



Vermont Environmental Justice Law

The Core Principles of Community Engagement

Draft 3

“The Interagency Committee shall (. . .) develop, in consultation with the Agency of Natural Resources and the Environmental Justice Advisory Council, a set of core principles to guide and coordinate the development of the State agency community engagement plans (. . .).” 3 V.S.A. § 6006 (c)(2)(B).

Published:
9.18.2023





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Title page photo citation: "Community meeting at O.N.E. Community Center, Burlington." Photo by Michael Weiss. Photo found on page 10 of the [Connecting People to Power](#) report – full citation found in the references section.



Introduction to the Core Principles of Community Engagement

The “Core Principles of Community Engagement” were developed as part of the implementation of the Vermont Environmental Justice Law (or [Act 154 of 2022](#)).¹ These principles will guide the development and implementation of community engagement plans by Vermont State agencies covered (the “covered agencies”) by the Vermont Environmental Justice Law.² The audience for these principles is State agency staff tasked with developing community engagement plans under the Vermont Environmental Justice Law.

The community engagement plans developed and adopted by covered agencies will create pathways for the meaningful participation of all individuals, with particular attention to environmental justice populations³, as defined by the Vermont Environmental Justice Law, in the development, implementation, and enforcement of any law, regulation, or policy. These principles endeavor to support State agencies in developing inclusive, innovative, and equitable community engagement plans by addressing systemic barriers to meaningful engagement of environmental justice focus populations.

These principles were developed by the [Interagency Environmental Justice Committee](#) in close consultation with the [Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#) and the [Agency of Natural Resources](#). These principles are not an exhaustive list, and they build upon prior innovative community engagement work in Vermont and across the United State.⁴

The twelve principles are broken into two sections. Section one includes the first six principles. These principles will guide Vermont State agencies in building a strong foundation for equitable community engagement. Section two includes the remaining six principles. These principles will guide Vermont State agencies as they engage in meaningful community engagement with Vermonters, focusing on best practices for engaging environmental justice focus populations.

¹ To learn more about the development process of the Core Principles of Community Engagement, you can reference the deliverable [guide](#).

² You can reference the glossary for a full list of the Vermont Environmental Justice Law “covered agencies.”

³ You can reference the glossary for the current definition of *environmental justice focus population* included in the Vermont Environmental Justice Law. Note that this definition is subject to regular review and revision.

⁴ Visit the reference section of this document to view the resources that inspired and informed these principles.



Opening Reflection⁵

The Vermont Environmental Justice Law specifies that meaningful participation “integrates diverse knowledge systems, histories, traditions, languages, and cultures of Indigenous communities in decision-making processes” (3 V.S.A. § 6002(6)).

Across these twelve core principles of community engagement, there is an assumption that community is in reference to the human community, with particular focus on engaging environmental justice focus populations. Indigenous perspectives remind us that survival in the Anthropocene will require moving beyond narratives of separation that remove humans from the larger community of life on Mother Earth. The first principle of the foundational 1991 [Principles of Environmental Justice](#) states: “Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.”⁶

We need to supersede our anthropocentric perspectives and recognize the interdependence of humans with everyone and everything else. Recognizing this truth spoken for generations by Indigenous communities, we must commit to engaging respectfully and reverently with the other-than-human members of our community – the plants, the animals, the fungi, the air, the waters, and so forth. Expanding our definition of community, we commit to finding right relationship with all community members – human and otherwise.

This opening reflection is offered to agency staff as a reminder to center and credit Indigenous communities’ experiential knowledge and remain open to transforming paradigms in service to the larger ecosystems within which we co-exist.

Excerpt from the **Indigenous Principles of Just Transition**

“A Just Transition acknowledges Indigenous traditions that tell us that all economic activity must be rooted in an understanding and respect of our sacred relationships with Mother Earth and Father Sky. We have our place and our responsibilities within Creation’s sacred order. The interdependence of humans and nature is primary. We recognize that there is no separation between how we treat nature and how we treat ourselves; the demand for the recognition of Indigenous rights and the Rights of Mother Earth are the one and same.” (pg. 3)

⁵ This opening reflection was co-written by Rich Holschuh, the Vermont Native American Tribe representative on the EJ Advisory Council and the EJ Coordinators.

⁶ The full citations for all sources referenced throughout this document (including the quotes found in the green textboxes) are located in the references section.



Principle 1. Utilize existing guidance for equitable community engagement.

Overview of the principle

Don't reinvent the wheel. There is a wealth of pre-existing information about equitable and effective community engagement, including Vermont-specific resources. It overburdens local communities when their prior input on how to do engagement effectively is not used or shared across state agencies. Proactively identify existing resources when building your community engagement plan.

Throughout the community engagement process, use the [Guiding Principles for a Just Transition](#), developed by the Just Transitions Subcommittee of the Vermont Climate Council in 2021, to guide your work.

Excerpt from the Vermont Environmental Justice Law

“Both the Advisory Council and the Interagency Committee shall consider and incorporate the *Guiding Principles for a Just Transition* developed by the Just Transitions Subcommittee of the Vermont Climate Council in their work.” (3 V.S.A. § 6006(a)(3))

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ Start your planning process with an assessment of existing resources and guidance. Have all stakeholders involved in the planning process set aside dedicated time to review and reflect on how to incorporate the findings contained in these pre-existing materials.
- ✓ In your community engagement plan, identify specific tools and resources staff can consult when putting the community engagement plan into action (see the *Resources and tools* section below).

Resources and tools

- The community engagement [resource library](#) is an online resource maintained by the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) to support implementation of the Vermont Environmental Justice Law. This library includes an array of resources and tools to support the state government in implementing these principles.



- The [*Connecting People to Power*](#) report, referenced throughout this document, has many practical examples of how to put the core principles into practice within State agencies.
- When developing community engagement plans, consult the self-assessment questions and scoring rubric embedded within the [*Guiding Principles for a Just Transition*](#). The questions and rubric can support assessment of the equity and justice implications of community engagement plans.
- The [*Public Participation Plans: Federal Guidance and State Examples*](#) memo developed by the Center for Whole Communities, the Rural Environmental Justice Opportunities Informed by Community Expertise (R.E.J.O.I.C.E.) project, the Rights and Democracy Institute, and the Vermont Renews BIPOC Council, is a key resource that can help align your community engagement plan with federal public participation requirements.



Principle 2. Value and integrate community input at every stage of agency action.

Overview of the principle

A recognition that *meaningful community engagement is worth the effort* needs to permeate Vermont state government decision-making. Agencies should partner with communities throughout program and policy development, co-creating solutions to community issues. This requires a culture change, driven by dedicated time and commitment.

Agencies should acknowledge that while ensuring meaningful community engagement typically requires longer timeframes, outcomes will be improved. When reviewing program priorities or determining budget and staffing needs for a new program, agencies must account for the capacity (time and money) required to include meaningful engagement and outreach.

Excerpt from the **Vermont Environmental Justice Law**

“Meaningful participation means that all individuals have the opportunity to participate in energy, climate change, and environmental decision making. Examples include needs assessments, planning, implementation, permitting, compliance and enforcement, and evaluation.” (3 V.S.A. §6002(6))

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ Public comment should not be treated as one-off interactions, but rather part of an ongoing dialogue. When developing your community engagement plan, ensure that public comment periods include multiple touch points and active follow up.
- ✓ Meaningful community engagement is equally (if not more) important as technical consultation to decision-making processes and needs to be treated as such. When creating your community engagement plan, establish methods for community engagement and technical analyses to work together. Make concrete suggestions on how decision-making protocols should incorporate public input.

Resources and tools



- Engage with the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) by Rosa González at Facilitating Power.



Principle 3. Build your agency’s internal capacity for meaningful engagement.

Overview of the principle

Effective community engagement requires dedicated resources. Community engagement should be prioritized in annual agency budget requests. Assess how much staff time is currently dedicated to community outreach and where there are gaps. Advocate for resources needed to adequately value the time, effort, and expertise needed to do meaningful community engagement, and adjust reporting and programmatic timelines to accommodate community engagement efforts (Principle 11). Agencies should identify ways to compensate community members who are consulted during engagement efforts (Principle 7).

Community engagement plans are effective only if they are well implemented by staff who are dedicated to redressing environmental injustices and understand the central role of meaningful community engagement for reaching equitable solutions. This starts at the hiring phase: set expectations for community engagement and equity considerations in job descriptions and value knowledge of these areas when selecting candidates. Avoid patterns of prioritizing technical skills or knowledge over an ability to connect with and understand the needs of local communities. State agencies must invest in staff education and training to enable them to effectively implement community engagement requirements and goals.

Excerpt from the **Connecting People to Power** report

“[A] successful public involvement program consists of knowledgeable agency staff who are committed to community engagement... Environmental justice principles and public participation concepts should be incorporated into job descriptions and the onboarding of new staff.” (pg. 32)

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ Ensure staff from across the agency are aware of your engagement planning process and understand how it connects to their specific areas of work. Use this planning process as an opportunity to educate staff on the importance of meaningful participation and community engagement.



- ✓ As you draft your community engagement plan, identify the specific money and time resources needed to implement any proposed actions so that specific budget requests can be developed. Consider using your plan as a vehicle for identifying, requesting, and advocating for additional resources.
- ✓ When developing your community engagement plan, consider creative ways to incentivize community engagement by other stakeholders your agency works with. For example, an agency could require that community input already be conducted when entities submit permit requests to state agencies.

Resources and tools

- Consult the staff training guidance in the [Connecting People to Power](#) report (page 32 to 33).
- Consider engaging with tools such as the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) by Rosa González at Facilitating Power. Do an honest assessment of where your agency falls now on this spectrum and have a clear vision of where you want to be in 1 year, 5 years, 10 years, etc.
- The 2022 [Report from the Vermont Executive Director of Racial Equity](#) includes additional considerations regarding hiring staff who are focused on equity work and how to avoid pattern-matching in hiring practices that reinforce existing biases (page 9).



Principle 4. Coordinate with other agencies to de-silo policy conversations and share resources.

Overview of the principle

Interagency coordination is key to effectively engaging communities without overburdening those most impacted by environmental injustices. Community engagement plans should reflect a commitment to collaborate with other government partners on community engagement where possible.

Vermonters do not experience environmental injustices in the silos that the government operates within. Governmental silos contribute to inefficiencies when establishing community engagement plans and limit adoption of best practices. Since state agencies are closer to power and resources, they need to be accountable for breaking down these silos and collaborating on engagement at the interagency level.

Consider establishing interagency teams that discuss community engagement processes and approaches plus share resources and tools. Build and implement community outreach and engagement plans in partnership with other agencies. Gather evidence and successful examples of how meaningful community engagement improves processes and outcomes.

Excerpt from the **Connecting People to Power** report

“We are locked into silos, when we need to be thinking comprehensively and looking at co-benefits and points of intervention.” (pg. 39)

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ Seek opportunities to learn from other agencies and share resources during the drafting of your community engagement plan.
- ✓ Connect with the Interagency Environmental Justice Committee established by the Vermont Environmental Justice Law. The Interagency Committee members can be valuable points of contact to support coordination of community engagement across agencies.



- ✓ In your plan, identify cross-cutting policy issues that you could collaborate with other state agencies when seeking input from local communities and develop strategies for coordinating those efforts.

Resources and tools

- Consult the section with detailed guidance related to stakeholder and intergovernmental involvement in the [Connecting People to Power](#) report (page 34 to 40).
- Familiarize yourself with the public engagement work done by other State agencies in Vermont. You can explore the online [resource folder](#) with public engagement resources shared by Vermont state agencies covered by the Vermont Environmental Justice Law.



Principle 5. Build resilience and trust by building ongoing, reciprocal relationships.

Overview of the principle

Communities are equal partners who know best what their needs are. Begin building these critical connections with community members by engaging early and often. To (re)build relationships with environmental justice focus populations, state agencies must ensure ongoing dialogue and communication. Reciprocal and collaborative relationships require continual opportunities for conversation and knowledge-sharing. Use two-way communication methods that partners, and community members are familiar with using.

Excerpt from the **Emergent Strategy** by adrienne maree brown

“Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.” (pg. 42)

Proactively collaborate and co-create engagement processes with existing community-based organizations that have built trust over time with environmental justice focus populations. To ensure delivery of culturally appropriate services, consider paying community liaisons to bridge agency staff and community members. Prioritize collaborating with groups that work closely with environmental justice focus populations. Develop and clearly document these relationships with community-based organizations (to ensure continuity in commitment even with staff turnover) and delineate a clear relationship holder who will cultivate and tend to the relationship.

Excerpt from the **Rights and Democracy Quick Tips for Community Engagement**

“Community Engagement is not about listening; it is about partnership and collaboration with community members with lived-experience that serves as potent expertise.” (pg. 1)

State agencies must ensure that the relationships they build with community partners are not foundationally extractive, but instead mutually beneficial. Offer the communities information and access to resources alongside any asks you have for their expertise or knowledge. Provide tools and connections that support community members taking action without needing to rely on you (agency staff) as an intermediary. Compensate community engagement partners for their expertise and contributions (see Principle 7).



Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ Early in your planning process, take stock of existing relationships. Agencies should map community partnerships within the agency with lead relationship holders for each community partnership. Be aware of which communities you may be overburdening with outreach, and which communities you may be missing.
- ✓ In your plan, be specific about how relationships will be maintained. Identify which staff will be committed to maintaining relationships and conducting follow-up and consider how to maintain relationships when there is inevitable staff turnover.
- ✓ Seek opportunities to compensate community partners to engage in your planning process with you (Principle 7). You can strengthen relationships by being transparent and inviting feedback throughout the planning process (Principle 10).
- ✓ In your planning process, catalog and commit to using two-way communication methods that community members are familiar with using.
- ✓ Interagency coordination (Principle 4) is key to building reciprocal relationships with communities, particularly environmental justice focus populations. Work alongside the Interagency Environmental Justice Committee to ensure that agencies are not overburdening communities but instead supporting (re)building trust.

Resources and tools

- Consult the Guidance and Recommendation section #3 (Focus on early, inclusive, and meaningful public involvement) and section #4 (Encourage stakeholder and intergovernmental involvement) in the [Connecting People to Power](#) report (page 34 to 40).
- For an example of an accessible and empowering public participation resource, check out the *Community Engagement Resources* packet prepared by the Environmental Justice Clinic at the Vermont Law School and the White River Natural Resources Conservation District. This resource is located in the [Environmental Justice Community Engagement Public Folder](#).



Principle 6. Prioritize voices most impacted by environmental injustices and address systemic barriers to participation.

Overview of the principle

Give space and power to the voices of communities most impacted by historic and ongoing environmental injustices. Acknowledge and address inequitable power structures and the impacts of structural racism. Listen with the intent to take concrete action to address the needs expressed by the community. Remember “sharing power requires ceding power.”⁷

Use the environmental justice focus population definition⁸ within the Vermont Environmental Justice Law to prioritize engagement efforts. Consider intersectionality when identifying and prioritizing voices. Remember that no group of people is a monolith and strive in your process to seek a broad range of perspectives.

Address any systemic barriers that prevent public outreach and participation efforts from reaching the communities most in need. For example, outreach notifications sent by mail often only reach building owners, not renters. Identify policy and procedural changes that will help address limitations to community outreach. Consider how

Excerpt from the **Vermont Environmental Justice Law**

“It is further the policy of the State of Vermont to provide the opportunity for the meaningful participation of all individuals, **with particular attention to environmental justice focus populations**, in the development, implementation, or enforcement of any law, regulation, or policy.”
(3 V.S.A. § 6003) [emphasis added]

⁷ Rodríguez et al., Changing Power Dynamics among Researchers, Local Government, and Community Members, page 5.

⁸ You can reference the glossary for the current definition of *environmental justice focus population* included in the Vermont Environmental Justice Law. Note that this definition is subject to regular review and revision.



education and training can support communities' full engagement and ability to benefit from state programs.

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ Throughout the planning process, include explicit recommendations or considerations for ensuring that engagement and outreach strategies are tailored to specifically reach environmental justice focus populations. Your plan should specifically center and address the needs of Vermonters who are low-income, Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC), or speak languages other than English (Principle 9).⁹
- ✓ As you develop your engagement plan, seek guidance from the Environmental Justice Advisory Council. As representatives of environmental justice focus populations, they can speak to barrier the common barriers to engagement facing their communities.
- ✓ Ensure you use plain language and provide language access services as you seek community input on your plan (Principle 9).
- ✓ As an agency, catalog barriers to meaningful participation of environmental justice focus populations as you identify them. Share the barriers with your agency representative on the Interagency Environmental Justice Committee.

Resources and tools

- The Washington State Department of Health [Community Engagement Guide](#) outlines common barriers that community members come up against when collaborating with State agencies alongside potential solutions (page 8 to 12).

⁹ You can reference the glossary for the current definition of *environmental justice focus population* included in the Vermont Environmental Justice Law. Note that this definition is subject to regular review and revision.



Principle 7. Compensate community members for their expertise.

Overview of the principle

Just like agency staff, community members are experts in their own right and experts of their own experience. Per the Vermont Environmental Justice Law, agencies must engage Vermonters from environmental justice focus populations in the evaluation of new and existing activities and programs. We should never expect community members from environmental justice focus populations to volunteer their time, expertise, and efforts to advise state agencies, just like we wouldn't expect a consultant to work for free. To demonstrate that we value their time and expertise, community members' efforts and contributions should be compensated and recognized as core to agency decision-making processes. This does not include compensation for basic civic engagement (voting, submitting public comments, testifying, etc.).

Excerpt from the **Connecting People to Power** report

“Any effective policy, planning and action must take into account [impacted community member’s] knowledge and expertise, based in place, experience, and community. Doing so respectfully means compensating people who choose to share their knowledge at a professional rate, one that recognizes how rarely knowledge-holders are well-paid, securely salaried or offered benefits for their community-centered work.” (pg. 12)

Agency staff should actively seek opportunities to resource community partners through grants, contracts, consultancies, stipends, sponsorships, honoraria, donations, etc. It also means advocating for equitable pay for members of citizen advisory boards charged with conducting work of the state. Similar to community members, agencies should not expect community-based organizations to contribute their time and expertise without due compensation.

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ Identify existing resources and/or seek out additional resources to compensate environmental justice focus populations for advising you on your plan.
- ✓ Include specific resource requests in your plan and advocate for adequate funding to support community engagement in your annual budget requests (Principle 3).



- ✓ Work directly alongside other agencies when developing compensation expectations and processes. Cross-agency collaboration and consistency will be of critical importance to instituting just and equitable compensation (Principle 4).

Resources and tools

- An example of a compensation model used in a pilot project with the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation can be found in the Appendix (page 12) of the [*Connecting People to Power*](#) report.



Principle 8. Do your homework and adapt engagement to communities’ specific needs.

Overview of the principle

Before starting engagement, take time to look back and learn about the prior history of engagement with the relevant communities and teach yourself about the historic and ongoing injustices impacting this community. Before you begin engagement, ask yourself: ‘Do I understand historical and ongoing conditions that contribute to inequity in this community?’

Excerpt from the Washington State **Community Engagement Guide**

“It’s important to understand the community’s culture, norms, values, power and political structures, economic conditions, social networks, demographic trends, and history.” work.” (pg. 6)

Commit to increasing your self-awareness and understanding of your agency. Learn about past engagement efforts by your agency, department, or program. Before you begin engagement, ask yourself: ‘Do I understand how my agency and other related agencies have engaged with this community in the past? What were the results of prior engagement?’ You must recognize and own what has occurred in the past and recognize how it has lasting impacts today. Avoid defensiveness and honor community frustration that may stem from past agency action or inaction.

Each community is different, and engagement should be adaptive and place-based, rather than broad strategies that are used uniformly statewide (for example, engaging New Americans in Chittenden County requires a different approach than engaging mobile home communities in Orleans County).

Avoid pattern-matching when considering the local and historical context, as reinforcing traditional engagement habits will reinforce patterns of racial and social inequity in most Vermont communities today. For example, choosing a space for an engagement event simply because it is considered the “traditional” place for holding similar activities, without considering whether it is truly accessible for environmental justice focus populations, will reinforce a pattern of exclusion. This exclusion will then reinforce traditional patterns around what policy concerns and ideas are brought forward as priorities.



Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ In your plan, include information about past engagement efforts by your agency and be transparent about areas where you seek to improve.
- ✓ Provide specific guidance in your plan for how agency staff should analyze the specific, place-based needs of local communities before conducting engagement efforts.
- ✓ Proactively reach out to stakeholders from local communities who have not traditionally been involved in state agency outreach efforts as you seek feedback on your engagement plan. Adapt your approach to specifically center the needs of community members who are low-income, BIPOC, or have language access needs, even if that approach is not preferred by community members who have historically held more power and influence over policymaking.
- ✓ As you develop your engagement plan, consult with the Environmental Justice Advisory Council, who serve as representatives of environmental justice focus populations across Vermont.

Resources and tools

- The *Summary of Information Preferences for REJOICE Focus Group Participants* includes a summary of the trusted information sources for specific Vermont communities. This resource located in the [Environmental Justice Community Engagement Public Folder](#).



Principle 9. Conduct accessible and inclusive outreach and engagement.

Overview of the principle

To ensure accessible and inclusive outreach and engagement, consider the needs of people who speak languages other than English (see glossary for definition of limited English proficiency included in the Vermont Environmental Justice Law), those living with a visual or hearing impairment, and those with limited or no access to technology or transportation.

Excerpt from the **Connecting People to Power** report

“Without asking first, listening, and testing methods, it is easy to expend considerable effort, staff time, and funds while reaching out ineffectively. Achieving meaningful involvement requires outreach that is accessible in its language, content, and delivery through trusted entities and relevant platforms.” (pg. 34)

Center diversity, equity, and inclusion as you plan and implement outreach and engagement to ensure your efforts reach communities who are typically left out. Ensure this level of engagement and consideration for reaching impacted communities is proactively planned for and captured in project timelines and budget needs (Principle 3 and Principle 11). Don't make this effort and engagement an afterthought. Commit to changing the pattern of who is engaging, actively working to empower voices most impacted by environmental injustices (Principle 6).

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ As you are developing your plan, consult with community-based organizations with direct ties to environmental justice focus populations about best practices for accessible and inclusive engagement for the communities you are trying to engage. But remember to do this in a coordinated way alongside other agencies to not overburden community members (Principle 4).
- ✓ Within your community engagement plan, include detailed expectations for language access protocols: What is translated, when, and into what languages? It may help to develop an agency language access plan and procedure. When planning your language access actions, consult with other agencies. Clarify how you will provide



translation and interpretation services free of cost to members of the public and let people know ahead of time that interpretation services are available.

- ✓ Write your community engagement plan in plain language that is easy for all Vermonters to understand (this is also a key first step to being able to translate your plan or plan summary into languages other than English).
- ✓ Include and/or reference accessibility checklist(s) in your engagement plan that can be used by staff to consider physical, language, or other access considerations when conducting outreach and accessibility.
- ✓ If your agency has a group working on diversity, equity, and inclusion, invite them to participate in your planning process.

Resources and tools

- Refer to the Vermont Office of Racial Equity's [Language Access Report](#), which includes helpful guidelines for creating language access plans and a comprehensive summary of language access recommendations.
- The online [Language Access Guidance Summary](#) was created help agencies navigate billing, timelines, budgeting, and finding language access service providers.
- Ensure external communications are vetted for plain language using this [plain language checklist](#) developed by the Green Mountain Self Advocates.
- Reference the Stakeholders and Impact section of the Vermont Office of Racial Equity's State of Vermont [Policy Impact Assessment](#).
- The Washington State Department of Health [Community Engagement Guide](#) includes a community engagement checklist (page 5).
- Every community has unique needs and perspectives. For an example of the diverse needs of Vermont communities as it relates to transportation equity, take a look at the *Direct Community Engagement for Transportation Equity* report. This resource located in the [Environmental Justice Community Engagement Public Folder](#).



Principle 10. Be transparent and accountable from start to finish.

Overview of the principle

Commit to transparency from inception and throughout any engagement process. Transparency is a key part of building trust and authentic relationships over time with communities. Transparency must include a recognition of historical and ongoing barriers to equitable community engagement of environmental justice focus populations (Principle 6).

Be honest and forthcoming about the purpose and scope of your project and how you will use the community input you receive. Be transparent with community members about what can and cannot be achieved given project constraints. Communicate openly with community members as you encounter challenges. Be accountable to your word: if assurances are made, actively follow up. Only make promises you can keep and make sure to follow-up on commitments in a transparent way.

Excerpt from the **Changing Power Dynamics** report

“Transparency around methods, resources, timelines, opportunities, and limitations is essential to building authentic partnerships and engagement with communities. Local governments should be clear about what can and cannot be achieved given the timeline, budget, and other constraints, as well as establish a long-term feedback loop whereby community members can measure progress (or lack thereof). Accountability measures signal a commitment to policy impact and to dismantling structural racism in practices and programs.” (pg. 7)

Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ When developing your community engagement plan, create systems to consistently demonstrate how community feedback has informed agency actions or decision-making.
- ✓ Agencies should revisit their community engagement plans on a regular basis to assess areas for improvement. Include an agency commitment to a regular review and revision process when developing your initial plan.
- ✓ In your plan, identify specific data and metric collection methods you will use to evaluate your agencies alignment with stated goals.



Resources and tools

- Consider engaging with tools such as the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) by Rosa González at Facilitating Power. Do an honest assessment of where your agency falls now on this spectrum and have a clear vision of where you want to go.
- The [StriveTogether Guide](#) is a great resource about system-level metrics and indicators.
- Explore [Whole Measures](#), a program of [Center for Whole Communities](#). They offer pathways for transforming measures of success.



Principle 11. Commit enough time to do engagement well.

Overview of the principle

Equitable community engagement is a process that takes time (often more time than our timeframes and deadlines account for). Plan accordingly and adapt timeframes as needed (including seeking changes to statutory deadlines, if needed) to meet the needs of the community you are endeavoring to serve. This may involve seeking changes to statutory deadlines or working with your Administration to change fiscal year reporting and programmatic timelines to account for the time required to conduct community engagement. Do not sacrifice the integrity of the process for the sake of meeting deadlines. From the start, communicate your commitment to incorporate engagement to all project partners, funders, and policy makers.

Building in sufficient time allows for an iterative and adaptive engagement process that can attend to changing community realities. Proactively identify unexpected barriers during engagement and commit resources to removing these barriers. Adapt your implementation approach in response to factors such as cultural appropriateness, a communities' specific needs, and the efficacy of certain outreach methods, among others. Ensure there is adequate time built in to address these emergent challenges when they arise.

Excerpt from the **Guiding Principles for a Just Transition**

“Planning and implementation must balance being time bound and honoring the varied ways of learning, understanding and agreement that exist in different cultures and communities.” (pg. 7)

Remember that it is worthwhile to take the time needed to do equitable community engagement. When we commit wholeheartedly to equitable community engagement, we arrive at more just and equitable solutions.



Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ As you develop your engagement plan, build in significant time to gather and respond to feedback from the Environmental Justice Advisory Council and environmental justice focus populations.
- ✓ Adapting timelines may require building coalitions with other stakeholders to effectively advocate for the timelines you need to ensure meaningful engagement.

Resources and tools

- Consult the project implementation timeline in the [Connecting People to Power](#) report for an example of the timeframes needed to do iterative, innovative and effective community engagement (page 5).
- Reference the [Electricity Policies and Programs Review: Initial Results and Key Takeaways from the Request for Input](#) from the Vermont Public Service Department. Slides 13 and 14 include public input on the best project timeline to allow adequate time and space for engagement and technical analysis.



Principle 12. Show up on the ground and work towards equitable solutions alongside community members.

Overview of the principle

Dedicate the time (Principle 11) and resources (Principle 3) to meet people where they are, especially environmental justice focus populations. Show up on the ground and be flexible and innovative in your approach. As a state employee, you are closer to power and resources, and you must go to the community. Do not expect community members most impacted by environmental injustices to come to you.

Do your research about the community ahead of time (Principle 8) to determine the most appropriate and effective engagement approaches. Create supportive conditions that incentivize agency staff to attend community events and groups, when appropriate. Only show up when you have made arrangements ahead of time and know you are welcome. Actively dismantle the right to comfort when entering community spaces – instead, honor and hold space for difficult conversations.

Excerpt from the **Connecting People to Power** report

“Those closer to power and resources must go out of their way to meet collaborators where they are: with meaningful compensation, in welcoming spaces, with co-created, accessible language, moving at the speed of trust to devise equitable solutions together.”
(pg.34)

As a representative of state government, do not take the posture of an automatic “no” simply because an idea from a community member cannot be immediately put in place or there are significant barriers to implementing an idea within your agency. Listen with empathy and respect and treat community members’ input and ideas as real possibilities. Recognize that this receptive posture of “yes” is a paradigm shift for many government staff.

Respect diverse ways of knowing and learning. Do not make assumptions about people based on identity. Recognize everyone has unique experiences and perspectives. Do not tokenize community members and assume a single individual can speak on behalf of an entire identity group.



Recommendations for putting this principle into action as you draft your plan

- ✓ As you develop your community engagement plan, be prepared to identify and address structural barriers to implementing these core principles. Seek creative solutions and be willing to advocate for necessary changes to ensure agency action alignment with these core principles. Ensure there is engagement and buy-in from agency leadership early on in your planning process.
- ✓ Identify opportunities to build staff communication skills through trainings, etc. to support their implementation of this principle.
- ✓ When conducting outreach about your community engagement plan, identify existing, trusted, in-person or virtual spaces where you can share information and gather feedback from stakeholders. Remember to only show up in a community gathering space when invited.

Resources and tools

- The [Connecting People to Power](#) report includes recommendations for staff training related to effective communication and working across difference (page 32 to 33).



Closing Reflection

We close with an invitation for agency staff to reflect on the [Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing](#).

These principles were developed in 1996 during a meeting hosted by the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice. The *Jemez Principles* were developed to inform how groups of people can work together to advance environmental justice. As you draft your community engagement plans, consider how the *Jemez Principles* can inform your process.

In the same spirit as the opening reflection, which grounded us in Indigenous wisdom and called for transformative change, we end with renewed commitment to self-transformation on a personal, societal, and biosphere scale.

As the final Jemez Principle (Principle 6) instructs: “Commitment to Self-Transformation. As we change societies, we must change from operating on the mode of individualism to community-centeredness. We must “walk our talk.” We must be the values that we say we’re struggling for and we must be justice, be peace, be community.”



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Glossary: Section 1

The first section of this glossary includes terms defined in the [Vermont Environmental Justice Law](#). **These definitions are all subject to change with time.** The Environmental Justice Law explicitly requires review of the definitions every five years and by December 1, 2023, the law requires that the Advisory Council and Interagency Committee recommend revisions to the *environmental justice focus population* definition.

“The Agency of Natural Resources, in consultation with the Environmental Justice Advisory Council and the Interagency Environmental Justice Committee, shall review the definitions contained in section 6002 of this title at least every five years and recommend revisions to the General Assembly to ensure the definition achieves the Environmental Justice State Policy” 3 V.S.A. § 6004(e).

“The Advisory Council and the Interagency Committee shall jointly ... consider and recommend to the General Assembly, on or before December 1, 2023, amendments to the terminology, thresholds, and criteria of the definition of environmental justice focus populations, including whether to include populations more likely to be at higher risk for poor health outcomes in response to environmental burdens...” 3 V.S.A. § 6006(c)(3)(A).

Terms defined in the Vermont Environmental Justice Law

Community Engagement Plan: “Each of the covered agencies shall create and adopt on or before July 1, 2025 a community engagement plan that describes how the agency will engage with environmental justice focus populations as it evaluates new and existing activities and programs. Community engagement plans shall align with the core principles developed by the Interagency Environmental Justice Committee ... and take into consideration the recommendations of the Environmental Justice Advisory Council ... Each plan shall describe how the agency plans to provide meaningful participation in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” 3 V.S.A. § 6004(c).

Covered Agencies: “Covered agencies means the following State agencies, departments, and bodies: the Agencies of Natural Resources, of Transportation, of Commerce and Community Development, of Agriculture, Food and Markets, and of Education; the Public Utility Commission; the Natural Resources Board; and the Departments of Health, of Public Safety, and of Public Service.” 3 V.S.A. § 6004(b).



Environmental Justice Advisory Council: “The Environmental Justice Advisory Council (Advisory Council) [provides] independent advice and recommendations to State agencies and the General Assembly on matters relating to environmental justice, including the integration of environmental justice principles into State programs, policies, regulations, legislation, and activities.” 3 V.S.A. § 6006(a)(1)(A).

Environmental Benefits: “Environmental benefits means the assets and services that enhance the capability of communities and individuals to function and flourish in society. Examples of environmental benefits include access to a healthy environment and clean natural resources, including air, water, land, green spaces, constructed playgrounds, and other outdoor recreational facilities and venues; affordable clean renewable energy sources; public transportation; fulfilling and dignified green jobs; healthy homes and buildings; health care; nutritious food; Indigenous food and cultural resources; environmental enforcement; and training and funding disbursed or administered by governmental agencies.” 3 V.S.A. § 6002(1).

Environmental Burdens: “Environmental burdens means any significant impact to clean air, water, and land, including any destruction, damage, or impairment of natural resources resulting from intentional or reasonably foreseeable causes. Examples of environmental burdens include climate change impacts; air and water pollution; improper sewage disposal; improper handling of solid wastes and other noxious substances; excessive noise; activities that limit access to green spaces, nutritious food, Indigenous food or cultural resources, or constructed outdoor playgrounds and other recreational facilities and venues; inadequate remediation of pollution; reduction of groundwater levels; increased flooding or stormwater flows; home and building health hazards, including lead paint, lead plumbing, asbestos, and mold; and damage to inland waterways and waterbodies, wetlands, forests, green spaces, or constructed playgrounds or other outdoor recreational facilities and venues from private, industrial, commercial, and government operations or other activities that contaminate or alter the quality of the environment and pose a risk to public health.” 3 V.S.A. § 6002(2).

Environmental Justice: “Environmental justice means all individuals are afforded equitable access to and distribution of environmental benefits; equitable distribution of environmental burdens; and fair and equitable treatment and meaningful participation in decision-making processes, including the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Environmental justice recognizes the particular needs of individuals of every race, color, income, class, ability status, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, ethnicity or ancestry, religious belief, or English language proficiency level. Environmental justice redresses structural and institutional racism, colonialism, and other systems of oppression that result in the marginalization, degradation, disinvestment, and neglect of Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color. Environmental justice requires providing a proportional amount of resources for community revitalization, ecological restoration, resilience planning, and a just recovery to communities most affected by environmental burdens and natural disasters.” 3 V.S.A. § 6002(3).



Environmental justice focus population: “Environmental justice focus population means any census block group in which:

- A. the annual median household income is not more than 80 percent of the State median household income;
- B. Persons of Color and Indigenous Peoples comprise at least six percent or more of the population; or
- C. at least one percent or more of households have limited English proficiency.”
3 V.S.A. § 6002(4).

Interagency Environmental Justice Committee: “The Interagency Environmental Justice Committee (Interagency Committee) [shall guide and coordinate] State agency implementation of the Environmental Justice State Policy and provide recommendations to the General Assembly for amending the definitions and protections.” 3 V.S.A. § 6006(a)(1)(B).

Limited English proficiency: “Limited English proficiency means that a household does not have a member 14 years or older who speaks English “very well” as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.” 3 V.S.A. § 6002(5).

Meaningful participation: “Meaningful participation means that all individuals have the opportunity to participate in energy, climate change, and environmental decision making. Examples include needs assessments, planning, implementation, permitting, compliance and enforcement, and evaluation. Meaningful participation also integrates diverse knowledge systems, histories, traditions, languages, and cultures of Indigenous communities in decision- making processes. It requires that communities are enabled and administratively assisted to participate fully through education and training. Meaningful participation requires the State to operate in a transparent manner with regard to opportunities for community input and also encourages the development of environmental, energy, and climate change stewardship.” 3 V.S.A. § 6002(6).

Glossary: Section 2

The second section includes additional terms used in the Core Principles of Community Engagement that are not defined by the Vermont Environmental Justice Law. Whenever possible, definitions were chosen from the Environmental Justice Law [online resource library](#) for community engagement. Many definitions were also taken from the [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).

Additional terms used in this document

Accountability: “In the context of racial equity work, accountability refers to the ways in which individuals and communities hold themselves to their goals and actions and



acknowledge the values and groups to which they are responsible.” *Source of definition: [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).*

Anthropocene: “The Anthropocene is an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems.” *Source of definition: [National Geographic](#)*

Community: “A community is a group of people who are brought together by something in common. This can include things like cultural background, shared experience, and geographic location. One person can belong to many different communities.” *Source of definition: [Washington State Department of Health](#)*

Community Engagement: “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 wellbeing of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.” *Source of definition: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)*

Deliverable: Generally, a deliverable is an element of output within the scope of a project. It is the result of objective-focused work completed within the project process. Within the context of the VT EJ Law, a deliverable is the final work product created through the implementation process of the VT. *Source of definition: [Civil Rights and Environmental Justice Unit at the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources](#)*

Diversity: “Diversity includes all the ways in which people differ, and it encompasses all the different characteristics that make one individual or group different from another. It is all-inclusive and recognizes everyone and every group as part of the diversity that should be valued. A broad definition includes not only race, ethnicity, and gender—the groups that most often come to mind when the term “diversity” is used—but also age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, and physical appearance. It also involves different ideas, perspectives, and values.” *Source of definition: [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).*

Equity: “To treat everyone fairly. An equity emphasis seeks to render justice by deeply considering structural factors that benefit some social groups/communities and harm other social groups/communities. Sometimes justice demands, for the purpose of equity, an unequal response.” *Source of definition: [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).*



Inclusion: “Authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision/policy making in a way that shares power.” *Source of definition:* [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).

Interpretation: “The practice of communicating the meaning of different languages between parties who do not speak and/or sign the same language. A person who provides interpretation services is called an interpreter. For more detailed information on different types of interpretation, see [The Terminology of Healthcare Interpreting: A glossary of terms](#) (The National Council on Interpreting in Healthcare, 2008).” *Source of Definition:* [Language Access Report, Vermont Office of Racial Equity](#)

Intersectionality: “Per Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw: Intersectionality is simply a prism to see the interactive effects of various forms of discrimination and disempowerment. It looks at the way that racism, many times, interacts with patriarchy, heterosexism, classism, xenophobia — seeing that the overlapping vulnerabilities created by these systems actually create specific kinds of challenges.” *Source of definition:* [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).

Pattern-matching: The act of basing decisions or actions on historical or traditional decision-making factors. As such, pattern-matching will reinforce biases or stereotypes intrinsic to those factors. As described by the [Local and Regional Government Alliance on Racial Equity](#), “many current inequities are sustained by historical legacies and structures and systems that repeat patterns of exclusion. Institutions and structures have continued to create and perpetuate inequities, despite the lack of explicit intention. Without intentional intervention, institutions and structures will continue to perpetuate racial inequities.”

The concept of pattern-matching is often discussed in the context of financial investments in start-up companies, where the criteria by which start-up companies are evaluated reinforce biases toward financing people who are wealthy, white, and male (despite research showing these decisions do not correlate to better outcomes). For more information you can reference this [article](#) or this [video](#). Pattern-matching is also relevant in the context of hiring decisions. As described in the 2022 Report of the Vermont Executive Director of Racial Equity, “in traditional hiring processes, organizations often get bogged down in corporate culture and pattern-matching that ultimately favors candidates who look and think and grow up like they do. This often results in exceptional candidates being shut out based on arbitrary or unnecessary factors.”



Source of definition: Civil Rights and Environmental Justice Unit at the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources

Plain-language: “Writing that an audience can understand easily the first time they read or hear it” (U.S. General Services Administration, n.d.b). Plain-language uses simple sentence structure, active rather than passive voice, and other features that make the writing easy to understand. Plain-language is easier to read for people with cognitive, developmental, or learning disabilities.” *Source of Definition: [Language Access Report, Vermont Office of Racial Equity](#)*

Power: “Power is unequally distributed globally and in U.S. society; some individuals or groups wield greater power than others, thereby allowing them greater access and control over resources. Wealth, whiteness, citizenship, patriarchy, heterosexism, and education are a few key social mechanisms through which power operates.” *Source of definition: [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).*

Racism: “Racism = race prejudice + social and institutional power. Racism = a system of advantage based on race. Racism = a system of oppression based on race. Racism = a white supremacy system. Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices.” *Source of definition: [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).*

Right to Comfort: An aspect of white supremacy culture that shows up as “the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort,” “scapegoating those who cause discomfort (for example, targeting and isolating those who name racism rather than addressing the actual racism that is being named)”, and “feeling entitled to name what is and isn’t racism.” Antidotes to “right to comfort” include “understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning,” “avoid taking everything personally”, and “remember that critical feedback can help you see your conditioning as you learn to separate your conditioning from who you actually are.”

White supremacy culture, in this context, refers to “white middle and owning class values and norms. White middle- and owning-class power brokers embody these characteristics as a way of defining what is ‘normal’ and even ‘aspirational’ or desired – the way we should all want to be. These characteristics are not meant to describe all white people. They are meant to describe the norms of white middle-class and owning class culture, a culture we are all required to navigate regardless of our multiple identities.”



Source of definition: [White Supremacy Culture](#)

Speed of Trust: “Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.” This definition is an adaption of concepts named by Stephen Covey, Mervyn Marciano, and others, written by adrienne marie brown. It is based on research demonstrating that teams or groups of people with higher levels of trust are able to operate faster, more effectively, and more sustainably.

Sources of definition: adrienne marie brown, “Emergent Strategy”; Stephen Covey, “The Speed of Trust”

Structural Racism: “The normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal – that routinely advantage Whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. Structural racism encompasses the entire system of White domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society including its history, culture, politics, economics, and entire social fabric. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in a particular institution because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually reproducing old and producing new forms of racism. Structural racism is the most profound and pervasive form of racism – all other forms of racism emerge from structural racism. Source of definition: [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).

Tokenism: “Tokenism is, simply, covert racism. [Racism](#) requires those in power to maintain their privilege by exercising social, economic, and/or political muscle against people of color (POC). Tokenism achieves the same while giving those in power the appearance of being non-racist and even champions of diversity because they recruit and use POC as racialized props.” Source of definition: [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#).

Translation: “The conversion of written documents or other recorded media from one language to another. Translation may take the form of a video of a signer for signed languages like American Sign Language (ASL). Audio or video recordings of a person reading a document can also be considered translation, since the audio or video recording is conveying the meaning from a written document and not another speaker. A person who prepares translations is called a translator.” Source of Definition: [Language Access Report, Vermont Office of Racial Equity](#)