



Guiding Ohio Online

Level Up: Partnerships

Only undertake a partnership level up challenge after clearing it with your site supervisor and/or library director.

What is a Partnership?

A partnership is a recognized relationship between the library and another organization in the community. The partnership can be as formal or informal as suits the partner agency and the library. Although the library will benefit from community partnerships, this is not always the primary purpose for entering into them. The purpose of many partnerships is for the library to learn about the agency's services, connect with community members they serve, and provide appropriate community-led programs and services.

For many of the partnerships you will engage in, the partner agencies have no obligation to provide any specific services to the library in return, although many will choose to do so. Their part in the reciprocal agreement is to provide the library with access to their clients.

Why Partner?

There are several reasons for exploring partnerships with agencies in your community. Programs and services for low-income or marginalized community members are often vulnerable to one-time project funding, which is tentative and temporary. Funding sometimes arrives and disappears abruptly. Some service providers and their clients sometimes view the library as yet another of those bureaucracies which will parachute in with a great idea and then withdraw a year or two later, leaving conditions much as they were. If the library is interested in engaging with service providers and socially excluded community members, it may need to establish its credibility through a partnership. This will demonstrate that the library's commitment to the community is long-term.

At its most practical level, a partnership can greatly enhance the library's access to a target audience. Community agencies provide diverse services and often use publicity and referrals to attract participants whom the library would not ordinarily reach.

Step 1. Determine Purpose of the Partnership

You do not need a specific goal in order to create community partnerships. The desire to promote greater understanding, liaise with one another, and access community members who do not use the

library are reasons enough.

Ask yourself if the partnerships you develop will have to dissolve at the end of your AmeriCorps term of service or when the Guiding Ohio Online AmeriCorps program ends. Knowing that the partnership is temporary may influence your selection for strategic reasons. You do not want to select an agency that has already been subjected to a number of haphazard, temporary programs and whose staff and clients now feel cynical about such endeavors. Ongoing partnerships are preferable over temporary ones whenever possible. On the other hand, the short term initiative may provide the foundation for a long-term relationship. Consider these issues and possibilities in advance.

Step 2. Identify Potential Partners

You've already identified some potential partnership through "Getting to Know Your Library: the Community" and "Steps to Success: Outreach." Carefully document potential areas of partnership—this will provide you with a quick reference for current and future partnerships.

Step 3. Approach Potential Partners

Explore with your potential partner how the partnership might work. The meetings and discussions you have will vary with each potential partnership. Sometimes, one or two informal conversations will be enough. Other agencies have complex reporting structures and need approval at many layers before agreeing to even the most informal partnership. Understand their hesitation or their administrative protocol and allow potential partners the time they need.

Step 4. Determine the Nature of the Partnership

In conversation with your community partners, determine whether a formal partnership agreement or an informal partnership arrangement is appropriate. A formal partnership involves a signed agreement, often called a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), while an informal partnership needs only a verbal agreement. For certain partners, a formal agreement might be advantageous, as it may enhance their stature in the community or increase the funding they attract. Investigate whether your own library has any policies regarding the number and types of formal partnerships it may have.

Some partners may feel that a formal document could create obligations in time or resources that

they cannot meet. Informal arrangements are simpler and more comfortable in such cases. An informal arrangement is equally professional and is as important as a formal partnership would be. Your relationships with staff and community members would be the same. Be prepared to discuss each type of partnership and allow your community partner the final decision whenever possible.

Step 5. Finalize the Partnership (Formal)

If you and your partner decide to develop a formal partnership, you will need to have a written agreement in place. The needs of each partner and its clients will always be unique, so there is no standard, sample agreement format to follow. If your library system has already developed a standard partnership agreement, you may need to use that. Be aware, however, that if the standard agreement is too formally structured, some agencies may be reluctant to commit to it. Find out if you can alter the standard agreement to make it more flexible and suitable.

When you work out the details with your community partner, try to include the topics below.

- *Purpose.* Be sure that your community partner understands exactly you're expect from them and why.
- *Objectives.* If you have specific objectives for your partnership, state them in the agreement. In other cases, your partnership goals can be kept open-ended, so that you will not be limited later. For example your goal might be: "to meet community members who use this space and involve them in discussions about library programs and services," or "to explore with staff and clients possible ways the library can provide more effective programs and services to meet the needs of the community."
- *Parameters.* Outline the library's commitments. Keep your approach simple to start, but also build flexibility into the agreement. For example, you might begin simply by agreeing to visit for an hour or two each week at a suitable time for a program.
- *Administration.* Confirm any paperwork, reports, or record keeping that may be required.
- *Communication.* Discuss how frequently you will meet to review and evaluate the partnership. Be sure to include that either partner is free to request a meeting at any time.
- *Change.* Include the flexibility to have any aspects of the partnership evaluated and altered at any time.

Step 6. Build the Relationship

Once the partnership is in place, begin to get to know both the staff and its clients.

Step 7. Evaluate the Partnership

Exactly how often you meet with your partner to evaluate the partnership, and the form these meetings will take, can be included as part of the agreement. Some agencies' head offices may require an annual formal evaluation report with set statistics and categories. If such a report is required, discuss how these needs can be met in the simplest way possible.

When you evaluate your partnerships, there are a number of things to keep in mind. As with all relationships, partnerships evolve over time and go through various stages and degrees of activity. Do not be too concerned if a once active partnership tapers off for a period of time. Each agency will be faced with its own challenges and programming needs, and these needs will change over time. If your partner is going through a period where they just do not have the time or resources to engage in activities with the library, perhaps they will again in the future. Wherever possible, keep in regular contact with a partner to remind them of the library's presence.

Because of the high stress nature of the work, some community agencies experience significant staff turnover. Bringing new staff up to date on your partnership with them can be time consuming, but is a critical aspect of maintaining the partnership.