



CHAPTER 6: BUILDING AND SUSTAINING MEMBERSHIP

If you have started a family council or worked to keep one going, you know that recruiting members is a constant challenge with no easy answers. The key is to get many members working on it, and to work on it regularly.

Remember, good programs that keep members engaged will attract members. Remind yourself, and your leadership team, of the many benefits of keeping focused on this goal.

Benefits of Increasing Membership

- There is strength in numbers.
- More families and friends are represented.
- Diversity is advanced.
- Group confidence is increased.
- Credibility with administration is enhanced.
- New members bring in new ideas.

Benefits of Increasing Participation

- When there are more members to share the work, more can be achieved.
- Sharing tasks develops multiple leaders.
- New participants bring new skills and perspectives and prevent the organization from getting “stale.”
- Retains current membership.

The suggestions in this chapter will help you build and retain members. There are more suggestions here than any one family council can use. Choose or adapt those that are most relevant to your situation.

The Basics of Membership Development

Build awareness

Advertise the council’s presence so potential members know it exists, what it does and why they should join. The council can do this outreach, but it is much easier if facility staff help by providing council information to families of new residents on admission and

in facility mailings.

Communicate in as many ways as possible

- Mailings to the council's mailing list, or facility mailings to known relatives
- Postings on a facility bulletin board can reach visitors not on either list.
- Members or staff can pass out meeting notices at the home in advance of, and on the day of, the meeting.
- Leave notices at the visitor sign-in desk.
- Ask the facility to announce meetings on their PA system (15 minutes before meetings and right before it is due to start).

Do not assume that people know about your council. Always include information in the notice about the council's purpose, benefits, and achievements and whom to contact to learn more.

When recruiting, recognize and respond to the point of view of potential members. Outreach materials should emphasize families' self interest. *"Join the council to get information and mutual support you can't get anywhere else. . . ."*

Target relatives of new residents, because they especially need information and support

- Send a welcome letter to each new family and friend.
- Assign a welcoming committee to greet and recruit new families and friends.
- Establish an orientation program and materials to assist new families and friends.
- Ask all members to note new residents and to seek out their visitors to invite them to join.
- Ask administration to include information about the council in admission packets.
- Offer to work with staff to develop a joint introduction to the nursing home brochure.

Make it personal

People are more likely to pay attention when they hear someone talking about the family council than when they read about it. Personal invitations to join, take on a new task, or participate more fully usually work best. With personal contact, you can highlight aspects of your council's work and potential members can ask questions and connect with current members.

- Ask every member to commit to inviting one other person to the next meeting.
- Telephone calls are effective and are less burdensome if a calling list is divided among several members.

- Encourage each member to connect with other families and friends while visiting. If necessary, train or role-play introducing yourself, telling about the council, and inviting someone to an upcoming meeting.
- Assign members to greet visitors at the home's main entrance on a high traffic visiting day. They should be prepared to offer materials and answer questions. Add a nearby table with printed information.
- Have one or several members offer information about the family council at council and facility sponsored special events.

Plan strategically

- Include outreach and recruitment in other regular council activities.
- When posting meeting times and places, always include a welcome for newcomers, a statement of what the council is and does, and whom to contact for more information.
- As you meet staff and introduce them to the council, ask for their help with awareness and outreach. If you formally acknowledge staff, for example, with a holiday treat table on each floor, make it very public and advertise your presence in the facility.
- If you contact local elected officials on public advocacy issues, ask them to publicize the council in their newsletter and constituent materials.
- A simple newsletter can communicate news of council work and upcoming events to members and serve as a recruitment brochure. Use a standard format that includes the following elements in each issue:

A “news” section, front and center;

a designated space for council mission and outreach information;

a list of upcoming events, with times, places and purposes;

a place to celebrate successes - a new one, even if small, for each issue;

any council activity. For example, if staff recognition is a council activity, recognize the special work of a staff member within a general expression of appreciation to all staff.

There are sample newsletters in *Appendix I* and on the CD.

Expanding Participation and Sustaining Membership

The first step is getting newcomers to come to a meeting. Then, to succeed, you will have to convince them to participate in council efforts and commit to the group's purposes.

- Delegate interesting assignments.

- Mentor new individuals, if need be, so that they can be successful at their tasks.
- Include newcomers in planning.

You need active participants, not mere attendees, to expand work beyond the leadership group, to sustain the organization over time, and to develop new leaders. If people feel that they are engaged in meaningful efforts, and their efforts are valued, they are more likely to stay loyal to the council and promote the council's work to others in the home.

Don't let the desire to “get it done now” lead you to shut out newcomers

Sometimes, the desire to foster participation is undermined by a tension between getting more people involved and getting the job done.

When a group that is used to working together has developed efficient routines to get things done, they may unintentionally discourage others from joining in. To sustain an organization, you must delegate and tolerate others' learning curves. A new volunteer may be less efficient and slower than those who usually do a task, but as she learns she becomes an active part of the group. Because she is willing to take on the job, the leader who used to do it can take on another job that needs her added experience and skill.

Look out for a “been there, done that” defeatism that councils with stable leadership can sometimes fall into. Listen to newcomers with openness, even if their suggestions have been tried and discarded in the past. New players, new times and facility changes might make something work now that didn't work in the past. Look for opportunities to try again.

Make sure the council changes as its nursing home community changes

If the population of the home has changed, you have probably adjusted your recruitment. For example, if a new minority population has recently been admitted, you will want to be sure to reach out and include these residents' families in your council. (See *Chapter 7, Diversity and Family Councils*) Similarly, if your home is admitting younger, disabled individuals, you will want to find ways to address their needs and interests. If key administrative staff change and bring new attitudes or policies, your advocacy priorities and style should take that into account. Usually this occurs in the natural course of your work.

Sometimes, though, amid the pressures of day-to-day council work, no one notices that the council has not changed in ways it should. When you see this, find a way to address it. It may be as simple as a change in advocacy perspective in meetings with the administrator. Or it may require assigning someone to undertake a new, redesigned recruitment campaign. Noticing and acting are the important things.

When Building Membership Is a Particular Challenge

With your leadership group, figure out why building membership is so hard. Once you have identified the reasons, make a plan and commit the needed energy and time to move forward.

Identify difficulties and ways to address them

Analyze your council's strengths and weaknesses, your goals and achievements. Try to pinpoint the difficulties affecting your council right now. You can look within and outside your organization for information and feedback in any of the following ways:

- Brainstorm in the leadership group.
- Get feedback from a few people outside the council. For example, staff and new relatives can help you with outreach. Talk to members who have drifted away and newcomers who never returned after a first meeting.
- Do a survey. This gives the most information and is a form of outreach. If you do not have the resources yourself, see if facility staff will help. There is a sample survey in *Appendix I* and on the CD.
- Ask an objective outsider to attend a meeting as an observer with a newcomer's point of view. Have the person compare what actually happens in your meeting with the points discussed in *Chapters 3* and *4* on effective leadership and meetings.

Ask the relevant questions

What should you ask and think about? Here is a list of possibilities. Not all will be relevant for every council at every point and, of course, no one can address them all. Choose the ones that are most meaningful for you.

Do relatives, residents and staff know about the council?

Do they know what it does?

Are meeting times and places known and convenient?

Is it easy for families to contact council leaders?

Are phone numbers and email addresses posted for obtaining more information about the council?

Are there members wearing name tags saying "Ask me about the Family Council"?

Is the tone and style of council communications appealing?

Are the programs and priorities interesting? Varied?

Are meetings well run; do they stick to the agenda, end on time, and encourage participation?

How often are suggestions and new ideas adopted, volunteers accepted, tasks delegated to someone new?

Do members know and talk about successes and benefits of membership? For example, did you give a great holiday party for residents or do members visit for each other when someone is away on vacation?

Move forward

A serious look at your council's membership building efforts and style, plus the feedback you get from others, should suggest some changes. Make a plan, adopt the changes and move forward. If necessary, plan to revisit the issue again in a year.

Don't let worries about membership numbers consume all your energy. Small groups can be very effective. Successful, active councils attract engaged new members, regardless of their initial size. As your effectiveness increases, and becomes better known, you will naturally attract more people to your council.

There are sample materials in *Appendix I* and on the accompanying CD that relate to the materials in this chapter, especially

- ▶ Meeting flyer
- ▶ Postcard notices (in *Word*)
- ▶ Postcard notices (in *Publisher*)
- ▶ Newsletter (in *Word*)
- ▶ Newsletter (in *Publisher*)
- ▶ Business cards (in *Word*)
- ▶ Business cards (in *Publisher*)
- ▶ Member welcome letter and packet
- ▶ Membership form
- ▶ Council history and accomplishments for welcome packet
- ▶ Contact number list for welcome packet
- ▶ Council evaluation survey