2008-2012

Use of Peer Learning Network (PLN) by the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (NACDD) Action Communities for Health Innovation and EnVironmental ChangeE (ACHIEVE) Communities

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHRONIC DISEASE DIRECTORS
Promoting Health. Preventing Disease.

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Introduction

Over the last five years, the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (NACDD) worked with a national partnership, including the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), the NACDD, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE), and the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA), and 149 local communities to implement Action Communities for Health Innovation and Environmental Change (ACHIEVE). Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as part of its Healthy Communities Program, the goal of ACHIEVE was to reduce chronic diseases and their associated risk factors, reduce morbidity and mortality, decrease health disparities, and create healthy communities.

NACDD sought to fund, train and support 48 of the communities in 31 states (including one US Territory). The ACHIEVE funding was for a three-year project period and allowed local communities to work through a multi-phase process and create or continue a multi-sectorial coalition, assess the community for policy, system and environmental infrastructure, as well as create a tailor-made plan to address each community uniquely. To assist each community team along this process NACDD developed numerous training and technical assistance approaches. One unique approach that evolved over time was the use of a Peer Learning Network (PLN). The PLN was established to provide a forum for shared learning and knowledge exchange outside of the traditional trainings and technical assistance to all ACHIEVE teams. This forum was conducted virtually with the use of conference call and webinar technology. NACDD employed a third party facilitator to assist with all call facilitation. This was by design to allow the NACDD staff to be in an observational role, as opposed to the technical advisor.

This report seeks to provide data and a review of the use of the PLN among the 2009-2012 NACDD ACHIEVE community cohorts (Figure 1). Data was collected through bi-annual Progress Updates using Survey Monkey online technology and collected from four of the five ACHIEVE cohorts. NACDD did not adopt utilization of the PLN until 2010-2011: it was implemented during the last two years of ACHIEVE (2010-2012).

The 2008 cohort was excluded because that group had completed the three year project period at the time the PLN was initiated, but the two previous cohorts (2009-2010) were included in the network.

> **Figure 1. ACHIEVE 2008-2012 Cohorts**
>
> 2008 (10 teams)
>
> 2009 (13 teams)
>
> 2010 (10 teams)
>
> 2011 (10 teams)
>
> 2012 (5 teams/5 mentors)

Peer Learning Network Year 1

As NACDD endeavored upon the creation of the PLN during the 2010-2011 project year, the expertise of Community Initiatives, Inc. (CI), was sought to develop and implement the PLN. Members of the CI team served as the facilitators, in conjunction with NACDD staff, for all calls during Year 1 (2010-2011) and Year 2 (2011-2012) of the PLN. During the first year of operation, three separate groups were identified (Figure 2). Among the three cohorts participating, the 2009 and 2010 cohorts were combined into one peer group and 2011 was divided into two smaller groups. Based on experience from CI, PLN groups with 6-8 team members would be conducive to enhanced discussion and facilitation. Groups with more members, up to 30, could engage, but in a more limited form of peer sharing. This information formed the creation of the initial PLN groups. Funding and resource availability drove the design for groups of both large and small sizes.

> **Figure 2. PLN Year 1 (Oct. 2010 – Sept. 2011) Groups**
>
> **Group 1** – 2009 & 2010 teams combined (n=23 teams)
>
> **Group 2** – 2011 Team 1 (n=5)
>
> **Group 3** – 2011 Team 2 (n=5)

Group 1

The facilitative discussion design was reflective of the ACHIEVE phase that the teams were in when they engaged in the PLN, as well as the technical assistance needed by each. For example, the 2009 teams were in project period Year 3 and focused on implementation, evaluation and sustainability. The 2010 teams were in project period Year 2 and just beginning the implementation and evaluation phase and preparing for sustainability. The main focus of these calls was to highlight the 2009 teams that were successfully implementing and sustaining Policy Systems and Environmental improvements project activities, and to assist the 2010 teams that were beginning these same processes. To aid the teams in getting to know each other, a photo based contact list was generated to give participants an opportunity to see who they were connecting with virtually.

The call format included members of NACDD staff, CI staff and all 2009 and 2010 communities. Maximum participants on the call could be up to 30 individuals. Call schedule included a brief welcome, roll call and any important updates provided by NACDD staff (*10 minutes*). CI began each call with an overview of the peer learning process and potential outcomes/expectations and discussed any 'ground rules' as necessary (*10 minutes*). Next CI began a discussion about the scheduled topic (*10 minutes*) followed by a brief report from one or more communities on what is working in this area (*10-15 minutes*). NACDD worked with CI to identify ahead of time the topic(s) and any potential resources or trainings that might be beneficial to highlight.

NACDD worked with CI to identify one or more coaches that could present briefly on the topic at hand. The remaining time would be spent in a facilitated manner with CI posing questions to the group around the topic, to engage participants in a group-think or group discussion (*30 minutes*). NACDD staff closed each call with final comments and provided any follow up questions or information necessary (*5 minutes*).

During Year 1, Group 1 calls were held quarterly, and occurred in May, July, and September, (insert year here?). Nearly 85% of 2009 teams and 90% of 2010 teams reported participating on at least one call during this time period. The call participation averaged 15-17 members per call.

Groups 2 and 3

In a similar progression, this design was reflective of the phase the teams were in and the intensity required for the phase. The 2011 teams were newly funded and all in project period Year 1. The immediate phases for the teams included creating or refining an existing a coalition, conducting an intensive community assessment and developing a community action plan to address any gaps identified during the assessment. The focus of the calls was around the process the teams were going through, the barriers they were facing and the solutions being implemented. There were no formal presentations during these calls.

The 2011 cohort was divided into two separate groups to allow for an enhanced and intimate setting for sharing and dialoguing. Given the specific ACHIEVE phases that these teams were undergoing at the time, the decision was made to divide the PLN cohort into two distinct groups so that they would have the added benefit of participating in a smaller group setting. The two groups were selected based on the size of the communities; therefore, a larger urban team and a smaller rural team were formed. To aid the teams in getting to know each other, a photo based contact list was generated to give participants an opportunity to see who they were connecting with virtually.

The format and structure of these PLN group calls closely resembled that of the Group 1 PLN group calls. The call format included members of NACDD staff, CI staff and all five participating 2011 communities per call. The maximum participants on the call could be up to eight individuals. The call schedule included a brief welcome, roll call and any important updates provided by NACDD staff (*10 minutes*). CI then began with an overview of the peer learning process and potential outcomes or expectations and discussed any 'ground rules' as necessary (*10 minutes*). Next CI began a discussion about the scheduled topic (*10 minutes*). NACDD worked with CI to identify ahead of time the topic(s) and any potential resources or trainings to highlight. The remaining time was spent in a facilitated manner with CI posing questions to the

group around the topic to engage in a group-think or group discussion (*30 minutes*). NACDD staff closed the call with final comments and provides any follow up necessary (*5 minutes*).
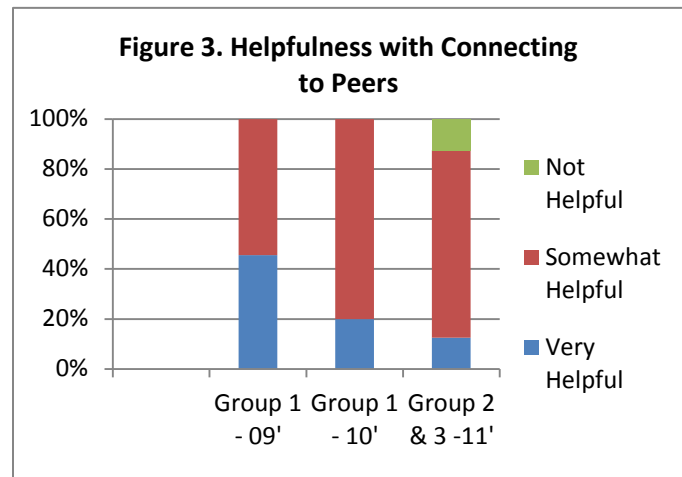
During Year 1, the PLN calls were held quarterly for each of the two groups; 100% of teams reported participating in at least one call during this time period.
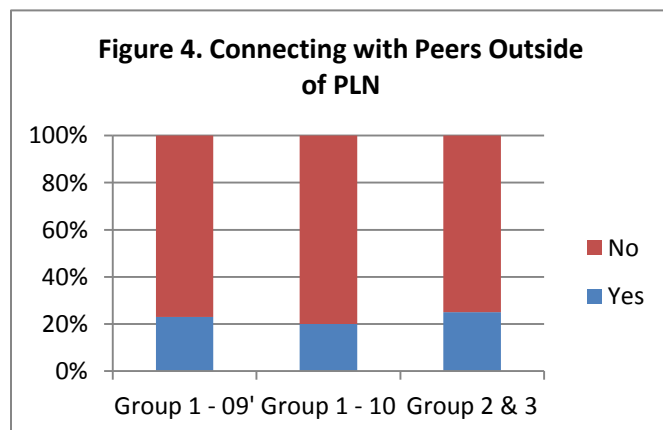
Year 1 Results

At the end of Year 1 of the PLN, all groups were assessed for a variety of indicators. These included helpfulness of the PLN for connecting with peers, connectivity to peers outside of the PLN, and usefulness sustaining the coalition, using the assessment and developing the community action plan (2009 only).

Helpfulness with connecting to Peers

When asked about the helpfulness of the PLN to connect with peers (Figure 3.), Group 1 indicated 46% (2009) and 20% (2010) '*Very Helpful*' and 54% (2009) and 80% (2010) indicated '*Somewhat Helpful*'. '*Not helpful*' was selected by 0% of the groups, respectively. Group 2 and 3 were evaluated together, where 12.5% indicated the PLN was '*Very Helpful*' with connecting with peers, 75% indicated '*Somewhat Helpful*' and 12.5% indicated '*Not Helpful*'.

Figure 3. Helpfulness with Connecting to Peers

Connecting with Peers Outside of PLN
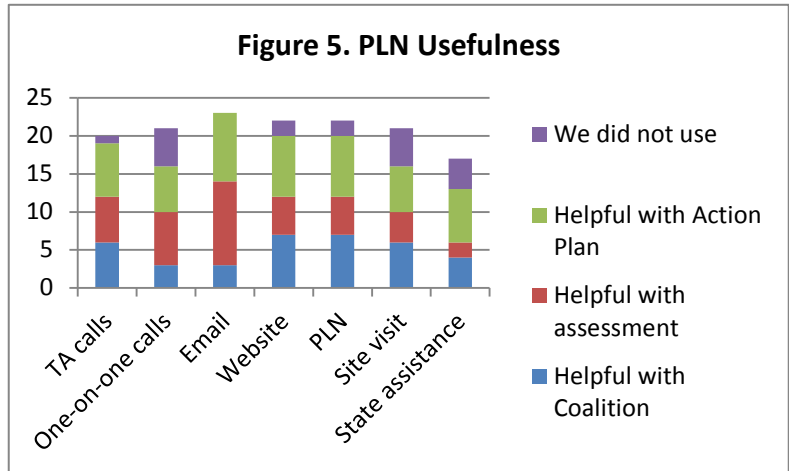

Figure 4. Connecting with Peers Outside of PLN

When asked about connecting with a peer outside of the PLN (Figure 4.), Group 1 indicated 23% (2009) and 20% (2010) '*Yes*'. Group 2 and 3 responded together, with 25% indicating '*Yes*'.

PLN Usefulness with Coalition, Assessment and Action Plan (2009 only)

As a component of the final progress report the 2009 teams were asked to describe the PLN in overall usefulness with specific project components. This included usefulness with the maintenance of the coalition, use of the assessment tool and with action plan implementation. This question was posed as part of a broader question looking at all technical assistance and trainings; for the purpose of this report, all data is represented to compare to the peer learning network. The PLN, tied with the website, was answered as the most '*Helpful tool for assisting with coalition sustainability*'; and the PLN tied with the website as third most '*Helpful with the re-assessment phase*'. Only direct email and one-on-one calls served as a more helpful tool. Finally, the PLN tied with both the website and direct email as the most '*Helpful tool for action plan implementation*'.

Figure 5. PLN Usefulness

Peer Learning Network Year 2

Using the Year 1 experience and data results, the NACDD team reviewed the process and developed the Year 2 format in collaboration with the CI team. With the 2012 group only having five teams, it made sense to keep Group 1 with 2010 teams only (n=10), and to continue the 2011 teams split up into Group 2 (n=5) and Group 3 (n=5). With the addition of the 2012 teams (n=5), they were identified for Group 4.

Figure 6. PLN Year 2 (Oct. 2011 – Sept. 2012) Groups

Group 1 – 2010 teams (n=10)

Group 2 and 3 – 2011 Team A (n=5) & Team B (n=5)

Group 4 – 2012 Team 2 (n=5)

Figure 7.		
Teams	**# of Calls**	**Participants**
Group 1	2	18
Group 2	2	13
Group 3	3	8
Group 4	3	20
make up	1	6
total	**11**	**66**

A total of 11 calls were held, with 66 total participants among the four groups. These calls were held in Feb, Mar, April, May, June, August and September. (Figure 7)

The initial schedule was established to allow every group at least three calls. However, due to low attendance for Group 1 and 2 on the final calls, a make-

up call was scheduled to allow both groups to make up the call and do it together. This call yielded a total of seven participants, three from Group 1 and three from Group 2. This blended format provided an excellent platform for sharing across groups.

Group 1

During Year 1 the 2010 teams were paired up with the 2009 teams for a larger group that was most conducive to the presenter and discussion format as described in the Group 1 section above. With the graduation of 2009 teams, it created an opportunity to allow the 2010 teams to meet in a more intimate setting and allow for better discussion and sharing.

A similar format was applied as described in the Group 2 and 3 sections above. Members of NACDD staff, CI staff and all five 2010 communities per call made up the attendees. This group was scheduled to meet three times, but met twice as a group. They were offered one make-up call in conjunction with Group 2, and averaged nine members per call. In similar structure as the preceding PLN year, the typical call agenda consisted of a brief welcome, roll call and any important updates provided by NACDD staff (*10 min*utes). CI then began with a request for updates from each community. The remaining time was spent in a facilitated manner with CI posing questions to the group around the topics identified during the updates to engage in a group- think or group discussion (*30 minutes*). NACDD staff closed the call with final comments and provides any follow up necessary (*5 minutes*).

Group 2 and Group 3

The success of dividing the 2011 teams into two groups encouraged the NACDD team to continue with the split. However, in an effort to keep the groups fresh and give the participants an opportunity to meet others in the cohort of 10 teams, the groups were divided up based on content focus area for the current year. The two most popular strategies identified by teams was '*Physical Activity/Built Environment*' and '*Workplace based initiatives*'. While these factors initially drove the group dynamics, the teams shared efforts outside of these focus areas on the calls. This was quickly adopted by the groups and the content focus became less prominent. Again, to aid the teams in getting to know each other, a photo based contact list was generated.

Building upon the original format these teams experienced in Year 1, the format described above in Group 1 was adopted. Group 2 met three times with 3-5 members on each call. The NACDD team, CI and group members attended the calls. After CI provided time for each member to give a brief update on successes and barriers, a facilitated discussion was undertaken to allow for team members to share with each other and learn from others

experience. The topics often led to how to sustain momentum, engage coalition members, generate resources and implement strategies.
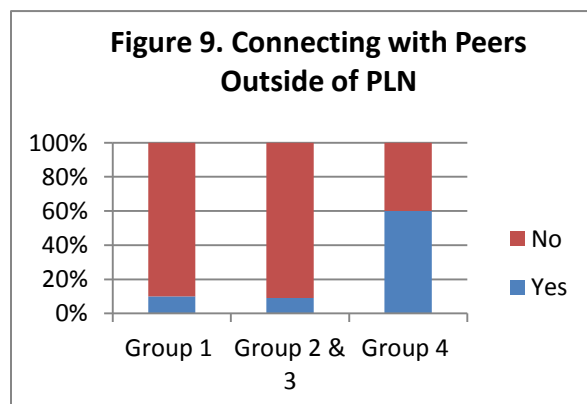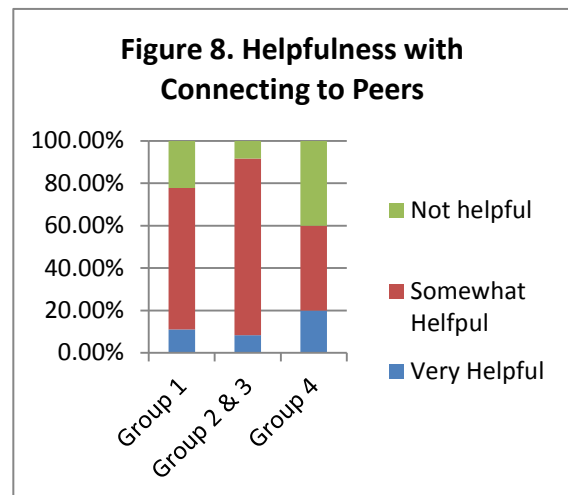
Group 4

The 2012 cohort was a smaller group (n=5) compared to the other groups; so there was no need to divide this group. They met together three times with 6-7 members on each call. The calls focused mainly on the process the teams were experiencing, barriers encountered and solutions applied. The teams in the 2012 cohort were also assigned a mentor, a new facet to the ACHIEVE experience for the 2012 funding year, so initial calls also delved into the mentor-mentee relationship. The format of these calls was similar to the above description for Group 2 and 3. NACDD team members, CI staff and all 2012 teams were invited to each call. NACDD opened the calls with a welcome, roll call and updates. CI then proceeded to open it up for updates, followed by in an in-depth discussion about any successes, issues or concerns that came up during the initial updates. NACDD would close the call with final comments and address any concerns as appropriate.

Year 2 Results

Helpfulness with connecting to Peers

When asked about the helpfulness of the PLN to connect with peers (Figure 8.), Group 1 indicated 11% '*Very Helpful*', 66% '*Somewhat Helpful*' and 22% '*Not helpful*'. Group 2 and 3 were evaluated together;8% indicated the PLN was '*Very Helpful*' with connecting with peers, 83% indicated '*Somewhat Helpful*' and 8% indicated '*Not Helpful*'. Group 4 indicated 20% '*Very Helpful*', 40% '*Somewhat Helpful*' and 40% '*Not Helpful*'.

Figure 8. Helpfulness with Connecting to Peers

Connecting with Peers Outside of PLN

When asked about connecting outside of the PLN with peers, the majority of Groups 1, 2 and 3 indicated '*No*'. No more than 10% indicated '*Yes*' for any group. However, in Group 4, 60% indicated that '*Yes'* they had connected outside of the PLN.

Figure 9. Connecting with Peers Outside of PLN

What Would You Change

When the group members were asked open-ended questions about whether they would change anything about the PLN, a variety of suggestions were obtained. These suggestions are outlined in the table below:

Table of open-ended responses to 'What would you change about the PLN?'	
Group 1 – 2010 Cohort (n=10)	Perhaps a topic or a speaker from one community could present on an action plan they have found success with.
	Not really - they are pretty useful. Maybe have more time for just dialogue between the partners. I just wish I had more time to attend them.
	Seek recommendations for topics of the PLN calls from the coaches in the NACDD ACHIEVE communities.
Group 2 & 3 – 2011 Cohort (n=10)	Perhaps connect people by region a little more so that we might have more of an opportunity to connect outside the PLN calls
	I believe I would assign a similar program to one another so that they partner in the process as co-mentors. I would pick programs that are similar in Geography and scope to work together and include them in a team approach.
Group 4- 2012 Cohort (n=5)	Perhaps sending some more specific information ahead of time about the topics or discussion points.
	Have mentors participate in the calls. Hearing from the success have mentors has been very beneficial to this process and could help to improve the PLN calls.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall NACDD found the PLN to be a successful format to provide technical assistance to coalitions working to create healthy communities through policy, systems and environmental improvements. The smaller groups (n=5) were the most successful at reaching an intimate dialogue. Additionally, the pairing of the groups based on geographic size appeared to work the best, when compared to the content area specific groups.

Generally, the groups rated the PLN as a helpful mechanism for connecting with peers, however, there were noticeable differences between this perceived 'helpfulness' and 'actual connecting' outside of the PLN with peers. If NACDD pursues the PLN with future funded communities, it is recommended that more effort be placed on engaging communities in discussion outside of the PLN. This could take place at in-person trainings and with continued use of the photo-based contact list and more direct referrals to successful teams based on

technical assistance requests. Use of face-to-face web streaming technology may also improve the connectivity of peers outside of the PLN.

It was also noted that the earlier the groups were in project implementation, the more helpful the PLN was perceived, and the more groups connected with peers outside of the PLN. This could indicate that during the early ACHIEVE phases, the peer support is more critical, and as the project period (ACHIEVE phases) progressed it became less so. Overall, all groups still rated the PLN as being helpful to connect with peers.

The NACDD ACHIEVE team recommends the continuance of a third party facilitator. The CI team filled this role expertly and was very responsive to the questions and concerns of the groups, while also balancing the needs of the NACDD team. Given this, the third party facilitator does not necessarily need to be an outside vendor; rather, NACDD can foster the PLN facilitation role within the organization through staff or a consultant trained in the area of group facilitation.

Finally, based on some of the recommendations for the groups, NACDD, or other organizations seeking to replicate a similar peer learning technique, should consider the following: exerting increased planning in advance of calls with outlining call topics, pre-selecting speakers to speak in an expert capacity rather than in a 'presenter' role, and selecting groups based on similar experiences, geographic location, community size, or outreach area.