

ORANGEBURG 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 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 ORANGEBURG COUNTY SESSIONS.

What is Needed to Meaningfully Engage with Communities?

"Whether you're going to back up what you say, or whether you're just coming in to use us for your own good. Then after you get what you want, then you disappear. you haven't earned my trust yet."

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

"And there's alcohol stores and title loan stores that they put on every block because they already know you're poor, sooner or later, you going to have to come to me and ask me for a loan. So I'm already going to put this loan up."

Gun Violence is a Primary Community Issue. There is a large concern about gun violence and people are worried about their safety. Residents shared concerns about recent 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.

Economic Changes Causing Poverty. Residents of Orangeburg talked about how downtown used to be vibrant, but after the opening of the mall, downtown became economically depressed. This is part of an overall theme that economic development does not often happen in African American neighborhoods, and seems to benefit outsiders more than residents.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

"And so there is a lot of racism there. And then you still got the ghost of Orangeburg Massacre in the room too. So there's just a lot of racism and trauma at various levels."

"The people in Vance don't trust people in Santee. The people in Santee don't trust the people in Edisto. People in Edisto don't trust the people in Orangeburg."

"So nothing happens in Orangeburg without permission. So we have gatekeepers that allow outside influences to come in and do what they do. And earn their money and they pick up and they go ahead and move us with their buildings. It's all over the city. That's exactly what happens"

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. The Orangeburg Massacre of 1968 weighs heavily on the community.

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 few opportunities to be part of decision-making, which has resulted in people feeling disenfranchised.

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 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.

