

Leveraging Community Expertise to Advance Health Equity

Summary

Eva H. Allen, Jennifer M. Haley, Joshua Aarons, and DaQuan Lawrence

Community engagement can take many forms, but authentic engagement means community members are not merely present but actively taking part in decisionmaking. As discussed in our [full report](#), stakeholders must be intentional in leveraging community expertise and sharing power to meaningfully involve people who experience health inequities in efforts to address inequities. Governments, health care and social service organizations, philanthropies, and others working on health equity should partner with organizations that are community-centered, culturally and linguistically effective, and trusted, and support them with sufficient resources (table 1). Adopting key principles and strategies can help maximize the potential of community engagement (table 2). Over time, elevating and operationalizing community voices could lead to greater oversight and accountability for advancing health equity and, ultimately, more progress in eliminating systemic barriers so community members can optimize their health and well-being.

We've got to be prepared to invite the community to participate in decisionmaking. It's not, 'We're going to take your input on advisement,' it's, 'We're going to decide together what to prioritize and how that work's going to happen.'

—Study participant

TABLE 1

Stakeholder Outreach versus Community Engagement

Stakeholder outreach	Community engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convening focus groups, surveys, and town halls to gauge community concerns Developing initiatives to solve problems identified by the community Supporting community members' involvement, such as by providing child care and food at community meetings Implementing short-term solutions to address health disparities, such as initiatives to reduce the prevalence of diseases among certain subgroups in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborating with and sharing power with communities to identify their priorities and solutions Investing in community-led initiatives to develop and implement solutions; governments and organizations can provide funding, training, and other resources and facilitate connections Making sustained, ongoing investments that facilitate shared power, such as by hiring and adequately compensating community members to serve as community health workers, researchers, or governance members Engaging in long-term capacity building, leadership development, and trust building to address underlying social determinants of health and reduce long-standing inequities; evaluating the effectiveness of such efforts

Sources: Shavon Arline-Bradley (founding principal, R.E.A.C.H. Beyond Solutions), presentation given December 2019, and key stakeholder interviews.

TABLE 2

Principles and Strategies for Effective Community Engagement

Principles	Strategies
Community engagement relies on establishing trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take a humble approach to relationship building that includes actively listening and acting on feedback. Defer to community expertise in defining problems, collaborate with community members in formulating solutions, and act on their input. Be transparent. Explain reasons for collecting information and how it is going to be used, and be forthcoming about why certain suggestions cannot be implemented. Partner with trusted community leaders and community-based organizations (CBOs). Come together with appropriate CBOs and community leaders to broker trust.
Community engagement requires sufficient and flexible funding and cross-sector support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure flexible and sustainable financial resources. Provide robust, sustained, and flexible funding for CBOs and coalitions serving communities. Streamline grantmaking and cost reimbursement systems to allow smaller organizations to more easily take part. Adequately compensate staff and community members. Allocate specific resources in budgets for hiring and properly compensating state agency and organizational staff and compensating community members for their input and participation. Collaborate across sectors. Forge partnerships across health care, public health, and social service sectors to effectively tackle multidimensional barriers to good health.
Community engagement should be continuous and sustained.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate considerable time and patience. Recognize that forming authentic relationships with communities requires time, patience, and long-term commitment. Provide infrastructure, technical assistance, and support. Invest in developing leadership skills and building capacity for community members to effectively address their current and future challenges. Follow through and “close the loop.” Dedicate funding for evaluation and dissemination of findings to monitor whether initiatives are working as intended and promote community buy-in and sustained investment in interventions.
Community engagement should pay explicit attention to eliminating structural racism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hire from the community. Ensure diverse staff at all levels, including in leadership positions, to improve understanding of health inequities and how to address them. Address participation barriers. Provide transportation, child care, translation and interpretation services, disability accommodations, and other supports to break down systemic barriers that may prevent some community members from engaging. Eliminate structural racism inside and outside governments and organizations. Provide antiracist and implicit bias trainings, work with staff to improve workplace culture, and establish diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Source: Key stakeholder interviews.

ADDITIONAL READING

Leveraging Community Expertise to Advance Health Equity: Principles and Strategies for Effective Community Engagement

Eva H. Allen, Jennifer M. Haley, Joshua Aarons, and DaQuan Lawrence urban.is/36aOMRC

Nine Ways to Strengthen Program Evaluations by Centering Community Voice

Amelia Coffey <https://urban.is/36jPi01>

To Advance Racial Health Equity, Fund Organizations Led by and for People of Color

Kimá Joy Taylor urban.is/3zOLO36