

Best Practices for Community Engagement: Tip Sheet

A Guide for Grantees of the Office of Adolescent Health and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families

Developed by Healthy Teen Network

This tip sheet was developed to provide guidance to OAH and ACYF grantees as they continue to build their programs. It serves as a guide in thinking through this important program development process and helps grantees identify key elements necessary to engage their communities in youth programming.

What Is Community Engagement?

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 “involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as a catalyst for changing policies, programs and practices.”¹

Why Is Community Engagement Important?

Community engagement increases your program’s influence and ability to achieve the change you desire. It broadens your base of support and can put you in touch with important contacts to leverage resources and get specialized expertise. That kind of support not only makes a program more effective but also improves its prospects for sustainability.

Preparing to Get Started

Even before you start, you need a plan for “gaining entry.” Identify local individuals and organizations interested in teen pregnancy prevention and build relationships with them based on trust and mutual respect. Think about who might be good leaders and who might play different roles. Consider what resources you will need to get people involved and sustain their interest until goals are met. Position your group as a mediator rather than taking sides, and carefully respect the community’s ethical standards. Finally, make sure there will be checks and balances so that the group’s power is not centralized but community-wide.

Assessing Community Needs and Resources

To get started, an essential Step 1 is a thorough assessment of community needs and resources, gathering and analyzing quantitative data (surveys, vital statistics, national data to compare with local) and qualitative data (from focus groups, interviews, observation). Part of that assessment should focus on youth as individuals—age, gender, race, ethnicity; sexual risk-taking behaviors; risk and protective factors—and part on the larger community system—youth-serving programs and organizations, policies supporting reproductive health, community values toward programs, history and experience with community engagement efforts, and so on. This assessment will help you identify needs—where there are gaps in services—and also identify change agents, good people to involve in your own community engagement effort.

Sharing Information About Your Program with the Community

Step 2 is sharing information about your program with the community when you have gained entry, and regularly and frequently (at least monthly) as the project progresses. Tell the story of your initiative in a clear and compelling way. Use simple language, with visuals, and involve the audience with open-ended questions. Share the story in writing too, through the Web, newsletters, newspapers and social networking media. This sharing

¹ Principles of Community Engagement, CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement, Retrieved May 2, 2011

builds mutual understanding and collaboration and helps your program leverage collective wisdom, effort and support from the community. Consistently reiterate your vision, and emphasize that participating empowers the community and helps achieve collective wisdom to produce innovative solutions that improve the quality of life.

Asking Community Members to Assist Your Program

Step 3 is getting staff, partners and stakeholders to get involved, working together for the benefit of your program. They can help with program planning, bringing different perspectives to the table and offering specialized expertise. They may be able to expand the program if volunteers can supplement paid staff or partners can create new opportunities by lending resources. Raising awareness of the program (marketing) is another major way they can contribute, taking advantage of both informal networking and social networking media. Raising money, providing space for activities, and providing pro bono specialized training for staff are other ways they can contribute. Also, as private citizens, they can advocate for public policies that address needs identified in the community. Once people and organizations become engaged in working with your program, they are bound to bring forward other creative ideas for support as well.

Shaping Your Community Engagement Effort

Step 4 is shaping your community engagement effort, selecting who will be involved and how they will work together. In thinking about whom to involve, consider the frequency of participation required; the knowledge, skills and attitudes a person might contribute; the money or time one could contribute; and the flexibility required to revise activities as needed; and enduring commitment to the initiative. Decide whether participation will be open to all or by invitation only, and determine what is a manageable size and what diverse knowledge, skills and capacities are needed. Strive to include representation of those not traditionally asked to the table and achieve a balance of thinkers and doers.

Once participants are brought together, they need to determine meeting schedules and modes (in-person, online, by phone). Roles and responsibilities must be assigned, and the group must agree on leadership roles and their decision-making process (democratic vs. consensus, final and binding vs. flexible and okay to revisit later).

Who's Who in Community Engagement

People with different strengths can take different roles in community engagement. The Project Manager coordinates the effort, coaches the core Project Partner Group and Stakeholder/Advisory Group, supervises staff, facilitates relationship-building activities, and oversees data collection, analysis and dissemination with the community. Project Partners comprise the core decision-making group. They share resources, knowledge and staff, stay fully informed of project benchmarks, and—working with like-minded individuals, have equal responsibility for the project's success. Community Stakeholders (who may comprise your Advisory Group) are allies who are kept informed of the project's progress so they can offer insight into the community's reaction or clout in getting things done. The Advisory Group takes direction from the core Project Partner Group.

Keeping People Engaged

Keeping people engaged involves building trust and sustaining relationships. Build trust by being open and honest, listening well, using appropriate humor to add levity and build group cohesion, and speaking directly and frankly about contentious but important issues such as power differentials, racism and financial decisions. Make sure people understand each other, and involve the group in determining how that will be done (e.g., by assessing performance, frequent "check-ins," formal facilitation). Immerse yourself in the activities of the community daily, interacting with others in festivals, learning events, meals and so on. All in a group must be accountable, finding a balance between responsibilities so a process will not go on eternally.

Dealing with Conflicts

Conflicts are a natural part of group process. They happen for a variety of reasons, including communication breakdowns, power imbalances, incompatible goals and agendas, commitment imbalance, inequitable distribution

of work and resources, turf battles and discrimination. Open communication is one of the best ways to prevent or resolve conflicts. Other methods of resolving conflicts include negotiation, help from a third-party consultant or facilitator, written agreements, and interactive activities such as role-play or “walk in my shoes” activities. Occasionally it is necessary to ask someone to disengage. In that case, review the person’s contributions to the process, focus on behaviors and any behaviorally-based performance feedback given previously, give the person ample warning and a specific time frame for improvement, be clear and concise, and negotiate an alternate role only when necessary.

Learned from Case Studies

Two case studies have brought to light important lessons for community engagement related to teen pregnancy prevention. Morgan and Lifshay’s 2006 Community Engagement in Public Health study in Contra Costa, California, concluded clearly that the Health Department cannot act alone to create healthy communities. Successful Community Engagement: Laying the Foundation for Effective Teen Pregnancy Prevention, a 2001 study in North Chicago by Goldberg et al., had three important lessons:

- A program must take time to build relationships before providing services.
- Staff must understand the community’s systems and context.
- Staff must be invested in the initiative and integrate the community engagement core values into their own values.

Successful Community Engagement

Based on these case studies and the wisdom gathered from other communities’ experience, there are several ways to increase the likelihood of success for your community engagement effort:

1. Address the community system, not just the individual.
2. Ensure initiative is culturally appropriate.
3. Explain the relevance and benefits of the initiative.
4. Empower the community from within.
5. Use coalitions/advisory groups effectively from the beginning to the end of the initiative.

Good luck, and may your community relationships and partnerships do wonderful things for your program!

Resources:

- Community Engagement in Public Health. Mary Anne Morgan and Jennifer Lifshay. Contra Costa Health Services, 2006. http://newroutes.org/sites/default/files/live/community_engagement_in_ph_0.pdf
- Developing and Sustaining Community-Based Participatory Research Partnerships: A Skill-Building Curriculum. The Examining Community-Institutional Partnerships for Prevention Research Group, University of Washington. <http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/cbpr/index.php>
- Developmental Sequence in Small Groups. Bruce W. Tuckman. Psychological Bulletin 63, pp. 384-399, 1965. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3954/is_200104/ai_n8943663/
- It's Not Enough to Collect the Data: Presenting Evaluation Findings So That They Will Make A Difference. Minnesota Department of Health. <http://www.health.state.mn.us/communityeng/>
- Principles of Community Engagement. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Committee on Community Engagement, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Public Health Practice Program Office, Atlanta, GA, 1997. <http://www.cdc.gov/phppo/pce/>
- The Right Way to Fire Someone: Firing an employee may be the hardest thing you'll have to do, but if you follow these tips, you can get the job done right. Cliff Ennico. Entrepreneur, September 11, 2006. <http://www.entrepreneur.com/humanresources/managingemployees/discipliningandfiring/article166644.html>
- Successful Community Engagement: Laying the Foundation for Effective Teen Pregnancy Prevention. Barbara Goldberg; Victoria Frank; Susan Bekenstein; Patricia Garrity and Jesus Ruiz, Journal of Children and Poverty, 17(1) pp. 65-86, 2011.