



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GUIDANCE AND BEST PRACTICES

## INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is defined as "the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people" (CDC, 2018). Community outreach is a function of communicating with partners or gathering information or data from them. Community engagement is not synonymous with community outreach. While there is a role for both outreach and engagement when organizing for change, community engagement should happen early and often. The goal of community engagement is to act in support of achieving a community's desired change (Hammerlinck, 2019).

The difference between the two can be summed in by the table below.

Community Outreach	Community Engagement
Short-Term	Long-Term
Marketing	Relationship Building
What can A do for B?	What can A and B do together?
One Group Benefits Most	Community Benefits
Transactional	Connecting
Directional	Cyclical

(Hammerlinck, 2019)

## MAKING THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement provides a means of navigating complex social, economic, cultural, and/or political settings where qualitative research is

being conducted or health services are being provided. A community engagement plan can be used in a variety of contexts, such as event promotion, education, advocacy, or general community outreach. An effective engagement plan requires careful planning, focused messaging, and ongoing evaluation to ensure it meets its goals and effectively engages your intended audience.

## **BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Meaningful engagement with communities is often overlooked due to pressures of urgent timelines or general perceptions that community members are not considered experts. However, it is the expertise of lived experience of community members that the public health community must use - ensuring that risks are minimized and benefits maximized. Community collaboration adds value and enhances the understanding of technical staff, researchers, service providers and others involved in public health programs.

## **ASSESSING READINESS**

The main indicator of readiness for community engagement is the capacity to establish a feedback loop to ensure programs, events, and other planned activities are responsive to the needs and desires of your specific community of focus. Capacity could include staffing, funding, willingness to act, physical space, and other logistical concerns affecting the ability to implement and sustain these activities. Visit the [Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research](#) to review an example of this in action and an [assessment tool](#) that your organization can use to assess readiness.

## **USING A DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH**

In today's rapidly evolving world, community engagement initiatives must be underpinned by a solid understanding of the communities they aim to serve. This is where a data-driven approach becomes invaluable. By leveraging data, we can tailor our efforts to meet the unique needs of each community, ensuring that our interventions are both effective and impactful.

### ***Identifying the Problem: What Are We Trying to Solve?***

The first step in a data-driven approach is to define the problem we are addressing clearly. This involves gathering quantitative and qualitative data to understand the issues facing the community. Are we addressing education gaps, healthcare disparities, environmental concerns, or something else? Data helps us pinpoint the problem and set a clear objective for our engagement efforts.

### ***Geographic Focus: Where Are We Making an Impact?***

Next, we must determine the geographic area of our focus. This could range from a small neighborhood to an entire city or region. Understanding the geographical scope helps in collecting relevant data and tailoring our strategies accordingly. For example, data on population density, cultural diversity, economic conditions, and infrastructure vary widely from one area to another and significantly influence our engagement strategies.

### ***Community Demographics: Who Lives There?***

Understanding the demographic profile of the community is crucial. Data on age distribution, ethnicity, income levels, education, and occupation provide insights into the community's characteristics. This information helps in designing initiatives that resonate with the community members' experiences and needs.

### ***Stakeholder Identification: Who Else Is Interested?***

Identifying stakeholders who are, or should be, interested in the problem is essential. These can include local businesses, educational institutions, healthcare providers, non-profits, and government agencies. Engaging with

these stakeholders not only provides additional data and resources but also fosters collaborative efforts for more significant impact.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis: Making Sense of the Information***

Collecting relevant data is just the beginning. The critical part is analyzing this data to draw meaningful insights. This might involve looking at trends over time, comparing demographic data, or assessing the effectiveness of existing initiatives. The analysis should lead to actionable insights that inform our engagement strategy. The Community Health Equity Assessment within the [Health Community Technical Assistance Toolbox](#) provides a customizable template of a health equity focused data collection tool in both English and Spanish.

### ***Strategy Development: Crafting a Data-Informed Plan***

Armed with data and insights, the next step is to develop a strategic plan for community engagement. This plan should outline specific goals, target audiences, engagement methods, and metrics for measuring success. It should be flexible enough to adapt to new data or changing community needs.

### ***Implementation and Evaluation: Putting Data into Action***

Implementing the engagement strategy requires careful coordination and monitoring. Data plays a crucial role here too, as it helps track progress and measure impact. Continuous evaluation using data allows for adjustments and improvements in the strategy, ensuring that the community engagement remains effective and relevant.

### ***Other Things to Keep in Mind***

Using publicly available data can provide a good starting point for identifying communities of focus for engagement. This data can include race/ethnicity, income, education, etc. Much of this data can be found on national websites like the [US Census website](#) while more locally-relevant data may exist within a local health department or university such as

Vermont's [How Healthy Are We? Data Resources](#) and the [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#).

A data-driven approach to community engagement offers a powerful way to make meaningful and lasting impacts in communities. By grounding our efforts in data, we can ensure that our initiatives are responsive, targeted, and effective, leading to positive change and stronger communities.

## IMPLEMENTATION

In this section answer/address the following: What steps are needed to effectively implement strategies and best practices.

1. **Define the purpose and goals of community engagement:** Start by defining the purpose and goals of the engagement process.
  - a. What do you want to achieve through community engagement, and why is it important to your organization and the community?
  - b. How will the community benefit from the engagement?
  - c. Who are the partners/community members you want to engage with?
  
2. **Identify the priority audience:** Identify the specific groups of people you want to engage with based on their interests, needs, and concerns. This could include community members, local organizations, government agencies, or other stakeholders. Oftentimes, organizations are often provided compensation through grants or contracts to assist with this work. It is important to note that individuals from the priority audience must also be compensated for their time and expertise, too. Lived experience is valuable! Compensation is even more critical for members of the priority audience especially if they are a representative of historically or currently marginalized populations. Members of these communities are oftentimes not shown that their contributions are valued, from a monetary standpoint. Failure to compensate these individuals is extractive and not a collaborative approach to community engagement.
  - a. Who are you trying to reach? Do you have a personal or professional connection with this group?
    - i. If not, how could you employ the help of someone already connected with this group?

- b. What channels do they use to communicate and engage with other members of this group? What channels do they use to communicate with others outside of this group? How are these communication channels different?
            - i. Who is left out of decision-making conversations? How could they be better engaged?
3. **Develop a communication plan:** Develop a plan for communicating with the priority audience, including the message itself, messenger(s), communication channels, and frequency of communication.
  - a. What is/are your key message(s)? What tone and language should you use? Keep in mind that plain language are key for understanding across all reading levels. It also avoid the use of jargon which can be hard to understand for those outside of a particular field.
  - b. What language(s) do(es) your audience read and speak? Does your audience need written translated materials translated? Should any materials be interpreted via in-person interactions or in recorded videos?
  - c. Translation and transcreation of messages into a variety of languages with the help of native readers and speakers may be needed to reach your intended audiences.
  - d. How can you make it relevant and compelling to your audience?
    - i. What are ways you can engage your priority audience to co-create or review the messages?
  - e. What communication channels best reach your audience?
4. **Choose engagement methods:** Choose engagement methods that are appropriate for the priority audience and the goals of the engagement process. This could include in-person meetings/events, surveys, online platforms, focus groups, or other methods.

- a. Which methods of engagement are most effective for your audience? (Consider using a mixed-channel approach to reach a broad audience.)
  - i. Why are some channels more effective than others? (language barriers, internet and transportation access, mobility, ability needs)
  
- 5. **Create engagement materials:** Create materials to support the engagement process, such as handouts, brochures, presentations, games, or online resources. Think outside the box, do not let what has already been done limit development.
  - a. Are there ways you can include the priority audience in crafting these materials?
  - b. In what ways can you engage the “unconventional partners” (arts community, libraries, chefs, barbers, etc.)?
  
- 6. **Host events:** Host events, such as town halls, workshops (virtual or in-person), or community-building days to engage with the priority audience and gather feedback.
  - a. Involve priority audience in planning and implementation, encourage creativity.
  
- 7. **Collect and analyze feedback:** Collect feedback from the priority audience using surveys, interviews, or other methods. Analyze the feedback to identify common themes and prioritize actions.
  - a. How will you measure the success of your activities?
  
- 8. **Take action:** Use the feedback to develop action plans and implement changes based on the feedback received.
  - a. What does a community-led feedback loop look like?
  
- 9. **Communicate results:** Communicate the results of the engagement process to the priority audience and related groups. Provide updates on the actions taken and the impact of the engagement process on a regular basis (monthly, quarterly, as tangible updates occur, etc.).



- a. Consider the ways you will communicate this information based on your audience (newsletters, radio, social media, bulletin board, television, in-person, etc.)
10. **Evaluate the process:** Evaluate the effectiveness of the engagement process by analyzing participation rates, feedback, and outcomes. Use this information to improve future engagement efforts.
- a. To the best of your ability, ensure evaluation methods are unbiased, valid, and equitable.
  - b. Think beyond simply checking the number of individuals reached.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

The City of Philadelphia employed an equitable process for community engagement as the driver to reduce climate impacts in one low-income community. The “Beat the Heat” Team was comprised of city representatives alongside a number of community-based organizations, working in tandem with community members to identify tangible solutions to reduce the impacts of climate-related issues experienced by community members.



## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- [Strengthening And Sustaining Public Engagement In Vermont](#)
- [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)
- [Beat the Heat Hunting Park Philadelphia Report](#)
- [Beat the Heat Toolkit | Office of Sustainability | City of Philadelphia](#)

## REFERENCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). Ensuring Quality Health Systems and human resources.

[https://www.cdc.gov/globalhivtb/who-we-are/resources/keyareafactsheets/Ensuring-Quality-Health-Systems-and-Human-Resources\\_1.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/globalhivtb/who-we-are/resources/keyareafactsheets/Ensuring-Quality-Health-Systems-and-Human-Resources_1.pdf)

Hamerlinck, V. a. P. B. J. (2019, June 6). Community Outreach vs Community Engagement. Leading Differently.

<https://leadingdifferently.com/2019/06/06/community-outreach-vs-community-engagement/#:~:text=Community%20engagement%20should%20happen%20early,it%20is%20intended%20to%20reach.>

*This program is funded in part by the Vermont Department of Health, the Vermont Department of Housing & Community Development, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This resource was developed by Equitable Cities LLC to support and sustain efforts for Vermont communities seeking to improve health equity through community design and placemaking.*