

NORTH COLUMBIA, 29203

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 PURPOSE 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 NORTH COLUMBIA (29203), SC SESSIONS.

What is Needed to Meaningfully Engage with Communities?

“I think it's more about follow through...to me, that's where the distrust is. It's like, everybody parachutes in with their program, they say they're going to do X, Y, and Z, and then they might stay for a little while and then you don't see them anymore. So, it's showing up in sustain.”

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.

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.

Community Members Want Long Term Partnerships for Change. 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.**

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 residents including **in-person promotion** in neighborhoods.

Social Issues are a Key Community Concern

“What makes me want to get more involved or try to make this place a safer place, was the little boy...that was in his apartment playing...and a bullet went through the window and shot him. And he went to his mother saying, “Mom, I've been shot,” and died in her arms. That happened here...”

Gun Violence, Gangs, and Crime are Primary Community Issues. There is a large concern about gun violence, which causes concerns about safety. Residents shared concerns about recent drive-by shootings and the fear it causes in the community. Participants expressed how there is good happening in their communities, but it is overshadowed by the violence and other disorder that commonly gets reported in the news and media. People commented on how other aspects of neighborhood disorder including crime, substance abuse, drug dealing, gambling, and gang activity impact their quality of life, too.

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 to keep them busy. Thus, community centers and trusted adults are needed for youth.

BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

"[They] want us to come out and vote or come to their meetings and... once they're where they need to be they disappear. They'll come out, they'll shake your head. "You need anything? I got somebody in my office that works with that." You reach out and email them and they don't even contact you back."

"We got dealers. You know what I mean? It's a lot going on right in that little zone. But we don't have a voice at all there. People come out, they put all these signs out in our area. Vote for this person and vote for this. And like they said, how do we get in touch with them? We never going to speak to them once they're in their office. We don't have anybody to talk to."

"At a minimum, we should have awareness of each other, so that we don't duplicate the efforts...in the ideal world...we all could just work together. But some people got to work in their lane, but I still try to do my homework... At least know who's who and make sure that whatever our service is, that people are getting it."

"[Public agencies] do not communicate or take the time to expose people outside to what they are doing. They have had a very selfish mindset, 'This is what we do'...No, this is what you supposed to do for the community. And work with other organizations who might be doing the same.... You can unite and save money."

"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. For example, some discussed how wealthier communities around town often receive services (such as road maintenance) before theirs.

Hopelessness and a Lack of Growth. 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.

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. There was also significant conversation around the challenges of working in silos, duplication of efforts, and lack of connectivity. Participants talked about how working in silos promotes the lack of unity in their communities and how it inhibits collective action. They explained that people often get inspired to work on a local problem, but often work on their own and do not seek out others doing similar work.

"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.