United States Environmental Protection Agency

How to Support Water System Partnerships

Water System Partnerships Handbook

Steps for Identifying, Assessing, and Launching Partnerships

STEP 1: Identify PWSs in Need

STEP 2: Determine How Partnerships Could Improve Compliance

STEP 3: Assess Practicality of Potential Partnership Activities

STEP 4: Identify on the Ground Support

STEP 5: Develop a Communications Plan

STEP 6: Approach PWSs About Partnerships

This document is intended to be used as a tool for state drinking water programs to identify, assess, and implement water system partnerships. Technical assistance providers may also find this tool useful for the same purposes in the communities they support.

Overview

Public water systems (PWSs) are required to provide safe drinking water to their customers that meet all federal and state regulations. In order to maintain consistent service at full-cost pricing with the resources they have available and consistently comply with these regulations, PWSs must have technical, managerial, and financial (TMF) capacity. Small and mid-size PWSs may face unique challenges in providing drinking water that meets federal and state regulations. These challenges can include:

- Undertrained and retention of drinking water operators,
- Persistent compliance issues,
- Aging infrastructure,
- Limited resources,
- Economies of scale, and
- Water quality and/or quantity issues.

Resources are available to help build TMF capacity, and PWSs can overcome some of these challenges by developing partnerships with other PWSs. Partnerships encompass a range of opportunities for PWSs to work together to protect public health by leveraging existing resources. **"Water system partnership"** is an umbrella term used to define any informal or formal relationship or agreement that PWSs engage in. Partnerships can be as basic as providing aid during a crisis, or as intricate as creating a new entity to manage a group of existing PWSs. The most successful partnerships are those that benefit all participating PWSs by addressing a shared challenge or by matching PWSs with complementary strengths and expertise and that have the support of the communities involved.

Benefits

When a PWS enters into a partnership there are immediate and long-term benefits for the PWS, state drinking water program, and PWS customers. PWSs that engage in partnerships can experience improved economies of scale, long-term savings, improved customer service, and increased TMF capacity. In addition, when PWSs are able to alleviate immediate concerns and improve public health protection, PWSs are able to better understand their existing operations and maintenance (O&M) and capital improvement costs to plan for future operations. When PWSs engage in partnerships that are designed to help overcome specific challenges, the state drinking water program may see enhanced compliance, resource savings, and improved customer relations. Finally, partnerships can help provide drinking water customers with improved water quality and increased reliability of water service.

Types of Partnerships

The type of partnership a PWS forms should be tailored to address the PWS's unique challenges and strengths, as well as the community's culture and existing relationships.

Resources

Visit The EPA's water system partnerships website for more information about:

- Programs and policies implemented in each state that encourage water system partnerships and
- Water system partnership case studies.

The EPA's water system partnership website also contains additional information on partnerships, information about upcoming events, and stakeholder-specific guides.

Partnership Benefits

For the system

- Economies of scale
- Long-term savings
- Improved customer service
- Planning for future operations
- Increase technical, financial, and/or managerial capacity
- Public health protection

For the state program

- Improved compliance
- Potential reduction in number of regulated systems
- Resource savings
- Improved customer relations
- Public health protection

For the customer

- Improved water quality
- Increased reliability of supply
- Public health protection

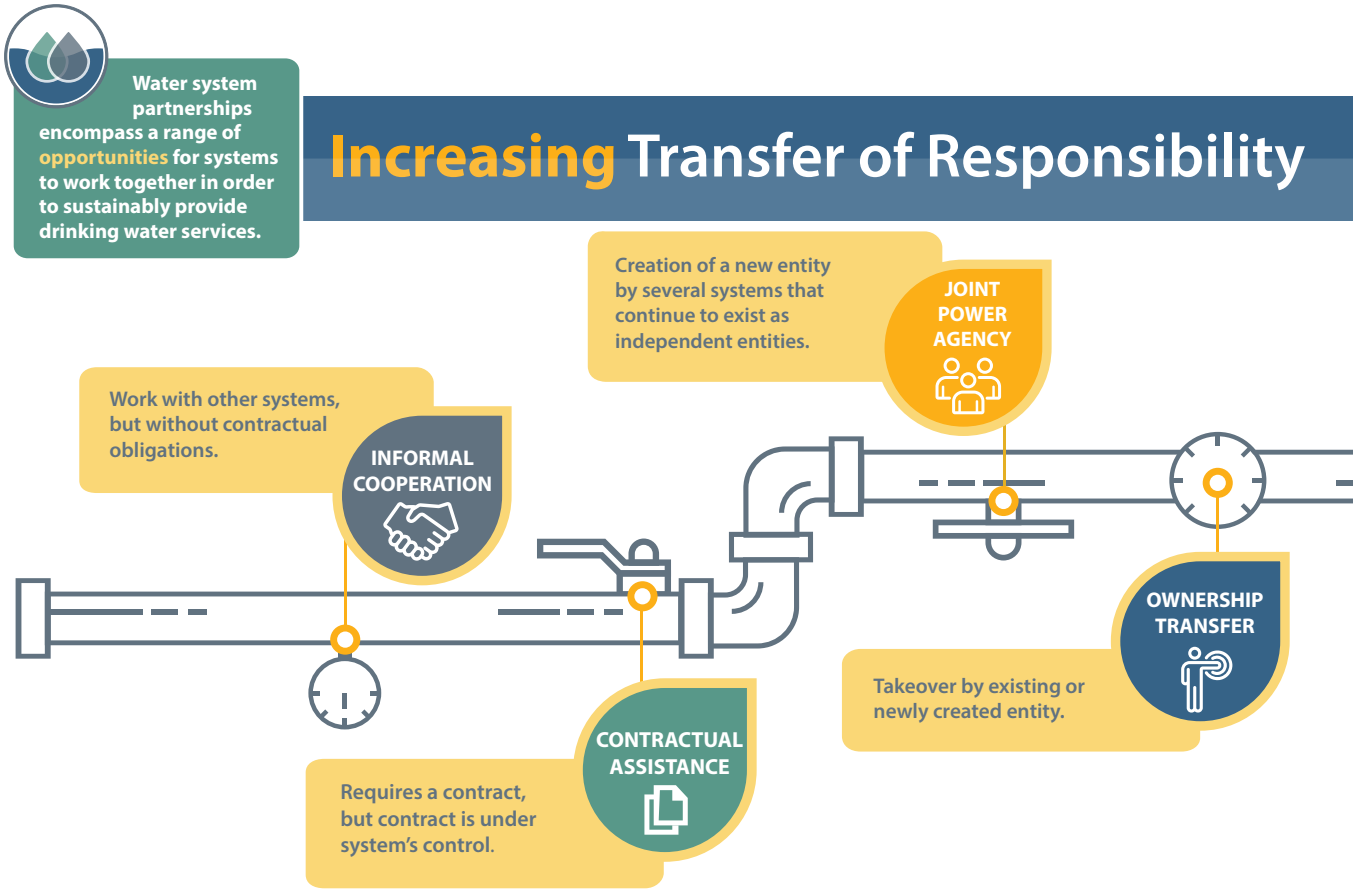
There are four general types of partnerships. PWSs can also use several types of partnerships in a layered approached to improve efficiency and provide safe drinking water. For partnership examples, visit the EPA's Interactive Partnerships Case Studies Map.

Informal Cooperation: PWSs coordinate with other PWSs without contractual obligations. Examples and Advantages.

Contractual Assistance: PWSs contract with other PWSs or service providers. The PWSs remain independent, but certain functions are contracted out to increase efficiency. Examples and Advantages.

Joint Power Agency: A group of PWSs create a new management entity designed to serve the PWSs that formed it. Examples and Advantages.

Ownership Transfer: PWSs engage in mergers, mutual transfer of existing entities, or creation of a new entity. Examples and Advantages.



Funding Partnerships

The EPA offers several financial resources to assist PWSs in accessing information and identifying potential funding sources, including:

- Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Eligibility Handbook: This document contains a compilation of examples of funded projects that demonstrate the exceptional flexibility inherent to the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) program in funding infrastructure projects.
- Analysis of Uses of Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Set-Asides: The DWSRF set-asides support activities necessary to ensure safe and affordable drinking water by providing states with flexible tools to assist PWSs with training, technical assistance, and pre-construction activities to help ensure that PWSs have the technical, managerial and financial capacity to obtain a loan and to effectively maintain their resources. This document provides an analysis and examples of the multiple uses of the DWSRF set-asides in promoting capacity development efforts.

- Water Finance Clearinghouse: The Water Finance Clearinghouse is an easily navigable web-based portal to help communities locate information and resources that will assist them in making informed decisions for their drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure needs.
- If a PWS is interested in conducting a feasibility study to consider and weigh partnership options, funds could come from the state or other federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) or the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). Additionally, groups such as Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) or National Rural Water Association (NRWA) can provide training, technical assistance, and facilitation to support the process of creating a water system partnership.

The Role of the State Drinking Water Program in Developing Partnerships

There are many roles needed to support a water system partnership, from initiation through implementation. State drinking water programs, PWS owners and boards, and associations must work together to provide the best support possible to create and maintain partnerships. State drinking water programs can play a role in encouraging, fostering, and supporting partnerships.

The steps in this document can help state drinking water program staff identify when and how to approach a PWS about partnership opportunities. Using this document, you and your team will be able to:

- Identify PWSs in need (Step 1),
- Determine how partnerships could improve compliance (Step 2),
- Assess practicality of identified partnerships and partners (Step 3),
- Identify project champions and on the ground support (Step 4),
- Develop a communications plan (Step 5), and
- Approach PWSs about partnerships (Step 6).

State drinking water program staff may also choose to approach PWSs earlier in the process based on existing relationships and the PWS's knowledge, concerns, and priorities related to partnerships. The steps in this document can help identify and categorize PWSs in need of partnerships. State drinking water programs can adjust steps or the order of actions based on what works best with their PWSs.

Establishing Your Team

Developing partnerships takes time, collaboration, and coordination between PWSs. Depending on the type of partnership, the partnership can also benefit from coordination and collaboration from organizations that provide support and technical assistance to PWSs. State drinking water program staff, including staff from the Capacity Development program, Operator Certification program, compliance, enforcement, and DWSRF can work together to help identify PWSs that might benefit from a partnership, discuss partnership implementation challenges, and determine the most effective way to collaborate with PWSs. Utilizing data, knowledge about specific PWSs, and existing efforts and relationships will strengthen your team's ability to assess partnership options and support PWSs.

Using this Document

Thisdocument is intended to be used as a tool for state drinking water programs to identify, assess, and implement water system partnerships. Throughout the various steps of this handbook, you will be prompted to fill in sections. These fillable sections will help guide you and your team through the process of identifying PWSs, assessing partnership options and feasibility, and developing a plan for implementation. Technical assistance providers may also find this tool useful for the same purposes in the communities they support.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY PWSS IN NEED

The purpose of this step is to begin identifying PWSs with compliance issues by reviewing your state's drinking water compliance and TMF capacity data. As you and your team review your state's data, you should consider the following questions:

Are there geographic patterns or areas within your state where many PWSs violate drinking water regulations?

Yes ☐ No ☐

- Where are the compliance problems concentrated (select all that apply)?

  Rural Areas ☐ Suburban Areas ☐ Urban Areas ☐

- Are there areas of PWSs with similar problems?

  Yes ☐ No ☐

Do PWSs using ground water or surface water have more violations?

Ground Water ☐ Surface Water ☐ Equal ☐

How many PWSs in the state are publicly-owned? How many are privately/investor-owned?

Publicly-owned: Privately/Investor-owned:

- Are compliance challenges correlated with ownership type?

  Yes ☐ No ☐

Are the highest number of violations related to monitoring or reporting?

Monitoring ☐ Reporting ☐ Equal ☐ Other (e.g., MCL) ☐

From the above questions, record any patterns you notice with your compliance and TMF capacity data. For example, the northwestern part of the state has multiple surface water PWSs in rural areas with monitoring violations. In addition, some of the PWSs in this area also have managerial-related challenges.

These answers can start to determine what common challenges PWSs are facing. Using the responses above, complete the table below to identify specific PWSs that might benefit from a partnership.

PWSID or PWS Name	General Location in the State	Type of Water Used	Ownership Type	PWS Size	Do they have health-based violations?	Reason for Violations	Are there similar characteristics to other PWSs?
PWS 000123	Northwest-ern part of the state	Surface Water	Public	Small (popu-lation about 3,000)	Yes	Multiple monitoring violations	Yes
		Ground Water Surface Water	Public Private		Yes No		Yes No
		Ground Water Surface Water	Public Private		Yes No		Yes No
		Ground Water Surface Water	Public Private		Yes No		Yes No
		Ground Water Surface Water	Public Private		Yes No		Yes No
		Ground Water Surface Water	Public Private		Yes No		Yes No
		Ground Water Surface Water	Public Private		Yes No		Yes No
		Ground Water Surface Water	Public Private		Yes No		Yes No

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You now have a list of PWSs that could benefit from a partnership. In the next step, you will review the PWSs identified and brainstorm what types of partnerships may help PWSs overcome the identified challenges.

STEP 2: DETERMINE HOW PARTNERSHIPS COULD IMPROVE COMPLIANCE

This step is intended to provide general guidelines to help your state drinking water program consider whether a water system partnership could support a PWS and help them address compliance challenges identified and documented under Step 1. There are several factors you should consider when first determining if a partnership might be a viable option for the identified PWSs. The factors to consider include:

Technical Factors: If the challenge is that the PWS cannot find or keep a certified operator, then contracting out O&M could be an option. The PWS would need to identify an appropriate provider of contract O&M services, including a certified operator, and determine whether the PWS can afford these services. If the PWS's challenge is related to the water quality or quantity, or failing infrastructure, joint power agency or ownership transfer partnership options may offer a more appropriate solution.

Administrative Factors: If a PWS's challenge is maintaining compliance with drinking water regulations, the PWS can compare the costs of possible solutions, including partnership options. Educating PWSs on viable alternatives can encourage discussion and induce change. States may be able to encourage partnerships as a way to cost-effectively improve compliance.

Community Factors: Communities may consider their PWS and provision of their own drinking water to be part of their community's local control, identity, and self-sufficiency. Acknowledging these values and finding partnership options that respect community structure and history can help build trust. Many partnership options, particularly those under informal cooperation or contractual assistance, can provide the PWS and community with the support they need without removing the PWS from the community's control or identity. Ensuring communities understand the importance of safe drinking water and the challenges their PWS might be facing should be highlighted. In other situations, communities may be overwhelmed with the responsibilities associated with owning and operating a PWS, making ownership transfer or joint power agency the best solution.

Solutions to challenges should consider technical, administrative, and community factors, or a combination of factors, when addressing the challenges. Keep these in mind while considering other factors and what partnership types and activities are attainable for each situation, PWS, and community.

If the partnership option under consideration requires geographic proximity, make sure the geographic area considered is broad enough to include multiple options for potential partners, but limited enough to make a partnership feasible. Some partnership options, such as contracting management services like payroll and billing, may not necessarily rely on geographic proximity and consideration can include partners outside the region.

Select the button to the right for additional questions to consider when deciding whether certain partnership options may be effective for a particular PWS.

Additional Questions to Consider

Acknowledging and documenting PWSs' strengths and challenges can highlight opportunities for PWSs partnerships that may improve TMF capacity, compliance, and the ability to provide safe drinking water. Using the PWSs identified under Step 1 and the information presented in this step, consider how you could group PWSs together by possible partnerships to help them address their challenges. Are there trends for the PWSs that need support? If you group PWSs by shared challenges or comparable strengths and weaknesses, can you think of partnership solutions that might benefit all PWSs? Are they in the same general area? Did any of the PWSs have similar compliance challenges? If so, what were they? Did they have comparable strengths or challenges? How could their strengths or weaknesses contribute to a partnership?

Review of Partnership Types

- **Informal Cooperation**: PWSs coordinate with other PWSs without contractual obligations.
- **Contractual Assistance**: PWSs contract with other PWSs or service providers. The PWSs remain independent, but certain functions are contracted out to increase efficiency.
- **Joint Power Agency**: PWSs create a new management entity designed to serve the PWSs that formed it.
- **Ownership Transfer**: PWSs engage in mergers, mutual transfer of existing entities, or creation of a new entity.

For more information, review the Types of Partnerships section for examples, and partnership benefits.

Use the table below to brainstorm how these PWSs could work together to help overcome their challenges. You can start by:

- Assigning a grouping number in the first column,
- Listing the names or PWS ID that could be part of the partnership in the second column, and
- Filling in the "Reason PWS Fits in Grouping" column with information about why certain PWSs might work together.

- Next, consider the different roles/strengths the PWSs might have in these groups and the partnership type that would best suit them in the fourth column. Use additional rows if more space is needed.
- In the fifth column, assign the appropriate partnership type.
- In the last column, assign grouping titles that relate to the foundation of the grouping. Doing so will help you and your team consider and keep multiple possible groupings organized. Remember that PWSs can be considered for multiple partnerships and more than two PWSs can make-up a grouping. A grouping could also include non-PWS service providers. In Step 3, you will consider the feasibility of these potential partnerships and explore potential challenges.

Consider the points above while brainstorming possible partnership options in the table below:

Grouping	PWS Name or ID	Reason PWS Fits in Grouping	Role in Partnership/ Strengths	Identified Partnership Solution (Type)	Grouping Foundation/Title
1	**000123**	Similar area and monitoring violations	Needs access to a part-time certified operator	Contractual Assistance	Northwestern Surface Water PWSs
1	**123000**	Similar area and monitoring violations	High operator turn-over, cannot keep an operator on full-time	Contractual Assistance	Northwestern Surface Water PWSs
1 2 3 4				Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer	
1 2 3 4				Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer	
1 2 3 4				Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer	
1 2 3 4				Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer	
1 2 3 4				Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer	
1 2 3 4				Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer	

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STEP 3 PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT OF IDENTIFIED PARTNERSHIP TYPES AND PARTNERS

In Step 3, you will consider partnership development and the implementation process. At the end of Step 3, you and your team will have a list of potential partnerships that have been vetted against factors, such as:

- Are there physical limitations that impact partnership options?
- What are the possible unintended consequences for partners?
- Are there available resources and incentives to support the partnership?

Reminder

The PWSs identified in Step 1 are those that might benefit from partnership activities. Under Step 2, the identified PWSs were reviewed to determine if there were groupings of PWSs that could benefit from partnerships.

At this stage, partnerships with the lowest perceived risk should emerge to the top of the list. Things to consider are the physical condition of the partnering PWSs, any geographic impacts, and the adequacy of supply.

Using the information from Steps 1 and 2, consider the potential benefits and challenges of implementing partnership activities. Consider the partnership options you brainstormed under Step 2, are there combinations you and your team should explore further?

Fill in the tables below by identifying the specific activities that could occur under the partnerships. Determine if there are challenges to implementing activities and how those challenges may impact the feasibility of the partnership. You and your team should focus on the PWSs and possible relationships identified in Step 2 and identify any shortcomings, barriers, or limitations.

Information entered in the previous tables will auto-populate in the tables below. If you do not see the Grouping Foundation/Titles or PWS Names and IDs previously entered, click in and out of each cell to reset the fields.

Grouping Foundation/Title:

Partnership Type: ◯ Informal Cooperation ◯ Contractual Assistance ◯ Joint Power Agency ◯ Ownership Transfer

PWSs Included in the Partnership	Possible Partnership Activities	How does this solve the PWSs' violations identified in Step 1?	What are the possible challenges to partnership implementation?
✓ Example PWS			

Do any of the challenges (e.g., geographic location) make this partnership type unfeasible? Yes ☐ No ☐

Grouping Foundation/Title:

Partnership Type: ◯ Informal Cooperation ◯ Contractual Assistance ◯ Joint Power Agency ◯ Ownership Transfer

PWSs Included in the Partnership	Possible Partnership Activities	How does this solve the PWSs' violations identified in Step 1?	What are the possible challenges to partnership implementation?

Do any of the challenges (e.g. geographic location) make this partnership type unfeasible? Yes ◯ No ◯

Grouping Foundation/Title:

Partnership Type: ◯ Informal Cooperation ◯ Contractual Assistance ◯ Joint Power Agency ◯ Ownership Transfer

PWSs Included in the Partnership	Possible Partnership Activities	How does this solve the PWSs' violations identified in Step 1?	What are the possible challenges to partnership implementation?

Do any of the challenges (e.g. geographic location) make this partnership type unfeasible? Yes ◯ No ◯

Grouping Foundation/Title:

Partnership Type: ◯ Informal Cooperation ◯ Contractual Assistance ◯ Joint Power Agency ◯ Ownership Transfer

PWSs Included in the Partnership	Possible Partnership Activities	How does this solve the PWSs' violations identified in Step 1?	What are the possible challenges to partnership implementation?

Do any of the challenges (e.g. geographic location) make this partnership type unfeasible? Yes ◯ No ◯

Save and continue » Clear form »

States should consider the availability of support and the incentives in place for PWSs to collaborate. For example, if a PWS needs staff training, you and your team should consider:

- Does a partnering PWS have capacity to provide mentoring or share training resources?
- What incentive does the mentoring PWS have to help another PWS?
- How receptive would the PWS receiving support be?

The availability of support is one important factor for PWSs working together to solve complex challenges. Building support and relationships takes trust, understanding, and a willingness to work together to benefits all PWSs in areas that are valuable to them.

You and your team should focus on the PWSs' needs and should address the boundaries and population of the service area, the current and future demand on the community's resources, the adequacy of existing infrastructure and equipment, and available financing options. You should also consider the financial implications of partnership solutions. Solutions should focus on the long-term TMF capacity and work to improve the sustainability of participating PWSs over time.

Initiating partnership activities, like the ones you identified in the form above, involves planning, engagement, communications, and follow-through. As you consider why the PWSs should or would consider engaging in partnerships, you should also consider what the PWSs need in order to build and maintain these new relationships and continue the partnership in the future. Different partnership types will require varying degrees of involvement and accountability. Making the relationship part of the PWSs' culture and internal policies is significant to the sustainability and growth for any partnership.

- What short- and long-term incentives are available and can be used to promote partnerships with the PWS(s)? List available incentives (e.g., economies of scale):

- Based on the questions you answered and the form you completed under this step, identify which of the potential partnerships and partnership activities are most feasible to pursue. Take into consideration how partnership activities could address PWSs' needs and barriers to success.

Communicating the benefits of partnerships can be challenging depending on the state's existing relationship with the PWSs. Understanding and analyzing barriers to change and involving trusted members of the community can help regulators and community stakeholders develop a plan to overcome challenges through partnership.

Often, the final partnership type and activities are chosen and agreed upon with the full participation of a project champion, local officials, and PWS management. If you believe that a water system partnership is a viable option for the identified PWSs, you and your team can engage champions and technical assistance providers to develop a full plan.

Incentivize Partnership

Partnership incentives include the inherent benefits and additional financial or outreach-related benefits that the state offers to PWSs that engage in partnerships. The most effective way that you can promote partnerships is to ensure that PWSs:

- Recognize partnership potential,
- Raise awareness of challenges, and
- Consider the options available to PWSs to improve operations and provide safe drinking water to their customers.

You and your team can help PWSs benefit from partnerships by:

- Educating PWSs on how partnership options can help achieve and maintain compliance, and
- Creating incentives that help PWSs consider new ways of maintaining compliance.

Enforcement as an Incentive

Keeping the PWS informed of their compliance status, including notice of violations and enforcement, can help improve communication and understanding. Prior to working with PWSs to determine the partnership options that are right for them, ensure that the state has the necessary legislation in place to support those decisions.

STEP 4: IDENTIFY PROJECT CHAMPIONS AND ON THE GROUND SUPPORT

The purpose of Step 4 is to help improve communication and partnership oversight. This can be done by engaging with various stakeholders and interest groups to build relationships and gain support for the partnership.

Champions, Allies, and Stakeholders: Unique Perspectives and Support

Stakeholders

Examples:
- Water system customers
- Water system owners and staff
- Schools and childcare facilities
- Seniors centers and community centers
- Local or state health departments

Allies

Examples:
- Community organizing group
- A technical assistance provider
- Senior centers or community centers
- Local chamber of commerce
- Schools and childcare facilities

Champion

Examples:
- A citizens' committee
- A technical assistance provider
- Another system interested in partnership
- The owner of the water system
- A county or regional government

Champions

Local champions can be strong proponents of partnerships. They are also critical for the long-term success of partnerships. The champion, preferably a local stakeholder, can propose, endorse, encourage, and defend the partnership ideas. A natural champion may emerge out of the initial challenge that created the need for a water system partnership. If a natural champion does not emerge, you could encourage a person or group to become the champion. Possible champions could include.

- A citizens' committee,
- A technical assistance provider,
- Another PWS interested in partnership,
- The owner of the PWS,
- A county or regional government,
- Volunteer support groups, or
- A financial aid program.

Consider possible champions for the partnership you identified as most feasible under Step 3.

Do any of the communities or PWSs have strong champions already identified? Yes ☐ No ☐

Who are they?

Engaging with these individuals or organizations early and often in the development and planning stages can help keep momentum and can also aid in early communications with PWSs and communities.

Are there PWSs that do not have identified champions? Yes ☐ No ☐

If so, use the list of possible champions above to identify possible champions for the partnership:

While a local representative or group is the ideal champion for the partnership proposal, a local government entity may be able to encourage several PWSs to partner. Volunteer support groups, such as service organizations and economic organizations, can be advocates for establishing a partnership. Technical assistance providers understand PWSs' challenges and can be effective promoters and communicators when it comes to a water system partnership.

Community politics may come into play when identifying a strong champion. This, along with other community cultural and political factors, should be considered when identifying and engaging a champion.

Allies

Partnership allies are stakeholders interested in the partnership's success. Allies can help the PWSs approach the community and other stakeholders about partnership benefits. It is best if allies are organizations or individuals who already have the public's trust or are already working closely with the PWSs. These organizations and individuals often are diverse and have different needs and interests from one another. Having multiple allies who can speak to various needs and benefits can be particularly helpful.

Possible allies include:

- Community groups,
- Customers,
- Entity staff, operators, and managers,
- Elected officials,
- County judges and commissioners,
- Technical assistance providers,
- Drinking water regulatory agency staff,
- Senior centers or community centers,
- Local or state health departments,
- Local chamber of commerce,
- Local business owners,
- Public Utilities Commissions,
- State Department of Education,
- Tribes,
- Faith-based organizations,
- Recreational departments,
- Tourism bureaus,
- Regional planning committees,
- Public Service Commissions,
- Schools and childcare facilities, and
- The media.

Stakeholders

Not all stakeholders will be project allies, or proponents of the partnership. Facilitating discussions between all stakeholders, including partnership opponents, early on in the partnership development helps understand all perspectives, builds trust, and ensures transparency. Champions and allies can be utilized to present messages that show the value of partnerships to stakeholder groups who may not initially see the benefits. Identifying key categories of stakeholders is important before communicating specific partnership ideas. Drawing on the experiences, expertise, and influence that champions and allies have will help you overcome political and social barriers when communicating with PWSs about partnerships.

Working with the State Public Utilities Commission

Most Public Utilities Commissions (PUCs) have jurisdiction over publicly-owned and privately/investor-owned PWSs and PWSs serving outside their municipal boundaries. The number of PWSs under PUC jurisdiction varies by state, but regardless of their specific reach, they can be effective in promoting partnerships within the state. The PUCs can grant or refuse rate relief and revoke certifications through their audit process, which can drive PWSs to partnerships. PUCs can also make mergers or acquisitions more attractive by marketing the partnerships to privately-owned PWSs that might consider a partnership if they felt they could earn the necessary return on their investment. The PUC should consider an acquisition adjustment or a slightly greater rate of return as an incentive for privately/investor-owned PWSs to acquire other PWSs.

STEP 5: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR COMMUNICATING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

In Step 5, a plan for communicating with stakeholders will be developed. Once partnership options and groupings have been considered and vetted against practicality and your team of supporters has been identified, the communications plan should help you and your team work with the PWSs and stakeholders.

A communications plan should include how, when, and what you plan to share with the PWSs and stakeholders. You should consider any potential communication challenges PWSs could face when trying to establish a partnership.

Identifying the Right Messenger

Identifying if there is someone at the state level who talks to the PWSs on a continuous basis, such as a sanitarian, regulatory person, or engineer to use existing lines of communication when approaching the PWS can help open the subject in a less formal way; and may improve the willingness of the PWS to participate. While developing the communications plan and approaching the PWSs, remember the two tasks that need to be completed: for the PWSs to listen to the proposition about engaging in a partnership and for the PWSs and stakeholders to understand the partnership benefits.

The project champion should be consulted while the communications plan is being developed. They can provide insights about how to communicate the message and can be a good messenger for you and your team. Other potential messengers include other state personnel who already have working relationships with the PWSs or communities.

Your state drinking water program and the project champion should engage with various stakeholders to build relationships and to gain support for actions that will improve compliance. To fulfill this role, you and your team may need to communicate with PWS owner(s), boards of directors, town councils, and citizens' groups. Any one of these groups may become the critical group that leads the partnerships.

Notificationand education enable effective communication with PWSs and other groups. You and your team should tailor your approach to the interests of the groups with whom you are meeting. Communities are more likely to invest in partnerships if they consider themselves to be stakeholders and can see the direct benefit of the partnerships.

Communicating the Significance of Partnerships

Communicating the need for partnerships to PWS owners, operators, and customers is a critical part of the partnership process. The following challenges and opportunities could be shared with stakeholders and included in the communications plan:

- **A serious public health concern.** PWSs that have persistent violations of drinking water regulations create a serious public health concern.

- **Compliance is required at the state and federal levels.** Enforcement actions might be taken for persistent violations of drinking water regulations.
- **The cost of failing to return to compliance.** There are costs of inaction. For example, a PWS may lose a grant or loan if they fail to implement changes that would have improved compliance.
- **Benefits.** Communicate to PWS owners, operators, and customers the benefits of establishing a partnership.
- **Improved public health protection.** Communicate the benefits of access to safe and reliable drinking water to the customers. Explain the reduction in risk and focus on public health.
- **Long-term cost reduction.** Partnerships are often the most cost-effective way to meet drinking water regulations and to meet the water demands of customers. PWSs may find some costs, such as fire insurance and emergency connections, can be reduced by implementing partnerships.
- **Increased reliability of service.** Establishing a partnership can enhance customer service and ensure a dependable water supply, especially to customers who have previously experienced water leaks or outages.

Addressing Community Concerns

The communications plan should include how you and your team plan to address any concerns over loss of autonomy the community might have depending on the partnership type. Encourage local officials to define concerns and explain what a loss of autonomy means to the community.

- Is it a loss of jobs? Often showing that the partnership will not impact personnel salaries or hours can alleviate concerns.
- Is it a loss of control over rates? If a PWS is being purchased or joining a joint power agency, a rate agreement with the partnering PWSs or managing body may help to ease these concerns.
- Is it fear of a loss of political control? Encouraging community members to participate and become involved stakeholders can assure citizens that they will still have a voice in the future of their PWS.
- Is it a fear of the loss of community identity? Sometimes the PWS functions as the only quasi-governmental organization that the community can identify with, particularly in unincorporated rural communities. Ensuring that the community will still have its own separate identity can help alleviate these concerns.

Addressing these concerns is a unique challenge as these topics may be sensitive to communities. Having a plan for what to say, how to say it, and who will say it can help you and your team plan around challenges. Some loss of control or community identity may occur, depending on the partnership type (e.g., ownership transfers). In these cases, communicating that control is exchanged for safer drinking water can help create the business case for stakeholders.

Communicating Community Benefits

Benefits of partnerships need to be clearly stated and communicated to the public. For example, there are benefits when a community has a reliable source of safe drinking water. A PWS that is consistently able to provide safe drinking water can support the public health of their community, which is also critical for the community's economic vitality.

Document Stakeholders

If not already developed during Step 4, develop a full list of potential stakeholders for the project. While developing the list, consider the following:

What are the stakeholder groups that may be affected (positively or negatively) by a change in the current operation of the PWS?

- Who would be impacted if a PWS were to engage in a partnership?
- Who would be impacted if the PWS were to become inoperable?

Grouping/Foundation Title:

Partnership Type	Point of Contact or Existing Connection	Primary concerns or reason to get involved?	Role (Champion, Ally, Stakeholder)	Best method and forum to engage or communicate?
Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer			Champion Ally Stakeholder	
Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer			Champion Ally Stakeholder	
Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer			Champion Ally Stakeholder	
Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer			Champion Ally Stakeholder	
Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer			Champion Ally Stakeholder	
Informal Cooperation Contractual Assistance Joint Power Agency Ownership Transfer			Champion Ally Stakeholder	

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STEP 6: APPROACH PWSs ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

You and your team have several ways that you can inform and educate PWSs and stakeholders on partnerships. The EPA has developed resources for states, federal agencies, PWSs, and technical assistance providers, which can help plan and implement various types of partnerships.

Steps 1-3 helped identify PWSs that could benefit from partnerships and the partnership activities that would be beneficial for the participating PWSs. Steps 4 and 5 helped identify stakeholders, develop messaging, and engage with champions, allies, and stakeholders. You and your team can use information from the previous steps to put together a message tailored to each PWS and situation. The messages should be tailored to the PWSs and stakeholders and work best when based off of the intended roles and relationships.

The way you meet with the project champion, allies, stakeholders, and PWSs to convey information should be considered. Consider the following when developing communication techniques and methods:

- What types of communication already exist that are successful (e.g., websites, monthly meetings, local newspaper)?
- What meeting location would work best for the stakeholders (e.g., public library, coffeeshop, city hall)?
- What input can local officials or stakeholders offer to help plan the time and location of meetings?
- Have there already been studies or regional planning efforts that could provide information for the communities on water sources, availability, and quality issues?
- Have the entities, engineering, or financial consultants completed any preliminary studies on options or costs?
- Can the regulatory agencies or technical assistance providers help conduct feasibility studies and/or consolidation assessments?
- Are the PWSs already engaging in partnerships that might serve as helpful examples? PWSs may have informal partnerships that are a routine operation and the PWS may not think of them as "partnerships." Highlighting these successes could be helpful in starting a conversation about additional partnerships.
- Are there examples of other partnerships in the area (or in the state) that might be helpful?
- Can you and your team help set up a workshop or training with the champions or allies (such as the Environmental Finance Centers or technical assistance providers)?
- Would a meeting facilitator be helpful?
- When approaching the PWS, who should be approached first?
- Who will the message resonate with?
- Who are the decision-makers?
- If there are potential challenges with PWS personnel, how can the messaging or how the information is shared help overcome those challenges?

The table below includes examples of the approvals, funding, and technical assistance that a PWS may need to acquire before formally implementing a partnership. Review this table with PWSs and explain which of the items below you and your team may provide assistance with. Make sure PWSs understand that all steps do not necessarily apply to each partnership type or partnership activity. For specific partnership examples please visit the EPA's Water System Partnership website. This list is not exhaustive and should be reviewed and added to depending on the situation.

Example of Partnership Actions	Your Role	PWS Role
Obtaining the necessary approvals	Inform PWSs of approval requirements and help them navigate the process.	If any of the participating PWSs are privately/investor owned, state PUC approval may be required.
Obtaining financing	Provide information on available grants and loans that can be used to fund partnerships. Educate PWSs on funding procedures. Help PWSs make the case to funding agencies that partnerships promote compliance.	Secure grants or loans to help facilitate partnerships. Investigate financing sources to minimize the impact on the local ratepayer. Understand funding procedures and how other PWSs have utilized funding for partnership.
Approving plans and specifications	Educate the PWS on plan reviews and encourage them to use an impartial technical assistance provider to improve the likelihood of success.	If part of the partnership involves engineering changes, a plan review is usually required.
Finding sources of technical assistance	Help PWSs make connections with technical assistance providers in the State (such as NRWA or RCAP).	Contact and obtain necessary technical assistance from providers who are willing to help in the partnership effort.
Supporting regional planning activities	Attend community meetings to show support for partnerships.	Hold community meetings to gain buy-in for partnership options and to educate others on how the partnership will help the PWSs overcome present and future challenges.
Plans and specifications for construction-related projects	Approve engineering plans and specifications.	Complete engineering plans and specifications and submit them to the state.

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