DARLINGTON COUNTY

OPEN MIC COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS
SUMMARY REPORT

Enhancing Equity in Cross-Sector Alignment Through Meaningful Community Engagement Project

THIS PROJECT AIMS TO UNDERSTAND HOW WE CAN PROMOTE MEANINGFUL AND INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PROMOTE FAIR DECISION-MAKING. COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS LED A SERIES OF COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS (AKA "OPEN MIC" COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS) IN 4 SC COMMUNITIES. THE PUROSE OF THE OPEN MIC SESSIONS WAS TO GATHER PERSPECTIVES ON EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT, AND KEY COMMUNITY CHALLENGES. THE FOLLOWING IS A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THE DARLINGTON COUNTY SESSIONS.

What is Needed to Meaningfully Engage with Communities?

"Trust is like respect. You have to give it to get it. You have to earn it. It takes time to build that relationship. Somebody might fool you for a little while, but the longer you have to interact with them, their true self going to show. How they keep their word [or] don't keep their word."

Trust is the Essential Building Block for Community Engagement. Building trust takes **making genuine connections, taking the time to listen, and seeing things from someone else's perspective**. It also takes **acknowledging the past**, history, and how the community may have been mistreated. People explained that listening to the community and asking for feedback can help **identify community assets** to build upon. Participants agreed that trusted individuals are usually people from within the community and **trust is built through consistency, commitment, honesty, and follow through**. Residents want people who come into their community to **have a reliable presence and establish long-term connections**.

Time and Respect are Essential for Relationship Building. Engaging with community means **treating people with respect and dignity** and **having real conversations**, even though they may sometimes be difficult. Finally, participants emphasized that collaborators should **be dependable** and show up when and where they say they will.

Importance of Communication to Let People Know What is Going on in The Community. The importance of **different communication strategies** and getting the word out about community events and efforts was discussed across communities. Multiple communication strategies are needed to reach community residents including **in-person promotion** in neighborhoods.

Social Issues are a Key Community Concern

"There's just a lot of just anxiety from a lot of people right now...in my own [house], I don't go outside after dark and that's scary for me right now."

Gun Violence is a Primary Community Issue. There is a large concern about gun violence and people are concerned about their safety. Residents shared concerns about recent drive-by shootings and the fear it causes in the community.

Need for Youth Engagement and Community Recreation Programs. Participants discussed the need for programs to guide youth, as they can get involved in gangs and other bad influences if they do not have positive influences. Many parents are busy working and need free/low-cost sports and other activities.

Lack of Jobs, Transportation, and Access to Healthy Foods Frustrates Residents. Geographic isolation in Darlington's rural areas results in a lack of access to resources including jobs, education, childcare, quality grocery stores, and healthcare. Transportation services are lacking, especially for youth and senior citizens, and as one resident shared, *"they're just scattered all over the place."* Resources in and around these areas are spread out and traveling to and from places takes a long time, which is hard for those who work. The lack of resources in these small towns also impacts the ability to keep young residents.

BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

> *"It seems to play out where somebody tell you, "This is what we going to do. Whether you like it, don't like it." A lot of time people just come...especially people with clout and power. Sometimes they'll pacify you and listen. Or pretend they're listening, but they already have their mind made up."*

> *"But what really, where's the change? My grandmother is a native of Darlington. And she said to me... she doesn't see where it has changed that much. And that's sad. because after these years...the same thing continues to happen."*

> *"I remember talking to the city manager and she's like, "So, why doesn't the Black community come out to the things downtown?" And we're like, "You all don't advertise for us." They mainly advertise to the people that they want to come...so, I went out there the other week...and it was like me and one other Black guy."*

> *"I'd say the younger people are getting left behind...we actually forgot about the youth and now, they are looking to the others who are actually getting them in a lot of trouble."*

History of Racism Sets an Important Context for Community Engagement. People talked about racism and inequity in opportunity and how it underlies many of their social issues. Participants shared about the Lamar School Bus Riots and how these events continue to shape the perspectives of residents and their feelings of mistrust and being ignored. Participants emphasized that racism needs to be acknowledged and discussed.

"We've Seen This Before": Lack of Trust in Decision Makers, Stemming from a History of Disingenuous Engagement and Broken Promises. Many shared stories of broken promises from local policymakers, developers, and other decision-makers, which has resulted in an overwhelming lack of trust in elected officials across communities. Participants explained that politicians come into their communities to campaign, making promises to get votes, but are never seen again once elected. Others shared those efforts to engage the community thus far have been selective, at the convenience of outsiders.

Lack of Opportunities for Community Voices in Decision Making. Participants also shared frustration with outsiders coming into neighborhoods and making decisions without community input. To some, there have been no opportunities to be part of decision-making, which has resulted in people feeling disenfranchised.

Being Ignored and Having Disparate Access to Resources and Information. Certain areas or neighborhoods receive resources, information, and attention, while others are left behind. People explained how they often do not get information about events.

Hopelessness and a Lack of Youth Involvement. Lack of action, development, and growth can prevent people from getting involved and engaged. The lack of time and energy for community engagement was also discussed. Participants explained that many people are "*just trying to survive*" and that many residents are working multiple jobs, raising children, and/or caring for older family members. The lack of engagement with teens and young adults was also described as a barrier in communities. Others attributed the lack of involvement among young people to them being busy and trying to start their own lives.

Lack of Knowledge About How to Engage and Connect with Existing Efforts. Several conversations highlighted that people need help connecting with and navigating to available services. This stems from a lack of awareness that resources exist, as well as people not knowing how to access available resources or navigate the process.

"Outreach Is Only a Position": Lack of Trust in Public Sectors. Discussion about public sector agencies (e.g., state and county public health and social service offices, hospitals, and health systems) focused on lack of communication and lack of willingness to change to improve services for communities. Participants explained a history of negative experiences, community needs not being met, lack of engagement and communication. Others emphasized that the priorities of public sector agencies are just driven by politics. These issues have resulted in a strong lack of trust for these agencies.