

# Engaging the Power of Communities for Better Health

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**Authentically engaging community residents is necessary to impact social drivers of health. Acknowledging the value of residents' lived experiences in the planning, implementation, and financial decisions of community engagement initiatives is key. Sustainability of community engagement initiatives depends on open communication and follow-through on commitments.**

## Approaching Communities

In recent years, the medical community has focused attention on addressing social determinants of health. While investments in non-health care services that address social drivers are directionally correct, to make significant and sustainable impacts on health, organizations and health systems must effectively engage with the people they intend to serve.

In practice, however, community engagement efforts often begin too late in the planning process and fail to plan for the sustainability necessary to build trust and achieve buy-in. Disregarding the value of community input during visioning and early conception, as well as throughout implementation, may result in participant disengagement and an initiative's failure to deliver its intended results. It also overlooks the need for interventions to evolve over time, and the fact that this evolution requires developing a plan for obtaining ongoing input from those whose opinions matter most: the participants themselves.

Consider the experience of the Cottage Grove community, a neighborhood in the eastern part of Greensboro, North Carolina. Cottage Grove residents suffered from decades of systematic exclusion, such as redlining, disinvestment, and environmental health challenges. Poor housing stock has led to high asthma rates stemming in part from poor living conditions in the housing that is available. In 2018, the community was struck by an EF-2 tornado that cut a path of destruction across the neighborhood and destroyed several homes. Additionally, broken promises by some who gave the pretense of working to create change within community, but failed to work authentically with residents, fractured trust and accomplished nothing.

Taking a shortsighted approach to community engagement has several limitations. First, a non-inclusive community engagement initiative may be perceived as tokenism or

disingenuous by community members, especially those who have become jaded by negative community engagement experiences in the past. This is common when agencies view community engagement as a box to check instead of recognizing the power and importance of the community's voice and knowledge about itself.

In Chatham County, North Carolina, the public health department recognized that the traditional community health assessment (CHA), conducted once every four years, never fully realized the potential of what true community engagement could bring to the process. Historically, issues identified in the CHA were prioritized based on a community survey with a sample not representative of Chatham County's demographic characteristics. When it came time to plan, implement, and evaluate interventions designed to address the health priorities in Chatham County, there was no process for ongoing community involvement. In 2018, the Chatham County Public Health Department and Chatham Health Alliance set out to address this limitation by asking community survey participants to enroll in a first-of-its-kind longitudinal cohort representative of the county's population [1]. Every 12 months, staff and volunteers reach out to enrolled participants by mail, email, phone, and in-person visits, according to participant preference, to inform new and ongoing strategies while growing and sustaining relationships between practitioners and community members. In addition to traditional focus groups, the Chatham County Public Health Department has been working to implement the evidence-based World Café model, an effective method for hosting large group dialogues [2], through local community conversations. These recurring community conversations, focused in predominantly African American communities, seek to build relationships through open-ended discussions that can lead to action conceived, planned, and implemented jointly by community members and department staff. While the community cohort and community conversations are still in their early stages, they

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show promise of being the cornerstone of a community assessment and strategic planning process that prioritizes ongoing community participation.

With similar aims of more authentically engaging communities to address the root causes of health issues, the Rhode Island Health Department of Health (RIDOH) established Health Equity Zones (HEZs) throughout the state [3]. The goal of these diverse, community-led, place-based collaboratives is to build capacity at the local level and unite community residents, community-based organizations, and other local stakeholders around shared goals for improving health and well-being in their neighborhoods. HEZs tackle a variety of issues identified by the community as priorities, and their activities range from developing farmers markets to improving access to affordable housing, supporting residents and families affected by opioid use disorder or community trauma, increasing urban green space and the walkability of neighborhoods, and much more [3].

Authentic community engagement begins with truly understanding and recognizing the necessity of including in the conversation the people whose lives are the focus of community change initiatives. People with lived experience are experts in the issues that impact their lives. Those individuals must be treated as true partners in the work. This means that they are not an afterthought, and that they are included in the visioning, decision-making, planning, and implementation of goals and objectives that significantly impact their day-to-day reality. This increases opportunities to build trust over time and helps with agenda, goal, and objective alignment.

### **Community-led Governance**

Bringing community residents to the table should also involve them “setting the table” and being decision-makers from the very beginning. This creates alignment of agendas between the community and the organizations involved in the initiative, which in turn provides a stronger foundation upon which to build. This moves an organization from simply utilizing community-informed methods to utilizing true community-driven collaboration and shared power.

When residents are included from the beginning in every opportunity to create change in their neighborhood, this demonstrates the value of their lived experience. When organizations look to community members for advice and innovative ways to create policy, systems, and environmental changes, they are choosing to involve those individuals in the design and execution of the program. This is especially important with regard to utilization of resources. In choosing this approach, organizations are treating the community as partners in the work and are sharing power in decision-making and development of solutions.

It is worth noting that challenges will arise with such a significant cultural shift, as most governance structures are top-down. However, when thinking about how to address health equity and health disparities effectively, we must shift

from traditional structures to one that focuses on grassroots, bottom-up methods and, in the process, acknowledges residents as the experts on their lives and community.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, the Collaborative Cottage Grove was formed in response to a grant award from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation to work with the residents of Cottage Grove on policy, system, and environmental changes. The Collaborative Cottage Grove is a multisector partnership developed between community members, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood associations, health systems, and local government entities. The structure of the collaborative team is designed not to overshadow community member voices but to intentionally allow community members to develop the strategies and make decisions on how to approach their environmental health needs.

### **Community-directed Investments**

Financial support is a key part of fostering community-led initiatives. How funding is structured and the values underlying funding sources are just as important as how much funding is available. Funding structure often impacts the kind of work that residents can engage in, such as in the case of grant funding that stipulates specific types of activities required. Funding also contributes to the administrative burden faced by residents and the sustainability of projects. The funding mechanisms of community-led work have the potential to truly accelerate or stifle community efforts.

To allow community residents to design and lead initiatives informed by their lived experience, funding needs to be flexible enough to allow for resident creativity and innovation. Many funding opportunities tend to have a restrictive menu of interventions, which can stifle innovation. While guidance can be helpful, funders should allow for novel ideas.

As governmental and non-governmental funders develop requests for proposals (RFPs), they must find ways to improve the flexibility in how their funding can be used. When developing RFPs, consideration should be given to broadening the types of organizations that can receive funding.

Grants often fund programmatic work, but may limit allocations to the structural and administrative aspects of community-led efforts that enable them to succeed long term. For example, a community collaborative working on food access through improving availability of farmers markets may access grant funds to pay for materials needed to help set up the markets, but may not be able to use these funds to ensure that staff have competitive living wages and benefits. Spending money on such necessities may not have the same evocative appeal as programmatic spending but is crucial for a successful initiative.

RIDOH utilizes a braided approach to fund HEZs. This involves weaving together funds from several state and federal sources with differing stipulations and reporting requirements. RIDOH has made a conscious decision to

braid funds in such a way as to allow the most flexibility in activities for community residents possible. HEZs are also encouraged to apply for additional funding from external sources such as grants and philanthropic organizations. The HEZ experience has highlighted the need to consider three principles when funding community-led work: funding flexibility, funding structural versus programmatic work, and funding sustainability.

## Maturation and Sustainability

Effective community engagement requires a continuous process of building and strengthening relationships between practitioners and community members. Only through investment in relationships, fostering trust, and maintaining an open dialogue can initiatives be sustained. The host community, and leadership within that community, must be engaged as new strategies are being formed through planning, implementation, and beyond if trust is to be developed and maintained. Embracing and sustaining continuous community engagement requires reimagining the traditional models of engagement. In addition to more traditional forms of outreach like in-person meetings, community engagement in today's environment must consider alternative meeting and communication platforms such as social media, email, and other virtual technologies.

Although continuous community engagement takes effort, it is a worthwhile investment that should be considered essential to strategic planning and improving relationships between practitioners and community members. Dedication to this kind of engagement will yield better outcomes in the long term. Flexible funding and appropriate funding for organizational needs are two aspects of ensuring sustainability of community-led work. As we fund community projects and collaboratives, it is important to keep in mind the long-term vision for the work. Is the expectation that this is a one-time project, or are residents hoping to build something that lasts indefinitely? Funding should help community residents achieve their long-term goals and enable residents to engage in activities that will improve their sustainability. For example, in some of the Rhode Island HEZs, residents are being paid for their participation and are being encouraged and supported in taking leadership roles in HEZ work. Funding this kind of work helps to build resident engagement and ensure the sustainability of the HEZs over time.

With a true community-engaged approach, residents are active participants and community voice is prioritized, yielding more equitable solutions, increased individual capacity, strengthened community partnerships, and increased trust between members of the community and the organizations working with them. The Cottage Grove neighborhood has

seen positive environmental changes through the collaborative's utilization of these principles, such as park enhancements and toxicology remediation, apartment rehabilitation, bike lane implementation, traffic calming, and sidewalk implementation.

Take for instance Stephen Smoot, a longtime resident of Cottage Grove who is originally from New York City and now serves as the chair of the Healthy Housing Community Action Team.

"I had no intention on staying in this community," Smoot stated during a November symposium hosted by the National Academy of Medicine called *Vital Directions for Health and Health Care: The North Carolina Experience*. "However, when you knocked on my door and shared with me that you wanted to work with me and others after learning that I was dealing with similar challenges as other folks, I began going to the community meetings. I realized my voice matters and all of us are stronger together. I became invested, so I stayed."

Mr. Smoot is one of many examples of the success that happens when you invest in residents and genuinely value their experience and expertise. Grassroots methods can help address health inequity and health disparities, but this work also requires leadership capacity to engage with people at the community level and do so in a way that builds power in those communities. Engaging community means partnering with residents to ensure that concerns are directly reflected in planning, decision-making, solution development, and implementation. **NCMJ**

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