



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Why Engage the Community?

Community engagement is a cornerstone of effective public health practice. Involving community members in making decisions and taking action is critical. Successful community engagement builds skills and capacity within the community, which are fundamental factors for optimal health.

Community engagement is a process of involving community members and the reliance on a community's own resources and strengths as the foundation for designing, implementing, and evaluating solutions to problematic conditions that affect them. As such, community engagement involves interpersonal trust, communication, and collaboration. Such engagement, or participation, should focus on, and result from, the needs, expectations, and desires of a community's members.

Effective community engagement results in activities and programs that reflect the strengths, needs and resources of the community, and outcomes that are understandable to community members and that reflect community expectations.

Along with more traditional risk reduction activities, building community engagement is increasingly regarded as a priority for health improvement. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recently noted that the next generation of prevention interventions must focus on building relationships with communities, and derive from the communities' assessments of their needs and priorities.

What is Community Engagement?

“Community” is a fluid concept and may be described as people (socioeconomics and demographics, health status and risk profiles, cultural and ethnic characteristics), location (geographic boundaries), connectors (shared values, interests, motivating forces), or power relationships (communication patterns, formal and informal lines of authority and influence, stakeholder relationships, resource flows).

Effective community engagement brings people to the table—both community members and professionals—and nurtures their active participation in all aspects of decision-making processes. The International Association for Public Participation defines "constructive citizen participation" as a systematic process that provides an opportunity for citizens, planners, managers, and elected representatives to share their experience, knowledge, and goals, and combine their energy to create a plan that is technically sound, economically attractive, generally understood and accepted by most of those affected by it, and is thus politically viable. Cultural strengths are identified and valued as the process seeks to meld community “wisdom” with scientific and institutional expertise. Community members are valued as equal partners. Information is gathered to inform action, and new understandings emerge as participants reflect on potential actions.

The Cycle of Engagement. The cycle of engagement typically has three parts to it: First is coming together - starting the conversation and dialogue; building trust and safe spaces for people to think, debate,



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reflect and make decisions. Second is moving forward—converting dialogue into activity; reaching out beyond the original planning group; and creating dynamic partnerships to implement programs and provide services. And third is sustaining momentum—building structures; developing and sustaining leadership; assessing and improving programs; measuring change and communicating results. These three steps can bring many sectors of the community together, foster new alliances and relationships, provide community members with a better compass for understanding community problems and assets, and be used to drive community change.

Principles of Community Engagement.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (CDC/ATSDR) Committee for Community Engagement suggests several underlying principles that can help guide community members in designing, implementing, and evaluating community engagement efforts, and form effective engagement partnerships. Each principle covers a broad practice area of engagement, often addressing multiple issues, and is organized in three sections: items to consider before starting the engagement effort, what is necessary for engagement to occur, and what to consider for the engagement to be successful. The nine principles are discussed below. For more information see the website for strategies at: www.health.state.mn.us/strategies/. Click on “Community Engagement”.

Before starting a community engagement effort it is important to:

- ▶ Principle 1 -- Be clear about the purposes or goals of the engagement effort, and the populations and/or communities you want to engage.
- ▶ Principle 2 -- Become knowledgeable about the community in terms of its economic conditions, political structures, norms and values, demographic trends, history, and experience with engagement efforts.

For effective engagement to occur, it is necessary to:

- ▶ Principle 3 -- Go into the community, establish relationships, build trust, work with the formal and informal leadership, and seek commitment from community organizations and leaders to create processes for mobilizing the community.
- ▶ Principle 4 -- Remember and accept that community self-determination is the responsibility and right of all people who comprise a community.

For engagement to succeed it is necessary to:

- ▶ Principle 5 -- Partner with the community to create change and improve health.
- ▶ Principle 6 -- Recognize and respect community diversity.
- ▶ Principle 7 -- Identify and mobilize community assets, and develop capacities and resources for community health decisions and action.
- ▶ Principle 8 -- Release control of actions or interventions to the community, and be flexible enough to meet the changing needs of the community.
- ▶ Principle 9 -- Commit to the activities for the long-term.



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New Assumptions. Effectively engaging the public means adopting an entirely different set of assumptions about the public, it means doing things differently. For example:

- ▶ Professionals within public institutions must understand that under the right conditions, people can deal with complex issues, and that they are willing to take the time to do it thoughtfully.
- ▶ We must recognize that people think about public concerns not in isolated bits, but in inter-related webs of concerns; and that there is a wisdom in communities throughout the state that needs to be tapped in order to truly make sense of data and decide what actions to take.
- ▶ People need to learn from one another—have room for ambivalence and time and space to test ideas, explore, and listen—so they can sort out what they believe and learn together.
- ▶ People need a sense of possibility to engage in public discussions—a belief that something worthwhile might be produced from their efforts and involvement.
- ▶ It is essential for those engaging the community to adhere to the highest ethical standards. Failure to act ethically is not an option. Ethical action is the only hope for developing and maintaining the trust of communities.

Community Engagement and the Local Public Health Act. *“Governmental public health agencies must find ways to improve communication and openness with the public to maintain and increase their trustworthiness.”* (IOM, Healthy Communities, 1996).

Community participation was a key ingredient in the original design of the Community Health System in Minnesota. The 1976 CHS Act established a system of local public health agencies across the state and required Citizen Advisory Committees and community involvement in community health assessment and planning. Since that time, local public health agencies have served as catalysts, engaging people in ways that allowed communication and cooperation among community members, organizations, and government entities.

The State’s changing demographics and the recent priority focus on the elimination of health disparities is challenging the established ways this work has been done. Success in achieving public health goals will require a new level of communication and cooperation between community members who have not been a part of past decision-making processes and the organizations and governments that serve them. In the words of one public health practitioner, *“This work means making a commitment to change the way we do our work.”*

Suggested Strategies. Successful community engagement calls for everyone to take responsibility—to step up to the plate, to be involved and to hold one another accountable. Multiple sectors must be involved in efforts to eliminate health disparities. Suggested strategies include:

- ▶ Take the time necessary for authentic participation.
- ▶ Initiate or expand dialogue within the broader systems and communities served.
- ▶ Periodically and systematically create the time and place needed for internal



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discussions, planning, and training on community engagement strategies and tools.

- ▶ Recognize and plan for expanded timelines necessitated by identification, recruitment, and orientation of new partners and community members.
- ▶ Include adequate time in decision-making processes for representatives of organizations and communities to seek input.
- ▶ Communicate with the community every step of the way.
- ▶ Encourage and support community engagement training opportunities.
- ▶ Assure that community engagement principles are incorporated into contracts for capacity building and technical assistance, social marketing and evaluation, so that contractors include community engagement information and strategies in their activities.

*“Go in search of people.
Begin with what they know.
Build on what they have.”*

Chinese proverb

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