Quick Tips for Community Engagement

The Rights & Democracy Institute

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The Basics

- Community Engagement is not about listening, it is about partnership and collaboration with community members with lived-experience that serves as potent expertise
- For providing expertise and time, community members should be fairly compensated
- Each community is different; be adaptive, respectful, and move at a pace that facilitates trust, collaboration, and feedback
- Community Engagement is based on trust - without this, engagement is futile.

Preparing Yourself and Your Agency

- Determine the readiness of your agency to engage the community:
  - Are you ready to make changes based on community input?
  - Do you have experience and knowledge of your target community and its culture?
  - Do you understand historical and ongoing conditions that contribute to inequity in your community?
  - Have your staff addressed interpersonal racism and classism that impede inclusive processes for building relationships, collaboration and engagement of marginalized communities?
- Use the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) as a tool to map your progress
- Allocate staff time and resources to community engagement - for participant stipends, childcare, venue rentals, food costs, research, and most importantly, follow-through.
- Understand the historical context of your engagement - how has your agency, and other related agencies, engaged with this community? What was the result? Why?
- Begin forming relationships with stakeholder organizations to better understand different populations and to establish rapport

Making a Plan

- Be proactive at identifying community leaders, partners, or representative professionals to assist in planning - and be sure to compensate them for their work!
- Work with stakeholder organizations, as well as related state agencies, to understand how community engagement can be beneficial to their goals and build on their work - and how it may relate to their community engagement plans and goals.
- Ensure that your engagement goals include a process of integration of community recommendations in implementation plans, or at minimum, the inclusion of recommendations as an important factor in final decisions. If this can not be accomplished, reconsider the need for engagement.
- Ask yourself: "What would a partner need to make decisions or provide input on a project on this topic?"

- Prepare to communicate the full scope and process of a project in laymens terms, including; the range of stakeholders involved and how each stakeholder's input will influence the project, what specific input is desired from the community and how it will be used, timelines and avenues of community engagement, and timelines of project implementation.
- In consultation with community stakeholders, identify common barriers to participation in target communities and develop relationships with relevant agencies and service providers that can alleviate these barriers.
- Establish communication channels *and* documentation processes to account for diverse content and methods of communication you may receive. This may include:
    - Phone lines and voice-mail boxes, photo and video submissions, email, text messaging, social media forums, online forms and surveys, mail-based surveys and information, and in-person communications outside of traditional public meetings.
- Create an outreach plan in partnership with community stakeholders, using local knowledge and available datasets.
- Work with stakeholders to develop language and communications that will be well-received by your target population. In addition to outreach materials, this may include translation of key documents and summarization of lengthy or complex information.

Making Connections
- Begin with mutual connections - and make further connections based on their relationships.
- Spend time at local events and service organizations to build trust and recognition
- Work with stakeholders to identify high-traffic locations for flyering, tabling, or impromptu conversations

Engaging Respectfully & Meaningfully
- During conversation, issues may emerge that are not relevant to your engagement goals - rather than ignoring these issues, connect community members to relevant service providers when possible.
- Allow community members to contribute in ways that feel meaningful and appropriate to them. Sometimes, these contributions may be emotional or non-technical.
- When appropriate, create "affinity spaces" for engagement that is comfortable and safe
- Establish and clearly communicate expectations and guidelines for participation

Maintaining Relationships, Building Trust, and Fostering a Culture of Partnership
- When possible, develop opportunities for community members to become formally integrated into decision-making processes through methods such as compensated board or committee appointments or hiring community members into managerial and executive roles.
- If there are any reports that emerge from engagement with community members, offer opportunities for community members to give feedback, and make edits based on this feedback.
- Ensure any "deliverables" of engagement are accessible to community members
- Provide tools, resources, information, and connections that will allow community members to take action and influence decisions without needing to rely on you as an intermediary.

Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/equity to learn more about the Transportation Equity Framework