**Role of the Community Advisory Board**

Our university-based Healthy Divas research and development team includes transgender and gender diverse individuals, however we felt it was important to organize a transgender community advisory board (CAB) to help guide our work to ensure that our interventions are designed with full engagement and in partnership with trans communities.

Community based organizations (CBOs) and other organizations or agencies operating in transgender communities may or may not need a separate trans-specific CAB. The need for a trans-specific CAB depends on your organization’s mission, composition, staff structure, knowledge of and access to local transgender communities, and other factors. If your organization already has a mechanism in place to engage with transgender communities effectively, you may not need a trans-specific CAB. Some organizations have found that having a group of external advisors is extremely helpful, maybe even essential.

Some organizations may feel that they already are sufficiently connected to local trans communities because they have a few trans-identified staff members. We have observed that even when 2-3 trans staff pool their shared knowledge, they still may not have a complete understanding of the diversity needs and issues facing all trans communities. A full and shared understanding of the diversity of trans communities is very helpful if the project is going to reach diverse groups of trans women. A local trans CAB can help organizations better serve their local trans communities.

A trans-specific CAB can serve as a resource to the Healthy Divas program, and it can help to nurture and support the program. It should be comprised of trans people who may be community or thought leaders, trailblazers, activists, influencers, religious or faith leaders, other professionals, and they may come from the HIV, LGBTQIA, public health, business, and university communities.

A CAB typically meets as needed, quarterly or perhaps monthly, to provide guidance and input on program activities (e.g., recruitment, developing and updating a resource list of trans-affirming services, networking with other organizations and programs). Its members may or may not be individuals in positions of power within the community. You may want to have a mix of leaders and others who are community members but have not yet had the opportunity to fully develop their leadership potential. These members-at-large can still provide extremely valuable input to planning and implementing your Healthy Divas program. But it is vital that at least some of your CAB members are particularly knowledgeable about or well-connected within the community.

It is important to have community leaders involved in the CAB because they are not only able to provide the program with valuable information and advice, but they can also be instrumental in providing access to resources that will facilitate program sustainability. They also possess an important historical perspective about the community, such as how other programs have handled challenges or situations that your Healthy Divas implementation may face.

CAB members often fulfill a liaison role by providing a link between the program and the organizations they represent. They keep their organizations informed of the program’s progress and current activities. By virtue of their connection to various community organizations, CAB members also are in a good position to help the program and organization network in the community.

**Ensuring the Project**’**s future**

Another potential role of a trans CAB is to generate ideas and support for continuing Healthy Divas, and possibly other trans-specific funding, beyond its initial funding period. You may seek out CAB members who work for funding organizations or are in the grants-making business. Including these individuals on the advisory board instills in CAB members a sense of ownership of the program. By participating on the advisory board, these individuals are kept fully informed of the program’s activities and plans. All these things help to increase the likelihood that community leaders and decision makers will perceive the program’s (or organization’s) activities as important and a part of a broader community effort.

**Composition of the CAB**

CAB members include diverse individuals, including those in positions of power. CAB members who are particularly knowledgeable about or well-connected within the community can provide valuable advice and access to resources that help the program’s operations with activities such as recruitment and networking.

The CAB should be a workable size: 10 to 12 members are optimal. Representatives from the following key community sectors should be considered to be on the Community Advisory Board:

* HIV/AIDS prevention organizations
* Trans health and advocacy organizations
* Legal aid providers
* City/county public health department
* LGBT community (LGBT community center)
* Arts
* Other policy and planning organizations
* Local college or university
* Social service agencies that work with trans communities
* Business leaders
* Religious or faith leaders
* Media
* Social groups or organizations

In selecting CAB members, it is extremely important to consider the candidates’ personal qualities. All members must support the philosophy and mission of the program and the parent organization, and they must value the clients that the project serves. If possible, try to avoid selecting individuals who have contentious relationships with one another. The work of the CAB is too important to be compromised by personal pettiness and bickering.

Whenever possible, try to have a blend of “old” and “new” voices. While highly experienced CAB members are vital in bringing their knowledge of the community’s history to the table (e.g., what has worked in the past and what hasn’t), it is equally valuable, however, to make sure you invite some “fresh” community voices to be on the board, and not rely solely on those who have been serving on similar boards for years. This diversity will help to ensure that the program or organization maintains its innovative perspective and does not fall into the same patterns as previous programs in the community. For this reason, it is important to have on the CAB several community-at-large members who may not be affiliated with any particular organizations, but who are perceived in trans communities as wise, committed people who may have a lot of ideas and energy to offer the program.

**Making a list of potential CAB members**

You may want to compile a list of potential CAB members by meeting with your staff, colleagues at other organizations, or select key informants.

Staff should meet with each candidate individually to discuss the goals of Healthy Divas, the organization’s mission, the role, and responsibilities of the CAB members, and why the person is being considered for board membership. Meeting personally with each CAB member prior to the board’s first meeting ensures that everyone coming to the meeting will be “on the same page.” Don’t make the mistake of not meeting with particular CAB members prior to the board’s first meeting. Otherwise, you may discover after it’s too late that a particular member has a personal agenda that disrupts meeting deliberations.

It can be helpful to ask prospective CAB members who else they think might be considered for the CAB and leave the meeting without asking the individual to join the CAB. This allows time to think through, after the meetings have been completed, who would work well together. It can be quite awkward to invite people to join the CAB and then find out in subsequent individual meetings that certain people do not get along well together.

**CAB Meetings and Operations**

Typically, the CAB meets monthly, although for some programs quarterly meetings are sufficient. Key project staff, including peer counselors and supervisors, should attend CAB meetings, and either program staff or a CAB-elected chair can facilitate the meetings depending on local preferences. The typical agenda for a CAB meeting includes an update of current activities by the project staff, who highlight successes as well as areas needing advice or assistance from the CAB. This is followed by discussion among the advisory board members and project staff. The meeting concludes after those present have identified whatever actions need to be taken, and then assign specific tasks either to the CAB members or the staff.

It is helpful for the minutes of the meeting to be sent to all CAB members and relevant program staff within one week following the meeting. Since CAB members are busy people, they may not be able to attend each meeting, but it is important to keep all members informed about what happens at the CAB meetings. A staff representative can then personally contact absent CAB members to solicit any additional input they may have to offer.