

MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: GOING BEYOND THE BOX CHECKING





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For cross-sector alignment and community change initiatives to succeed and be sustainable, the public health, social service, and health care sectors must engage with the communities being served and the people who have actually experienced the targeted inequities. Partnering with community members with lived experience enhances the community's ability to address its own health needs and health inequities, which is the ultimate goal.¹ However, time and time again, engaging with communities in a meaningful, effective way proves challenging, and it often results in organizations finding ways to “check the box” or only superficially engage with community members. To explore this critical issue in cross-sector alignment, the Center for Community Health Alignment at the University of South Carolina Arnold School of Public Health and other collaborators engaged in a two-year project in partnership with state and community-level leaders and residents in four communities.

Here, we describe the challenges we found, community perspectives on those challenges, and — most crucially — the strategies that emerged to address these challenges in ways that respect and engage community members and more successfully meet their needs.

COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS AS PROCESS LEADERS

For our research to authentically reflect community engagement principles, two things were imperative. First, our team had to comprise both experienced researchers and trusted individuals who have worked at the community level. Second, the power and decision-making had to be equitably shared across all members of our research team. To meet these goals, three of the five leadership team members who designed the initial project proposal were community health workers (CHWs).² Once we received funding, we contracted with four additional CHWs to be core leaders of the research team and trained them in research methods.

CHWs advocate for and support the increased capacity of the communities in which they work.³ Having CHWs involved in participatory research projects not only allows for representation of their community's views on important health issues, it also creates awareness amongst the research team of the many challenges faced by communities experiencing inequities, while maintaining a strengths-based approach.⁴ The CHWs on our research team equitably shared responsibility for developing all research tools, drafting all discussion guides, creating recruitment

materials, facilitating community conversations, and analyzing data.

This approach resulted in the ability to more effectively engage community residents in the research process. As trusted individuals in their communities, CHWs have knowledge and relationships that significantly helped with recruitment and project participation. Additionally, because community members trusted the CHWs, they trusted the project — including the academic researchers and collaborating organizations at the table. Furthermore, the CHWs were able to effectively communicate the community’s needs, concerns, and priorities to the rest of the research team, which helped to inform the research questions and next steps. Finally, because the CHWs had established relationships in their communities, project participants felt comfortable in openly and honestly sharing with our team their thoughts about their community and what it needs to move forward. In this way, the CHWs not only expanded the reach of the work but also gave it deeper meaning and impact.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: CHALLENGES, FINDINGS, AND STRATEGIES

The components of the research project included multiple sets of interviews and a series of dialogue sessions in four communities across the state. We conducted two iterations of community dialogue sessions — called *open mic discussions* by CHWs and the local partners — in each of the four communities. We held the sessions in a diverse range of neighborhoods and recruited individuals from different demographic groups to ensure a range of perspectives. Our project produced volumes of actionable, community-generated information; in the following, we focus on some of the community engagement challenges that emerged. We also highlight strategies to address these challenges that offer guidance for working alongside communities in a more meaningful and sustainable way.

Challenge: Building Relationships and Trust

Trust and relationship building emerged as central themes in our research, yet organizations rarely give these elements enough intentional work and focus. People coming into communities

may not know how to approach or connect with community members; they may think they are building trust, but it may be ineffective or perceived as insincere by community members. One statewide leader with experience in community-engaged work noted that while organizations may like the concept of community engagement, the reality of what that looks like is sometimes abstract at best:

The idea of having those people at the table, it's just foreign to them. ... 'I want to hear what you have to say about it, but [the idea of] having a leader of your group or whatever actually sitting at my table ...' I don't think that they think it that far.

Strategy: Prolonged Interactions

Building trust requires time: taking the time to listen, to see things from other people's perspectives, and to make genuine connections. Investing this time helps team members to get to know people in a community on a deeper level through prolonged interactions, as well as to gain respect and empathy for their needs. To build effective relationships that facilitate engagement, it is important for team members to continue to show up, to ask how they can be more involved in community activities, and to build trust through action and patience over time.

Strategy: Partner With Gatekeepers

Trust is built through consistency, commitment, honesty, and follow-through, and oftentimes community gatekeepers or champions can facilitate these critical components of trust. A statewide interviewee said that connecting with local people can be challenging without gatekeepers; in such cases, organizations —

lack someone who has that front-row, face-to-face contact with the most vulnerable in their communities, [someone] who's able to speak with them on their experience to give the different perspective of what people are experiencing in the community at large.

Another interview participant explained how genuine dialogue with community gatekeepers is important to creating a relationship, including by —

finding out who those influencers are, building transparent and honest relationships with them — not overpromising and underdelivering — but just being honest with them about what you can do and what you can't do.

Challenge: Histories of Broken Promises

Communities may be hesitant to engage in efforts because of prior experiences of disingenuous engagement that failed to produce meaningful change or that produced only short-lived change. Many open mic participants shared stories of broken promises from local policymakers, developers, and human service organizations; such experiences resulted in an overwhelming lack of trust in not only the individuals responsible, but also other people from those sectors. One person at an open mic session explained why their community lacked interest in the whole process:

[They] want us to come out and vote or come to their meetings and things like that. It's like, once they're where they need to be, they disappear. And the thing is, they'll come out, they'll shake your hand. 'You need anything? I got somebody in my building, I got somebody in my office that works with that.' You reach out and get their email addresses and email them, and they don't even contact you back. They don't even contact you back.

Participants also said that efforts to engage the community sometimes appear selective and solely at the convenience of outsiders. Community members view these selective engagement opportunities as inauthentic or disingenuous — as based on the organization's need, rather than the needs of the community. As one interviewee explained,

No one disengages faster ... and [we] never hear back ... until two years later and it's time for you to do another listening session for your grant deliverable.

Strategy: Follow Up and Follow Through

Community leaders discussed the importance of following up after collecting information or ideas from community members. For example, our project hosted community data sharing sessions to inform the community of what we learned in the open mic discussions. In discussing plans for the follow-up sessions, one of the team's CHWs shared the following:

[We should] go back to the communities ... and invite a larger audience, including policymakers and key players, so that we can work alongside residents to bring about the change they want to see and get the word out about their concerns ... and develop tools and best practices to have for people who want to engage in this work.

Challenge: Acknowledging and Understanding Local Context

A major theme in the open mic sessions was how outsiders — both people and organizations — come into communities and deploy events and programming that do not match with a given community's actual needs. Participants shared that violence in communities and the effects of it are currently at the forefront of many people's minds. Other significant concerns are a lack of affordable housing, economic development, and other key resources — including education, childcare, transportation, and jobs.

As one open mic participant explained, however, when institutions focus on their own priorities instead of what the community actually needs, apathy and frustration may result:

We get tired of doing stuff because somebody else from the outside has an idea, but then ... we go and then the community doesn't show up, and then everybody says, 'Well, the community didn't show up.' Well, that's because that's not what the community really wanted. So, I think it's kind of just getting to know and meet people.

Another salient theme we found was that, while well-meaning, outside groups often fail to build a true partnership because they don't understand the local culture and history. A statewide leader of community engagement explained this as follows:

It's mostly how the message is being brought to [people] with lived experience. You've got to understand, there's culture there. If I want someone to change how they eat, well you have to realize they've been eating like this since grandmamma's, grandmamma's grandmamma. ... knowing how to actually sit down and have that conversation with the individual and recognizing the culture.

Equally important, if groups are not willing to hold difficult conversations that acknowledge racism and its effects, generating authentic relationships is likely to be challenging at best. Two communities that participated in open mic sessions mentioned major events in their communities' history that continue to shape residents' perspectives — and their feelings of mistrust and being ignored. It is only by talking openly about these events, they said, as well as the historical, structural racism that has impacted their communities, that effective relationships can be built.^{5,6} As one resident stated, “That's the elephant in the room that nobody likes to deal with.”

Strategy: Discuss Local Context, Culture, and Key Historical Events

Effective community engagement requires learning the local culture and context related to the target topics. It also means having difficult conversations, which may include acknowledging how the community has been mistreated and discussing issues relating to racism and inequitable opportunities. It is important for people coming into a community to listen to the communities' concerns, acknowledge them, and be up front about whether those priorities can be addressed within the initiative's scope. It is also critical that the community be given the opportunity to decline to participate — or, if possible, to reshape the initiative's focus on their own priorities. If such a reshaping is not possible, consider offering to connect the communities with other institutions that can help address their concerns.

Challenge: A History of Imposed Decision-Making and Governance

Outsiders often come into neighborhoods and make decisions *for* the communities instead of *with* communities. This leaves residents outside the decision-making process and results in their disenfranchisement. One community resident who participated in open mic sessions explained community disenfranchisement as follows:

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 [when] you talking about 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.

Strategy: Share Power During All Project Phases

Community leaders said that it is essential to include community members in every phase of any community initiative; this, historically, has not always been the reality. One community leader explained it as follows:

I think we missed the mark a lot of times. We just get a lot of great ideas, but by the time they get to the community, the community is just kind of like, 'Where did this come from? Who said that we needed this? Who said that this is the right way to engage with us?' I think inviting the community in or some type of folks who represent the community when that work is being identified, when that work is being thought of, when those partners come in that room to decide how they're going to divvy out the funding for specific projects ... especially those folks even on the grassroots level, getting them in on the front end and helping them understand the process behind why decisions are made — I think that is very important..

Community members should be invited to contribute to initiatives in different ways. For example, community members could be asked for their opinions or given a role in decision-making processes. Or they could be asked to share knowledge and information about their community. Engaging community members in active roles might include having them act as formal and informal advisers, serve as intermediaries with the community, provide historical context, be outspoken champions of causes, and participate in and volunteer at events. Also, as one CHW research team member emphasized, community members who are involved in efforts should be paid while they work alongside organizations' members.

Strategy: Use Various Approaches to Communicating With Residents

Multiple communication strategies are needed to reach community residents and let them know how they can be involved, including in-person promotion in neighborhoods. One community resident explained the need to take information to community members in their natural meeting places:

We got to go to the barber and beauty shops. We just can't rely on Facebook and Instagram and those other things, which is what seems to be what's popular now with communication. I think we've got to look at different ways of communicating so that the people that need the message can actually get the message.

When events are held in communities, organization members should make efforts to talk to residents rather than talking only to their own colleagues or team members:

So, you have to branch out your comfort zone ... branch out when you go in communities and start talking to somebody new that you don't know. Because that's the only way that you're going to get people engaged, by going up to them, talk to them, visiting them, and different things. And I didn't see much of that out [of] the organizations that came here; they basically just talked

amongst one another. Some of them did, but the majority of them didn't; they didn't take time and say, 'Hey. How are you doing? How's life been treating you?' or 'What's going on?' They didn't engage in that, so you can't expect for the people in the community to engage.

Challenge: Creating Accessible, Respectful Engagement Initiative

Coalition or community meetings are often held during the day or just after work, which can make it difficult for people to participate. Other challenges to reaching community members include using common terms rather than jargon, and understanding that residents might lack transportation, cellphones, or computers and internet access.

One statewide community engagement leader explained the need for accessible meetings and events as follows:

A lot of people travel out of their county to go to work. So, they're not available during the day ... and a lot of coalitions meet over lunch or they meet during work hours. So, some of the people who actually live there are just simply not available during the day.

In relation to organization staff using jargon at meetings, one community leader illustrated the problem from personal experience:

When I heard 'food desert' for the first time, I had no idea what that meant. I asked several groups, and they didn't know. People still don't know that [it] means there's no grocery store.

Another state stakeholder noted that using jargon and technical terms can also discourage community members from participating and that meeting formats may need to be revised to connect with the people with whom we want to engage.

Strategy: Meet People Where They Are

To authentically and respectfully engage with communities, sector leaders must be flexible and creative and engage with people in different ways. A community resident explained this need:

You have to meet people where they are ... and it might not necessarily be that professional setting. And ... sit down and listen and not just discredit them because they're not as articulate or hadn't been to school for 30 years. If they have something to say, you should listen, not brush them off as they're not educated.

The timing and location of meetings and events should be key considerations. Some participants suggested working through trusted organizations that are already gathering places — such as churches, schools, food banks, fraternities and sororities, neighborhood associations, and organizations with CHWs — and holding meetings at these places at times when people normally gather.

Messaging is also important, including the ways in which messages are developed and delivered. When working to create new connections, both the message and messaging should be crafted with care to ensure that they resonate with community members. Again, it is important to avoid technical language and research jargon, which is off-putting — and suggests that you are working “on” communities rather than “with” them.

Challenge: Some Funding Structures May Inhibit Authentic Engagement and Collaboration

Participants cited two key barriers to community engagement related to traditional grant funding. First, they said that grant-funded programs often lack sufficient time for planning and initial relationship building. Second, as mentioned before, grant funding opportunities often arrive in communities with preset agendas that are unaligned with the community's needs, interests, or prior traumas. For example, a community may be concerned about safe and affordable housing or

violence, but the program or initiative focuses on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption.

One person explained how these issues can inhibit authentic engagement and collaboration with community members:

I think one, is that it's hard to do [community-engaged work] well when you have a project you need to accomplish. So, when you go to a community and you say, 'Help us understand what you need as a community,' and they say, 'We need our streetlights fixed,' and you are actually there to do reading education and support for the kids in the neighborhood, are you going to fix the lights? Because that's not what you do — that's not what you're funded to do. ... So I think there's barriers because there's not funding for — generally, there's not a lot of funding support for just listening to your neighborhoods and identifying their needs — and meeting them — regardless of what they are and whether or not they fit into the box that you want them to.

Strategy: Redesign Funding Opportunities

Ideally, funders would require or invest in an initial planning phase that goes beyond the traditional 90-day period; in reality, it may take up to a year to build relationships and fully understand community context, needs, and strengths to build on. Funding or program development opportunities should start with the communities, and community leaders should be part of conversations around priority-setting and resource allocation. If a grant funding opportunity does not align with a community's priorities, the funder should be open to changing its priorities or finding a creative way to include resources that address the community's actual concerns.

Challenge: Increasing Capacity Building in Community Engagement Techniques

Research participants suggested the need for more capacity building around community engagement. One state-level leader described the challenges as follows:

So, we talk about, all the time, evidence-based programs; well what is evidence-based community engagement? We need to create a model — or identify effective models — and then, in future grants, support a wider use of those models..

Strategy: Increase Authentic Engagement Capacity

One way to leverage funding toward meaningful community engagement is to build capacity and tools to help organizations and communities partner in a more equitable way. This could include guidelines for how to work together and how to reach out to the people most affected. Other capacity-building suggestions that we heard included training community members on how to engage on their own terms and build more shared power; training for multisector coalitions of organizational leaders, alongside local community groups, to facilitate opportunities to learn about each other’s context, culture, and priorities; and capacity-building efforts to assist communities in building connections with larger, statewide efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

While multisector coalitions, public health providers, health care providers, social service providers, researchers, and funders all understand what community engagement entails, it still proves difficult to authentically engage with the people most impacted by health inequities in a meaningful way. Our project gathered a wealth of data to inform this persistent challenge. Across our data, similar themes emerged that point to a clear set of challenges to community engagement, as well as to strategies to help address the challenges. Critical themes included the importance of trust and relationship building, meeting people where they are, respecting local culture and history, being open to difficult but necessary conversations, and being intentional and flexible around how to involve community members in all parts of the process. Further, we found that funding structures need to facilitate community engagement and long-term investment, provide ample time for requisite relationship building, and allow for the agenda to emerge from community members over

time. Participants also identified the need for training in best practices for community engagement and for additional capacity-building support for institutions, community coalitions, and other community leaders. Implementing these community-generated solutions to promote community engagement will enhance the ability of practitioners in multisector alignment initiatives to create lasting partnerships for collective impact.

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4. Wennerstrom, A., Vannoy, S. D., O’Toole, E., & Wells, K. B. (2011). Community-based participatory development of a community health worker mental health outreach role to extend collaborative care in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Ethnicity and Disease*, 21 (3 Supp 1), 45–51.
5. In February 1968, police opened fire on a large group of unarmed black students during a civil rights protest at South Carolina State University. The incident resulted in the deaths of three young men and injuries in 28 more. While largely unrecognized, it was one of the most violent events of the civil rights movement; see <https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/orangeburg-massacre>
6. On March 3, 1970, a large group of angry white parents attacked two school buses carrying black students to Lamar elementary and high schools in Darlington County; see <https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/lamar-riots/>