

# The Core Principles of Community Engagement

## Draft 2

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## Introduction

**What:** Developing core principles of community engagement is the first deliverable of the [Vermont \(VT\) Environmental Justice \(EJ\) Law](#). The ten State agencies covered under the VT EJ Law (the “covered agencies”) will apply these core principles as they develop and adopt their community engagement plans (due in 2025).

**WHO:** The VT EJ Law prescribes that these principles are to be developed by the Interagency EJ Committee, in consultation with the EJ Advisory Council and the Agency of Natural Resources. Public input, especially from EJ focus populations, is to be reflected in the final draft. You can learn more about the core principles of community engagement by consulting the [guide to the core principles of community engagement](#).

**WHEN:** We are working toward completion by September 1, 2023 – and – moving at the speed of trust required to come to consensus. This involves multiple rounds of synthesizing input and feedback, gathering public comments, and sharing / getting feedback from covered state agency employees who will be implementing these principles. Current goal is to consent to a first draft by Aug 28 to post online for public comment and agency feedback, and to consent to a final version by September 21, but additional time will be built in as needed to reach consensus.

**WHY:** Vermont’s State Environmental Justice Policy, as established in the VT EJ Law, calls for covered state agencies “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” (reference the glossary for the definition of meaningful participation).

**HOW:** EJ Coordinators are facilitating the following process for drafting the core principles of community engagement:

**Preparation:** EJ Coordinators create [guidance](#), the [online resource library](#), and a [public input survey](#).

**July 18, 2023: Interagency EJ Committee and EJ Advisory Council meeting** with listening session for the EJ Advisory Council and members of the public on effective community engagement (you can reference notes from the listening session in the July 18, 2023 [draft minutes](#))

### **After the meeting:**

- Interagency EJ Committee members submit ideas for core principles of community engagement to the EJ Coordinators.
- EJ Coordinators [synthesize feedback](#) from the Interagency EJ Committee, the listening session, and the public input survey into [Draft 1](#).

**August 11, 2023: Interagency EJ Committee meeting** to refine Draft 1 of the core principles of community engagement – opportunity for public comment (you can reference the August 11, 2023, [draft minutes](#)).

**After the meeting:**

- EJ Coordinators synthesize feedback from Interagency EJ Committee and public into Draft 2 (this document).
- Draft 2 is distributed to the EJ Advisory Council and posted online.

**August 21, 2023: EJ Advisory Council meeting** to give feedback on Draft 2 of the core principles of community engagement – opportunity for public comment.

**After the meeting:**

- EJ Coordinators synthesize EJ Advisory Council and public feedback into Draft 3.
- Draft 3 distributed to the EJ Advisory Council, the Interagency EJ Committee, and the public.

**August 28, 2023: EJ Advisory Council and Interagency EJ Committee joint meeting** to seek consensus to post Draft 3 online for three-week public comment period and gather additional input from covered agency staff (a separate, parallel processes)

**After the meeting:**

- EJ Coordinators synthesize any final feedback on Draft 3 needed to reach consensus between the groups to move to review phase and post online.
- EJ Coordinators collaborate with Interagency Committee and Advisory Council to gather input for incorporation into the final draft.

**September 21, 2023: EJ Advisory Council and Interagency EJ Committee joint meeting** to seek consensus on final draft to share with covered agencies (along with guide to writing community engagement plans, forthcoming).

**As needed:** Continue deliberations, gathering feedback, and integrating reviews until consensus is reached. Additional joint meetings are scheduled for October 19, 2023 and November 16, 2023.

**Note:** Information needed to participate in this process can be found on the [EJ Law calendar](#).

# At-A-Glance: The Core Principles of Community Engagement

## Section 1: Laying the Groundwork

1. Value and integrate community input at all stages of program and policy development and decision-making.
2. Utilize existing guidance for equitable community engagement.
3. Build your agency's internal capacity for meaningful engagement.
4. Build resilience and trust by building ongoing, reciprocal relationships.
5. Prioritize voices most impacted by environmental injustices.
6. Do your homework and adapt engagement to communities' specific needs.
7. Address systemic barriers to reaching particular communities.
8. Coordinate with other agencies: de-silo policy conversations & share resources.
9. Collaborate with community-based organizations that have built trust with EJ focus populations.

## Section 2: Meaningfully Engaging Communities

10. Compensate community members for their expertise and efforts.
11. Accessible and inclusive outreach.
12. Meet community members where they are.
13. Communicate with respect and care.
14. Transparency from inception.
15. Work toward a yes.
16. Commit enough time to do engagement well.
17. Iterative and adaptive approach to community engagement.
18. Be accountable.

# Detailed Descriptions: The Core Principles of Community Engagement

## Section 1. Laying the Groundwork

**Principle 1:** Value and integrate community input at every stage of agency action; including program and policy development and decision-making.

A recognition that meaningful community engagement is worth it needs to permeate agency cultures.

Engaging impacted communities should be the first step in developing programs and policies – identify ways to gather community input from the inception of a project.

Meaningful community engagement is equally (if not more) important as technical inputs and assessments to our decision-making processes and should be treated as such. Community engagement and technical analyses should work together and be advanced synergistically when possible.

Communities should be thought of as partners. Communities know what their needs are. Agencies should partner with communities throughout every stage of program and policy development, co-creating the roadmap to solve community issues. Public comments should not be treated as one-offs, but rather part of an ongoing dialogue.

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**Principle 2:** Utilize existing guidance for equitable community engagement.

Don't reinvent the wheel!

Identify existing materials and build on resources available when shaping your engagement plan. Throughout the community engagement process, center the [Guiding Principles for a Just Transition](#) developed by the Just Transitions Subcommittee of the Vermont Climate Council. And reference the EJ Law's community engagement online [resource library](#).

### Principle 3: Build your Agency's internal capacity for meaningful engagement.

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 and more just outcomes. 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. State agencies must invest in staff education and training to enable them to effectively implement community engagement requirements and goals.

State agencies must internally coordinate community engagement efforts. Agencies should map community partnerships within the Agency with lead relationship holders for each community partnership. Take the time to identify which staff will be committed to maintaining relationships and conducting follow-up.

Budgeting for community engagement must adequately value the time, effort, and expertise involved. Agencies should identify ways to ensure they can compensate community members who are consulted through engagement efforts.

Agencies should also consider creative ways to incentivize community engagement by other stakeholders. For example, requiring community input already be conducted / considered when entities submit permit requests to state agencies.

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### Principle 4: Build resilience and trust by building ongoing, reciprocal relationships.

Communities are equal partners who know best what their needs are. Begin building these critical connections by engaging early and often. To (re)build relationships, 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 or community members are familiar with using.

State agencies must ensure that the relationships they build with community partners are not foundationally extractive and parasitic, but instead generative and mutually beneficial. Offer the communities information and access to resources alongside any asks you have for their input or knowledge.

*“Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.” (adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy, page 38)*

## Principle 5: Prioritize voices most impacted by environmental injustices.

Give space and power to the voices of communities most impacted by historic and ongoing environmental injustices. Acknowledge and address the ongoing experience and impacts of structural racism. Use the environmental justice focus population defined within the EJ Law to prioritize engagement efforts (see glossary). Listen with the intent to take concrete action to address the needs expressed by the community.

Consider intersectionality when identifying and prioritizing voices – for example, we may effectively engage BIPOC communities, but are we only reaching folks who are able-bodied or have higher incomes? Remember that no group of people is a monolith and seek a diverse and broad range of perspectives.

*Relevant excerpt from the VT EJ 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.” [emphasis added] § 6003. Environmental Justice State Policy*

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## Principle 6: Do your homework and adapt engagement to communities’ specific needs.

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.

Do research about yourself and your Agency. Learn about past engagement efforts by your Agency. You must recognize and own what has occurred in the past and recognize how it has impacts today. Avoid defensiveness and honor frustration that may stem from past agency actions and decisions.

Community engagement strategies should vary based on the communities, population, and the focus of that specific meeting or discussion, rather than broad strategies that are used uniformly statewide (for example, engaging people in Chittenden County will be different from engaging people in Orleans County).

Avoid pattern-matching when considering the local and historical context, as reinforcing existing demographic patterns reinforces patterns of racial and social inequity in most Vermont communities.

## Principle 7: Address systemic barriers to reaching particular communities.

Take actions to ensure that public outreach and participation efforts are actually reaching the communities in need. For example, outreach notifications often only reach land/home-owners, not renters. Ensure that your engagement and outreach is inclusive of EJ focus populations (see glossary). Identify policy and procedural changes that will help address these limitations to community outreach.

*Relevant excerpt from VT EJ Law: “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.” (§ 6002. Definitions)*

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## Principle 8: Inter-agency coordination: de-silo policy conversations and share resources.

Interagency coordination will be key in effectively engaging and centering communities without overburdening those who are already on the frontlines or most impacted by environmental injustices. State agency community engagement plans should reflect a commitment to collaborate on community engagement efforts where possible and appropriate so as not to overburden and over tap communities.

Vermonters do not experience environmental injustices in the silos that government operates in. Since State agencies are closer to power and resources, they need to be accountable to breaking down these silos and collaborating on engagement at the interagency level. Avoid responding to community feedback with “that isn’t in our agency’s purview” (see Principle 15) – instead, ensure that feedback gets to state agency staff who are able to respond. (See relevant part of Principle 14: “Only make promises you can keep and make sure to follow-up on commitments in a transparent way.”)



**Principle 9:** Collaborate with community-based organizations that have built trust with EJ focus populations.

Rather than making assumptions about how to best reach communities, collaborate and co-create engagement processes that engage existing community-based organizations that have built trust with EJ focus populations (see glossary).

Prioritize collaborating with groups that work close with Environmental Justice focus populations.

To ensure delivery of culturally appropriate services, delivered through trusted community entities, consider paying community liaisons to bridge State agency staff and community members.

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## Section 2. Meaningfully Engaging Communities

### Principle 10: Compensate community members for their expertise and efforts.

Just like Agency staff, community members are experts in their own right and experts of their own experience. We should never expect community members to volunteer their time, expertise, and efforts. To demonstrate that we value their time and expertise, community member's efforts and contributions should be compensated and recognized as core to Agency decision-making processes.

Agency staff should actively seek opportunities to resource community partners (grants, contracts, consultancies, stipends, sponsorships, honoraria, donations, etc.). Similar to community members, State agencies should not expect community-based organizations to contribute their time and expertise without due compensation.

To compensate community members and community-based organizations for their time and contributions, the Vermont State Legislature must work alongside and resources State agencies.

State agencies must also work directly alongside other agencies when developing compensation expectations and processes. Cross-agency collaboration and consistency will be of critical importance as institute just and equitable compensation.

*“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.” (Watson et al., Connecting People to Power, page 12).*

## Principle 11: Accessible and inclusive outreach.

To ensure accessible and inclusive outreach, consider the needs of people who speak languages other than English, those living with a visual or hearing impairment, and those with limited or no access to technology or transportation.

There are many aspects to accessible and inclusive outreach that need attending, including:

- Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) to ensure we can reach communities that are typically left out; changing the patterns of who is engaging.
- Developing language access plans and procedures: provide translation and interpretation services free of cost to members of the public.
- Developing plain language content that is easy for all Vermonters to understand: create external communications in plain language, avoiding jargon and legalese.
- Considering physical accessibility

State agencies need to learn from each other's experience with implementing accessible and inclusive outreach. Agencies can coordinate trainings and provide technical assistance to each other. When implementing accessible and inclusive outreach measures, consider a phased implementation.

Consult with community-based organizations about best practices for accessible and inclusive outreach.

## Principle 12: Meet community members where they are.

Dedicate the time and resources to meet people where they are. 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 them to come to you. Only show up when extended an invitation and be mindful of and actively work to dismantle white comfort.

Look for opportunities to immerse yourself in the community you are trying to reach by attending community events and groups. This also includes meeting community members where they are in the digital realm and sharing information on relevant platforms.

*“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.” (Watson et al., Connecting People to Power, page 12)*

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## Principle 13: Communicate with respect and care.

Be present, listen generously, and respect diverse ways of knowing and learning. Communicate with respect and caring for your fellow humans. Consider these touchstones shared by Shalini Suryanarayana which she learned during her practice with WholeHeart, LLC (Based on the Center for Courage & Renewal; 100 Million Healthier Lives Touchstones for Collaboration):

- Be present as fully as possible.
- Listen generously to your own and one another’s experience and discoveries.
- Respect each other’s ways of knowing and learning.
- Speak from your heart. Pause and listen with your whole body. Use “I” statements.
- Turn to wonder. Set aside judgement or critique.
- Practice asking questions that open, rather than just offering counsel and correction.
- Respect confidentiality.

Do not make assumptions about people based on identity; recognize everyone has unique experiences and perspectives. Do not ask people to speak on behalf of others (i.e., do not tokenize people and assume someone can speak on behalf of an entire identity group).

## Principle 14: Transparency from inception.

Commit to transparency throughout the process. Transparency is a key part of building trust over time with communities. Transparency must include a recognition of historical and ongoing barriers to equitable community engagement of EJ focus populations.

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. If assurances are made, actively follow up.

Do not collect input if you cannot meaningfully integrate it into the final product. Only make promises you can keep and make sure to follow-up on commitments in a transparent way.

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## Principle 15: Work toward a yes!

When engaging with community members, lead with a “yes” approach. Do not take the posture of an automatic “no” simply because an idea cannot be immediately put in place or there are significant barriers to implementing an idea. Listen with empathy and respect and treat community members input and ideas as real possibilities.

Recognize that this posture of “yes” is a paradigm shift for state government staff.

Seek creative solutions to move toward yes!

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## Principle 16: Commit enough time to do engagement well.

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 to meet the needs of the community you are endeavoring to serve. Do not sacrifice the integrity of the process for the sake of meeting deadlines.

Remember that it is worth it 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.

## Principle 17: Iterative and adaptive approach to community engagement.

Community engagement should be adaptive and iterative. As the process unfolds, remain open to adapting 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.

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## Principle 18: Be accountable.

Develop data and metric collection methods to support Agency accountability to community engagement goals. Share these data and metrics with the public.

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.

Make sure to follow through on all promises and commitments you make to a community. Develop practices to demonstrate how community feedback has informed agency actions or decision-making.

## Works Cited

1. adrienne maree brown. March 2017. [Emergent Strategy](#): Shaping Change, Changing Words.
2. Morris, Kiah; Just Transitions Subcommittee; Vermont Climate Council. August 2021. [Guiding Principles for a Just Transition](#).
3. Washington State Department of Health. [Community Engagement Guide](#).
4. Watson, Britaney; McCandless, Susannah; Byrne, Jennifer; McGinn, Ginny. 2023. [Connecting People to Power](#): Community Engagement Pilot Report and Planning Recommendations to the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation. Center for Whole Communities (CWC), Rights and Democracy Institute (RDI), and Vermont Law and Graduate School (VLS) Environmental Justice Clinic.

## Glossary

The goal of this glossary is to support reader comprehension. Definitions of terms are pulled from a wide array of sources. Citations are provided. Whenever possible, definitions were taken from the Vermont EJ Law ([Act 154 of 2022](#)) or resources in the [online resource library](#).

Term	Definition
<b>Agency of Natural Resources (ANR)</b>	<p>“The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) is charged with oversight and management of Vermont’s natural environment on behalf of the people of Vermont. [The Agency endeavors] to draw from and build upon Vermonters’ shared ethic of responsibility for our natural environment, an ethic that encompasses a sense of place, community and quality of life, and an understanding that we are an integral part of the environment, and that we must all be responsible stewards for this and future generations.”</p> <p>Source of definition: <a href="#">Agency of Natural Resources</a></p>
<b>Community</b>	<p>“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: <a href="#">Washington State Department of Health</a></p>
<b>Community Engagement</b>	<p>“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: <a href="#">Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</a></p>
<b>Community Engagement Plans</b>	<p>A community engagement plan is a document that describes how the covered State agencies will provide meaningful participation to all individuals, with particular attention to environmental justice focus populations, in the development, implementation, or enforcement of any law, regulation, or policy.</p> <p>“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.” Source of definition: <a href="#">VT EJ Law</a></p>
<b>Covered Agencies</b>	<p>“Covered agencies” include “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</p>



	Resources Board; and the Departments of Health, of Public Safety, and of Public Service.” Source of definition: <a href="#">VT EJ Law</a>
<b>Deliverable</b>	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 EJ Law. Examples of deliverables in the VT EJ Law include the Core Principles of Community Engagement or the VT State EJ Map.
<b>Environmental Justice</b>	“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.” Source of definition: <a href="#">VT EJ Law</a>
<b>Environmental Justice Advisory Council</b>	“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.” Source of definition: <a href="#">VT EJ Law</a>
<b>Environmental Justice Focus Population</b>	“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.” Source of definition: <a href="#">VT EJ Law</a>
<b>Interagency Environmental Justice Committee</b>	“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.” Source of definition: <a href="#">VT EJ Law</a>
<b>Meaningful Participation</b>	As defined in the VT EJ 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. 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

	<p>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.</p>
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