Guidance for the Development of Community Engagement Plans

Vermont Environmental Justice Law

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Part One: Foundations

Purpose of this guidance

This Guidance was developed to support implementation of the Vermont Environmental Justice (EJ) Law (Act 154 of 2022). It is intended to help covered agencies create Community Engagement Plans that support meaningful participation and strengthen relationships with Vermont communities. This document provides shared structure, language, and guiding practices for engagement across State government. Effective engagement often follows three phases: learning and preparing, engaging and listening, and reporting back and adapting based on what is heard. While engagement activities may vary across agencies, programs, and communities, these phases provide a simple framework for planning, implementing, and continuously improving engagement efforts..

Community Engagement Plans establish agency-wide policies, commitments, procedures, and resources that support meaningful participation across agency activities. Community Engagement Plans **are not** intended to prescribe the engagement approach for every individual project, permit, rulemaking, grant program, or decision.

For specific decisions or initiatives, agencies should develop project-specific engagement strategies, public involvement plans, or other scoped engagement approaches that apply the principles and commitments established in the Community Engagement Plan.

Community engagement is ongoing work built on relationships, transparency, learning, responsiveness, and continuous improvement. **Strong Community Engagement Plans should provide enough structure to guide staff while remaining flexible enough to respond to different community contexts and needs.**

How to use this guide:

This Guidance is designed for a wide range of engagement efforts across State government. Some readers may be developing an agency-wide Community Engagement Plan, while others may be planning a specific engagement process or learning foundational engagement practices.

Readers are encouraged to use this document flexibly based on the scope and goals of their work.

Values, Commitments, and Meaningful Participation

Community Engagement Plans are intended to help covered agencies meet the requirements of the Vermont Environmental Justice Law and support meaningful

participation. While legal requirements provide an important foundation, meaningful community engagement is also shaped by the values and commitments that guide how agencies build relationships, share information, listen, learn, and make decisions. As covered agencies work through this Guide, they are also encouraged to consider the values and commitments that will guide their engagement efforts. DRAFT STATEMENT HERE ABOUT DEVELOPING A VALUES STATEMENT AND LINK TO RESOURCE LIBRARY.

Core Principles of Community Engagement

The Core Principles of Community Engagement provide foundational guidance for ethical and meaningful engagement.

These principles emphasize:

- relationship-building,
- accessibility,
- transparency,
- accountability,
- responsiveness,
- and continuous learning.

Legal and Policy Foundations:

VT Environmental Justice Law Act 154 and Title IV of the Civil Rights Act:

The Vermont Environmental Justice Law was created to address environmental health disparities and improve the wellbeing of Vermont residents. A central goal of the Law is ensuring that communities can meaningfully participate in decision-making processes. This work is supported by federal civil rights protections, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.

To support this work, the Law requires covered agencies to develop and implement Community Engagement Plans that create opportunities for Meaningful Participation and help ensure all Vermonters can engage in State government decision-making processes. Consistent with Title VI, agencies should take steps to remove barriers to participation and

provide meaningful access for individuals and communities who may otherwise face challenges engaging with government programs and services.

Community Engagement Plan Requirements

Under the Vermont EJ Law, covered agency Community Engagement Plans must:

- describe how the agency will engage with Environmental Justice Focus Populations;
- describe how the agency will support meaningful participation in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964;
- be informed by the Core Principles of Community Engagement; and
- be developed in consultation with the Advisory Council.

Policy Statements

A Policy Statement helps connect an agency's values and commitments to its legal responsibilities. It communicates clear expectations for staff, supports consistent implementation of meaningful participation, and helps ensure engagement efforts align with both agency goals and the requirements of the Vermont Environmental Justice Law.

A clear Policy Statement can also strengthen accountability by helping staff and community members understand the standards that guide the agency's approach to community engagement. Agencies may adapt a Policy Statement to reflect their unique mission, responsibilities, and engagement practices. A template for developing a Policy Statement is provided in Section 5 LINK HERE

Shared Language and Definitions

The terms below are intended to support a shared understanding of community engagement practices across covered agencies. These plain language definitions are designed to help staff apply the guidance in day-to-day work. Full statutory definitions from Vermont Environmental Justice Law (Act 154 of 2022) are included in Appendix A.

Accessibility

Designing spaces, services, information, and experiences so they can be used and understood by as many people as possible.

Community Engagement

Building relationships and working together with communities on issues that affect their lives and wellbeing.

Covered Agency

A Vermont State agency, department, or public body required under the Vermont Environmental Justice Law to develop a Community Engagement Plan.

Decision-Making

The process of making choices that shape plans, policies, services, programs, or outcomes.

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice means all people have equitable access to environmental benefits, fair treatment in environmental decision-making, and protection from environmental burdens regardless of race, income, identity, language, or background.

A full statutory definition is included in Section 5.

Environmental Justice Focus Population

Communities identified in the Vermont Environmental Justice Law as more likely to experience barriers to participation or disproportionate environmental burdens.

A full statutory definition is included in Section 5.

Key Partner

People, groups, or organizations who may influence or be affected by a decision, policy, program, or process.

Meaningful Participation

Under Vermont's Environmental Justice Law, Meaningful Participation means creating opportunities for all people to participate in decisions that affect their communities. This includes engaging community members throughout planning, implementation, evaluation, and other decision-making processes. Meaningful Participation recognizes and values diverse knowledge, cultures, languages, histories, and lived experiences. It also requires agencies to reduce barriers to participation, provide support that enables communities to engage fully, and communicate transparently about opportunities for input and how feedback is used.

Program Evaluation

The process of understanding what is working well, what could improve, and how a program or engagement effort is affecting people and communities.

Systemic Barriers

Policies, practices, systems, or cultural norms that make it harder for some groups of people to access opportunities, resources, or decision-making power.

PART 2. BUILDING A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Understanding the Planning Process

Most engagement efforts include:

1. Preparing for engagement;
2. Designing engagement activities;
3. Facilitating engagement;
4. Following through after engagement; and
5. Adapting and improving over time.

The following sections provide recommended practices for each stage.

BEFORE THE ENGAGEMENT

Scoping

Scoping helps agencies understand the overall shape, scale, and readiness of an engagement effort. **Starting engagement without enough staff time, budget, or decision-making clarity can lead to rushed or transactional processes and inhibit meaningful participation.**

This may include:

- identifying the purpose of the engagement;
- assessing available staff, time, and budget;
- understanding decision-making timelines; and
- evaluating agency readiness to receive and use feedback.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What decisions are being informed?
- What level of engagement is appropriate?
- Are timelines realistic for meaningful participation?
- Is leadership prepared to receive and act on feedback?

Set a Goal

Clear goals help shape:

- engagement methods,
- outreach strategies,
- facilitation approaches,
- and evaluation processes.

Examples of engagement goals may include:

- building relationships;
- sharing resources
- improving a policy or program through gathering feedback (for example, on rules and permitting)
- understanding community priorities and identifying barriers communities experience;

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What are we hoping to learn?
- What decisions will this engagement inform?
- What does successful engagement look like?

Do Your Research

This step helps agencies understand:

- previous engagement efforts,
- historical relationships between communities and the State,
- and prior harms, frustrations, or successes.

Researching history can help agencies avoid repetitive or extractive engagement.
It is strongly recommended you use this Community Engagement Inventory tool to review previous SoV engagement efforts before launching a new process.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What feedback have communities already shared that is relevant to your scope?
- Are there communities experiencing engagement fatigue?
- Who in SoV can support agencies by sharing lessons learned from past efforts?

Identify Communities

This step helps agencies understand who may be affected by a decision, policy, program, or project.

Agencies should consider:

- Does a community of focus/priority population stand to benefit or be harmed by this decision, policy, program, or project?
- who has historically had access to decision-making,
- who may have been excluded,
- and what barriers may affect participation.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Who is most impacted by this legislative, rulemaking or permitting decision or resource allocation?
- Whose voices may be missing?
- What barriers may communities face in benefitting from a decision, policy, or resource?

Identify Key Partners

Key partners may include:

- community-based organizations,
- advocacy groups,
- local leaders,
- service providers,
- municipal entities,
- other State agencies,
- and trusted community connectors.

Strong partnerships can:

- strengthen outreach,
- reduce engagement fatigue,

- improve trust,
- and support more reciprocal engagement.

DESIGNING THE ENGAGEMENT

Develop Relationship Strategy

Relationship strategies help agencies identify how staff will build and maintain relationships with communities over time.

Relationship-centered engagement enacts the Core Principles of Community Engagement. In practice this includes:

- showing up consistently,
- practicing transparency,
- meeting people where they are,
- avoiding tokenism,
- using trauma-informed approaches,
- and remaining accountable.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What trust-building may be needed?
- Who will maintain continuity over time?
- How will staff communicate transparently?

Identify Access Considerations

This step focuses on reducing barriers to participation.

Agencies should consider:

- language access,
- physical accessibility,
- transportation,
- internet access,
- meeting times,

- childcare,
- digital accessibility,
- and culturally relevant engagement practices.

Covered agencies must comply with applicable Federal and State accessibility and nondiscrimination laws. It is important to clearly communicate how participants can request accommodations or language access support.

Identify the Engagement Method

Different engagement goals and community contexts may require different engagement methods.

Possible methods include:

- listening sessions,
- focus groups,
- advisory bodies,
- workshops,
- surveys,
- public comment opportunities,
- one-on-one dialogue,
- and community-led meetings.

Agencies should select methods that align with:

- the scope of the work,
- community's decision-making authority,
- community preferences,
- accessibility needs,
- and available capacity.

Conduct Outreach

Outreach helps build awareness and invites communities into engagement opportunities.

Effective outreach:

- begins early,
- uses trusted communication pathways,
- provides clear and accessible information,
- and meets communities where they are.

It is strongly recommended to use multiple outreach methods and communication formats whenever possible.

Compensation

Compensation recognizes the value of community members' time, expertise, labor, and lived experience.

Compensation:

- reduces barriers to participation,
- supports equity,
- acknowledges emotional labor,
- and reinforces that lived expertise is valuable.

DURING THE ENGAGEMENT

Set Expectations

At the beginning of an engagement, agencies should communicate:

- how the engagement will function,
- what participants can expect,
- how feedback will be gathered,
- and how staff will interact.

Clear expectations reduce confusion and support transparency.

Set Boundaries

Agencies should clearly communicate:

- what decisions are open for influence,
- what limitations exist,
- and how feedback may or may not shape outcomes.

Communities may lose trust when agencies are not transparent about what decisions are already fixed.

Develop Community Agreements

Community agreements establish shared expectations for respectful participation and communication. Invite all participants (including key partners) to help shape or add to community agreements.

These agreements can support:

- safety,
- accessibility,
- equitable participation,
- and respectful dialogue.

Community agreements may include:

- respectful listening,
- time-sharing expectations,
- accessibility practices,
- and processes for addressing harmful behavior.

AFTER THE ENGAGEMENT

Integrate Feedback

Integrating feedback means thoughtfully reviewing and applying community input where possible.

This process should:

- remain open to lived expertise,
- consider historical context,
- challenge assumptions and bias,
- and evaluate how feedback may inform agency work.

Be Responsive

Responsiveness means acknowledging feedback and maintaining communication after engagement.

Examples may include:

- follow-up emails,
- public summaries,
- updates on decisions,
- explanations of limitations,
- or descriptions of how feedback was used.

Share follow-up information with participants whenever possible.

Evaluate the Engagement

Evaluation helps agencies understand:

- what worked well,
- what barriers remained,
- who participated,
- and what improvements may be needed.

Evaluation may include:

- participant feedback,
- participation data,
- accessibility assessments,

- and qualitative observations.

Adapt Engagement Strategy

Engagement strategies may need to change in response to:

- low participation,
- accessibility barriers,
- confusion,
- emerging community needs,
- or changing circumstances.

Adaptation helps agencies remain flexible and responsive. **Strong engagement processes are adaptive. Willingness to adjust an engagement strategy is often a sign of responsiveness, not failure.**

PART 3. APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Process-Specific Best Practices

Engagement approaches may need to change depending on:

- legal requirements,
- timelines,
- technical complexity,
- and decision-making structures.

This section provides examples of how meaningful participation can be applied within different State processes. Across all process types, agencies should strive to:

- communicate transparently,
- reduce barriers to participation,
- provide clear and accessible information,
- and create opportunities for meaningful input whenever possible.

Rulemaking

Rulemaking processes often involve technical language, formal procedures, and strict timelines.

Meaningful participation in rulemaking may include:

- plain-language explanations,
- glossaries of technical terms,
- timelines and process maps,
- community-specific notice of public feedback opportunities (beyond existing requirements),
- interpretation and translation,
- oral comment opportunities,
- and accessible hearing formats.

REQUIRED
Rulemaking processes must comply with the Administrative Procedures Act and other applicable legal requirements. Provide educational information before formal public comment periods begin.

Permitting

Permitting processes can significantly impact communities, ecosystems, and public health.

Meaningful participation in permitting may include:

- timely notices,
- plain-language explanations,
- community-specific notice of public feedback opportunities (beyond existing requirements),
- accessible hearing formats,
- interpretation and translation,
- and multiple ways to provide feedback.

Policy Development & Program Implementation

Policy and program development often involve decisions about:

- Legislative and agency-wide priorities,
- implementation structures,
- resource allocation,
- eligibility criteria,
- and accountability.

Meaningful participation can help agencies:

- Inform policy and program priorities (applying learnings from previous engagement)
- better understand community needs,
- avoid unintended harms,
- strengthen program effectiveness.

STRONGLY RECOMMENDED
Engage communities early in policy development whenever possible. [sentence about planning ahead to have space to engage communities on front end?]

State-Stewarded Resource Allocation

Resource allocation decisions can significantly affect communities.

Agencies should strive to incorporate meaningful participation throughout:

- planning,
- implementation,
- evaluation,
- and adaptation.

Technical Assistance (Non-Financial Resources)

Meaningful participation may include:

- gathering input from recipient communities,
- evaluating barriers to access,
- incorporating feedback into program design,
- and maintaining pathways for ongoing communication.

Grantmaking & Contracting (Financial Resources)

Meaningful participation may include:

- involving impacted communities in program design,
- gathering feedback on eligibility and application processes,
- evaluating barriers to participation,
- and improving transparency around funding decisions.

Complex application processes may unintentionally advantage organizations with more staff capacity or prior experience navigating State systems. (Link VDH equitable granting practices resource here.)

PART 4. ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS & CAPACITY

Internal Readiness

Meaningful engagement requires more than public-facing activities. It also requires internal readiness.

Agencies should assess whether they have:

- leadership support,
- staff capacity,
- adequate timelines,
- budget resources,
- internal coordination,
- and organizational willingness to receive and integrate feedback.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Are timelines realistic for meaningful engagement?
- Does staff have sufficient capacity?
- Is funding available for accessibility and compensation?
- Are accountability structures clear?

Training and Capacity Building

Staff training and ongoing learning are important components of meaningful engagement.

Training topics may include:

- trauma-informed engagement,
- accessibility and language access,
- cultural humility,
- facilitation skills,
- relationship-building,
- and conflict navigation.

Build engagement training and onboarding into long-term agency systems whenever possible.

Continuous Improvement and Accountability

Meaningful engagement is ongoing work that requires learning, adaptation, and accountability.

Continuous improvement may include:

- updating Community Engagement Plans,
- revising outreach strategies,
- improving accessibility practices,
- strengthening responsiveness processes,
- and adapting engagement methods over time.
- Development of program evaluation criteria to support accountability (plan/agency wide?)

Relationship-centered engagement requires agencies to remain transparent, responsive, and open to growth.

PART 5. Putting it into Practice

Resource Library

This section of the guidance provides specific detail and resources for each individual component introduced above. These resources and details have been developed and

curated based on the experiences and expertise of the Community Engagement Plan subgroup members - advisory council members, covered agency staff and the ANR coordination staff and Inter-agency council representative.

The resource library is organized to mirror the flow of the first four parts of this guidance document. In it you will find:

- Why is this important: What is the purpose of this component of community engagement?
- Practical Applications: How to write your plan
- Examples you can pull from existing resources

Putting it into Practice

Part 1: Foundations

1A. Plan Introduction

Why is this important?

The Introduction provides important context for agency staff and community members who read the Community Engagement Plan. It explains why the Plan exists, what it is intended to accomplish, and how it will be used. A strong Introduction helps readers understand the agency's approach to engagement and the role the Plan plays in supporting meaningful participation.

The Introduction can also establish transparency by describing how the agency has engaged communities in the past and how the Community Engagement Plan will strengthen or guide future engagement efforts.

Practical Application

When developing an Introduction, agencies should clearly describe the purpose and scope of the Community Engagement Plan, including the types of engagement activities it applies to and the legal requirements it supports. Agencies may also want to provide a brief overview of the contents of the Plan and explain how the Plan will help support meaningful participation and strengthen relationships with communities.

Examples:

- Vermont EJ Law (Act 154 of 2022), 3 V.S.A § 6004 (c)
- Core Principles of Community Engagement
- EPA Public Participation Toolkit

1B. Values and Commitments

Why is this important?

Values and commitments statements communicate how an agency approaches community engagement and what community members can expect when working with the agency. They help establish a shared culture of engagement by describing the principles and behaviors that guide staff when building relationships, gathering feedback, and making decisions.

Well-crafted values and commitments statements can help create consistency across engagement efforts while demonstrating the agency's commitment to meaningful participation, transparency, and accountability.

Practical Application

As agencies develop values and commitments statements, it can be helpful to reflect on the principles that should guide engagement efforts across all programs and initiatives. Values and commitments are most effective when they are action-oriented, written in plain language, and focused on behaviors and practices that staff can consistently apply. Agencies may also consider how their values reflect the unique nature of their work and the communities they serve.

Examples:

- White River NRCD Community Engagement Plan Template (page 1-2)
- VDH Community Engagement Guide (pages 4-5 and 9-10)
- Guiding Principles for a Just Transition (pages 6-7)
- Core Principles of Community Engagement

1C. Policy Statement

Why is this important?

A Policy Statement establishes agency expectations for community engagement and provides a foundation for consistent implementation across programs, projects, and initiatives. It communicates the agency's commitment to meaningful participation and helps ensure engagement efforts align with both agency goals and legal requirements.

A clear Policy Statement can also strengthen accountability by helping staff and community members understand how engagement should be conducted and what standards the agency seeks to uphold.

Practical Application

When developing a Policy Statement, agencies should describe their expectations for engagement and reference the legal and policy frameworks that guide their work. This may include defining meaningful participation, identifying related accessibility and language access policies, and explaining how community members can provide feedback on engagement efforts. Agencies may also wish to acknowledge that engagement practices evolve over time and commit to continuous learning and improvement.

Examples

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Vermont Environmental Justice Law (Act 154 of 2022)
- Core Principles of Community Engagement
- Agency Language Access Policies
- Agency Accessibility and Civil Rights Policies

Putting it into Practice

Part 2: Building a Community Engagement Plan

2A. Understanding the Community Engagement Planning Process

Why is this important?

Community engagement is not a one-size-fits-all process. Effective engagement requires flexibility to respond to the needs, priorities, and contexts of different communities while maintaining a commitment to meaningful participation. Community Engagement Plans can help establish a consistent framework for engagement while allowing staff to adapt their approach to different situations.

The goal of the engagement planning process is to create a shared understanding of how engagement will be designed, implemented, and evaluated across the agency.

Practical Application

As agencies develop Community Engagement Plans, it can be helpful to focus on creating flexible processes rather than rigid procedures. While engagement approaches may vary, agencies can establish common expectations and practices that help support consistency, accessibility, and quality across engagement efforts. The following sections describe recommended steps that agencies may use when planning and implementing engagement activities.

Examples:

- VDH Community Engagement Guide
- VTrans Public Involvement Guide

- White River NRCD Community Engagement Plan Template
- EPA Public Participation Toolkit

2B. Before the Engagement

Scoping

Why is this important?

Scoping helps agencies understand the size, complexity, and resources needed for an engagement effort before engagement begins. This includes identifying the purpose of the engagement, assessing available capacity, and considering the agency's readiness to receive and respond to community feedback. Taking time to scope an engagement can help establish realistic expectations and create a strong foundation for meaningful participation.

Practical Application

As agencies develop Community Engagement Plans, it can be helpful to consider the overall scope of anticipated engagement activities and the resources required to support them. This may include reviewing previous engagement efforts, exploring approaches used by other organizations, and assessing available staff time, funding, and organizational capacity. Agencies may also benefit from considering whether leadership and decision-making processes are prepared to meaningfully incorporate community feedback.

Examples

- EPA Public Participation Toolkit (Public Participation Process Planning)
- Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership
- State of Vermont Equity Impact Assessment Tool
- VDH Community Engagement Guide (pages 9-10 and 18)

Setting a Goal

Why is this important?

Setting a goal helps establish a clear purpose for engagement and creates a shared understanding of what the agency hopes to achieve. Clearly defined goals can help guide decisions about engagement methods, outreach strategies, resource allocation, and evaluation.

A strong engagement goal helps agencies move beyond simply gathering feedback and toward understanding how engagement will inform decisions, strengthen relationships, or support positive outcomes.

Practical Application

When establishing engagement goals, agencies may find it helpful to focus on the questions they hope to answer and the decisions they hope to inform. Developing a clear engagement purpose can help create alignment among staff and ensure engagement activities are designed with intention. Goals may evolve over time, but having a clear starting point can help shape the overall engagement strategy.

Examples

- Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership
- Whole Measures approach
- Whole Measures of Community Food Systems (page 10-11)

Research History

Why is this important?

Researching history means developing an understanding of the topic, communities, relationships, and previous engagement efforts connected to the work. This includes learning what communities have already shared, identifying existing knowledge, and understanding how past experiences may influence current engagement efforts.

Taking time to understand history can help agencies build on previous work, avoid engagement fatigue, and demonstrate respect for the experiences and contributions of community members.

Practical Application

As agencies prepare for engagement, it may be helpful to review previous engagement efforts conducted by the agency or by other organizations on similar topics. Understanding common themes, community concerns, and existing relationships can help inform engagement design and reduce the likelihood of asking communities to repeatedly provide the same information. This process can also help agencies identify opportunities to build upon previous feedback rather than starting from scratch.

Examples

- Community Engagement inventory being developed by Community Engagement Community of Practice (hopefully published June 2026)
- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principles 4, 8

Identify Communities

Why is this important?

Identifying communities means understanding who may be affected by a decision, project, policy, or program. It also means considering who has historically had influence in decision-making processes and who may have been excluded or underrepresented.

The goal is to ensure engagement reflects the experiences, perspectives, and expertise of the communities most impacted by the work while creating opportunities for voices that may not otherwise be heard.

Practical Application

As agencies identify communities, it can be helpful to think broadly about who may be affected by a decision or initiative. This includes people who may benefit from the work, those who may experience unintended impacts, and communities that have historically faced barriers to participation. Agencies may also benefit from considering existing relationships and reflecting on whose perspectives may be missing from the conversation. Tools such as partner mapping and power mapping can help identify communities whose voices should be included in engagement efforts.

Examples

- Whole Measures approach
- EPA Public Participation Toolkit (Public Participation Tools)
- Guiding Principles for a Just Transition (page 7)
- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 6
- EJ Mapping Tool (forthcoming)
- Power Mapping

Identify Key Partners

Why is this important?

Key partners can help agencies strengthen relationships, expand outreach efforts, and improve engagement outcomes. These partners may include community organizations, advocacy groups, local leaders, other state agencies, or trusted individuals who have established relationships within communities.

Building partnerships can help increase participation, strengthen trust, and create more coordinated approaches to engagement.

Practical Application

As agencies identify key partners, it can be helpful to consider who already has trusted relationships with the communities they hope to engage. Agencies may also look for opportunities to collaborate with other organizations or state agencies working on related

issues. In some situations, community liaison models may help agencies build stronger relationships and create more accessible pathways for participation and communication.

Examples

- EPA Public Participation Toolkit (Public Participation Tools)
- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 6

2C. Designing the Engagement

Develop a Relational Strategy

Why is this important?

Strong community engagement is built on relationships. Developing a relational strategy helps agencies define how they will build, maintain, and strengthen relationships with communities over time, not just during individual engagement efforts.

Relationship-centered engagement is grounded in trust, transparency, consistency, humility, and a willingness to meet communities where they are. A relational strategy can help establish shared expectations for how agency staff engage with community members before, during, and after engagement activities.

Practical Application

As agencies develop a relational strategy, it may be helpful to reflect on how relationships are currently built and maintained with communities. This includes considering how staff will demonstrate transparency, show up consistently, listen with humility, avoid tokenism, and incorporate culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches into their work.

Examples

- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principles 1, 5, 7, 10
- VDH Community Engagement Guide (pages 11-15)

Identify Access Considerations

Why is this important?

Meaningful participation requires more than inviting people to engage. It also requires reducing barriers that may prevent people from participating. Identifying access considerations helps agencies proactively prepare for the physical, communication, language, technological, cultural, and accessibility needs of community members.

Planning for access early can help create more inclusive engagement opportunities and ensure community members have the support they need to participate fully.

Practical Application

As agencies plan engagement efforts, it may be helpful to consider the needs of the communities being engaged and identify potential barriers to participation. This may include selecting accessible locations, providing interpretation or translation services, offering materials in multiple formats, planning for accommodations, and ensuring sufficient staff capacity and resources are available to support access needs.

Examples

- ANR Language Access Plan (2024)
- ANR Language Access Card
- ANR Disability Nondiscrimination Plan (2026)
- ANR Reasonable Accommodation Request Intake Form
- Connecting People to Power Report, Recommendation 5
- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 9

Identify the Engagement Method

Why is this important?

Different engagement goals and communities may require different approaches. Identifying the engagement method helps agencies determine how community members will participate and how feedback will be gathered.

The most effective engagement methods are responsive to the needs of the community, the goals of the engagement, and any legal requirements that may apply. In many cases, using multiple engagement methods can help broaden participation and improve accessibility.

Practical Application:

As agencies select engagement methods, it may be helpful to consider community preferences, accessibility needs, available resources, and the level of influence participants may have in the process. Agencies should also be transparent about any legal requirements or limitations that affect decision-making and ensure information is communicated in plain language that is easy to understand.

Examples:

- Connecting People to Power Report, Recommendation 1

Conduct Outreach

Why is this Important:

Outreach helps build awareness of engagement opportunities and invites communities into the conversation. Effective outreach begins before the engagement itself and focuses on building relationships, sharing information, and creating clear pathways for participation.

Thoughtful outreach can help increase participation, strengthen trust, and ensure community members have the information they need to engage meaningfully.

Practical Application:

As agencies plan outreach efforts, it may be helpful to identify key communities and partners early in the process. Meeting communities where they are, participating in existing gatherings, and seeking input on how people would like to engage can help create more effective and inclusive outreach strategies.

Examples:

- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principles 5, 7,

Compensation

Why is this Important:

Compensation recognizes the time, expertise, lived experience, and contributions that community members bring to engagement efforts. Community members often share valuable knowledge that helps shape decisions, improve programs, and inform agency priorities.

Compensation can also reduce barriers to participation and support more equitable engagement by acknowledging that participation requires time, effort, and resources.

Practical Application:

As agencies plan engagement activities, it may be helpful to consider when compensation is appropriate and what forms of compensation may be available. Agencies may also benefit from assessing what barriers compensation could help address and how compensation can be incorporated into engagement planning and budgeting processes.

Examples:

- VDH Procedure for Compensating Community Members
- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 12
- VDH Community Engagement Guide (page 5)

2D. During the Engagement

Set Expectations

Why is this Important:

Setting expectations helps create a shared understanding of how an engagement will be conducted and what participants can expect from agency staff. Clear expectations can reduce confusion, improve communication, and help create a more positive engagement experience.

Practical Application:

At the beginning of an engagement, agencies may wish to explain how the process will work, what participants can expect from staff, and how questions or feedback will be handled. Taking time to establish expectations can help create clarity and support meaningful participation.

Examples:

- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 10

Set Boundaries

Why is this Important:

Setting boundaries helps participants understand how their input will be used and the extent to which it can influence a decision or process. Being transparent about opportunities and limitations can help build trust and reduce misunderstandings.

Practical Application:

As agencies prepare for engagement, it may be helpful to clearly communicate what decisions are being informed, how feedback will be considered, and any legal, regulatory, or practical limitations that may affect outcomes. Transparency about these boundaries can help create realistic expectations for participants.

Examples:

- Vermont EJ Law Community Agreements
- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 10

Community Agreements

Why is this Important:

Community agreements help establish shared expectations for respectful participation and communication. They can support a welcoming environment where participants feel safe contributing their perspectives while respecting the experiences and participation of others.

Practical Application:

When planning engagement activities, agencies may wish to establish community agreements that reflect the goals and format of the engagement. Developing and communicating these agreements can help support respectful dialogue, clarify expectations, and create a more inclusive environment for participation.

Examples:

- Vermont EJ Law Community Agreements

2E. After the Engagement

Integrate Feedback

Why is this Important:

Integrating feedback means thoughtfully reviewing community input and considering how it can inform decisions, policies, programs, or future engagement efforts. This process helps demonstrate that community perspectives are valued and taken seriously.

Practical Application:

As agencies review feedback, it may be helpful to consider the context in which it was shared, the experiences that inform it, and how it may contribute to decision-making. Even when feedback cannot be incorporated directly, it may still provide valuable insight that can inform future work.

Examples:

- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 2

Be Responsive

Why is this Important:

Responsiveness helps community members understand that their input was received and considered. Maintaining communication after engagement activities can strengthen trust and demonstrate accountability.

Practical Application:

Depending on the engagement, responsiveness may include acknowledging feedback, sharing updates, communicating next steps, or providing summaries of what was heard and how feedback was used. Being transparent about what can and cannot be acted upon is an important part of this process.

Examples:

- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 2, 10

Evaluate the Engagement

Why is this Important:

Evaluation helps agencies understand what worked well, what challenges emerged, and what could be improved in future engagement efforts. Ongoing evaluation supports learning, continuous improvement, and more effective engagement over time.

Practical Application:

Evaluation may include collecting participant feedback, reviewing participation data, assessing accessibility, or measuring progress toward engagement goals. Agencies may find it helpful to establish simple methods for evaluating engagement efforts and using those findings to inform future planning.

Examples:

- Whole Measures approach
- Whole Measures for Community Food Systems (page 16-29)
- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 11
- VDH Community Engagement Guide (page 17)

Adapt Engagement Strategy

Why is this Important:

Community engagement often requires flexibility. Adapting an engagement strategy helps agencies respond to changing circumstances, emerging needs, and challenges that may affect participation or engagement outcomes.

Practical Application:

As agencies reflect on engagement efforts, it may be helpful to identify barriers, lessons learned, and opportunities for improvement. Adjusting timelines, outreach strategies, formats, or support services can help ensure future engagement efforts remain accessible, effective, and responsive to community needs.

Examples:

- Core Principles of Community Engagement, Principle 11

Part 3: Applying this Guidance in Different Contexts

Rulemaking

Permitting

Policy and Program Development

Program Implementation/Resource Allocation

Part 4: Organizational Readiness & Capacity

4A – Internal Readiness

4B – Training & Capacity Building

4C – Continuous Improvement and Accountability
