

## **Promoting Your Network's Services and Value Creating a Healthier Community and a Healthier Network Go Hand-in-Hand**

*By Amy Forsyth-Stephens, G-NET Planner and Evaluator  
and*

*Michelle Brauns, CEO, Community Health Center of the New River Valley and G-NET  
Project Director*

For non-traditional vertical health networks, defining and communicating your network's value to a large and diverse stakeholder group, and the community-at-large, can be a complex job that deserves a strategic and focused effort. Ideally, promoting what your network produces and the value of the underlying network go hand-in-hand. This article provides guidelines for working at a community level to promote and sustain the positive outcomes you are producing, which has at its core an intense focus on maximizing the health of your network itself.

### **Conveying Your Network's Value to the Community-at-Large**

A non-traditional vertical health network is made up of a variety of types of organizations, serving a certain geographic service area, and working in collaboration toward mutual health and organizational goals. Our network, the Giles Health Network, known as G-NET, serves a rural and isolated county in Southwest Virginia. Network members include the local community health center, the health department, school system, social services, community action organization, child abuse organization, mental health/substance abuse service agency, and agency on aging. G-NET provides a program named G-SMILE—an oral health education, outreach, and service collaborative.

It is critical that vertical networks can clearly and passionately articulate what they provide for their community. Begin by creating a case statement that defines your outputs—what it is that your network produces. Then, put a value on those outputs. Quantify them (count them), and determine the dollar value of each unit. Then, for stakeholders who might value a story more than a graph, put a face on those outputs. Describe in words how your community would be different if your network did not exist. Create written stories of individuals, families, and groups that thrived due to the work of your network. If your network produces more than one type of output (for example, oral health education in schools and affordable dental visits), repeat this quantify/qualify process for each type of output. Photos add to the appeal of these messages.

### **Promoting what you Provide to Every Resident of Your Service Area**

For your network to thrive, it is important for all of your good work to be directly attributable to your network—not to individuals or specific organizations, but to the collaborative as a whole. Brand the network with its own logo, tag line, stationary, signage, and website. Use this brand on every written product of the network—every piece of educational collateral, every public service announcement, every media hit, every correspondence. (Our G-NET logo is at the end of this article.)

Understand how information is communicated within your service area—to both the general public and those with influence. Pay specific attention to cultural factors

that drive how information flows throughout the community. For example, within our Appalachian community, churches play an important role in the dissemination of health information, but newspapers do not. In our area, conveying information to town and county officials is best done person-to-person, not via email. Dropping by a person's place of work is quite acceptable, and indicates inclusion and status.

When using the media, consider the use of familiar and trusted local individuals as spokespeople. Our G-NET posters and billboards feature the faces of well-known long-standing residents. In this tight-knit area, outsiders or academics would not be influential, and might even have the negative effect of creating suspicion.

### **Controlling your Viability over the Long Term**

A vertical network's primary purpose is to expand access to what it is that the network provides, whether that be organizational efficiencies, improved health outcomes, or something different. In order to be able to successfully realize that purpose, the network must be sure that it stays viable. Just as when the oxygen mask drops down in an airplane—when the parent must first be sure they are functional before attending to the child—a network must attend to its own health so that its offspring (e.g., services, efficiencies, improved health indicators) can survive and thrive.

Network leaders can sometimes get caught up in the delivery of their “widgets,” while neglecting the promotion of the network itself. It is good practice to always promote the network outputs and the network itself together. After all, one does not exist without the other—and one's success depends on the success of the other.

### **Creating Lasting Partnerships**

Networks rely on strong and lasting partnerships. Expanding network membership may be one goal, but expanding influence of the network should also be prioritized. Always include decision-makers in the network's general communications (e.g., members of town councils, County Administrators, State Legislators). Give influential people credit for the positive results by inviting them to speak at special events and celebrations, such as ribbon-cuttings and fundraisers.

Network leaders are busy people, but they should always carve out room in their schedules for informal and formal presentations to influential people. Make appointments, drop by, connect them with other influential people. Offer to give personal tours of your service sites. Nothing is more powerful than seeing something first-hand.

Hold social gatherings of stakeholders, contributors and supporters, and always invite the decision-makers. You want their buy-in, but they need to understand what it is you are asking them to support, and the value of your product. This ties back to the creation of the case statement, and the careful definition of your network's value.

Finally, be in the room for the budget discussions when your network might benefit. Attend those long meetings, and offer to make presentations. Enlist your member

organization leaders to assist. Network promotion should be at or near the top of every Network Director's job description.

### **In Summary**

In summary, know what your network provides that is valuable, and be able to articulate that with both numbers and stories. Know the dollar value of what you provide, but don't forget the real-life side of what you are accomplishing. Understand how best to communicate with your community-at-large, your target population, and your decision-makers. And finally, always promote both your services and your network together, relentlessly!

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*The mission of G-NET is to facilitate and expand the delivery of health care services to the people of rural Giles County, Virginia through the development of a vertical health network that integrates existing and future health care services administratively, clinically, and financially, and expands access to essential health care services.*

*Giles County Health Network has been a member of NCHN (National Cooperative of Health Networks) since 2011.*

