Featured Story: Franklin County Communities That Care Coalition

The place is Franklin County, Massachusetts. The year is 2003, and the kids are not all right. Teen substance abuse rates are disturbingly high, well above state and national averages: nearly half of all students between 8th and 12th grade are drinking alcohol; nearly 30% are smoking marijuana. Their parents, and their community, are putting their faith in a new initiative that they hope will turn the tide – and help their children heal.

The place is Franklin County, Massachusetts. The year is 2012, and the kids are doing fine. Marijuana use is down nearly 30%, alcohol use is down 37%, and the number of teens who binge drink has been cut in half. That new initiative, now a decade old, has proven its value to the community – and has proven the power of collective impact.

Founded in 2002, the Communities That Care Coalition (CTC) embraced the five conditions of collective impact from the very start, while understanding that implementation could be tailored to local realities and needs. CTC, for instance, has not one but two backbone organizations that jointly administer the initiative – a situation that CTC co-chair Kat Allen admits can at times be challenging, but it is one that she feels gives twice the credibility to the coalition: it makes the coalition a community endeavor rather than one agency’s project.

It is precisely this need to be flexible within the overall framework that informs Allen’s key insight as a practitioner: collective impact must be rigorous and disciplined, as well as organic and adaptive. CTC finds a common agenda through its Community Action Plan – in Allen’s words: “there’s a policy, a program or a practice for everyone in our Plan…what is the piece that you can take on to make a difference?” The Plan moves the community forward by ensuring that all participants are focused on key outcomes that the coalition then measures and reports – namely, reductions in teen substance abuse and improvements in associated risk factors – but the Plan itself is seen as a living document, one that has been revised twice since 2005. Successful strategies are retained; unsuccessful strategies are amended; fresh strategies are introduced. It is complex and it is messy, but Allen would not have it any other way. Her advice: “embrace the mess, and make it work to your advantage” – your roadmap will be ever-changing, and your destination will draw ever-closer.

The place is Franklin County, Massachusetts. The year is 2013. CTC has been on this journey for 11 years – and its work is only just beginning.