

Community South West Alliance

Partners

The Community South West (CSW) Alliance initially comprised nine community organisations providing a diverse range of community services in the Warrnambool area. They included: Aspire, Mpower Inc., Southern Way Direct Care Service Inc., Western District Employment Access Inc., Brophy Family & Youth Services, Vantage Inc., Community Connections (Vic) Ltd, Gunditjamarra Aboriginal Cooperative Limited, Western Regional Alcohol & Drug Service.

Why collaborate?

- To reduce operating costs and improve fundraising opportunities.
- To improve the quality of service delivery to the community.
- To establish a single voice around common community issues in the south west of Victoria.

The Alliance story

The CSW Alliance was formed in 2004 and is now in its third year of structured operation. A business structure was established to support the development of the Alliance. A memorandum of understanding, describing the shared values of members, was developed as a basis for decision making and conflict resolution. Management meetings were held regularly and a Strategic Plan was developed. In late 2005 a project manager was appointed (with funding from the Community Sector Investment Fund). The top priority for the project manager was to determine future collaboration activities. A strategy meeting was held and as a result, a planning paper, identifying key initiatives to be pursued, was produced and endorsed by member CEOs. A steering committee, including CEO's from each of the nine alliance organisations, was established to oversee the development and progress of these initiatives.

The alliance has in place a process for collaboration and discussion at three levels, including, Governance, CEO and Business Manager levels. Over time the focus of the alliance has shifted from being internal (purchasing etc) to external (how can we interact with the broader community).

Achievements

- Significant cost savings and improved services / supplier relationships as a result of group purchasing contracts established in a broad range of areas: vehicles, IT equipment, copiers, telecoms, furniture, insurance, stationery, catering, and printing.
- Creation of a new Community South West website, including staff intranet for information sharing across alliance organisations. www.communitysouthwest.com
- Creation of a group training calendar with training in specific areas being delivered by preferred training providers.
- Preparation of member profiles to assist in identifying potential opportunities for collaboration and provide information into funding submissions
- Enhanced staff skills and confidence and growth of goodwill between member organisations
- Boosted community profile through alliance hosted events such as the regional not-for-profit Conference held in February 2008
- Creation of a media/marketing process to raise profile of the alliance, its members and the contribution to the community
- Created a collaborative environment for increasing sharing of information and best practices between members
- Moved the alliance towards a sustainable future through incorporation, opening membership to other organisations and seeking alternative funding
- Assisted members to become more media conscious

Success factors

- The willingness of members to commit resources, including funding and staff hours to ensure the future of the alliance
- The alliance has been driven locally, by members
- Accessing funds for and finding a skilled project manager
- Demonstrated ability to work together, collaboratively, on major regional projects

Future Challenges

Blending differing perspectives as new members from different sectors seek membership
Balancing membership criteria to ensure alliance remains of value to the broader community against the need for operational revenue

Generating sufficient funding to retain project manager, fund operational costs and fund projects on behalf of members

Becoming recognised as a representative body within the broader community

Future / sustainability

- The alliance has demonstrated that it is feasible to create a regional structure funded through membership fees, however future sustainability will require revenue from other sources so as to minimise the burden upon members.
- While CSIF funding was critical in getting the alliance 'off the ground', the short-term nature of the funding imposed an additional financial burden upon a small group of members. It is recommended that any future funding of this kind be extended over a longer period of time as achieving sustainability for such collaborative programs is a long-term process.

Lessons learned

- The role of project manager is essential to the success of such projects, mainly to facilitate communication and decision making between members
- Collaborative programs are not short-term, they require considerable time to reach maturity
- External communication is as important as internal communication
- Members input into such programs, including funding, time and resources, are additional to their normal operations. Care is needed to ensure this additional burden doesn't create a breaking point where the value of such an alliance is eroded by the hidden costs of membership.

Further information

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