



RESEARCH REPORT

# Community-Engaged Approaches to Evaluating a Collective Impact Effort

Experiences Evaluating Family-Centered Community Change

*Amelia Coffey*  
July 2021

*Peace Gwam*

*Susan J. Popkin*



## ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Community-Engaged Approaches to Evaluating a Collective Impact Effort</b>	<b>1</b>
Background on Community-Engaged Methods	2
Community-Engaged Methods and the FCCC Evaluation	6
Goals and Expectations for Community-Engaged Methods in FCCC	7
Approaches to Community Engagement in the FCCC Evaluation	10
Value of the Approach	15
Challenges, Trade-Offs, and Limitations of the Approach	19
Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned	27
<b>Appendix. Data Sources</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Statement of Independence</b>	<b>37</b>

# Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at [urban.org/fundingprinciples](https://urban.org/fundingprinciples).

We would like to thank the various Family-Centered Community Change (FCCC) contributors who offered their insights for this report. These include Burgundi Allison, Cindy Guy, Traci Broady, and Kimberly Spring from the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Amoretta Morris, president of Borealis Philanthropy and former director at the Casey Foundation; Kantahyanee Murray, senior associate director at the Michigan Public Health Institute; independent consultants Scott Hebert, Brigitte Rouson, and Hilary Binder-Aviles; evaluators Jared Raynor and Kate Locke of TCC Group and Anna Minsky of Metis Associates; and our Urban Institute FCCC evaluation team: Marla McDaniel, Theresa Anderson, Marcus Gaddy, Amanda Gold, and Patrick Spauster.

# Executive Summary

The Family-Centered Community Change (FCCC) effort, launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, supported local service partnerships over eight years (2012–19) in three neighborhoods with high poverty rates: one each in Buffalo, New York; Columbus, Ohio; and San Antonio, Texas. These efforts sought to develop more integrated sets of services to help adults and children succeed together in a “two-generation approach.” The Foundation took what it termed a “strategic coinvestor” approach to FCCC, building on existing community-change efforts with flexible technical assistance and other local partnership-directed supports. The Urban Institute and two other evaluation firms conducted different evaluation activities around the effort.

Casey’s strategic coinvestor approach to FCCC reflected the Foundation’s priority to bolster the local partnerships’ decisionmaking power in every aspect of FCCC, including evaluation activities. The expectations and goals for involving local stakeholders in the evaluation activities were modest at the beginning—chiefly, to ensure the activities were workable and beneficial to the local partnerships—but grew over time. Over the course of FCCC, the field of community-engaged evaluation methods also grew and developed, and the Foundation increasingly viewed these methods as key to its efforts to support racial and ethnic equity and inclusion (REEI) in all facets of its work.

As these expectations grew, the evaluators employed an expanding set of community-engaged evaluation methods (CEM). We define “community” in FCCC as program participants and staff involved in administering the programs. CEM in FCCC included engaging the local partnership staff in planning data collection and reviewing products. In the latter half of the effort, it included engaging these staff, along with program participants, in interpreting preliminary evaluation findings during engaging community events called Data Walks. The Foundation also invited a select few program participants to learn about evaluation activities at FCCC stakeholder convenings beginning in 2016.

CEM exists on a continuum from simply informing and consulting with community stakeholders about evaluation activities to developing strong partnerships with community members and empowering them to make final decisions about evaluation design and execution. Most CEM in FCCC sat at the lower end of this continuum, with evaluators informing or consulting with community members. In most cases, evaluators engaged partnership staff rather than program participants.

During interviews with the Urban Institute team about their experiences applying CEM in FCCC, partnership staff, Foundation staff, evaluators, and other stakeholders all agreed that CEM added value to the FCCC evaluations and to community members. There was widespread agreement that Data

Walks were empowering experiences for FCCC program participants. Evaluators felt that feedback from these participants added nuance to evaluation findings. Evaluators also felt that soliciting ongoing feedback from partnership staff on products improved the accuracy of evaluation findings and helped build stronger relationships with these people.

However, despite this added value, stakeholders pinpointed challenges involved in using CEM. Program participants were only engaged at limited touchpoints and only in the later years of the evaluation. Evaluators and some Foundation staff felt that parents had been engaged in a tokenizing way. Stakeholders also noted that involving partnership staff in reviewing products took additional time they often needed to perform their core responsibilities to serve families. Evaluators also emphasized that involving these staff in planning evaluation activities limited the range of activities that stakeholders agreed on and ultimately meant the evaluation design did not include an outcomes study.

Despite these limitations, the FCCC evaluation methods included substantially more community engagement than external evaluations typically do. This effort was only possible because of a rare level of sustained support from the Foundation. The FCCC experience with CEM offers several lessons for incorporating these methods in future evaluations of community-change efforts that focus on shared decisionmaking, including the following:

1. Take a community-engaged approach in selecting program and evaluation grantees. This includes selecting evaluators with cultural competencies necessary to gain community members' trust.
2. Ensure all stakeholders share a common understanding of and commitment to community engagement in both the evaluation and programming throughout all phases of the work.
3. Foster a safe space for feedback by making clear commitments about how shared decisionmaking will work and following through on them.
4. Work to build relationships before beginning evaluation tasks and throughout the engagement.
5. Ensure local and outside stakeholders have the knowledge and skills to foster engagement and partnership.
6. Set initial community engagement goals and priorities up front as well as a process to update those goals and priorities over time.
7. Establish a commitment from the funder at the outset to adequately fund community engagement in effort design and evaluation.

8. Appropriately compensate participants for their contributions to the community-engaged evaluation and minimize participation burden.

These lessons are timely with increasing national recognition of the need to incorporate perspectives of those with lived experience in decisionmaking about programming affecting their lives.





# Community-Engaged Approaches to Evaluating a Collective Impact Effort

The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched its eight-year Family-Centered Community Change (FCCC)<sup>1</sup> effort in 2012 to support local partnerships in three neighborhoods with high poverty rates as they developed more integrated sets of services to help parents and children succeed together in a “two-generation approach.” Rather than creating an entirely new intervention, the Foundation collaborated with existing partnerships, located in Buffalo, New York; Columbus, Ohio; and San Antonio, Texas, and provided technical assistance, trainings, and peer-learning opportunities to build on existing community change efforts—a role the Annie E. Casey Foundation refers to as “strategic coinvestor.”<sup>2</sup> FCCC was a collaborative effort that included input from grantees and consultants the Foundation selected to provide technical assistance and other services to support performance measurement, evaluation, and learning. Casey referred to these contributors as the “FCCC evaluation and resource team.” The team included three research organizations: the Urban Institute (evaluating all three community efforts’ design, implementation, and family outcomes), Metis Associates (helping build and support each community’s data capacity and performance measures), and TCC Group (evaluating Casey’s strategic coinvestor role in FCCC). The Urban Institute began its evaluation in 2013. This report is part of a series about what we learned from seven years of observations in our research.

The evaluation and resource team used community-engaged approaches to programming and evaluation in different ways throughout the effort, though goals and practices concerning this approach evolved over time. Community-engaged evaluation approaches included input, participation, and reflections from community members—defined in this report as all program participants and staff involved in administering programming—who were stakeholders in the FCCC efforts.

Taking a community-engaged approach was an ambitious and challenging undertaking from the outset. These methods were employed in the context of three complex and unique service partnerships with differing goals and levels of buy-in to the evaluation efforts. The evaluators were all from outside the three communities where the partnerships existed, meaning evaluators’ cultural literacy and connections to the communities were limited.

This report discusses and reflects on how community-engaged methods (CEM) benefited the FCCC partnerships and enhanced the evaluation, particularly how these methods can engage community members in the research. We begin with background on CEM, providing context for how this field

evolved alongside the FCCC evaluation. We then discuss the rationale for using these methods for the FCCC evaluation and how our approach evolved over time. We draw on evaluation documentation as well as conversations with Foundation staff, interviews with the evaluation and resource team, interviews with staff from the three partnerships, and a reflective discussion session with the Urban evaluation team. A key limitation is that we were unable to obtain perspectives on the methodological approach from program participants (see appendix). We conclude with key takeaways and lessons learned for future evaluations of community-change efforts.

As we discuss later in this report, FCCC program and evaluation activities were closely intertwined, and approaches in one area affected those in the other substantially. Consequently, the report discusses CEM employed across the FCCC effort where these activities were relevant to community engagement in the evaluation. Although we focus mainly on issues concerning evaluation methods, we aim to produce a product that will be helpful for program practitioners, funders, and evaluators alike.

## Background on Community-Engaged Methods

Community-engaged research and evaluation aim to involve members of groups most directly affected by interventions studied in the research process (CTSA 2011). These approaches involve radical shifts in the role of evaluators, which traditionally centers professional evaluators as the sole evaluation experts, toward partnership with community stakeholders in the evaluation effort (Handley et al. 2010).

The field of community-engaged research methods has grown and evolved substantially over the past three decades. Many early and relatively widespread adopters were within the public health field. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published the landmark *Principles of Community Engagement* in 1997, recognizing the importance of engaging community stakeholders in public health research and intervention and laying out guidelines for doing so. In the ensuing two decades, and accelerating in the past several years, an expanding number of federal agencies and private stakeholders have promoted these methods, extending to many different sectors. Researchers and practitioners have developed a literature drawing from across social science disciplines, pulling from concepts related to constituency building, community psychology, and community participation, among others (CTSA 2011).

Various definitions of community have emerged in the context of defining community engagement. Community is often understood to include those affected by the topics, interventions, or conditions studied or dealt with and the larger set of stakeholders involved in addressing the issue. These

stakeholders look different depending on the context and can include groups of people with different characteristics, experiences, or concerns in common. In *Principles of Community Engagement*, the CDC defined community broadly to include any group of people organized in a unit or with a common interest. A community is not defined solely by geography but can refer to a group based on demographic identities, with a common interest or commitment to meeting a shared need. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director's Council of Public Relations defines community as including "people affiliated with or self-identified by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations." Pasick et al. (2010) include community members and staff at community-based organizations in their definition. And Kellogg's Community Health Scholars Program (2001) includes community-based organization representatives and people receiving local interventions in their definition.

As the CEM field has expanded, it has increasingly recognized the importance of centering community self-definitions. The field is also increasingly acknowledging that different stakeholders, including those whose views and priorities conflict, should be heard in the engagement process.

Just as no one definition of community exists, no single definition of community engagement does either, though the CDC has offered perhaps the most widely accepted one:

Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people...It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.

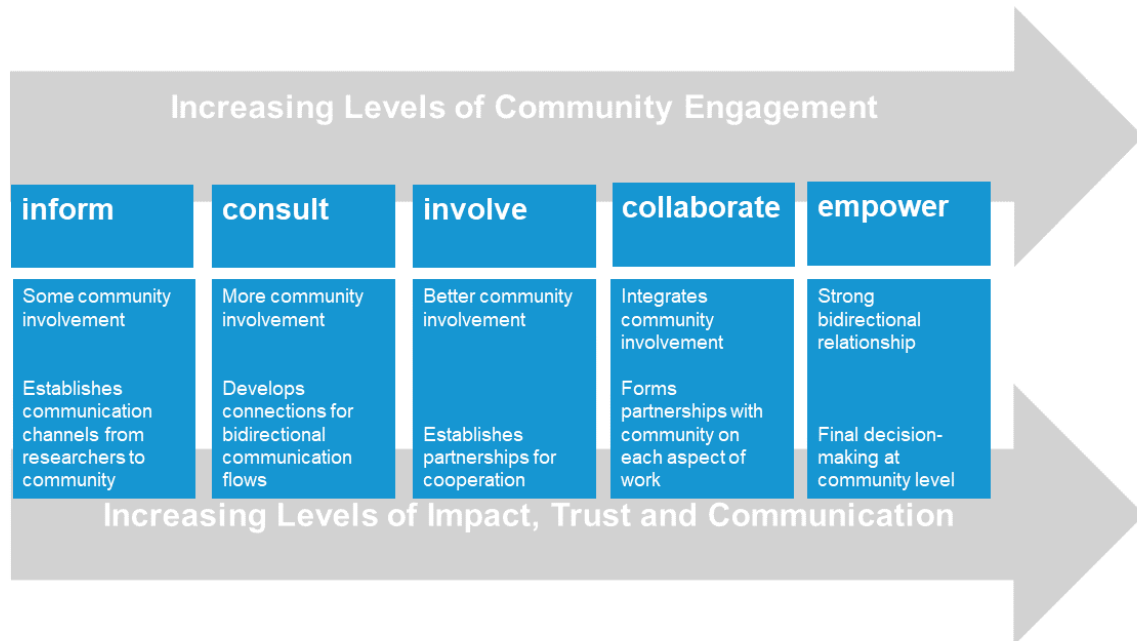
—CDC 1997

This definition extends well beyond research and evaluation to engaging community members in the planning and implementation of programs, efforts, and other activities they have a stake in. Leaders in the field have also proposed definitions more focused on research and evaluation, including the NIH Director's Council of Public Representatives (Ahmed and Palermo 2010):

Community engagement in research...is a core element of any research effort involving communities which requires academic members to become part of the community and community members to become part of the research team, thereby creating a unique working and learning environment before, during, and after the research.

Community involvement in the research process can take place at various levels and occur at all stages of the research and evaluation process, from design and selection of an evaluator onward. This variation is often depicted along a continuum, as in figure 1 (Arnstein 1969; Scally et al. 2020; Pasick et al. 2010).

**FIGURE 1**  
**Community Engagement Continuum**



**Source:** Adapted from *Principles of Community Engagement* (CTSA 2011).

This continuum can be applied with the following definitions in the context of research and evaluation:

- At the lowest level of engagement, researchers may develop a one-way communication channel to **inform** community members about their activities. Engagement at this level is typically transactional and involves leveraging community members to support the status quo—for example, providing informational sessions or sharing promotional materials. At this level of engagement, researchers generally conduct data collection without input from community partners.
- At the next level of engagement, researchers **consult** community members about evaluation activities. Consultation includes two-way communication, where community members can help shape the evaluation, though they may not have actual decisionmaking power. This level of engagement may include separate events, including focus groups and interviews, to gather feedback on evaluation design plans.
- In the middle of the engagement continuum, researchers may **involve** community members in limited decisionmaking. At this level, researchers and community members establish a cooperative, ongoing partnership that provides opportunities for more substantial

engagement. Researchers may engage community partners to assist with developing materials and approaches for recruitment. They may also consult with partners at the beginning of the research or evaluation project to identify key themes or questions to investigate or report back initial findings and conduct data analyses alongside community members.

- Still further along the continuum, researchers **collaborate** with community members. Collaboration includes engaging community members as partners in all aspects of the research and may involve establishing an infrastructure like a community advisory board to support ongoing communication and accountability between researchers and community members.
- At the most engaged end of the continuum, stakeholder partnerships fully **empower** community members to join in making final decisions about research design and execution.

At the most engaged end of the continuum are transformative methods and levels of engagement, which involve engaging community members in a power-sharing partnership that recognizes each member as an expert on their own experience and needs as well as engaging with their community. This deep, meaningful engagement includes involving community members as part of the research team alongside the professional researchers at every stage of the research process (Pasick et al. 2010). The most widely recognized form of transformative community-engaged research is Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR involves partnering with community members to design research of importance to the community and incorporating knowledge of community partners to drive social change (Community Health Scholars Program 2001).

CEM potentially enables inclusion, empowerment, ownership, and capacity-building for communities, as well as cultural humility and competency for evaluators and resource providers (Cargo and Mercer 2008). These methods rest on two main pillars: first, ethics and responding to a history of community exploitation in the name of research—especially communities with lower incomes and communities of color. The second pillar—community empowerment—gives community members some hands-on decisionmaking power and participation in research, recognizing that communities with low incomes have historically had very little control over the programs affecting their lives, such as schools, medical facilities, and public housing. Often this pillar covers activities aimed at capturing community members' lived experience. Community engagement is key to racial equity as it draws on the expertise of people most affected by programs and policies and includes them as knowledge contributors to the research. Community-engaged research can be used to understand the structural causes of issues and allow marginalized communities to have a voice in their community decisionmaking (Farrell, Langness, and Falkenburger 2021).<sup>3</sup> Evidence also suggests that community-engaged activities have positive

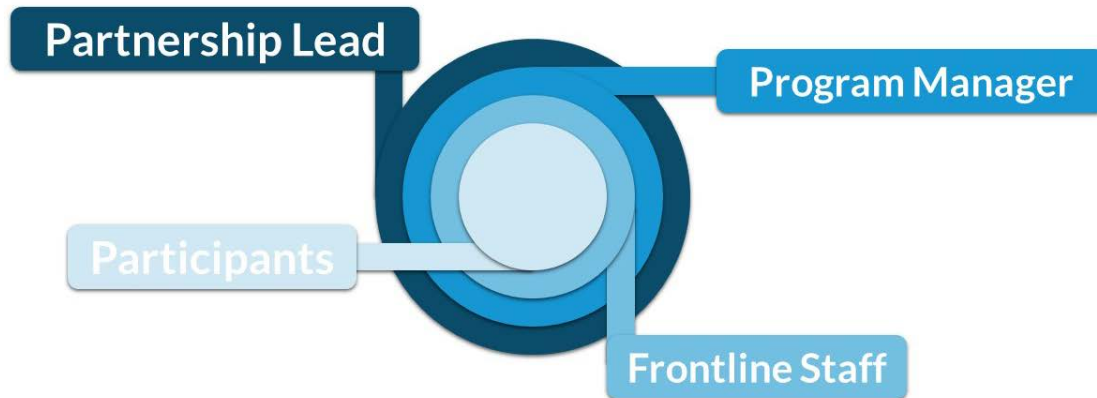
effects on participants' social networks, leading to enhanced feelings of connectivity to their community (Attree et al. 2010).

Increasing evidence suggests that community-engaged approaches offer many benefits to intervention leaders, professional evaluators, and their evaluation products. Handley et al. (2010) note that codeveloping research designs can produce more easily actionable findings. Further, including community members in data interpretation can increase the validity and relevance of those findings and make data from understudied populations more accessible to researchers. Attree and colleagues (2010) have also found that community-engaged approaches may benefit place-based interventions broadly through increasing mutual trust and understanding between recipients of interventions and programming leads. And a literature review by Staley (2009) found several additional areas of positive impact, including (1) improving development of research agendas, such as identifying new areas for collaboration and funding; (2) fostering goodwill with community members, which may lead to future collaborations; (3) benefits to researcher and evaluation staff through new insights and appreciation for community involvement, which can result in career benefits and work dissemination opportunities; (4) benefits to community organizations, including a higher profile, new knowledge, and new partnerships with community members; and (5) benefits to the general public, who will more likely be receptive to the research and benefit more from it.

## Community-Engaged Methods and the FCCC Evaluation

In this report, we define community as including all local stakeholders, including FCCC participants and partnership staff (figure 2).<sup>4</sup> This definition reflects the way the term was used throughout FCCC and aligns with several broad definitions found in the community-engagement literature. As community-engagement approaches evolved within FCCC, so did concepts of community and no single definition was employed consistently.

**FIGURE 2**  
**FCCC Partner Staff Roles**



Source: Urban Institute research team.

## Goals and Expectations for Community-Engaged Methods in FCCC

Casey Foundation staff shared an ethos of valuing community engagement in programming and evaluation from the beginning of FCCC, though it was not always stated explicitly or grounded in the growing academic literature on CEM. There was a sense among Foundation staff that previous community-change efforts the Foundation had funded, notably Making Connections, were too top-down in structure and that Casey staff wanted to go in a different direction with FCCC.<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the initial processes of planning the evaluation and program grant opportunities, Foundation staff had a general conviction that supporting local partnership staff to make decisions was an important part of their approach to the work.

This ethos was part of the thinking behind developing the novel strategic coinvestor role for the Foundation in FCCC, which oriented FCCC around local partner staff leadership and engagement in all its facets, including program design, partnership development, and requests for technical assistance from the Foundation.<sup>6</sup> As a former FCCC effort manager at the Foundation said, “As we thought about what it meant to behave as a strategic coinvestor, that absolutely meant being more participatory, being in greater relationship, and taking more feedback from the partners in everything we did, evaluation included.” In particular, Foundation staff said they had an implicit sense that the evaluation of the Foundation’s strategic coinvestor approach, which involved getting input from community partnership staff on how that approach was going, was part of the community-engaged approach to FCCC from the beginning.

---

*[The Foundation] should have some benefit, but we should not be the central entity making those decisions.*

*—Casey Foundation evaluation leader*

---

This emphasis on community partner input was also on display during program evaluation planning. The Foundation consulted with the community partnerships, who had already received initial grants and begun pilot planning, during the process of designing initial evaluation requirements. The community partnerships helped influence the selection of the Urban Institute team to conduct the program evaluation because the partners articulated their priorities and were able to vocalize concerns about their capacity for engaging in evaluation activities. Further, because FCCC was an exploratory effort to support the three community partnerships as they developed their programming, Foundation staff felt it was important that the evaluation take a flexible, responsive approach and develop methods and plans for data collection over time in continued consultation with the partnerships.

Despite these early priorities, Casey Foundation staff described having relatively modest initial expectations and goals about community engagement in the FCCC evaluation. They wanted to ensure the partnerships had the capacity to complete all required evaluation-related activities and that those partnerships would be able to use the data and evaluation findings for their own objectives outside of the FCCC evaluation. One Casey evaluation leader summed it up this way: “Our most modest objective was to conduct an evaluation that had the cooperation and buy-in of the folks on the ground,” and the Foundation staff realized that to achieve that objective the partnerships would need to “get something in return.” There was also an expectation among evaluation staff members at the Foundation that involving community partnership staff would lead to a stronger evaluation. Foundation staff expected that more community involvement would mean the evaluation would reflect a deeper understanding of the context in which each community partnership operated and therefore of which questions were most relevant. Foundation staff did not present concrete expectations as to what the community-engaged research methods would look like, beyond ongoing local partner consultation on evaluation activities and input on products.

The scope of these goals and expectations grew significantly over the next several years. As FCCC partnerships became more established, evaluators and Foundation staff were in frequent communication with partner staff through calls, emails, and on-site meetings. Engagement with participants remained limited during this period, but it marked the beginning of a gradual shift toward



expectations of increased engagement and more creative efforts to get input from program participants on their experiences with FCCC programming

Community engagement goals expanded further as, midway through the evaluation, the Foundation strengthened its focus on what it calls racial and ethnic equity and inclusion (REEI) in the projects it funds. This focus represented the culmination of two decades of work at the Foundation to embed equity and inclusion in all facets of its work, resulting from a recognition that barriers to success for the families its grants sought to help were the result of systemic racism deeply embedded in societal systems and structures, including public policies (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2017). The Foundation funded trainings on the topic in 2015 and 2016, both for the evaluation and resource team and for community partnership staff. Foundation staff recognized that a commitment to equity in their work should involve ensuring community members, and especially program participants, had opportunities to make decisions in designing programming and evaluation to ensure it reflected their needs and priorities. Despite this recognition, participant engagement remained limited throughout the effort (McDaniel et al. 2019).

---

*We've come quite a ways over the time that I have been at Casey in terms of more clearly articulating what are the principles that we hold to...across all phases of the evaluation.*  
—Casey Foundation staff member

---

Other changes followed this shift of focus that strengthened commitments to CEM. In 2017, a new evaluation officer with a commitment to deepening community engagement came onboard. This officer had deep familiarity with the growing academic literature around community-engaged research and evaluation methods and encouraged expanding use of these methods in the FCCC evaluation. Her priorities included expanding the range of stakeholders engaged in the evaluation and deepening the level at which they were engaged. This evaluation officer explained her perspective on the importance of “the role of the evaluator and being an advocate [for community engagement] and having the courage to have those negotiations, even when the project wasn’t designed to do that. That is in service to equity.” This perspective motivated her to advocate for employing more evidence-based CEM in the program evaluation.

Following these changes, the Foundation, along with the Urban team in its internal reporting to the community partners on their activities, encouraged greater program participant involvement in program design and decisionmaking.

## Approaches to Community Engagement in the FCCC Evaluation

The Foundation and the evaluation and resource team incorporated CEM throughout the effort, though they increased in scope and depth over time, often prompted or led by local partnership staff. Although these methods primarily involved engaging partnership staff, in limited instances they involved engaging program participants. The methods also involved different levels of engagement (table 1), though they mostly fell in the categories of inform and consult—the lower levels of engagement on the continuum.

**TABLE 1**  
**Levels of Community Engagement in the FCCC Evaluation**

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower	No engagement
<b>Evaluation design planning</b>						
FCCC participants						X
Frontline Staff						X
Program managers						X
Partnership lead		X				
Data manager		X				
Other stakeholders*		X				
<b>Data collection</b>						
FCCC participants	X					
Frontline staff	X					
Program managers	X					
Partnership lead			X			
Data manager			X			
Other stakeholders		X				
<b>Data analysis</b>						
FCCC participants		X				
Frontline staff		X				
Program managers		X				
Partnership lead		X				
Data manager		X				
Other stakeholders		X				
<b>Data sharing and use</b>						
FCCC participants	X					
Frontline staff		X				
Program managers		X				
Partnership lead			X			
Data manager		X				
Other stakeholders			X			

\*Including leadership at various partner agencies.

## EVALUATION DESIGN PLANNING

The Foundation's original request for proposals (RFP) for the research evaluation called for a design that would include three components: an implementation study, an outcomes study, and a cost study. It called for a flexible design that would evolve as the three partnerships moved from pilot into full implementation and stressed the Foundation's commitment to racial and ethnic equity and inclusion. The RFP reflected the Foundation's consultation with partnership leads about their evaluation needs and priorities. In response, the Urban team proposed consulting with the partnerships while developing the research design and throughout implementation.

Urban approached the evaluation of FCCC as a formative and implementation evaluation, initially expecting to provide regular feedback but would mostly use more traditional "arms-length" approaches such as surveys or administrative data analysis to conduct outcome and cost studies. However, as the evaluation evolved, we worked directly with representatives from the three partnerships and gradually shifted our approach.

## DATA COLLECTION

The evaluation and resource team engaged partnership staff in planning data collection.

**Data reporting and data system design.** Metis Associates, under direction from the Foundation, involved partnership staff in developing data systems to track services and program participant progress. The team had detailed conversations with staff over the course of the first three years of the partnership about which questions partnership staff would be asked to track, primarily with partnership leads and data managers—engaging them at what we observe as the involve level on the engagement continuum. Frontline staff provided feedback on the process, but their perspectives were given relatively limited consideration in this planning phase compared with partnership leads and data managers because of bandwidth constraints and partnership decisions about who should be involved, so they were engaged at the consult level.

**Outcome study design.** In 2015, the Annie E. Casey Foundation leadership team proposed monthly meetings to discuss data and learning processes with partnership leads and data managers from each community, called the data and learning affinity group (DLAG). The group addressed issues related to performance measurement, evaluation activities, desired learnings, and data collection to meet these goals. In the DLAG groups and individual calls, the Urban team engaged partnership leads and data managers in planning a potential outcomes study. Because of local partnerships' preferences to avoid introducing a survey and to focus on building local data capacity, the DLAG group decided to rely on program data the partnerships collected. The Urban team, in consultation with the DLAG group,

reoriented the outcomes study as a quantitative process study (QPS), which would use the program data to characterize participant characteristics, program experiences, and well-being. The research team held a series of individual planning calls with partnership leads and data managers at each partnership to understand their research and evaluation questions, and we used that as a basis to develop the overarching QPS analysis plan (Anderson et al. 2021). This level of engagement rose to the involve level because it included them in the decisionmaking partnership, though only a few categories of stakeholders were engaged.

**Cost study design.** Partner staff helped shape the scope of the FCCC effort's cost study (Gold et al. 2021). Data managers and partnership leads determined the type of study they wanted to pursue—Urban researchers proposed either a program- or case-level (i.e., participant-level) study, and the partner leads and data managers preferred a program-level study.

The data collection and analysis processes were also developed in consultation with community partner staff. Data managers in each partnership worked with Urban staff to determine which organizations would be included in the cost study, as well as the staff to include from each organization. The data managers determined both the frequency and length of data collection. The Urban team designed surveys and vetted them onsite with partnership staff at every level participating in focus groups to make sure cost categories were sufficiently representative of the work on the ground. Data managers reviewed the survey before Urban sent it out to staff. We determined that partnership leads and data managers were engaged at the involve level in this process, given their level of ongoing involvement in decisionmaking, and other staff were primarily consulted.

**Feedback on site visit plans.** Throughout the effort, the Urban and TCC Group teams shared site visit plans with partnership staff and gave them the opportunity to provide feedback with the goal of building and maintaining trust. Upon requests from partnership staff, the Urban team shared interview protocols for staff and program participants before site visits. TCC Group shared protocols and surveys with the partnership and data leads before using them. The team held monthly calls with staff at the lead organizations in each partnership and discussed issues and concerns via questions about the protocols with these staff. Occasionally, the Urban team tweaked language or changed plans about who they asked questions following these discussions. This engagement was primarily at the inform level and mostly involved partnership leads.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The Urban, TCC Group, and Metis evaluation teams all engaged partnership staff in the data analysis by the fourth year of the evaluation (2016). The Urban team also engaged program participants to a more limited extent later in the evaluation.

**Feedback loop on evaluation products.** From the beginning of the evaluations, the three evaluation teams shared internal products—including memos, presentations, and reports—with partnership leads and data managers in each FCCC partnership. These staff members shared products as they saw fit with other staff at partner organizations. Staff who received the reports had the opportunity to review the products for accuracy and provide additional context and perspectives before they were finalized.

The Urban team periodically solicited feedback on evaluation activities and processes from partner agency leaders on monthly check-in calls. Based on suggestions that came out of these conversations, the team tweaked their process of receiving and providing feedback to the partnerships. These changes included, beginning in 2017, sending evaluation products to the partner agency leaders to review and distribute to their colleagues for review before sending drafts to the Foundation. This shift also allowed the Urban team to begin providing quicker turnaround on post-site visit memos containing recommendations for process improvements following requests from partner agency leaders because it was no longer necessary to wait for Foundation staff review.

In the effort's final years, the evaluation teams involved partnership leads and data managers in reviewing drafts of external products, giving staff the opportunity to review products and provide written comments and edits in addition to the feedback they provided on monthly check-in calls. Partnership staff were also able to discuss product feedback during monthly DLAG calls.

This feedback loop on evaluation products rose to the consult level, though it was primarily confined to leaders at partner agencies and data managers.

**Data Walks.** Several years into the effort, the Urban team was concerned that the evaluation was too disconnected from local partnerships' work because the team had not yet engaged program participants or frontline staff with evaluation findings to get their feedback. Urban had begun to develop greater expertise in CEM and use Data Walks as a way of engaging more intentionally with both program implementors and participants to interpret findings. Data Walks are semistructured events in which participants rotate around a series of displays with data visualizations and text summarizing preliminary evaluation findings (for more on Data Walks, see Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena 2015). The Urban team proposed bringing these practices to the FCCC evaluation. The Foundation team was enthusiastic and directed the convening facilitators to incorporate a Data Walk in

the 2016 annual convening. Data Walks became a regular feature of the convenings and other meetings at the Foundation that included partnership staff and members of the evaluation and resource team.

In the same vein, the Urban team recommended moving away from traditional focus groups to holding community Data Walks that would include groups of program participants and partnership staff across levels in cointerpreting our findings. These groups attended Data Walks either together or apart, depending on logistical constraints and preferences of frontline staff in each partnership who helped with recruitment. The team held Data Walks for all three partnerships in 2018 and 2019 and used feedback from the events to inform and validate our findings.

These events were the community-engagement method with the broadest reach, engaging stakeholders across categories at the consult level, though they began midway through FCCC and involved relatively few program participants.

**Data Jam.** In April 2018, the Foundation organized a “Data Jam,” an engaging event based on Urban’s Data Walk format, which brought together agency leaders from the three partnerships and representatives from the evaluation team to share progress in FCCC and discuss key issues based on various data sources. The event renewed enthusiasm for a possible survey to track participant outcomes, though insufficient time remained to field one. This event engaged partnership staff at the consult level, because it gave them the opportunity to provide feedback on data, though the event timing meant feedback was not as actionable as it could have been if the Data Jam had been held earlier.

## DATA SHARING AND USE

The evaluation teams engaged partnership staff in evaluation data use increasingly over time.

**Data sharing at cross-site meetings.** The evaluation and resource team and Foundation staff organized a series of meetings where evaluation teams shared data with community members. The Foundation sponsored a semiannual or annual convening of FCCC stakeholders, including the evaluation and resource team and community members, throughout the effort. The evaluation teams did formal presentations, sometimes focusing on a particular issue or product. Early on, partnership staff were the only community members invited. Beginning in 2016, convening organizers invited community partnership staff to select a few program participants to attend the convenings, including participating in convening sessions and sharing their success stories during a session. These meetings engaged participating staff at the consult level but only engaged program participants at the inform level because of limited participation and lack of preparation to provide feedback.

***Cocreation of the racial and ethnic equity and inclusion (REEI) brief.*** The Urban team led discussion sessions with staff from each partnership and the evaluation and resource team to develop content for a brief on what FCCC stakeholders learned from educational trainings the Foundation provided on REEI and how they sought to incorporate REEI in their work (McDaniel et al. 2019). The teams provided detailed feedback on the brief outline and subsequent drafts, including comments that formed the basis of six key aspirational action steps the FCCC partnerships identified for fostering REEI. This engagement occurred at the involve level.

***Partnership staff engagement in external dissemination of findings.*** The Urban team worked with partner agency leaders and frontline staff to plan presentations at national conferences and webinars in the latter half of the evaluation to share findings from the FCCC evaluation. Frontline staff provided their experience and perspectives on what providing place-based two-generation services entailed, complementing data from the evaluation team. These activities included cooperating with staff, engaging them at the involve level.

## Value of the Approach

Community partners, Foundation staff, and evaluation and resource team members agreed that employing CEM in the FCCC evaluation added value.

### VALUE FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

***Value for partnership staff.*** Many stakeholders, including partnership staff and evaluation and resource team members, reported feeling that community-engaged evaluation approaches had been valuable for partnership staff (see figure 2 for partnership staff structure). Partner agency leaders and frontline staff alike across community partnerships remarked that Data Walks the Urban team held were especially useful, particularly for staff who were less familiar with the data and had not been able to review our reports.

Partnership staff and evaluators reported that these activities deepened their understanding of data. Many frontline staff members and evaluators remarked that data collection sometimes felt burdensome to frontline staff and they were not always clear what the purpose was, but Data Walks gave these staff members a better understanding of how we were using the information they provided. In several cases, more senior staff reported that the format inspired them to think more creatively about sharing data with other partner staff in an accessible way and clearly illustrating why data are important to the work of service-providing partners.

Staff across partnerships noted that they did not have internal capacity to hold events like these, so having an external evaluator provide that capacity added value.

---

*[Data Walk participation] can be thought-provoking stuff that I don't think we would have internal resources to dedicate to, as much as we might want to.*

*—FCCC partnership staff member*

---

Staff members at different levels appreciated the opportunity to discuss and interpret data with a mixed group of stakeholders. One leader at a partner organization observed that having Data Walks with program participants and staff was valuable for frontline staff because it took them out of the more typical context of leading activities to participating in an activity with parents on more equal footing. Frontline staff appreciated hearing perspectives on programming from participants that they might not hear otherwise. Staff in leadership roles appreciated having discussions with people their organizations were serving but who they might not otherwise meet. A few evaluators also said they thought it was especially important and gratifying for frontline staff, who generally have relatively little power in organizational decisionmaking, to have the opportunity to express their views on the effort to more senior partnership staff.

Particularly as they developed deeper relationships with the evaluation teams and became more comfortable giving and receiving feedback, partnership staff generally felt that ongoing engagement with evaluation feedback was constructive. Staff often emphasized that being able to develop relationships with outside evaluators over time and in different settings—including when evaluators visited partnership agencies and different stakeholders came together at convenings—for fostering this constructive engagement. Staff reported that being able to read and comment on Urban's reports spurred internal conversations on how to improve programming to better serve families. This held true even when feedback from the Urban team was not positive. A few staff members also said these opportunities made them feel more comfortable sharing feedback.



---

*It provided people a space to step back and reflect in a systematic way...[staff] were able to walk out the door of the interview with an enhanced perspective of [what] they were doing.*

—Evaluation team member

---

Evaluators noted that engaging partnership staff in codesigning evaluation processes made the evaluation more beneficial to local partner organizations because it increased their understanding of and investment in using the findings for continuous improvement. Several evaluators also felt that working with partner staff to determine how to produce and share the evaluation feedback made evaluation products more useful to the local partnerships.

**Value for program participants.** Partnership staff and evaluation and resource team members also emphasized the value of the Data Walks for program participants. Frontline staff almost universally reported that parents expressed they had found the events enjoyable and rewarding. These staff members heard from program participants that the experience made them feel like their voice and expertise were valued. Many mentioned how seeing evaluation findings allowed them to better understand why programming worked the way it did. One partnership staff member explained that by getting this information, “I think [participating parents] may understand a little more why we maybe do things a certain way.” This staff member also felt that having this understanding allowed program participants to be more informed in consenting to participate in programming. Similarly, a few evaluators felt that Data Walks furthered research ethics by providing more context for the evaluation work.

---

*I think it’s important for program participants to have an understanding—at least to be informed about what is being learned in the project. It’s about including them. It’s about being transparent. It’s about, in a way, in a certain sense, sharing ownership. When you share the data and everyone can comment on it, it’s like saying that we are all owners of this data. Plus, I think that it really lifted up community voice[s]...Being able to ask questions, comment, interpret what they see acknowledges that they are experts in their space and their role as participants, and that we value their voice.*

—Casey evaluation leader

---

## VALUE FOR THE EVALUATIONS

Foundation staff and members of the evaluation and resource team shared largely similar perspectives on the value that community engagement brought to the FCCC evaluations. The consensus was that Data Walks helped refine findings and make them more reflective of participant experiences and their local contexts. One Urban researcher recounted how explanations that parents who participated in Data Walks gave of experiences they were having helped the evaluation team understand what they were seeing when these experiences were reflected in data the team analyzed later. This evaluation team member also noted that the Data Walks provided evaluators with more well-rounded perspective on program participants' experiences because they were exposed to parents who had enjoyed relatively less work or educational success than those often discussed in interviews with partnership staff during the Urban team's visits or those invited to convenings. Another person on the Urban team recalled that being able to "check a few things [presented at the data walk], and say, 'Does this make sense? Did we capture this correctly?'" was helpful for validating and contextualizing the data the team produced.

---

*I think, broadly, it's aligned with our belief that if you're regularly engaging with the folks who are most directly impacted, that you're going to get better data, and it's also going to provide you with a fuller lens and analysis of that data because those are the folks that are [most equipped] to [interpret] the numbers and the information that you're getting.*

*—Casey Foundation evaluation leader*

---

Evaluators also felt that the Data Walks made the evaluation efforts more visible to community members, which strengthened the evaluation by encouraging participation. One Urban team member noted that, at least among those who attended, the Data Walks helped partnership staff and program participants understand the scope and purpose of the team's evaluation, making them more likely to participate in future evaluation activities. This person also felt that the events fostered a greater commitment to equity among research staff, which likely translated into more accurate and fairer findings.

---

*I think it builds credibility when people feel like we are giving back. When we're sharing back information, and then we're getting the feedback, and we're part of really engaging people in the process, I think they're more apt to [participate].*

*—Evaluation team member*

---

Several staff members across the evaluation and resource team also noted that working with partnership staff and other evaluators to plan evaluation activities reduced burden and created more sustained buy-in for evaluation among local partnerships. One evaluator mentioned that frontline staff especially appreciated the evaluation team's efforts to ensure that evaluation activities were not overly burdensome. This person suspected that doing so made these staff members more likely to willingly contribute to evaluation activities over the course of the evaluation. A TCC evaluator also felt that in one of the local partnerships where staff were more reticent to give feedback, building relationships through ongoing engagement in evaluation planning was important for building trust and getting more honest feedback in the evaluation's later years.

## **Challenges, Trade-Offs, and Limitations of the Approach**

Most local partnership staff and evaluation and resource team members agreed that, though challenges are inherent in taking a community-engaged approach to evaluation, it was worthwhile. In fact, most agreed that many limitations of the approach overall were related to it not going far enough to engage community members, particularly program participants. That said, the evaluation team members we spoke with raised numerous specific challenges and trade-offs involved in community-engaged evaluation efforts, including challenges for the evaluation and community members.

---

*I would say it did—that my overall response would be that we didn't go far enough with community-engaged methods and that they were always worthwhile when we did them.*

*—Evaluation team member*

---

## CHALLENGES FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

**Challenges for local partnership staff.** Partnership staff, particularly in Columbus, described facing challenges negotiating their engagement in planning data collection for the evaluations. Though this person emphasized that conversations around planning data collection happened in a trusting environment with evaluators, they also said it created “angst” to decide what data to collect because the plans took a long time to be settled and partnership staff were used to having data-reporting requirements dictated to them for other grants and were inexperienced at playing a leadership role in planning what the process would look like. At times, partnership staff felt unsure about how much they could object to data collection plans the Foundation and evaluators presented without jeopardizing funding.

---

*Other funding bodies—they give you the template. “This is your grant report. We expect you to fill it out.” It’s not so much the kind of partnership I know the Casey Foundation is trying to cultivate, and so it takes some adjusting, I think, because those are being funded to really get into relationship in that kind of way. It’s a lot of money. It can be scary to say no to somebody that’s giving you millions of dollars.*

*—FCCC partner staff member*

---

Staff across partnerships often noted in interviews that the most challenging thing for them about taking part in community-engaged evaluation activities was balancing the increased time commitment with everything else on their plates. In particular, staff at different levels noted that the work of recruiting program participants for Data Walks and assisting with the events often fell on frontline staff. A resource team member recalled getting feedback from partnership staff that the evaluation tasks were “too much coming at us, too fast” given their day-to-day responsibilities for administering programs and working with families. A few staff members in San Antonio described putting pressure on themselves to spend a lot of time recruiting to ensure robust attendance at Data Walks because they were invested in the events’ success, and this was stressful because it wasn’t possible to guarantee program participants’ attendance. One Foundation staff member noted that, though staff understood the value of getting feedback, the time commitment needed from them to recruit parents sometimes made it harder to get their buy-in. This person also noted that gaining this buy-in was even more

difficult because partnership staff were not compensated directly for engaging with the evaluation, unlike external evaluators, and in fact often participated during what would have been their free time.

---

*Figuring out how to incentivize and reward the folks in the communities who are doin' work on this. We're all on the payroll, right? Doing this work on the clock. Yet there's this expectation that people that live in the community should be volunteering their time to spend with us. That needs to be addressed.*

*—Foundation evaluation leader*

---

Staff at multiple local partners noted that evaluation activities also came in the context of a steady stream of requests to participate in interviews and complete surveys from multiple evaluators, which made buy-in to the time commitment involved in community-engaged evaluation difficult at times. One staff member in Buffalo said that engaging with the evaluation was “annoying” at times because it felt like staff were constantly asked to contribute to a confusing array of external evaluation activities and there were other things they would rather do. And a staff member in Columbus said, “It’s not having a clear sense early on what were the different roles [of the evaluation teams] and exactly why those different roles. It’s confusing and disorienting.” This person felt that this dynamic made it more difficult for partners to understand how to engage with evaluation activities.

Another type of challenge we often heard partnership staff discuss was that sometimes they felt unable to contribute to evaluation activities as well as they would have liked because they were out of the loop about the evaluations. Staff in all three partnerships reported inconsistent levels of engagement with evaluation products across partner agencies and staff levels. Staff in all three partnerships felt at times like staff at the partnership’s lead organization served as gatekeepers to evaluation products and did not pass everything on to them. Staff sometimes thought this was intentional on the part of the lead organizations because they wanted to control the flow of information within and outside their partnership to maintain partner and funder relationships. In many cases, partnership staff felt they did not receive evaluation products because of a broader lack of coordination across the partnerships. In other cases, staff received emails linking them to evaluation products or received information about the products at large partnership meetings but did not have the bandwidth to review the relevant materials. One staff member in Columbus explained, “Quite honestly, I could

have come across some of [the evaluation products]. There's billions of things that—[chuckles]—so if it's come out, I may have read it, but I just can't recall.”<sup>7</sup>

Many staff members also expressed that they did not have the skills necessary to interpret products. Staff often felt it would have been useful to receive a walkthrough of products so they could better engage with and use them in their work. Staff members at two local partnerships noted that their leadership asked them to review products for accuracy, but they would have appreciated the ability to review along with coworkers, engage more deeply, and discuss the implications of findings for their work. Other partnership staff also felt that the way evaluators had presented information made engagement challenging for them, with one saying, “I think that however we [share information] has to be interactive” or some people unaccustomed to engaging with data will feel detached. At times it was also unclear to staff less engaged in the evaluation where evaluation data presented at partnership meetings and Data Walks were coming from, which made it harder contribute to evaluation activities. In a few cases, partner agency leaders noted it would have been useful for evaluation teams to provide guidance on how to engage other staff with the evaluation plans and findings.

Foundation and evaluation and resource team staff noted that local partnership staff had not received adequate support to overcome this lack of capacity to engage with the evaluation. An evaluation staff member at the Foundation noted that, outside of data leads in each partnership, most staff members did not have “experience or expertise around what evaluation is,” which would make it hard both to engage with data themselves and facilitate program participants’ engagement. This staff member felt that the amount of technical assistance the Foundation provided to partnership staff to support capacity-building in this area was insufficient.

**Challenges for program participants.** Partnership staff and evaluation and resource team members also identified challenges that the community-engaged evaluation approach involved for program participants. These stakeholders widely agreed that participants were even less prepared to engage with data than partnership staff. Program participants were not used to interpreting data, and it was hard to make them feel comfortable doing so. One staff member in Columbus said that, while having program participants interpret data was useful, “I wonder if there was more that we could do to help prepare families for what they were going to see?” This person suggested that perhaps a pre-Data Walk session for program participants would have helped them understand what data were included in the evaluation before being asked to interpret it. However, they noted that getting participants to commit to multiple events can be challenging given their other commitments. A Foundation staff member noted that skill-building technical assistance could have been designed more intentionally to guide partnership staff in how to involve program participants in evaluation activities.

A few partnership staff members felt there were downsides to inviting program participants to Data Walks that included partnership staff and that these downsides could affect their comfort with contributing to the conversation. A Columbus staff member noted that there is “the unintended danger [that parents’] comments or reactions are out of consideration for staff,” meaning that parents would be reluctant to freely critique service delivery around service-providing staff. Additionally, a Buffalo staff member felt that, while “parents and staff should have the same information...it’s difficult to put parents and staff together sometimes. What is important to the staff isn’t important to parents,” and vice-versa. This staff member felt that these different priorities could make mixed-group conversations confusing for parents.

A few local partnership staff members also noted that Data Walks provided limited program participant perspectives. They pointed out that only a small share of participants attended the events, and these parents were likely to be those with greater attachment to FCCC services. This may have skewed the feedback to be more positive overall than less-involved parents would have provided.

#### CHALLENGES FOR THE EVALUATION

In addition to pointing out challenges that using CEM involved for community members (both program participants and partnership staff), our conversations with evaluation and resource team members highlighted several challenges that this approach involved for the evaluation efforts. Several staff members at the Foundation and evaluators who had been involved from the beginning of the FCCC evaluations noted that involving community partner staff in developing evaluation plans made completing the initial planning stage slow because it took several years to get the many players at the table in each partnership to agree on data collection plans. Further, this approach meant that in the end the partnerships opted not to select an outcomes study plan, and therefore the Urban team did not produce an outcomes study as originally intended. Similarly, because the data managers and partnership leads were given the ability to decide on the cost study type and opted for a program-level study, Urban was unable to produce a study that could provide the field with information about what it cost to serve FCCC participants.

---

*Because you are letting the [local partnership] decide what it wants to do, that means that you're not learning a lot of things that you would like to learn about.*

*—Evaluation Team Member*

---

Several evaluation and resource team members noted that the lack of central evaluation planning without a clear, universal understanding of what community engagement would look like led to several limitations. An evaluator from TCC Group questioned whether the hybrid model of community engagement in FCCC—where evaluators and Foundation staff consulted partnership staff about what methods they would use, but the limits of their ability to shape the evaluation was unclear—added more value for the evaluation than was lost in the inefficiencies and confusion it created. An evaluator from Metis also pointed to challenges with unclear authority for decisionmaking, explaining that in multiple instances the Foundation rejected community partners' data collection plans without issuing clear guidelines, further delaying the planning process while adding more confusion about roles for making decisions. Similarly, partnership staff were asked to select from among several cost study design options, but one Urban team member suspected that many staff members felt compelled to participate and did not view their engagement in planning as authentic. In fact, "Some of them were flat-out like, 'We don't even want to do a cost study, so whatever is the least amount of work we can do just because we have to.'" Further, expectations were not clarified from the outset that those most affected by FCCC (program participants) would be meaningfully engaged in the design and evaluation of the effort, which made multiple evaluators question the overall benefits of the community-engaged evaluation approach.

In addition to slowing down the process of establishing data collection plans, evaluators noted that community engagement slowed down review timelines. The process of obtaining feedback from partnership staff on every major deliverable to the Foundation from each evaluation team typically took at least several weeks. These delays generally occurred because these staff lacked time to review, though in several cases partnership staff objected to critical feedback and evaluators had to reach a common understanding of findings before moving on. This situation made providing timely feedback both to the partnerships and funder challenging and planning subsequent evaluation activities more difficult. It also contributed to the decision to delay publication of evaluation products until the final two years of the evaluation, which limited the evaluation's impact for the field. Although there was agreement that getting feedback from partnership staff was important, a few evaluators pointed out that partnership staff were more invested in some products than others, and it may have been possible



to more intentionally discuss which products they would review and why to most effectively use everyone's time.

Many evaluation and resource team members expressed that the lack of an agreed-upon plan for community engagement in FCCC evaluation activities made conducting those activities more difficult. A few Urban team members noted that partnership staff found leaning into community engagement challenging because it was out of the scope of what they had expected to do. These staff members often interpreted new requests from the Foundation and evaluators to achieve higher levels of engagement to be a matter of compliance with the FCCC grant requirements—or, as one Foundation staff member described it, a “checkbox”—rather than an equity issue they should all be invested in. This Foundation staff member noted that after local partnership staff touted their initial attempts to develop formal channels for program participant input on programming, Foundation staff heard little more about these efforts. Evaluation and resource team members generally agreed that because suggestions around increasing participant input in program design lacked specifics and were not mandatory, follow-through waned over time.

A few Urban evaluation team members noted that navigating the external evaluator role in the context of this ill-defined community-engaged evaluation approach was challenging. Community engagement ideally seeks to increase community members' ownership by engaging them as partners in the evaluation. However, because there was not a common understanding among partnership staff that this was the goal (and in fact the goals around community engagement shifted over time), these staff members often perceived the evaluators as holders of disproportionate power—more in line with what would be expected in a traditional evaluation. This issue indicated a lack of engagement of community members as partners and limited the extent to which the evaluation benefited from community members' candid perspectives.

---

*There was consultation. There was input. There was not true co-design with the FCCC [partnerships].*

*—Evaluation team member*

---

Evaluation team members also recounted how difficult they had found navigating their roles in employing CEM. One Urban team member noted it was hard at times to build trust with partnership

staff that was needed to engage them authentically in evaluation activities because of the large amount of turnover among evaluation teams, Foundation program officers, and partner agency leaders in Buffalo and Columbus. Evaluators felt that not all evaluation staff had the cultural competencies required to gain community members' trust. A few also found it hard to balance the need to offer honest, constructive critiques of partnership operations with the need to maintain positive, trusting relationships with partnership staff for ongoing engagement. Several Urban team members also noted that it was not always clear how to take feedback from community members—especially parents—on evaluation findings and use it to inform the broader evaluation. In part this was because taking a community-engaged approach was new to many team members, but also because of the lack of common expectations for how findings from the Data Walks would be used.

---

*I had a hard time figuring how to really incorporate [Data Walk feedback]—it informed broader thinking. I think we need to work on that more.*

*—Evaluation team member*

---

A few evaluation and resource team members thought the three partnerships' differing needs and priorities made employing CEM more complicated. One Foundation staff member said each partnership had "their own vision for what they were trying to achieve or their willingness to collaborate," which influenced how lead organizations chose to share information and engage their partners in evaluation activities. A Foundation leader also noted that the extent to which even partnership leads consumed information about the evaluation varied across the three partnerships, making the ease of employing CEM across the partnerships uneven.

Urban team members also spoke about the significant logistical lift involved in planning community engagement on the evaluation team's part. They acknowledged that Data Walks were complex events that took significant planning time. It was hard work to engage various community members at the same time, and the team was dependent on local partnership staff to help recruit participants. Also, over time, evaluators lost key contacts among staff in the three partnerships as employees left their organizations, making knowing who to partner with to plan community events more challenging. One team member expressed, "I did feel at some points that inserting a community-engaged method sometimes felt very rushed," pointing to the Data Jam and convening planning. This person felt that the evaluation teams

“were trying to do a lot of things simultaneously,” and it sometimes seemed like community engagement activities were only something done “on the side.”

Overall, many evaluation and resource team members had a sense that community engagement was challenging work, and the FCCC experience offered many lessons to build on for future evaluations.

## Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

Any level of intentional engagement of community members in planning and executing an evaluation is a departure from traditional evaluation procedures. It involves ongoing commitments from many stakeholders beyond those of a traditional evaluation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s commitment to respond to the needs and perspectives of staff in the three FCCC partnerships opened the door to the Foundation’s endorsement of community-engaged evaluation methods that emerged as the evaluations evolved. Individual champions of these methods at the Foundation facilitated a strengthening of this commitment over time. And the Foundation’s support for innovation during implementation also provided space for increased emphasis on CEM as the evaluations continued.

Taking an engaged approach to the evaluation also involved commitments from both partnership staff and members of the evaluation and resource team. It involved partnership staff dedicating substantially more time to evaluation activities than would typically be expected of program grantees. It involved evaluation teams pushing themselves to facilitate evaluation activities that were often challenging logistically and involved managing complex relationships. Here again, individual champions of community engagement were critical, with Foundation staff facilitating communication between partnership staff and the evaluators.

---

*I think it was hard...I think we did a really good job of leaning in and stretching ourselves, stretching our own ways of doing business and ways of operating, to be able to live into this value and a more participatory approach, in principle.*

*—Foundation FCCC program leader*

---

CEM had some meaningful benefits for community members and the evaluation. Partnership staff felt empowered to shape evaluation activities to meet their needs, at least to some extent. Program

participants communicated to frontline staff feelings of gratification that their opinions were solicited to a larger degree than they were used to during Data Walks. The perspectives evaluators received through seeking community input on the evaluation likely added to the validity and nuance of evaluation findings.

The experience of engaging program participants in the evaluation to the limited extent that we did points to the potential to use these methods to further racial and ethnic equity. Engaging members of these historically disenfranchised communities of color in the FCCC evaluation provided insights that we would have lacked otherwise, lessening the possibility that the evaluations misrepresent program participant experiences. The approach also provided opportunities to give information back to community members rather than engaging in the purely extractive data collection process of a traditional evaluation. This outcome suggests that taking steps toward higher levels of engagement of program participants than we did in FCCC, where they are supported in making decisions about evaluation design and execution, could have gone substantially further toward achieving equity in the evaluation. This level of engagement could have gone much further toward counteracting historical power dynamics whereby white funders and researchers make decisions about evaluations of interventions for communities of color.

Even with the commitments to and facilitators of community engagement, there were significant challenges to the approach and limits to its scope. Involving partnership staff in decisionmaking around planning data collection and developing evaluation products led to delays and cancellations of evaluation activities and publications that may have had benefits for the service partnerships and the field. Community engagement took place at relatively low levels, mostly informing and consulting with community members without deep, ongoing cooperative partnerships for the explicit purpose of evaluation engagement. Further, the evaluators mainly engaged partnership staff, and only a small subset of staff involved in the partnerships were consistently looped in on evaluation activities. Partnership staff who did participate devoted significant additional time to the evaluation as a result of the engaged approach. Parents participating in FCCC programming—those most affected by program design and implementation—were only engaged during discrete events, including convenings and Data Walks. And stakeholders we spoke with were generally concerned that program participants were engaged in a tokenizing way, meaning a few participants were engaged in ways that gave the impression of participant influence without actual decisionmaking power. Stakeholders often pointed to the small number of program participants whom the Foundation invited to cross-site meetings as an example of this tokenization. Additionally, partnership staff received relatively little preparation on how to contribute effectively to the evaluation, and community members received even less, meaning they were likely unable to contribute up to their full potential.

The nature of FCCC exacerbated these limitations and challenges. The Foundation's commitment to having local partnerships direct the effort meant they often opted not to provide clear guidance and expectations. This made it difficult to generate shared understanding of new evaluation methods as evaluators introduced them because, as the Foundation's communication carried more weight with the local partners, evaluators relied on the Foundation to communicate changing expectations. This also made it difficult to ensure accountability for follow-through on the part of both local partners and evaluators. The three FCCC partnerships were also complex efforts involving multiple actors, presenting a challenge for ensuring that all key stakeholders were engaged effectively in the evaluation. The partnerships also had different needs, preferences, and capacities, resulting in different levels of success with evaluation engagement at different times. The evaluation effort involved the additional complexity of three different external evaluators, which made maintaining a sense of connection between all these entities and the partnership staff—critical to successful community engagement—more challenging than if there had only been one external evaluator. Finally, FCCC evolved along with the field of CEM, which meant there was both increased understanding of how these methods should be employed and imperative on evaluators' part to do so, with the simultaneous inherent limitation that these expectations were not established at the beginning of the effort.

The FCCC evaluations were a good start, but there is a lot of room for further growth and refinement of community-engagement approaches for future evaluations of community efforts. Funders, program leaders, and evaluators could build on the experience of FCCC to enhance CEM use. Key lessons from FCCC on how to do this focus on fostering shared decisionmaking with community members and include the following:

1. **Take a community-engaged approach in selecting program and evaluation grantees.** This includes selecting evaluators with cultural competencies necessary to gain community members' trust and often involves partnering with local evaluation professionals. A successful model for doing this is establishing a grant review committee that includes community members (Gibson 2017).
2. **Ensure a common understanding of and commitment to community engagement among stakeholders in both evaluation and programming throughout all phases of the work.** Having local and outside stakeholders understand the importance of engaging as partners in the evaluation, including what this will involve and when, is critical. To ensure this common understanding is maintained throughout the effort, develop a process for communicating key concepts and goals to new staff and stakeholder organizations.

3. **Foster a safe space for feedback by making clear commitments about how shared decisionmaking will work and follow through on them.** This means outside stakeholders who would be perceived as the center of power in a traditional evaluation—external evaluators and funders—must foster a flattening of power hierarchies so community members feel comfortable stepping into the role of evaluation partners and making decisions. In this way, it is clear that stakeholders, especially program participants, are partners in program design and can make and veto decisions. Funders and external evaluators take a position of humility and openness to feedback, and they acknowledge their knowledge gaps about communities that community members can address to strengthen the evaluation. Optimal partnership involves intentional two-way learning, which could involve establishing a council at the beginning of the effort in which all stakeholders have an equal vote on key decisions. It could also involve providing proximity to local power—for example, providing a platform for program participants to influence local policymakers in an ongoing way (Cargo and Mercer 2008; Campano, Ghiso, and Welch 2015).
4. **Work to build relationships that help ensure wide sharing of ownership and decisionmaking among** community stakeholders, particularly program participants, at the beginning and throughout the work. This involves working through networks with deep, existing relationships in the community.
  - a. **Make a plan to engage program participants** in design and evaluation before the effort begins.
  - b. Ensure community stakeholders engaged with the evaluation are **representative of their community**. This means involving a **diverse group of program participants**, which may include different challenges.
5. **Ensure local and outside stakeholders have the knowledge and skills to foster engagement and partnership.** This involves flattening knowledge gaps, including in data and evaluation methods, with training and accessible information sharing for stakeholders less familiar with evaluation. Providing opportunities for those new to evaluation to communicate their learning goals and see them acted on can help build people’s confidence to contribute meaningfully. It is helpful to provide space for stakeholders to advocate for where they are most interested in or comfortable contributing. It is also important to ensure this information is communicated to new stakeholders as they come onboard.<sup>8</sup>
  - c. **Set expectations for sharing information** and products with all evaluation partners to keep them engaged. Ensure everyone involved in creating products has a common understanding of why doing so is important.

- d. One potential model to explore that emerged from FCCC is that of a **rotating cohort** where a subset of stakeholders make a deeper commitment to evaluation engagement for a set amount of time. This rotating responsibility could potentially relieve the pressure that could come with an open-ended commitment, allow enough ongoing involvement among each cohort for adequate training and preparation, and ensure more voices are included over the course of the evaluation.
- 6. **Set initial goals and priorities for community engagement** as well as a process to update those goals and priorities as stakeholder preferences and conditions on the ground change.
- 7. **Establish a commitment from the funder at the outset to fund the community engagement effort design and evaluation.** This strategy includes planning multiple budgets according to different stakeholders' potential preferences and ways the effort might evolve. It includes ensuring adequate time and resources for stakeholders to build trusting relationships and plan and execute a partnership. Adequate funding is key to ensuring that local stakeholders with competing demands are not overburdened by their community evaluation partner role and that the role is maintained over time.
- e. **Value program participants through compensating them for their time,** just as service providers, evaluators, and other professionals are compensated for theirs. Also make efforts to minimize participation burden by breaking down barriers such as lack of time or emotional bandwidth.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has already begun applying some of FCCC's lessons to strengthen community engagement in its subsequent grantmaking efforts. This is part of the Foundation's evaluation team's broader commitment to using an equitable evaluation framework to center equity in their practice, including seeking opportunities to engage program participants and local residents as partners in design and implementation of research and evaluation (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2019; WestEd 2019). We suggest expanding these efforts and encouraging other funders to follow suit.

The FCCC effort ended before the COVID-19 pandemic shed a glaring light on the stark racial and ethnic inequities in our society and the resulting racial reckoning that began in summer 2020. These events motivated the Biden administration's executive order that named community engagement as a key method for advancing racial equity and supporting underserved communities.<sup>9</sup> The experience of applying these methods during the FCCC effort provides important lessons for how to do so in this context of increased focus on elevating community voices.

# Appendix. Data Sources

Our data sources include the following:

- Interviews with partner staff at all levels during one site visit to each partnership in spring 2019, during the last full year of the effort, focusing on reflections on experiences with the evaluation. *Note: a significant limitation of this report is that the Urban team did not intentionally ask about CEM in FCCC during site visits, but rather focused more broadly on experiences with the evaluation. Therefore, readers should be aware that reflections on CEM from community partner staff reported here may be less comprehensive and focused than if we had focused our questions more narrowly on this topic.*
- Interviews with six evaluation and resource team members and six Foundation staff members about CEM in FCCC in June 2020. *Note: another notable limitation is that we did not obtain program participants' perspectives on the evaluation approach. Our last opportunity to engage with program participants came before we planned this report and its series of dedicated interviews and group discussions.*
- Urban Institute team discussions focused on reflections on CEM in FCCC in April 2020.



# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> FCCC is trademarked by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The abbreviation is pronounced “F-triple C.”
- <sup>2</sup> “Lessons from Casey’s Strategic Coinvestor Approach to Community Change,” The Annie E. Casey Foundation, August 19, 2020, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/lessons-from-caseys-strategic-coinvestor-approach-to-community-change/>.
- <sup>3</sup> See Lauren Farrell, Melanie Langness, and Elsa Falkenburger. “Community Voice Is Expertise,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, February 19, 2021, <http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/community-voice-expertise>.
- <sup>4</sup> Each partnership included frontline staff, who directly served families; program managers who oversaw programs within the partnerships; and a partnership lead staff member at the lead organization who coordinated between partners, the Foundation, and the evaluation and resource team.
- <sup>5</sup> See “Making Connections,” the Annie E. Casey Foundation, accessed May 25, 2021, <https://www.aecf.org/work/past-work/making-connections/>.
- <sup>6</sup> “Lessons from Casey’s Strategic Coinvestor Approach to Community Change,” Casey Foundation.
- <sup>7</sup> For more on partnership integration in FCCC, see McDaniel et al. 2021.
- <sup>8</sup> Sonia Torres Rodríguez, “Earning Trust by Collaborating with Resident Researchers,” *Medium* (blog), March 18, 2021, <https://medium.com/local-data-for-equitable-recovery/earning-trust-by-collaborating-with-resident-researchers-e504a740e015>.
- <sup>9</sup> “Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” The White House, January 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>.

# References

- Ahmed, Syed M., and Ann-Gel S. Palermo. 2010. "Community Engagement in Research: Frameworks for Education and Peer Review." *American Journal of Public Health* 100 (8): 1380–87.
- Anderson, Theresa, Susan J. Popkin, Marla McDaniel, Amelia Coffey, Amanda Gold, Patrick Spauster, Peace Gwam, Gina Adams, Marcus Gaddy, and Adaeze Okoli. 2021. *Developing Two-Generation Approaches in Communities: Final Report from Family-Centered Community Change*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2019. *Family-Centered Community Change: Supporting Families, Strengthening Neighborhoods*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- . 2017. *Operationalizing Equity: Putting the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Racial and Ethnic Equity and Inclusion Framework into Action*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 35 (4): 216–24.
- Attree, Pamela, Beverly French, Beth Milton, Susan Povall, Margaret Whitehead, and Jennie Popay. 2010. "The Experience of Community Engagement for Individuals: A Rapid Review of Evidence." *Health and Social Care in the Community* 19 (3): 250–60.
- Campano, Gerald, Maria Paula Ghiso, and Bethany J. Welch. 2015. "Ethical and Professional Norms in Community-Based Research." *Harvard Educational Review* 85 (1): 29–49.
- Cargo, Margaret, and Shawna L. Mercer. 2008. "The Value and Challenges of Participatory Research: Strengthening Its Practice." *The Annual review of Public Health* 29:325–50.
- CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). 1997. *Principles of Community Engagement*, 1st ed. Atlanta: CDC/ATSDR (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry Committee on Community Engagement).
- Community Health Scholars Program. 2001. *Stories of Impact*. Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
- CTSA (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium Community Engagement Key Function Committee Task Force on the Principles of Community Engagement). 2011. *Principles of Community Engagement*, 2nd ed. Washington, DC: National Institutes of Health.
- Gibson, Cynthia. 2017. *Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?* New York: Ford Foundation.
- Gold, Amanda, Peace Gwam, Theresa Anderson, and Marcus Gaddy. 2021. *The Costs of Coordinating Two-Generation Programs: Estimated Labor Costs of Family Services and Cross-Generation Coordination for Two-Generation Partnerships in Buffalo, Columbus, and San Antonio*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Handley, Margaret, Rena Pasick, Michael Potter, Geraldine Oliva, Ellen Goldstein, and Tung Nguyen. 2010. *Community-Engaged Research: A Quick-Start Guide for Researchers*. From the Series: UCSF Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI) Resource Manuals and Guides to Community-Engaged Research, edited by P. Fleisher. San Francisco: Clinical Translational Science Institute Community Engagement Program, University of California San Francisco.
- McDaniel, Marla, Theresa Anderson, Adaeze Okoli, Susan J. Popkin, Amelia Coffey, and Peace Gwam. 2021. *Developing Place-Based Two-Generation Partnerships: Lessons from Three Community Change Initiative Partnerships*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- McDaniel, Marla, Amelia Coffey, Marcus Gaddy, Adaeze Okoli, Charmaine Runes, Susan J. Popkin, and Theresa Anderson. 2019. "Fostering Racial Ethnic Equity and Inclusion (REEI)." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

- Murray, Brittany, Elsa Falkenburger, and Priya Saxena. 2015. *Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Pasick, Rena, Geraldine Oliva, Ellen Goldstein, and Tung Nguyen. 2010. *Community-Engaged Research with Community-Based Organizations: A Resource Manual for UCSF Researchers*. San Francisco: University of California San Francisco Clinical Translational Science Institute Community Engagement Program.
- Sally, Corianne Payton, Lydia Lo, Kathryn L.S. Pettit, Camille H. Anoll, and Kassie Scott. 2020. *Driving Systems Change Forward: Leveraging Multisite, Cross-Sector Initiatives to Change Systems, Advance Racial Equity, and Shift Power*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Staley, Kristina. 2009. *What Impact Does Patient and Public Involvement Have on Health and Social Care Research? A Literature Review*. Eastleigh, UK: INVOLVE.
- WestEd (WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center). 2019. *Reflections on Applying Principles of Equitable Evaluation*. San Francisco: WestEd.

# About the Authors

**Amelia Coffey** is a research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population, specializing in qualitative methods and project management. Her work focuses on research and evaluation of policies and programs intended to support financial stability and well-being for families and young people. Before joining Urban, Coffey spent several years at a nonprofit research center focused on improving child outcomes, where she gained experience designing and conducting evaluations of programs serving disadvantaged children and young people.

**Peace Gwam** is a research analyst in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. Since joining the Urban Institute in 2018, her research has focused on place-based initiatives and strategies to address homelessness. She plays an integral role in the Urban Institute's Urban-Greater DC initiative to encourage equitable development in the Washington, DC, region. Peace holds a BA in economics and history from the University of Maryland.

**Susan J. Popkin** is director of the Urban Institute's Housing Opportunities and Services Together (HOST) Initiative and an Institute fellow in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. A nationally recognized expert on public and assisted housing policy, Popkin directs a research program that uses community engagement and community-based participatory approaches to explore new strategies for improving outcomes for families, and she conducts evaluations of complex community-based interventions. Popkin is the author of *No Simple Solutions: Transforming Public Housing in Chicago*; coauthor of the award-winning *Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty*; lead author of *The Hidden War: Crime and the Tragedy of Public Housing in Chicago*; and coauthor of *Public Housing Transformation: The Legacy of Segregation*.

## STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

The Urban Institute strives to meet the highest standards of integrity and quality in its research and analyses and in the evidence-based policy recommendations offered by its researchers and experts. We believe that operating consistent with the values of independence, rigor, and transparency is essential to maintaining those standards. As an organization, the Urban Institute does not take positions on issues, but it does empower and support its experts in sharing their own evidence-based views and policy recommendations that have been shaped by scholarship. Funders do not determine our research findings or the insights and recommendations of our experts. Urban scholars and experts are expected to be objective and follow the evidence wherever it may lead.



500 L'Enfant Plaza SW  
Washington, DC 20024

[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)