

SPARTANBURG

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 SPARTANBURG SESSIONS.

What is Needed to Meaningfully Engage with Communities?

"How can you help me unless I give you a chance to understand how to help me. So you always have to include those in that. And then that helps us build the trust because it goes by relationship. Community really depends on relationship, which builds trust."

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

"The rent, went from like \$700 a rent to being \$1,200 a month for that same house"

"Women wouldn't go to work because they made enough just enough money to disqualify them from all they benefits, but not enough to survive."

Lack of Affordable Housing/Benefits Cliff. Residents of Spartanburg talked about how economic development has unintended consequences, such as increasing rents across the city, pricing community members out of neighborhoods. Further, Residents talked about the benefits cliff, in which women formerly on welfare start working, and lose their benefits, making it impossible to lift themselves out of poverty.

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.

Crime and Black on Black Violence is a Community Concern. There is a concern about violence and safety which may stop people from becoming engaged. Participants shared concerns about senseless shootings, and black on black crime.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The system has been designed to keep black people down.

"Just like the things I've mentioned transportation really mostly affected by not being able to go out to the good jobs is the inner city where the black people [are]"

"Because of the past. The past mistrust with the city, with people coming into the neighborhood, making promises. Empty promises just for a camera opportunity and then just leaving. We experienced a lot of that."

"A lot of times when we went through urban renewal, it shouldn't be; the people who are sitting at the table, should actually be from the community. It shouldn't be, we're going to tell you what we're going to do. It should be, you tell us, or let's sit down and have a conversation to see what's needed. And there's a lot of red tape for no necessary reason to get the resources that are needed"

"when I attend meetings, is that we don't include our youth and our youth or the next ones to be up"

"by this time people are burn out because it's like, we never produced anything so you just wasted a whole year of my life meeting to meet and we never actually start putting in"

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 that the system is designed to work against black people, leading to structural barriers, like poor transportation.

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.

A Lack of Action. Participants explained that sometimes community coalitions spend a lot of time discussing issues in meetings, but that discussion does not lead to meaningful action, which causes engaged people to burn out.

Hopelessness and a Lack of Youth Involvement. The lack of time and energy for community engagement was 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.

