

Overcoming Barriers to Data-Sharing

Asking for data is not like borrowing a cup of sugar.

People can be very protective of their data. It tells the story of the work they do and the people they serve. Their stories can be painfully revealing, easily misinterpreted, or somewhat complicated.

For these reasons, it is important to approach all data requests with respect, and to be prepared. Being prepared means:

- Knowing the “data keepers”
- Making a compelling case for why the data keepers should share their data
- Acknowledging potential barriers to data-sharing, and brainstorming possible solutions

The more prepared you are before making your data request, the greater the likelihood that you will get the data you need.

Identifying Data Keepers

Being prepared starts with finding out who oversees and/or maintains the records you need, and who has the authority to release these records. These are the “data keepers”.

Some agencies have just one data keeper; others have several. For example, in a police department the police chief may need to sign off on a request for crime data, but the head of community policing might ultimately release the records to you.

Since every agency functions differently, identifying data keepers can take some detective work. The more specific you are about the data you need, the more likely you are to find the person who maintains the data or who has the authority to release the data to you.

Making Your Case

Once you identify your data keepers, you’ll need to make a clear and compelling argument for why they should help you. Think through in advance what you will say and

be sure to tailor it to the specific interests of each data keeper you encounter. Your argument should include the following points:

- *Why you need their data.* Many agencies don't routinely share their data with the public, and don't understand how it might be used. So be prepared to explain the purpose of your project and why their agency's data are relevant. For example, if you are addressing prescription drug misuse, you might explain to a hospital administrator how her hospital's data will help clarify what prescription drug misuse looks like in the community.
- *Why they should care.* Sharing data takes effort. It also involves some degree of risk. So explain how your prevention efforts, and the data keeper's support of your efforts, will in turn benefit their work and the people they serve. For example, a police chief will be interested in reducing crime, so explain how your prevention effort, with the help of police data, can help to do that.
- *What data you would like them to share.* Be specific and be sure to ask for data that the agency actually collects. This is part of doing your homework and will go a long way in establishing your credibility. If you don't know the precise name of the record or report you need, at least be able to describe the type of information you're looking for (e.g., the number of people arrested for driving under the influence in the past year.)
- *How you will use their data.* Agencies want to be assured that their data won't be misinterpreted or misrepresented. And they don't want to be surprised! Be prepared to describe how you will (and won't) use the data, and to adequately address any expressed concerns. Keep in mind that some agencies may want to review any products you create with their data prior to their release.

Potential Barriers

Even when presented with a strong case, there are many reasons why people may be reluctant to share their data. Recognizing and respecting barriers is key to not only accessing the data you need, but also to building ongoing relationships with key stakeholders across the community. Below are some common barriers:

- **Confidentiality.** Many agencies are required by law to maintain the confidentiality of the people they serve. If their data includes information that could identify individuals (e.g., name, address, phone number), they may not be able to share these data in their existing formats. Maintaining confidentiality in small communities is especially a concern, since even demographic information (e.g., ethnicity) could identify individuals. Strategies for addressing this barrier include the following:
 - To protect privacy, suggest removing information in data reports that identifies individuals.
 - Develop a memorandum of understanding that describes how the data will be protected.
- **Trust.** Some people are reluctant to share their data because of how it could be interpreted or used. They might, for example, be uncomfortable with the story their data tells, especially if it has the potential for casting their organization, or community, in an unfavorable light. If they don't know you or your agency, or have had negative experiences sharing data in the past, they may be unwilling to do so again. Strategies for addressing this barrier include the following:
 - Invite someone from the organization to participate in the process of analyzing the data and planning related prevention activities.
 - Find someone with whom the organization has an established relationship and/or trusts to make the data request.
- **Ownership.** Some agencies and staff invest quite a bit of their time collecting, compiling, and managing their data. It represents their hard work, and they feel that their agency owns the information. Strategies for addressing this barrier include the following:
 - Develop a memorandum of understanding that outlines the data keeper's data sharing requirements, such as reviewing any materials/products before release.

- Provide data keepers with any data that you have collected that might be useful to them.
- **Limited time or resources.** At some agencies, sharing data can take quite a bit of time, especially if it involves photocopying paper records, transferring records from paper to computer, or removing identifiers before the data can be released. Strategies for addressing this barrier include the following:
 - Offer to help input written reports into their data system (if one exists), or hire an intern to assist with this task.
 - Offer to go through the records and compile the information you need.
 - Ask the data keep for their suggestions about how or where else to get the data you need.

Building Relationships

The best strategy for overcoming barriers is establishing strong relationships. People are more likely to share data with someone they know and trust. But relationships take time to build. So be patient. Be persistent. And keep your long-term goals in mind.

Remember: Obtaining a specific record or survey is just one part of your overall prevention effort. The larger goal is to foster the community support needed to sustain your prevention efforts over time.