

What We Learned About How Power Shows Up in Three Colorado Communities: Implications for Community Organizing for Prevention

Power is not a limited resource. Every single one of us has power, and our power can be used or demonstrated in different ways. Understanding how power shows up in communities is crucial when organizing communities to implement upstream prevention efforts.

Across Colorado, 14 community members from three communities participated in interviews in early 2023 and shared their perspectives about what power is like in their communities. Most people were currently or previously involved in Community Organizing for Prevention (COFP) efforts; some were familiar with COFP but not actively involved. The Community members spoke from their perspectives and backgrounds which can include different ages, racial and/or ethnic groups, sectors, religions, gender and sexual identities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, among others. When taken together, these people told a broader story about how power shows up in three communities in Colorado. Here is what they had to say:

- **Formal Leaders Hold Power.** Community members who hold formal leadership positions, including the mayor, town council members, county commissioners, law enforcement officials, school board directors, superintendents, large employers, and directors of organizations, are seen as holding power in communities. Formal leaders are seen as able to create change and as holding an obvious form of power across communities.
- **Influencers and Informal Leaders Hold Power.** People who have influence and ability to persuade others, who are often not formal leaders but are seen as a leading force, are also seen to hold power in communities. These individuals may not hold official status within a group or organization, but they are seen as able to create change and subsequently as holding power across communities.
- **Those With Privilege Hold More Power Than Those Without.** People who are seen as privileged, including formal leaders and people with identities that are usually adult, white, socio-economically advantaged, male, and able-bodied, are seen as holding more power in communities than historically marginalized groups, like BIPOC communities, the LGBTQ+ community, the disabled community, the elderly, and youth.
- **Youth Have Limited Power.** While youth are seen as having limited power, youth are also seen as having great potential and unrealized power in communities. Communities and adults care deeply about youth and their wellbeing. Spaces could be created for youth voices and experiences to be amplified, and youth could organize together in groups to advocate for issues that matter to them.
- **Relationships Matter in Power Dynamics.** Who you know and the relationships you have matters when it comes to how power shows up in communities. Relationships and connections in communities create social cohesion and build power around issues that matter to communities. When individuals and organizations interact less, relationships and connections falter, limiting the ability to build and share power in communities.

Implications for Community Organizing for Prevention in Colorado

Broadening the power base is a core component of COFP and is foundational to success in organizing communities to address shared risk and protective factors and implement upstream prevention.

Broadening and sharing power in communities advances equity for historically marginalized groups and creates an environment where all individuals thrive. Various types of power and power dynamics can complement or create discord within a community organizing effort. These findings resulted in two recommendations:

- **Understand the Bases of Social Power to Broaden the Power Base.** The bases of social power (Raven & French) provide a powerful frame for understanding the different types of power that individuals can hold, and how those types of power can show up in ways that help or hinder community organizing efforts.

Legitimate Power	Expert Power	Referent Power	Reward Power	Coercive Power	Informational Power
Power based on title, position, or rank	Power based on skills, abilities, lived experience, and knowledge	Power based on reciprocity and mutual respect	Power based on the ability to give and take away rewards	Power based on the ability to punish	Power based on being the keeper of information

- **Coach Towards and Implement Practices that Do Share Power.** With a deeper understanding of the types of power and how they show up within community, take strategic action to share power. Start with the basics: build authentic relationships based on trust and reciprocity. Invite people to coffee or tea to get to know them and share more about yourself, to learn about mutual interests and hopes for the future. Identify opportunities for people to participate and use their skills in meaningful ways. Consider ways you can share power through coalition activities, like holding meetings outside of business hours so that workers can participate, offering virtual or hybrid meetings to ease the burden of transportation, providing transportation to meetings, offering childcare, providing meals and financial incentives for participation, clarifying expectations of membership, and building in more equitable practices into the coalition bylaws. Learn about the history of power imbalances and harms caused in your community, and explore pathways to repair and heal as a collective.



Reflection Questions

- What do discussions about power look like with coalition members?
- What types of power are most obvious or recognized in your community? How are they used to complement or create discord in the community?
- Who does not have power? Who needs more access to what types of power? Why? How could your coalition build and/or share power with these groups or individuals?
- How does your coalition engage historically marginalized groups in community organizing efforts? Where are there opportunities to provide them more power in your community-driven prevention efforts?