

Key Principles of Community Engagement

HEAL Act Community Engagement Plan Resource

Do Research About the Community

It is important to understand each community's culture, norms, values, power and political structures, economic conditions, social networks, demographic trends, and history. It is also important to pay attention to how community members themselves define community. This may be the block where people live, it may be where they worship, or it may be their circle of friends. Additionally, become aware of the community's history of collaborating with other programs at the agency, with other agencies, and with partners, including the barriers they have faced when engaging with these different groups.

- Once the communities and/or populations have been identified, seek out information about history, context, current events, etc. Start by Googling! Read local articles and blogs. Seek out websites for community organizations, faith-based organizations, advocacy organizations, etc.
- *Connect with local government and/or Tribal government partners in the area that may already have a relationship with the agency* and ask them about their knowledge of and relationship with the community/population. Find out who else from the agency may have worked with this same group(s) and ask them about trusted leaders to reach out to.
- *Reach out to colleagues* to ask about their past or current work with the community/population you're working with.
- *Connect with trusted leaders in the community.* Ask them about their community and its pressing concerns. Learn about additional resources that will help gain a better understanding of the community.

Do Research About Yourself

Identify your own biases, privileges, and limitations before engaging with a community or potential partner including:

- Assumptions or stereotypes about this community
- Assumptions that may negatively impact interactions or efforts
- Cultural norms and values and how they align with those of the community
- Assessment of who is the most effective person to lead the effort. This may not be agency staff. It could be a trusted community partner.
- Know the history of how the agency has interacted with the identified communities it plans to engage.

- Did that community ask for changes that were not adopted or acted upon?

Be Proactive

When working on a specific project or trying to address certain health issues, reach out to potential partners and community members as early as possible. Per EJ Principle #7: communities have the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

Allow Community Members to Self-Identify

Remember that cultural identities are dynamic, how people identify is a personal choice, and that people are both individuals and members of various groups. Communities and individuals have intersectional identities, which means they are members of more than one group, some of which may have been historically marginalized or oppressed.

- When in doubt, ask how people prefer to self-identify!

Prioritize Unheard Perspectives

Give space and power to the perspectives of those whose voices are least heard. For example, elderly immigrants have insights to share but may not feel comfortable attending a town hall. Going to a senior center where they regularly gather may be a better way to reach them. Listen with the intent to take action on the needs expressed by the community. Recognize that individuals have different perspectives, and no perspective should be valued more than another.

- Ask “who’s not at the table?” and proactively seek out those folks. Ask directly how they prefer to engage and accommodate needs and preferences as much as possible.
- Listen to the needs different groups express, and take clear, detailed, and diligent notes to refer back to.

Value Others’ Time

Never expect community members to volunteer their time or expertise. Value what community members bring to the project through compensation, reimbursement, and/or support for one of their priorities.

- Ensure that adequate funds are available to compensate or reimburse community members. Research and know the agency’s community compensation policy and ensure that everything is in order to make this a smooth and quick process for community members involved.
- When community members share community priorities that may be outside of the project’s scope, find resources or individuals to connect them with. Seek additional resources in the agency, other state agencies, local governments, etc., that might be able to address the needs and directly connect them to the community member(s) who expressed the need.

- Communities are diverse and will often have a different understanding, or differing cultural and social approaches to time, timeliness, and urgency from other communities, and from the agency’s understanding of time. Be sure to have flexibility and work closely with the community to clearly set and communicate any commitment to deadlines and government processes.

Avoid Tokenism

Individuals should never be expected to speak on behalf of, or represent, an entire community. Nor should an individual or small group be invited to participate solely because they “check the box” of an identity or perspective.

- No community is a monolith, and no single person (or even multiple people) can speak for an entire community. Engage with as many different people in different settings as possible to get a more holistic, diverse, and nuanced understanding of the issue being explored.
- Honor the perspective and believe the experiences that the individual or small group shares. What they share may resonate with many whom they consider part of their community but recognize that they are only speaking on their own behalf.
- Learning from different, but similar perspectives can expand understanding of a broader community experience. This may happen through reading media written by people who share similar identities.

Recognize Strengths and Assets

Even communities that experience the greatest health and economic inequities have strengths, assets, and resources that should be acknowledged and leveraged.

- Seek to identify and understand these assets. Ask community members what their assets are (from their perspective) and highlight and amplify these as much as possible.

Ensure Communication is Ongoing

Collaboration requires continual opportunities for conversation and sharing.

- Use two-way communication methods familiar to partners and community members. Avoid making assumptions, ask!
- Ask community partners how frequently and in what formats they would like to communicate and what information is priority for them.

Be Transparent

Be honest and forthcoming about the purpose of the project and how the input will be used.

- Only make promises that will be kept and make sure to follow through on commitments. Not following through can erode the trust that has been built.

- Be clear about what is being asked and what is being offered in return. Use plain talk appropriate for the community being engaged.

Meet People Where They Are

Be flexible. Go to the community—where members gather—and work to build relationships and trust.

- Look for opportunities to learn about the community by attending community events and meeting with community groups.
- When meeting with community members, ask them what events are happening and which ones will be appropriate to attend as a guest.

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