



HOW TO

Leverage Community Partnerships

April 2012

Overview and Document Explanation

Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) is a national multi-stakeholder effort working toward common, fundamental objectives that lead to better care. All stakeholders, including consumers, health plans, clinicians, and employers, play a prominent role in achieving the AF4Q objectives to ensure the end results meet the needs of the AF4Q communities. A diverse set of committed partners, including robust consumer representation, is important to AF4Q's long-term sustainability. This document outlines a set of best practices for Alliances to recruit, orient, and support consumer stakeholders, also called community partners. It also contains resources consumers can use directly. While these best practices are aimed at consumer representatives, they are relevant to any group of volunteer stakeholders. AF4Q Alliances have implemented these best practices successfully.

How To Use This Document

This document was written for primary use by Alliance staff, but there are two “pull-out” sections that can be shared directly with consumers. The first pull-out section is a list of questions that can be used during an initial meeting with a new community partner. The second is a document designed specifically for consumers, titled, “Ten Keys to an Effective Partnership.”

What Is Meaningful Consumer Engagement?

Meaningful Consumer Engagement is a term used often when describing multi-stakeholder organizations. It is a set of practices established to activate consumers in all aspects of a project's design, governance, implementation, and evaluation. Meaningful consumer engagement is:

- *Effective*—Consumers' participation has an impact on programs and is an integral part of achieving the organization's vision/mission.
- *Equitable*—All stakeholder groups are engaged, including consumers, and stakeholder representation is balanced; consumers are offered equivalent opportunities in activities and shaping decisions regarding the organization's work.
- *Purposeful*—Consumers feel the relationship allows them to achieve their respective goals; the organization respects consumers' interests and uses their expertise.

Engaging consumers in meaningful ways is critical to building an effective and sustainable multi-stakeholder body. Meaningful engagement requires recruiting consumers, orienting them, partnering with them, and ultimately retaining them. These concepts will be addressed throughout this document. The goal of the methods and principles outlined below are for building a base of consumer stakeholders that is *effective*, *equitable*, and *purposeful*.

About Aligning Forces for Quality

Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's signature effort to lift the overall quality of health care in targeted communities, as well as reduce racial and ethnic disparities and provide real models for national reform. The Foundation's commitment to improve health care in 16 AF4Q communities is the largest effort of its kind ever undertaken by a U.S. philanthropy. AF4Q asks the people who get care, give care and pay for care to work together to improve the quality and value of care delivered locally. The Center for Health Care Quality in the Department of Health Policy at George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services serves as the national program office. Learn more about AF4Q at www.forces4quality.org. Learn more about RWJF's efforts to improve quality and equality of care at www.rwjf.org/qualityequality/af4q/.

About the Author

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Overview

To recruit consumer stakeholders from within your community, you need to find the right person, find the right organization, and provide the right support. The “Laser Focus” is one method to achieve these goals. It is a five-step process that includes:

1. Identifying prospective partner groups in the community;
2. Networking within your organization to identify connections to those groups;
3. Calling or visiting to make a “warm introduction”;
4. Holding a potential partner meeting with Alliance staff; and
5. Asking for a commitment.

After a consumer has made a commitment to participate in AF4Q, Alliance staff and the new partner need to discuss a number of important issues. These include the potential partner’s interests, expertise, opportunities for influence, potential challenges, and basic information on the goals and structure of AF4Q.

The **Ten Keys to an Effective Partnership** fact sheet, available on p. 6, is a resource designed to promote accountability and transparency between Alliances and consumer stakeholders and encourages consumers to recognize their engagement opportunities and ways they can maximize their effectiveness in their new role with the Alliance.

Experience has shown that to maximize an Alliance’s effectiveness, support is necessary for the meaningful participation of all stakeholders, including consumers. The approach may vary slightly in each community, but consumers generally agree about the most useful types of support and have found the following statements to be true:

- Collaborating with new stakeholders to communicate, shape, and define roles and responsibilities is an ongoing process.
- A code of conduct ensures that all stakeholders have an agreed-upon standard for professional interactions.
- Informal networking opportunities and formal pairings of stakeholders encourage peer-to-peer learning between new and experienced stakeholders.
- When recruiting and working with consumers, it is imperative they have an opportunity to contribute to shaping both short- and long-term goals.
- The Alliance staff should consider consumers’ needs when allocating funding, such as transportation, child care, and incentives.
- Incorporating technology into consumer stakeholder support is an ideal way to diversify your methods of contact and communication.
- Tailoring support to consumers improves positive working relationships and builds trust.
- The best way to keep consumers engaged is to provide them with opportunities to contribute to project goals and to show them how their contributions are valued and used.
- When ending a relationship with or without term limits, it is important to conduct an exit interview to learn from the successes and challenges of the departing stakeholder.

Recruiting Consumer Stakeholders

Recruiting community partners is an ongoing process requiring planning and dedication. Various AF4Q Alliances have used different methods to identify individual consumers and consumer representatives¹ to engage. One such method, called “Laser Focus,” was developed by the Puget Sound Health Alliance and has been highly successful, specifically when looking to recruit members of consumer organizations. The Laser Focus is an approach that can be tailored to fit the needs and dynamics of each community.

¹ For a definition of individual consumers and consumer advocates, see the *Defining Consumer Representation* fact sheet on <http://forces4quality.org/tools-and-resources>.

Laser Focus for Recruiting Community Partners

1. Identify prospective consumer groups in the community that represent the community's demographics.

The first step is identifying organizations in your community that have the potential to share AF4Q's goals. They may be local chapters of national organizations (e.g., American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, YMCA), or they may be unique to your community. Prospective organizations may not necessarily be focused on health issues exclusively, but their organizational vision and goals should be aligned with those of AF4Q. Identify groups that bring potential value to your organization by representing a particular population, condition, or geographic area.

2. Network within your organization to find contacts within targeted community groups.

Working with the Alliance's workgroups and leadership members will allow you to find possible connections to the organizations that have been targeted as potential partners. Exploring your internal networks is important to personalizing initial contact with perspective organizations; using a known contact will enable your partnership proposal to stand out. The team member with the known contact should be prepared to share all the basic information about AF4Q and the relationship they are seeking with the prospective partner for the next step, the "warm introduction." Alliance staff should be available to prepare the team member for this task if necessary.

3. Make a "warm introduction" via a phone call or visit by the connected AF4Q member with the goal of obtaining an expression of interest.

A "warm introduction" is making first contact with a prospective organization through someone who has an existing personal or professional contact within that organization. This is a short, informational conversation to discuss AF4Q's goals and activities, the ways in which the prospective organization could be of value to the initiative, and how the perspective organization could benefit from this partnership. This meeting or phone call with the identified contact at the prospective organization should include a member of the organization who has the ability to make decisions regarding formal partnerships. At the end of this meeting, you will ask for a formal "Expression of Interest" and contact information. If the prospective partner expresses interest, the AF4Q member or staff should follow up with a link to the website and other materials he or she thinks would be of interest. The result of the meeting should be shared with Alliance staff and relevant workgroups to complete the follow-up.

4. Alliance staff meets with the potential partner for a brief overview of health care quality issues and AF4Q's local efforts. Include printed materials.

This is the actual pitch for true partnership, also known as the "ask." This meeting is different from the warm introduction in that it is more formal and must include an Alliance staff member. During this meeting, the Alliance staff member should outline specific activities in which the prospective organization might like to partner and what value those activities can bring to their constituency. The value could be in improving the health of the community, sharing volunteers, conducting collaborative training sessions, or even improving public visibility. The Alliance should have a good understanding of the specific mission and target population the potential partner serves in order to draw parallels between the two organizations. The Alliance staff member should prepare specific examples that are relevant and highlight the strength and skill of the Alliance, such as current and completed projects, goals, and successes achieved with other community partners. For example, Alliance staff could explain how AF4Q has collaborated with other stakeholders to achieve improved health outcomes for people living in the community. This meeting should be somewhat formal (planned in advance at a convenient time and place for the potential partner) and provide the potential partner an opportunity to ask questions. Materials can include fact sheets on quality improvement, performance measurement and public reporting, consumer engagement, community educational materials, or even meeting agendas. The goal is to give the potential partner a complete and clear understanding of AF4Q and health care quality.

5. Ask for a commitment.

Finally, if you have determined this partnership would be beneficial to all parties, ask for a commitment from your potential community partner. This commitment should be time specific and include a brief description of expectations, including roles and responsibilities, which will be explained in more detail upon orientation.

Recruiting Should Be Diverse and Broad

While the recruitment strategy outlined above encourages networking, sometimes new relationships are needed so the Alliance can accurately represent the community it serves. If a majority of Alliance stakeholders are sitting on every other committee within the community, the diversity of ideas may be compromised. Be aware of which groups are underrepresented in your Alliance, and seek out partners to fill those voids. If possible, reach out to community organizations that focus on diversity or underserved populations for assistance in broadening the types of consumer representatives participating with the Alliance.

Right Person, Right Organization, Right Support

It is important to remember that forging a community partnership requires:

- An organization that supports Alliance goals and is willing to make a time commitment;
- An individual with an understanding of AF4Q and a desire to expand his or her existing knowledge of health care; and
- Support mechanisms provided by the Alliance to assist consumers in being effective, equitable, and purposeful.

Identifying a consumer leader who is the right fit requires Alliance staff to have a loose set of criteria to help guide their decision. Many successful consumer representatives possess knowledge of the health care system and have experience serving on multi-stakeholder bodies or working as advocates. Characteristics to look for when recruiting consumer leaders and other stakeholders include the ability to:

- Understand new perspectives;
- Communicate professionally;
- Follow through on commitments;
- Tell his or her “story” to put a face on health care quality;
- Listen and be open-minded to new ideas;
- Maintain communication with his or her constituents;
- Focus on solutions; and
- Understand both short- and long-term goals.

Other Tips for Recruiting Consumers²

- Consumers within your community need to be aware of your organization before they can join. Branding, establishing a media presence, and other communications and marketing tools all are part of building a name that is recognizable and attractive to others.
- Transparency is the key. During your warm introductions and initial interactions with potential consumer stakeholders, be open and clear about opportunities for engagement, AF4Q’s goals, and the impact your Alliance has had thus far on the community. Do not minimize the potential partner’s responsibility and expectations.
- In-person interactions are always preferable to emails and phone calls.
- Focus your energy. Try to partner with organizations that have overlapping goals and have shown a propensity for partnerships. Organizations that prefer to work independently may not be worth the energy.
- Consider working with physicians to recruit active and engaged patients from within their practices. Individual patients, caregivers, and consumer organizations all offer unique, valuable views. When working to recruit patients from within a practice or hospital, consider soliciting the assistance of non-clinical staff and engaging members from existing patient and family advisory groups when possible.
- Another important concept to consider is striking a balance between individual consumers, who bring their personal experiences, and consumer advocates, who represent a constituency.

² For tips on maximizing the effectiveness of consumer advocates, see *Consumer Engagement in a Multi-Stakeholder Group* fact sheet, available at <http://forces4quality.org/tools-and-resources>.

Bringing Consumer Stakeholders on Board

Once the potential partner has committed to joining your Alliance as a stakeholder, the next step is to have a conversation about both parties' expectations. This conversation can take place over the phone or in person, but not by email or by sharing materials. Think of this conversation as a two-way interview in which the consumer and the Alliance staff ask questions of one another to ensure a proper fit. The goal of the **Initial Conversation Guide** (available later in this document) is to give Alliances a greater depth of understanding of the new stakeholder. Some of these questions, such as previous experience in health care or AF4Q's goals, should have been explored previously during the recruitment stage. They should be revisited, however, during this conversation. This conversation also will provide staff with an opportunity to recognize when a consumer leader may not be an ideal fit for the organization by identifying major mismatches in goals or expectations. The **Initial Conversation Guide** will help facilitate relationship-building and explore different ways your Alliance can support effective, equitable, and purposeful consumer engagement.

Below you will find a list of useful questions for this process. You can share this pull-out section with other stakeholders and tailor it as necessary.

Initial Conversation Guide

1. Please share your experiences with the health care field. Please include both personal and professional experiences. How have your experiences shaped your views on health care?
2. Is there any area of AF4Q in particular in which you would like to be involved? Are there any areas that are less familiar to you within the scope of the project? How can we help you become more familiar with these topics? (Discuss methods for sharing information and learning style.)
3. Let's talk more about the goals of the project. Are you familiar with the three focus areas of AF4Q (Consumer Engagement, Quality Improvement, Performance Measurement/Public Reporting) or the overarching focus on disparities? Is there any sector in particular you would like to know more about?
4. AF4Q is a large project with many moving parts. Understanding the infrastructure is important to understanding how decisions are made and how the work gets done. (Share organizational map and brief explanation of the infrastructure. Consider sharing some resources beforehand, allowing them to review). Are these elements clear to you?
5. The Alliance has worked hard to convene stakeholders from a number of different backgrounds. Have you worked with a variety of people (that is, those offering different viewpoints and having different agendas)? If so, how?
6. Please describe your experiences participating in groups, including the size of the groups and any instances in which you served as group leader. What challenges did you face? What have you seen that enabled success?
7. As a partner in this effort, you will be asked to... (Here you should describe the commitment required for the position and the expectations of the Alliance for the new stakeholder. Include meeting times, pre- and post-meeting requirements, team building and support, as well as conceptual issues related to multi-stakeholder interactions. Ask for a formal commitment to follow through on these items.)
8. The commitment we just discussed addresses the Alliances' expectations of our stakeholders. What are some of your expectations? What ways can we best support you?
9. This partnership will require a certain level of commitment. How can the Alliance staff ensure we make valuable use of your time?
10. What is your preferred method of contact?
11. Do you see any barriers or challenges in participating in our effort (for example, time, transportation, child care, availability, or chronic condition limitations)? How can our staff help to minimize those challenges?

Ten Keys to an Effective Partnership (Consumer Section)

The following pull-out sheet is designed to be used by Alliance consumer stakeholders, not staff. This complementary document can be used as an accompaniment to **Leveraging Community Partnerships** or on its own.³ The goal of this document is to encourage consumers to recognize meaningful engagement opportunities and ask for them if they are not being offered. It also outlines ways consumers can ensure they are contributing to the project in meaningful ways. Effective relationships require all parties to take responsibility for the relationship.

³ For another document to share with consumers, see the *Effective Consumer Advocacy in a Multi-Stakeholder Setting* fact sheet at <http://forces4quality.org/tools-and-resources>.

Ten Keys to an Effective Partnership

- 1. You have a responsibility to share your expertise.** You are a partner in this work because you bring a unique perspective based on your experiences. Share that expertise and inform Alliance staff members about what focus areas are important to you in health care quality.
- 2. Ask how decisions are made.** A multi-stakeholder organization is most successful if all stakeholders, including consumers, are represented when organizational decisions are made. If you are not invited to be a part of shaping the goals and activities, take the initiative to ask how decisions are made. If all stakeholders are not represented in the process, advocate for a change in the process so that it includes all stakeholders, including consumers.
- 3. Ask for an “elevator speech,” if one is available.** Every stakeholder in the Alliance should know how to give an “elevator speech,” which is a short explanation of AF4Q and its importance to health care quality improvement. If one is not available, work with the AF4Q staff to write one that helps you explain the effort to colleagues and community members. Every member of the Alliance needs a solid understanding of the project’s goals, participants, and activities.
- 4. Follow through on commitments, and encourage others to do the same.** From your first interactions with the Alliance, expectations of your commitment should have been made clear. You have a responsibility to follow through with those commitments by engaging fully in the work. You also can act as a motivator for others to do the same.
- 5. Do your homework.** The more you know about health care quality, the better equipped you will be to contribute to the initiative and to the health of your community. Explore resources from reputable organizations such as the Agency for Health Quality and Research (www.ahrq.gov), Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org), Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (www.rwjf.org), Aligning Forces for Quality (forces4quality.org), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov), and the National Partnership for Women & Families (www.qualitycarenow.org). Most importantly, don’t forget to use the resources within your own Alliance. These should include resources written specifically for consumers.
- 6. Your perspective is valued and important; don’t be afraid to speak up.** Whether you are talking to an individual consumer or to the CEO of the biggest hospital in town, remember you were recruited because your opinion is valuable and welcomed. Don’t be afraid to share your perspective. Voicing opinions in a way that respects other stakeholders and builds bridges will likely result in trusting relationships.
- 7. Ask questions.** Acronyms, unfamiliar names, and industry-specific vocabulary are all a part of AF4Q interactions. Most people know a few; no one knows them all. If you are unsure of a concept, approach, or terminology, take a moment to ask for an explanation.
- 8. Don’t be afraid to ask for more (or less) responsibility.** Finding a balance that works for you is important, especially as a volunteer. If you would like to contribute more, talk to an Alliance staff member about what you would like to do or for information about available opportunities. If you are feeling overwhelmed, the Alliance staff can help you find a balance that works with your schedule.
- 9. Spread the word.** In many communities, an organization’s reputation is upheld by community members. Health care quality is an issue that touches everyone. AF4Q relies on consumers and other stakeholders to share what they have learned about quality improvement and the work of the Alliance with their colleagues, friends, and family members. (Your elevator speech is a great way to start the conversation.) As in any change movement, the people have the power to demand, create, and support change.
- 10. All good things come to an end.** Participating in an initiative is not necessarily a lifelong commitment. If you didn’t make a time-specific commitment from the beginning (for example, as a one-year term), the time may come when you wish to move on. When you are ready to move on, talk to the Alliance staff and set a timeline for your exit. If possible, offer to help find and train your replacement. Finally, take some time to share with the Alliance what you have learned and what you think they could do better. Your evaluation of the program from within is essential to improving their work.

General Strategies for Consumer Stakeholder Retention

Alliance staff members are responsible for supporting their stakeholders in a manner that is considerate, appropriate, effective, and standardized. The best practices listed below are based on feedback from consumers within AF4Q, as well as other multi-stakeholder collaboratives.⁴ By following these practices, Alliance staff members can improve community standing, work effectively with all community members, and increase the likelihood of a successful, sustainable Alliance.

Roles and Responsibilities

When a new consumer stakeholder is recruited, the Alliance staff should have already thought through his or her intended roles and responsibilities.⁵ Collaborating with the new consumer stakeholders to communicate, shape, and define these responsibilities is an ongoing process. Some roles may be more formal and standardized, like a board chair and co-chair, while others may be more fluid with fewer responsibilities, like a member of a subcommittee that is formed only for a short period of time. While roles and responsibilities should be laid out clearly at the time of recruitment, it is imperative to listen to the stakeholders' needs throughout the process and make changes as needed. Consumer roles and responsibilities also may change as projects change. Be sure to provide a project overview regularly to ensure consumer team members are up to date with the project's progress, efforts, and any changes in the project's structure, goals, or staff roles. When forming consumer-specific bodies, some Alliances write up a formal job description. Reach out to current consumer stakeholders to help create these descriptions.

Code of Conduct

Building a code of conduct with your staff and stakeholders means you all have an agreed-upon standard for interactions. Having agreements in place can make or break your relationships with stakeholders. Building a code of conduct also is a good way to share the Alliance's values. For example, if a meeting is cancelled, how far in advance is this done, and by what method is this information shared? If a stakeholder is consistently absent from meetings, what is the appropriate course of action? If a stakeholder is unable to attend, how should he or she notify the Alliance, and when? Using the example of confidentiality, the code of conduct could outline what types of information can be shared outside stakeholder meetings and what should remain private. This understanding of confidentiality increases the likelihood that opinions and experiences will be shared across stakeholder groups. A local employer should feel comfortable sharing business strategies that are relevant to improving employee health without fear that private information will be shared outside the meeting. Addressing such issues from the start of a relationship can help avoid confusion and negative situations in the future. The code of conduct can include both very specific and very general points, such as an expectation of respectful behavior among all Alliance members. A code of conduct should exist as a living document, with regular adaptation as the Alliances and stakeholders learn what is needed to overcome challenges together.⁶

Working with Experienced Consumers

When working with new stakeholders, Alliance staff should provide continuous support and guidance. Specifically, staff should be sure to communicate about Alliance activities, decision points, and opportunities for involvement; advocacy within the Alliance regarding the importance of the stakeholder's continued participation; and sharing resources the Alliance or other groups prepare to keep members up to speed on health care issues. However, staff guidance can be supplemented with peer-to-peer learning opportunities such as pairing new stakeholders with those who are more established within the Alliance. Established stakeholders are familiar with the topics of interest, as well as procedures, protocols, and infrastructure of the Alliance. Using this existing knowledge within your organization is an excellent way to share information and reduce demands on staff. Peer-to-peer learning can be encouraged through informal networking opportunities or formal pairings of stakeholders, such as a mentoring program. Consumers may wish to be paired with other consumers, though this is not always necessary. For example, consider pairing a consumer with a more expe-

⁴ See *Effective Consumer Advocacy in a Multi Stakeholder Setting* and *Alliance Stakeholder Best Practices* available at <http://forces4quality.org/tools-and-resources>.

⁵ See an example of *Roles and Responsibilities* here: http://qualitycarenow.nationalpartnership.org/site/DocServer/AF4Q_SCPA_Roles_Responsibilities_6-21-10.pdf?docID=7505.

⁶ For an example of a code of conduct developed by an AF4Q community, see http://qualitycarenow.nationalpartnership.org/site/DocServer/AF4Q_SCPA_Stakeholder_Benefit_6-21-10_2_.pdf?docID=7506.

rienced committee member who can help the consumer leader get up-to-speed quickly on the primary issues and history of the committee.

Quick Wins

Activities exist within the scope of AF4Q that support the achievement of both short- and long-term goals. When recruiting and working with consumers, especially volunteers, it is imperative to provide them an opportunity to contribute to both. Small projects with tangible goals demonstrate that their work has a direct and positive effect on their community. This is an especially important concept in the early stages of the partnership. Finding these “quick wins” can motivate community partners and increase self-efficacy. Examples of quick wins include soliciting feedback on Alliance websites and other resources, asking consumer leaders to share their stories with Alliance partners or at community meetings, or asking consumer leaders to write short articles for a newsletter or local resource. All of these examples offer an opportunity for consumers to provide input and value and for Alliances to acknowledge their contributions publicly. Celebrate all achievements with your community partners so everyone can share in the success and acknowledge the project’s progress.

Stipends, Reimbursements, and Resource Allocation

Within AF4Q, consumer input is invaluable. Working with consumers and consumer organizations increases the Alliance’s credibility, ensures projects are responding to the needs of the community, and provides Alliance staff with a set of problem solvers. Most consumer stakeholders volunteer their time to work with AF4Q. Alliance staff should consider these consumers’ needs when allocating funding. In-kind resources in the form of staff time should be allocated to consumer outreach, recruitment, and support. Many Alliances also have used funding to show their appreciation to their volunteer stakeholders with small incentives (such as gift certificates or stipends) and catered events. Alliances also should consider that some stakeholders, especially consumers, are unable to participate without some form of reimbursement. Reimbursements can include money for travel, child care, or even time. Remember, all stakeholders are essential to AF4Q’s success, and you cannot afford to lose them.

Using Technology

Incorporating technology into consumer support is an ideal way to diversify your methods of contact and communication. During recruitment, staff should identify consumers’ preferred method of contact. The Alliance should offer a variety of communication options, including phone, mail, email, webinars, social media (for example, Facebook), and in person contact. While technology can be very useful, it should not replace in person contact. Especially in the beginning stages of a partnership, personal interaction can be critical to maintaining close relationships.

Team Building

Within AF4Q, there are a number of teams that a stakeholder may belong to—for example, the overall Alliance team, one or more workgroup teams, a leadership team, etc. When working to facilitate positive relationships and trust, Alliance staff should tailor stakeholder support by position (for example, a specific work group) and identity (for example, consumers). In multi-stakeholder groups, address the importance of equality and respect. During workgroup meetings, Alliance staff should discourage one person or one stakeholder group from dominating the conversation. When facilitating discussions, make an effort to ask all stakeholders for their thoughts and opinions. This is especially true for consumers, who may feel intimidated or underrepresented during discussions. It also is important to provide opportunities for stakeholder groups to meet separately to share relevant perspectives and encourage peer-to-peer learning. One Alliance achieves this by organizing semi-annual consumer-only conferences. These provide an opportunity for consumer stakeholders who might not otherwise interact to explore perspectives from workgroups and projects outside their own.

Fighting Attrition

High turnover is seen far too often in volunteer partnerships. When a consumer stakeholder decides to leave an Alliance, all of the time invested in recruiting that person and getting him or her up to speed on the initiative is lost, along with that person’s institutional knowledge. The best way to keep such stakeholders engaged is to provide them with opportunities to contribute to the project and show them how their contributions are valued and used. After asking for input on a project, follow up and show your consumer stakeholders how their opinions were used to shape it. Find ways to solicit their feedback using evaluations, making sure to include questions about the perceived value of their work and

their satisfaction with the initiative.⁷ Most importantly, even if you are unable make the changes they request, always make the effort to respond and address the issue. Working continuously to identify opportunities for consumer engagement throughout AF4Q ensures that consumer leaders' involvement will not diminish over time as projects are completed. Selective recruiting, clear expectations, and quick wins are all strategies to fight attrition.

When and How To Say Goodbye

Partnering with community members is not a marriage. While some consumer stakeholders might make a lifelong commitment to the cause of health care quality, their time with AF4Q will not last forever. Alliance staff and volunteer stakeholders should periodically assess the relationship. They can do this through surveys or informal conversations. Sometimes even the most well-intentioned stakeholders are not the right fit for their roles. Working with consumers to identify another role may allow them to be more effective. Remember that consumers should be sitting on workgroups in every AF4Q focus area, not just those involved directly with consumer engagement. Tailored trainings in topics such as leadership, communication, or interpersonal relationships also can be used to improve a stakeholder's effectiveness. Some Alliances choose to use term limits for stakeholders, wherein stakeholders are asked to make a commitment of one to two years. Term limits allow both parties to reevaluate the partnership at the end of a term. They also allow either party to end the relationship if there are issues preventing an effective partnership. When Alliance staff has chosen to end a relationship, consider the following tips:

1. After the staff has exhausted internal mechanisms for supporting a stakeholder and made the decision to ask that person to leave the partnership, the time for debate has passed. The conversation is not an argument but a statement. Plan what you will say in advance.
2. Schedule a meeting with the exiting stakeholder and a third party.
3. Focus the conversation on the stakeholder's conduct. Avoid personal issues if possible.
4. The staff should recognize and thank the volunteer for his or her work so far but be clear that the relationship cannot continue.
5. When ending a relationship (with or without term limits), it is important to conduct an exit interview. Interviews give staff an opportunity to hear an experienced stakeholder's evaluation of the program, which offers an ideal opportunity to grow and learn.

⁷ For a sample survey, see Consumer Engagement Survey at <http://forces4quality.org/tools-and-resources>.