the map might pinpoint the locations of drug-related assaults, arrests, and other crimes. To show how the city is responding to the problem, a map might depict the location of substance-abuse resources, such as treatment centers, hospitals, churches, and anti-drug coalitions. It might also highlight areas targeted by Federal treatment or prevention grants, as well as neighborhoods with increased police patrols.

The type and sophistication level of the map will depend, to some degree, on the size of your community and its financial resources. Small cities and towns may need nothing more than an oversized paper map of the area, an easel, and a box of colored markers to plot their data.

However, most cities would benefit from use of a powerful mapping tool, such as Geographic Information System (GIS) technology. GIS software converts information about a location into an interactive, multi-layered map, with each layer reflecting a different data set. Layers can be combined and viewed in an overlapping manner, or peeled away and viewed individually. For example, you could use GIS technology to create layers showing the number and movement of open-air drug markets. Map databases can easily be updated when new data become available.

Many government agencies use GIS technology to help manage law enforcement and health care resources, national security efforts, and other activities. The software can be an equally valuable tool for State and local governments, particularly those striving to meet Federal guidelines and requirements such as those outlined in Presidential initiatives and by the Office of Management and Budget. It offers

increased efficiency, improved accuracy, and the ability to manipulate an enormous amount of information. And though the software and technical support can be expensive, GIS is worth the cost if it helps you better understand how to reduce drug use in your city.

KEY POINTS

- Study and carefully document the local drug problem, then share this assessment with all sectors of the community.
 - Base your drug assessment on solid evidence, not hunches or assumptions. Use local data to paint the drug picture:
 - What are the problem drugs?
 - Who are the users?
 - Who are the dealers?
 - Where do the drugs come from?
 - Seek the involvement of local law enforcement. The police are an important part of your team, as they often have access to data systems and technical support for comprehensive threat assessments.
 - See the “Resources” section for sources of local and national drug-use data.
-