



Safe
Routes
PARTNERSHIP
Active Paths for Equity & Health

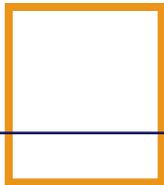


LET'S GET

TOGETHER

*A Guide for
Engaging Communities
and Creating Change*





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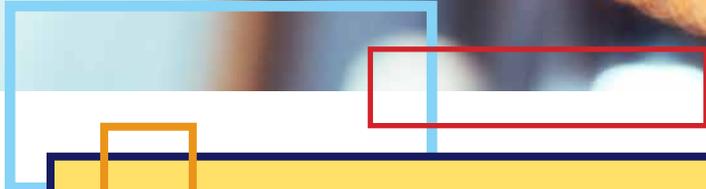


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INTRODUCTION

Engagement is a foundational part of building active and connected communities. It creates opportunities for people to work together on issues that they care about. Effective community engagement brings tangible changes that improve the lives of community members: opening a grocery store in a neighborhood with limited access to fresh produce, building sidewalks to allow children to safely walk to the local park, or city council adopting a Complete Streets policy. Community members can feel these changes in how they live, work, play, and learn. They can also feel these changes in how they relate to each other and how they perceive their community.

While engagement is a collaborative practice, the people who call a community “home” should drive decisions that impact their everyday lives. As community partners, your role is to facilitate this process in a way that ensures community members’ priorities, needs, and desires are being addressed. Your role is the same if you work with community members every day or just for specific projects. Your approach to community engagement will directly influence how community members’ needs are, or are not, being addressed and ultimately whether the effort or project is a success.

This guide offers tips and strategies for effective community engagement. We begin by looking at how your role as a community partner impacts the community you are working with. Then we discuss how you can build your understanding of the community by conducting community research. Next, we explore how to leverage partnerships in your community engagement. We round out the guide with creative ideas for engagement activities and strategies for sustaining community engagement long-term. Each section links to additional resources and a series of guiding questions to help you improve your practice.

Community Engagement Framework

We’ve created this guide for people who work closely with, or in service of, a community or set of communities. This may include, but is not limited to, Safe Routes to School practitioners, non-profit organizations, government agency staff, and community advocates. If you don’t fall into one of these categories, no problem! This guide will still offer you valuable insight on practicing community engagement.



What is a Community?

In this guide, we define a community as a group of people who share a common identity or characteristic, or a group of people living in the same place (neighborhood, town, city). Communities vary in size and scale. A community can be a group of people living in the same apartment building, a group of students attending the same school, or a group of local artists. A community can also be a broader group, like the Asian community, the LGBTQ+ community, or the Safe Routes to School community. As you work alongside different communities, keep these things in mind:

1. People belong to many different communities and have varying connections to each one. Consider this an asset and avoid putting people in boxes.
2. An individual cannot and should not represent the beliefs and views of an entire community. Everyone brings their own unique perspective.
3. Community members should define their own community. Create opportunities for people to share things about their community during the engagement process.
4. Communities are always evolving. Be open to evolving with them.

We've developed a basic framework for effective community engagement:

1. **Reflect** on your role as a community partner.
2. **Research** the community you are working with.
3. **Partner** with other organizations to build community relationships.
4. **Plan** thoughtful, culturally-responsive community engagement experiences.
5. **Implement** your community engagement activities and events.
6. **Sustain** your community engagement beyond a single project or initiative.

This framework is people-centered, meaning that the people who live, work, play, and worship in the community will be at the heart of this process. Getting to know the community you are working with is key to effective, equitable, and authentic engagement. We encourage you to take the time to move through each step and focus on building relationships along the way. Remember, there is no one size fits all approach to community engagement. Adapt these ideas and resources to fit the unique needs of the community where you are working, and let community members take the lead. They already have the skills and knowledge to help inform this process, so connect with them early and often. Now let's get started!

How to Use This Guide

- **Review the Basics** - Read this guide for an overview of key points on community engagement.
- **Learn from Example** – Check out our collection of case studies from organizations and agencies who are doing stellar community engagement work!
- **Go Deeper** – Explore the links for tools, worksheets, and additional resources. Use the guiding questions at the end of each section to push your own thinking around community engagement.



Safe Routes to School: E is for Engagement

Safe Routes to School promotes walking and rolling as safe options for school travel and physical activity. The Six Es make up the key components of a comprehensive Safe Routes to School approach: Engagement, Equity, Engineering, Encouragement, Education, and Evaluation. In 2020, Safe Routes Partnership removed Enforcement from the Six Es in favor of a more just, community-centered, and foundational E: Engagement. This move has brought a wave of innovative strategies to engage communities in Safe Routes to School without relying on law enforcement. From hands-on workshops to partnering with local leaders, Safe Routes practitioners are re-imagining community engagement to be more accessible, equitable, and culturally-responsive. As you move through this guide, look for specific tips on community engagement for Safe Routes to School. We encourage you to try some of them out in your own programs!



REFLECT

As a community partner, you play a unique role in helping to advance meaningful change. You might be coordinating a Safe Routes to School program, organizing a pedestrian safety coalition, or creating a neighborhood master plan. All of these efforts aim to improve the lives of community members, whether you are making it safer to kids to walk to school or planning for better access to public transit. While these efforts seem positive, it is important to keep in mind that community members might view your work in a different way. Perhaps you hold a different level of decision-making power than community members, like the power to impact state policies versus local policies.

You might not live in the community where you are working. You might be from a different racial or ethnic background than people living in the community. You might have a set of priorities that do not completely align with what the community wants. You might have a lot of energy, while residents are feeling community engagement fatigue.

Here's the good news: there are things you can do at each stage of your community engagement process to address some of these barriers. Begin by reflecting on your role as a community partner. We created a list of [Pre-Community Engagement Reflection Exercises](#) that will help you define your purpose for working in a specific community, identify your strengths and weaknesses as a community partner, and examine how your own power and privilege might impact the community you are working with. We encourage you to use the questions to spark thoughtful and honest conversations about your engagement practice.

If you are already working with a specific community, this reflection exercise is still useful. Take this time to reflect on your community engagement work so far and explore opportunities to improve. You can also invite community members and partners to do a reflection session with you. For example, if you are running a Safe Routes to School program and you have been working with the same school

or school cohort for a number of years, you can pull together various Safe Routes to School champions (administrators, teachers, parents and caregivers, crossing guards, etc.) to assess how well you are incorporating engagement into your program. You might find that you are doing a great job of reaching a certain group of students, but other students are not as active in participating. A reflection activity can help identify ways to eliminate some of the barriers to participation in your program.

Reflecting on your role is especially important if you live outside of the community where you are working and/or if you are a white person working in a community of color. Many communities of color and low-income communities have a history of working with individuals, government agencies, and organizations that did not have the community's best interest in mind. Policies like redlining, the

forced removal of Indigenous people from their lands, and the continued over-policing in Black communities have led to mistrust, frustration, and fear. These actions are also the direct result of institutional racism and white supremacy. Racism and white supremacy impact everything from education to public health to transportation to climate change - and its effects on communities of color are profound and harmful. Members of impacted communities might be wary of working with government or outside organizations. They might question if your work together will bring positive changes, especially if that has not happened in the past. It is your responsibility to learn about how your government agency, organization, or institution has impacted the community you are working with, and how your role is tied to that history. We will delve into this topic more in the next section of the guide.





- *Use reflection as a team-building exercise.* Teams can use reflection activities to learn more about each other's community engagement experiences. You can identify what ideas, resources, and expertise each team member brings to the table and determine areas where you need support. Consider organizing this reflection session as a team coffee chat or lunch break to get out of "formal meeting mode." If you want to add a fun twist to your reflection, ask people to respond to the questions through an art piece or other creative mode of expression.
- *Create a list of community engagement standards or norms – and commit to following them.* The legacy of inequity in communities of color and low-income communities requires you and your team members to commit to doing a better job at community engagement. As a part

of your reflection process, create a list of community engagement commitments you will make to ensure that you are working in solidarity with the community. The **Pre-Community Engagement Reflection Exercise** outlines a process for generating Community Engagement Commitments and provides commitment statement examples.

- *Be sure to ask community members for their engagement commitments or see if they would like to work on creating a list together.* Revisit your commitment statements throughout the engagement process to see if you are following through or if you need to make adjustments. Regular check-ins will help hold you and your team accountable for doing what you say you are going to do.

Safe Routes to School Tip

Incorporate the Six Es into your reflection exercise. Take a look at each E and think about how your work in that area is impacting the community. If you don't have to a team to work with, consider linking up with another Safe Routes to School practitioner for this exercise. You can share your reflections and brainstorm ideas for your individual programs.

Guiding Questions:

- What is your agency or organization's history of working in this community??
- What is your purpose for working with this community?
- What will you do to make sure your work has a positive impact on the community?

RESEARCH

In the previous section, we discussed the importance of understanding the history of the community where you are working. This section expands on that idea by exploring how to conduct community research. By community research, we mean getting to know where you are and who you are working with. It does not necessarily involve official research practices and protocols, although it can if it suits your work. Community research can be going on a walk around the neighborhood, visiting a local museum, or riding the bus around town. It can also be having coffee with a community member, attending a faith-based service, or volunteering at a community event. The information that you gather from these experiences can guide your engagement approach.

You can still do community research if you are already working in a community you know really well. Since places evolve over time, it's always a good idea to continue learning about where you work. There are always new ideas to explore, new places to discover, and new people to meet. Your community research might focus more on observing what has changed, what has stayed the same, and what opportunities there are for you to deepen your connection with the community. You can also use this time to nurture existing relationships, like inviting a community partner to go on a walk or ride. This is how you maintain existing connections and expand your knowledge of the community.

Community research is also a critical part of building trust with community members. As we mentioned earlier, many communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color, have been negatively impacted by systemic inequities. Some people might be hesitant or and reluctant to trust government agencies and organizations even if you do not intend to do harm. Community partners must understand this history and legacy of mistrust and work to dismantle systems of inequity if you want to make meaningful change. This means learning about the history of the people who live in the community and understanding how that history impacts the present day. Also remember that just because people

share a common background does not mean they want or need the same things, or that they have all had the same experience. Some community members might have had positive experiences working with government agencies and outside partners. Others might have had more negative experiences that impact their willingness to engage. Look for opportunities to hear people's individual stories so that you are building comprehensive knowledge as opposed to centering on one collective narrative.

When beginning your community research, focus on local activities that get you out on the ground so you can get a sense of what everyday life is like. Have fun with the process and be open to exploring new ideas. You never know what you will discover or who you might meet!



- **Take a walk to ride around the neighborhood.** Online maps can be helpful, but they do not provide the same experience as being in the actual place. Pick a day to explore a neighborhood. You can choose a few destinations in advance but it's also fun to walk or ride around and see what you discover. Pop into a coffee shop, hike a local trail, or sit on a park bench and take in what is going on around you. There is no right or wrong way to do this, just put on some comfy shoes and get out there!
- **Hop on public transit.** Taking a ride on the local bus or train will not only offer great sight-seeing, but it will give you deeper insight into how transit-riders experience getting around town. If you normally travel via other modes besides transit, you might not know what it's like to wait 20 minutes for the bus when it is snowing, or what it's like to carry a full cart of groceries on the train because there is not a grocery store near your house. So choose a few routes and go on different rides. Pay attention to who else is riding, where the busy hubs are, and some of the potential barriers to safe and easy transit. Transit workers and riders offer valuable perspectives that are often unheard, so use this chance to connect with them.

- **Do historical and archival research.** Every place has a story. Learning about these stories will help deepen your understanding of where you are working and who you are working with. Find opportunities to explore the local history. This could mean visiting the local historical society, looking through newspaper archives at the library, attending a museum exhibition, walking a heritage trail, or just chatting with a long-time resident. You can also research online. Many cities and towns have digital archives and other resources that provide information about their history, culture, and local attractions.
- **Attend a community event other than your own.** Sometimes we are so focused on our own work that we miss out on opportunities to attend different events and meet new people. Attending a community event outside your scope of work will help you understand people's needs and values. For example, a local cultural festival will teach you a lot about the kinds of food, music, arts, and traditions that community members enjoy. Volunteering at a local food and clothing drive will show you people's essential needs. This knowledge can inform your own engagement activities planning, like the kind of food you serve to the time of day you host a gathering. Community events are also a great time to connect with local leaders and potential partners.
- **Learn about the differences within communities.** There can be a lot of diversity within one community. For example, if a community has a large immigrant population, it's important to learn about all the different immigrant groups that live there. Another example is looking at intergenerational differences to understand how people vary even if they are from a similar racial or ethnic group. Looking at the diversity within communities will help you create a more well-rounded and responsive community engagement approach where everyone is included. As you do your community research, think about ways to learn about different groups you might engage.



Where can you learn about young people? Older adults? Women? Individuals with disabilities? Consider these questions when determining where, when, and how you conduct your community research.

- **Strike up a conversation.** This may sound simple, but sometimes the best way to get to know someone is to talk to them. Chatting with someone face-to-face, or even through phone or video call, is the first step in building a meaningful relationship. Your conversation might not even be related to what you are working on – and that's okay! Take the time to get to know someone. Find out about their interests, what they enjoy doing around their neighborhood, or what they like to eat. And remember, communication is a two-way street. These conversations should not be like an interview. Let the chat flow organically, and hopefully a new relationship will blossom!

Practice Active Listening

Active listening is a way to build trust and empathy. You will be talking with community members throughout your engagement process but it is important to be an active listener right from the start. Active listening involves listening without interrupting, paraphrasing what is being said, and withholding judgment.

It also involves putting your own thoughts and ideas aside while someone else is speaking. A main benefit of active listening is that it builds empathy and allows you to see someone else's point of view, even if you don't agree with them. Practicing active listening will show that you value people's thoughts, ideas, stories.

As you build relationships, you might begin having deeper conversations with community members. Some of these conversations might be contentious, emotional, or more personal in nature. Be prepared for what you will do in these cases. If someone gives you negative feedback or tells you “no” about something you want to implement, your response can make a big difference. One possible response is acknowledging what the person is saying before continuing the conversation. A phrase like, “So what I hear you saying is...” can be helpful in creating productive dialogue. Remember, active listening is a learned skill so your best chance at improving is by practicing.

Utilize the Power of Strategic Storytelling

Storytelling is an engagement tool that serves a variety of purposes. We use stories to share information, call people to action, or simply to connect with one another. Stories can also help establish trust and build relationships

with community members. Effective storytelling requires patience and practice, especially on the part of the listener. Safe Routes Partnership and our partners at Pueblo Planning created a [Storytelling Resource Guide](#) to help you collect and share stories to bring about social change. The guide offers tips on facilitating storytelling and turning stories into effective messaging. Use this resource as you begin connecting with community members during the research phase of the engagement process. As you move forward, consider how to incorporate storytelling into other parts of your practice.

Attend Community Events

Community gatherings, civic events, and celebrations can tell you a lot about how people live, work, and play. School board meetings and city council meetings can offer great insight into what policies are being prioritized on a local level and who has power and influence in the community. When you attend these meetings, pay attention to who else is in the room, who is missing, which voices are being uplifted, and which voices are unheard. Are people of color participating? Women? People with disabilities? Youth? Are the people making decisions representative of the community they are serving? If you see people who are not participating in the process, figure out what the barriers are and how you can reduce them in your upcoming events.

Check a local community calendar for upcoming events you can attend. Keep in mind that some events and celebrations might be spread through word-of-mouth or outside of standard, English-dominant communications channels. See if there are newspapers, radio stations, or TV stations aimed at different racial or ethnic groups. Familiarize yourself with holidays and celebrations of different religions and cultures. Look for events that are unique to the community and show off what makes that place special.

Here are a few examples of events to get you started:

- Arts and cultural festivals
- Farmers markets

- Faith-based services (if open to the public)
- Food and clothing drives
- County fairs
- Craft fairs
- Parades
- High school sports games
- Community walks and bike rides
- Open Streets events
- Food truck events
- Movie nights
- Community gardens
- City/Town Council meetings
- School board meetings
- Youth council meetings.

Conduct Community Research for Statewide Initiatives

If you are working on a statewide initiative, you can conduct research on the individual communities that make up the population. There are lots of ways to group communities together – race and ethnicity, age, geographic area, gender, disability, language, etc. If you are working on a team, assign each team member a community to research and report back to the group. For example, one team member might look into rural communities while another might focus on youth. Although on-the-ground research is ideal, in a large state, this might be a challenge. You might have to conduct the bulk of your community research online. Visit the city or town's website to get started. You can also explore local maps to get a sense of what is in the area. This is also an ideal time to

connect with potential project partners and community-based groups who you might end up collaborating with in the future. These partners can include elected officials or local government staff. Schedule a few Zoom calls to get to know each other. Ask someone to give you a virtual tour. Check out a community calendar of events and see if there are virtual events to attend. There are a lot of ways to learn about a community without being there, you just have to get creative!

Safe Routes to School Tip

Many schools are named after notable public figures or important community landmarks. Research the story behind the name of the school or schools you are working with. What does the name of the school tell you about the community? How do students, staff, and families feel about the name of their school? How can you incorporate this knowledge into your program?

Guiding Questions:

- What do you already know about this community? How did you gain this knowledge?
- What do you want to know about this community? What are you curious about?
- How can you learn more about this community? Where can you go? Who can you talk to?



PARTNER

Community engagement is a team sport. Dedicate time to developing and sustaining partnerships within the community. Your community partners will bring their own set of resources, knowledge, and expertise that will expand your capacity to make a meaningful impact. Community partners can connect you to local leaders, share information, and offer on-site event support. You can also join efforts to develop and implement programs, pass policies, and lead advocacy efforts.

You should prioritize building partnerships with community-based groups and people who have deep ties to the community. Groups led by people from the community bring a sense of “ground truth” that an outside partner does not have. They can ensure that your engagement is culturally-relevant and that the community’s perspective is being valued. A community group might be a gardening club, a knitting circle, and dance troupe, or a group of neighbors running a mutual aid. It does not necessarily have to be part of a “formal” organization.

You should also build relationships with stakeholders and decision makers including elected officials and others who hold “official” decision-making power. In many cases, getting their buy-in is necessary to create change. For example, if you want to increase physical activity among youth, see if there is a school board member who can be your champion. A school board member can influence policies to include more physical activity during the school day. If you gain decision-maker support, remember the importance of holding them accountable for doing what they say they are going to do. One way to do this is by staying connected with their staff. Many elected officials and other decision-makers, like school administrators, work with staff who manage day-to-day operations like creating schedules and meeting agendas. Building relationships with their staff will make it easier to follow up on next steps, streamline communications, and keep your priorities on the table.

Coalition Building

Coalition building is another community engagement strategy to increase your reach and influence. Coalitions work together to develop a common approach to address a specific problem. They are composed of different stakeholders with diverse areas of expertise that have a shared goal. Coalitions are useful if you want to grow a movement within a community. For example, a group of different youth and biking organizations might form a coalition to increase the number of kids biking. The coalition can work together to develop a youth cycling curriculum, organize bike rodeos, or be a united voice advocating for bike education in schools. There are many other options and structures for organizing a coalition. Check out these resources for more information:

- [University of Kansas Community Tool Box: Coalition Building Sections](#)¹
- [Developing Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide](#)²

- [Sierra Club Magazine - How to Build Diverse Coalitions](#)³
- [Liberating Structures Menu](#)⁴

Non-traditional Partnerships

While it might be common for certain sectors to work together, there are many potential partnerships between groups and individuals who on the surface might not seem completely aligned. When you dive a bit deeper, you’ll find that your interests probably do overlap in some way. If you are working on a physical activity campaign, reach out to a local dance or yoga studio. Engage farm and agricultural groups in food and nutrition initiatives. Invite a local arts collective to create decorations for your outreach table. You also find ways to support other groups’ initiatives so the partnership is mutually beneficial. Be up front about what you can bring to the partnership. Not only will this benefit your work, but the entire community benefits if everyone is working together.



Here are a few creative partnerships to consider that might work outside your direct area of interest:

- Artists and arts organizations
- Youth-led groups: Youth councils, Student Government Associations
- Environmental organizations
- Farmers and agricultural organizations
- Small business associations
- Local sports leagues
- Animal rights groups
- Senior centers
- Voting rights groups
- LGBTQIA+ groups
- Disability rights groups
- Rotary clubs
- Motorcycle/biker clubs
- Scout troops
- AARP
- Boys and Girls Clubs
- YMCA

Partner with Trusted Community Leaders

Every community seems to have that one person who knows everyone and everything. The woman who sits on her front porch and knows all the kids that walk to school. The barber who hears all the neighborhood gossip from customers. The community elder who carries generations of stories. These people tend to have trust and influence in the community despite not holding official leadership roles. They know how things work, they are well-connected, and they are invested in the well-being of their community. Other community members seek out their advice, value their opinion, and follow their lead when it comes to important issues. As you begin building partnerships, pay attention to who has the community's ear and who really has the power and influence to get things done. Then try sparking up a conversation with this person or ask to be introduced by another community member. Listen to their ideas and accept their honest feedback. You may find that your approach to something is totally off the mark – and that's okay! Trusted community leaders will help you find the best approach and help connect you with other people. Learn about working with trusted community leaders by reviewing the recording and slides from [Safe Routes Partnership's Community Engagement for Safe Routes to School Virtual Training](#).⁵

Community Asset Mapping

Low-income communities and communities of color are often defined by a barrage of negative narratives highlighting their deficits. Community asset mapping is a way to acknowledge the inherent strengths and values of a community as defined by those who live there. This exercise uplifts community-based narratives and highlights assets that might normally be overlooked like food, art, music, and other cultural markers. Consider working with community members and partners to create a community asset map as a part of your engagement. This [Community Mapping Asset Workbook](#)⁶ developed by [The Laundromat Project](#)⁷ gives you a step-by-step guide to creating an asset map in partnership with community members, artists, and cultural workers.

Safe Routes to School Tip

School partnerships can extend beyond administrators and teachers. You might need to coordinate with secretaries, custodians, school nurses, or support staff. Oftentimes these are the people who know the ins and outs of the school, from class schedules to where they store extra supplies. Make a point to connect with them early and include them in program activities.

Guiding Questions:

- What are the other groups and organizations working in this community?
- Who holds power in this community outside of elected officials?
- Who does the community trust?
- What resources or gaps in knowledge are you missing? Who can bring these resources and this knowledge to your community engagement team?

Case Study: Kansas City, Missouri Decriminalizes Walking and Biking Through the Power of Coalitions

Advocates in Kansas City, Missouri successfully pursued legislation to decriminalize walking and biking following a string of high profile cases involving over-policing of Black and Brown bodies. Kansas City-based advocacy organization [BikeWalkKC](#) led this effort alongside community partners, and members of the public, and others. A key part of their success was building a coalition of support to show how decriminalization was an issue of public concern that needed to be addressed by City Council. Their coalition brought together a diverse range of advocates working across different sectors including transportation, housing, sustainability, neighborhood development, civil rights, and local media. They mobilized their efforts through letter writing campaigns, public testimony, and connecting with local legislators, which resulted in over 300 emails to City Council expressing support for decriminalizing walking and biking. In May 2021, Kansas City, Missouri City Council voted to fully eliminate jaywalking and bike inspections violations and significantly modify penalties for dirty wheels. While coalition-building was one piece of a larger strategy, it was critical step in demonstrating large scale support for decriminalization and uplifting community voices.



PLAN

As you begin thinking about implementing engagement activities, it's important to have a solid plan. Your community research and partnerships should inform your plan. Your plan should include a variety of opportunities for people to participate and should consider the different needs of community members. Details like event format, meeting time, promotional materials, and even the food you serve should all be determined based on what works best for community members. You might find that you need to offer multiple engagement activities that are geared to different audiences but have a similar goal.

For example, if you are gathering community feedback on a transit plan, your engagement activities may involve online surveys, in-person outreach tabling, and listening sessions. Having a menu of engagement options makes it easier for different voices to be heard. Inviting community leaders and partners into the planning process will also help ensure that your activities suit the community's needs. Check out the [Safe Routes to Parks Checklist for Community Engagement](#)⁸ for more information on planning inclusive community engagement activities.

- *Be mindful of the squeaky wheels.* Community engagement can get overtaken by the same, and usually loudest, voices. These “squeaky wheels” tend to drive decision-making for a number of reasons: having more money, having more political influence, or having greater privilege than other community members. In some communities, this looks like homeowners dominating conversations about affordable housing while leaving out renters. In other communities, it might be wealthy white community members having outsized influence compared to poorer community members of color. It can also look like English-speakers making a majority of decisions while leaving out people who speak other languages. When creating your community engagement plan, be mindful of which voices you always hear from and who is being left out. If certain groups are being left out, find out why that is, then work to break

down those barriers. It's okay for some engagement activities to center on people who you don't always hear from - that's actually a good thing! It shows that you are serious about bringing tangible changes to communities who are often overlooked and under-resourced. Take a break from catering to the squeaky wheels and concentrate on the unheard voices.

- *Get creative with space.* Choosing the right location to host activities is key for reaching your intended audience. Open your mind to new ways of thinking about space. If you usually host events in the same places and are seeing the same faces, try using a new location. Spaces like grocery stores, hair and nail salons, barber shops, bus stops, health clinics, laundromats, and other service centers can connect



you to people you might not normally see at a traditional public meeting. Consider meeting people in outdoor spaces like park pavilions, sports fields, pools, apartment courtyards, or playgrounds. Exploring new gathering spaces will also help you build partnerships with different people from sectors like business owners, transit workers, gig workers, entrepreneurs, artists, and faith leaders.

- *Make it easy to participate.* As you plan your activities, you should always be thinking about how to make it easy for people who face the most barriers to participation. Think about the people who you want to engage – a single dad, a Spanish-speaking business owner, a transit rider with disabilities, a farmer. When you design your activities, ask yourself, “What might make it hard for this person to participate?” Offering childcare, food, transportation, and interpreters can be helpful, but also find out from community members what they need in order to participate in the process. They might share something you had not even considered. Be proactive about building accessibility into your plan so you don't have to fix mistakes afterwards. This will set you off on the right foot from the beginning and should bring you some goodwill within the community.
- *Don't overcomplicate it!* Oftentimes we get bogged down in planning processes that are too long and too complex. Be mindful of how much time you spend

trying to outline a perfect engagement plan. Instead, focus on what makes the most common sense and what will be the best experience for community members. And it cannot be restated enough: collaborate with your community leaders and partners each step of the way. Your community engagement plan will be better for it!

Spectrum of Public Participation

There are a lot of ways for community members to participate in decision making. One way to determine the appropriate level of participation is by viewing it as a spectrum. The International Association for Public Participation created a Spectrum of Public Participation⁹ to help people define what role the public can play in decision making processes. The spectrum also provides promises you can make to the public at each level of participation. In some cases, you just need to inform the public about something. For example, if you are working on a Safe Routes to School program, you might want to inform people about what Safe Routes to School is and how it can be used to keep students safe. As you move through the spectrum, the decision-making impact of community members increases.



IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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This does not mean that the “Inform” level is bad, it just means that there are different ways for people to participate. You might find yourself moving through different levels throughout one engagement process. In the Safe Routes to School example, you might consult with parents and caregivers, school

administrators, and other stakeholders on the details of your program. Community members may end up deciding on the final implementation, or maybe they become partners while you take official charge of the program. The key allowing for all kinds of public participation and keeping open lines of communication.

Safe Routes to School Tip

School administrators have limited time to manage community partnerships. If you want to implement an activity, approach with a clear and detailed plan that includes dates, times, goals, roles and responsibilities, and a flow of events. Administrators will appreciate your proactive leadership and consideration of their time.

Guiding Questions:

- What are the barriers to public participation in this activity and how can you address them?
- How can you incorporate different levels of public participation into your engagement plan?
- Who do you see and hear from all the time? Who is missing?

Case Study: Planning for Parks in Tucson, Arizona

When the City of Tucson passed Proposition 407: Parks + Connections in 2018, local non-profit **Living Streets Alliance (LSA)** jumped at the opportunity to reimagine the City's approach to community engagement. Prop 407 is a \$225 million bond package to improve park connections across the city over a ten-year period. LSA wanted to ensure that community members had a say in how this money would be used and which initiatives should be prioritized. Using their Safe Routes to Parks Active Communities grant, LSA worked with the City's parks and recreation department and transportation and mobility department to develop a community engagement plan to increase participation from populations and communities who have been historically marginalized and underrepresented in planning and decision-making processes, including youth, people of color and people with low incomes. Their plan included a two-day workshop on equitable community engagement facilitated by Safe Routes Partnership. These conversations were accompanied by a bike ride focus group with local bike club leaders in the Pueblo Gardens neighborhood to inform the alignment options under consideration for a nearby Proposition 407 project. LSA staff and City program managers and engineers joined the ride to hear the bike club's ideas for improving safety and access to parks and other neighborhood destinations. This engagement experience positioned community members as experts and decision makers. It also centered around a meaningful community activity – a weekly bike ride led by people in the neighborhood. Through thoughtful planning, collaboration, and experimenting with a “non-traditional” community engagement strategy, LSA and the City of Tucson made strides in reducing barriers to participation and shifting decision-making power to community members. Visit the Safe Routes Partnership [blog](#) to read more about this project.

IMPLEMENT

Once you have a team of partners and a plan in place, you can begin implementing community engagement activities and events. These activities and events can take many forms – community meetings, listening sessions, workshops, street fairs, bike rides, cultural festivals, the sky’s the limit! Just be sure to keep the community at the heart of whatever you are doing. Design experiences that foster a sense of belonging and social connection. Create opportunities for community members to teach you something instead of you always playing the educator role. And work with trusted community partners to ensure your activities are culturally-responsive and accessible.



Also, remember to have fun! Not every community gathering has to be a formal meeting. In fact, it should not be. Think about creative ways for people to participate outside of traditional meeting structures. Can you use play and model-building as part of a community design charrette? Can you incorporate local art and history into your walk audit? Can you make a community cookbook with favorite recipes from residents as part of a healthy eating campaign? There are a lot of possibilities if you think outside the box or if you ask community members what types of activities they are interested in. Getting community input will make it more likely that community members will participate in whatever activity you are planning. It will also show that you respect community members as decision-makers and collaborators.

- *Value the quality of the experience over the quantity of events or participants.* The word “community engagement” can conjure up images of packed public meetings, crowded street fairs, and volunteers scrambling to collect hundreds of survey responses. If this is your vision of community engagement, it’s time to expand your perspective. It’s the quality of the experience, not the number of participants, that counts. A high-quality experience might be a large health fair, but it can also be a small gathering of community leaders who meet to address local health concerns. When designing an engagement experience, consider the intended audience and outcome. If you want to collect a lot of baseline information about

the community’s health and safety concerns, a large-scale survey may be the way to go. If you are interested in more in-depth feedback, organize a few small gatherings where people can share more in detail. Offering different ways to participate will make your engagement experiences more accessible and will take some of the pressure off of you to hit high target numbers. Find out what the community values in an engagement experience and what “high-quality” means to them, then plan accordingly.

- *Add an artful infusion.* Arts-based engagement activities are a fun way to boost public participation and increase accessibility. Work with your team and community partners to incorporate art and creativity into your engagement efforts. Can you expand your walk and roll initiatives to include dance and movement? Can community members draw or sculpt their ideal transit system as opposed to filling out a survey? Can you hold a public meeting at a local gallery or museum? If you’re not an artist, no problem! Most communities have a collection of local artists, arts organizations, or creative individuals who enjoy working on public projects and who can bring fresh ideas to the table. Invite them to lead activities, design promotional materials, document events, and collaborate with community members. Many cities and towns also have an arts department in their local government that can

provide guidance on artist engagement including how to budget for artist fees and materials.

- *Celebrate and support local.* People take a lot of pride in their local community. From recommending favorite restaurants to cheering on local sports teams, community members will enthusiastically share what makes their community special. Find ways to celebrate and support local businesses, organizations, sports teams, and other community favorites during your engagement activities. If you are serving food at a meeting, order from a local restaurant. Partner with a local sports team on a physical activity initiative. Decorate your meeting and event spaces with photos of local places and portraits of community members. These special touches show that you did your community research, you value what makes the community unique, and you are serious about fostering a sense of belonging. Your trusted community leaders can help you generate ideas and give recommendations for incorporating some local flair to your engagement.
- *Ask community members what they like.* It is tempting to plan activities that are big and flashy, but that might not be what community members need or want. Ask them what kinds of activities they like instead of making assumptions. Some people will prefer large groups while others prefer smaller, more intimate settings. Virtual engagement has made it possible to reach different communities but some people still prefer in-person experiences. Some people enjoy activities that they can do with their friends and family. Others might like a one-on-one coffee chat. You will learn this as you talk to community members. Stay open to creating a variety of engagement experiences that incorporate the community's ideas.

Post-Activity Reflection

After each community engagement activity, take some time to reflect on how things went. This will help you determine any adjustments you need to make for

your next activity. Involve community partners and community members in the reflection process. They might have other thoughts that you did not consider. Here are a few post-engagement reflection questions:

- How did the process go?
- Who did we hear from?
- Who were we still not hearing from?
- What could we do differently/better?

Communicating with Diverse Audiences

You will communicate with a number of different audiences throughout the engagement process. Sharing information about an upcoming traffic safety meeting, mounting a social media campaign to encourage walking and biking, and even casual conversations with community members all require effective communications skills. Part of increasing effectiveness is making sure that you are connecting with your intended audience, and if you have multiple audiences, that means using multiple communications strategies. Even for a group with a shared background, there can be key differences between how people like to communicate. For example, older Latinx individuals might prefer face-to-face interaction while younger Latinx individuals might prefer social media or communicating via text. Again, this is where all your community relationships come in handy! Your trusted leaders and community partners will be able to share effective strategies for communicating your message. Here are a few additional resources on creating effective and

accessible communications strategies for different audiences:

- [ADA Best Practices Tool Kit for State and Local Governments](#)¹⁰
- [Effective Tools for Communications and Leadership in Indian Country](#)¹¹
- [National Congress of American Indians Tribal Communications Resources](#)¹²
- [Expert Panel Meeting on Communicating about Overweight/Obesity with Hispanic Audiences](#)¹³

And here are a few communications questions to consider:

- Who are you trying to reach?
- What message are you trying to share?
- What might make it hard for a community member to receive your message?
- How can you reduce these barriers to communication?

Working with Interpreters and Translators

Language access is an important part of reducing barriers to participation. While interpretation and translation services are becoming more common place, they are still far from standard practice. This does not have to be the case for your work! Check out these tips for increasing language access in your engagement practice:

- Find out what languages are spoken in the community. Remember to include languages spoken by smaller populations as they are just as important.



- Prioritize interpretation and translation services in your budget. Even if your budget is small, you can find ways to be resourceful. Maybe you pay for live interpretation at an event and work with community partners, volunteers, or interns to translate written materials. There are possibilities if you plan thoughtfully and leverage existing partnerships.
- A translated document is useless if it doesn't get in the hands of people. Work with community partners on a distribution plan for translated materials. Your plan might include distributing materials in spaces like grocery stores, laundromats, apartment building lobbies, fast food chains, pick-up sports games, and places of worship. Your community partners can help you determine which places to prioritize.
- Use plain language in your written materials. Keep in mind that literacy levels vary no matter what language the person is speaking. Learn more about plain language [here](#).
- Remember the power of phone calls, in-person chats, and word of mouth communication. Many community members who speak languages other than English prefer these kinds of interactions over flyers and emails.
- Prioritize language access in your hiring practices. Look for candidates who speak the same languages spoken by communities in your work area. You can also consider hiring community members as translators and interpreters or offer a stipend for services provided.



Mark Your Calendar!

When organizing meetings and events it is important to consider how work and school schedules, holidays, religious celebrations, or other cultural traditions will impact public participation. Gatherings and events might need to take place outside of the 9 - 5, Monday - Friday work schedule in order to accommodate students and people working. Additionally, if you schedule a meeting during a holiday, some community members might not be able to attend. Even the food you offer at a community event might be impacted by religious or cultural traditions or personal preference. Keep a calendar on-hand to check for scheduling conflicts and work with your trusted community leaders to align your events with other celebrations, religious observances, and school events. Also ask people what works best with their schedule and then plan your events accordingly.



Case Study: Portland, Oregon Safe Routes to School Pivots to Virtual Engagement

When COVID-19 disrupted in-person community engagement, Portland, Oregon's Safe Routes to School program pivoted to virtual and physically distanced activities. Traffic playgrounds, photo voice projects, social media campaigns, and a virtual internship program kept students and families safe and active through lockdown and online learning. Portland's traffic gardens displayed colorful messages reminding people to stay masked and distanced while on the course. A photo voice project provided opportunities for young people to share photos of what safety looks like for them. Even summer interns got in on the action and adapted to a virtual experience that still taught them valuable career skills. During this time, Portland Bureau of Transportation, the agency that runs Safe Routes to School, continued to address racial equity in their programming, from sharing anti-racism safety messages on social media to uplifting the expertise of communities of color. To learn more about how Portland Safe Routes to School implemented programs during COVID-19, check out this recording of our Safe Routes Back 2 School webinar.

Safe Routes to School Tip

Tabling at events like Back to School Night and local sports games can be an opportunity to raise awareness about Safe Routes to School. Besides sharing information about the program, you can also gather data about student travel and safety concerns. Check out our Safe Routes Community Engagement Cards for outreach tabling activities.

Guiding Questions:

- Who is the main audience for your activity or event?
- Why are you doing this activity or event?
- What might make it hard for people to participate?
- How is this activity or event advancing meaningful change within the community?

SUSTAIN

Follow through, or lack of follow through, can make or break your relationships within a community. If you are clear with your intentions at the start of the engagement process, community members should know what to expect from the result of your work together. For example, if you are organizing a walk audit, let people know what will be done with the results, what changes they can expect to see, and when the changes will happen. That last part is very important especially if it will take a long time for changes to be made. You don't want to leave community members wondering why a problem was not addressed. Then follow up periodically to let people know how things are progressing. Too often community members participate in programs, studies, in meetings only to see limited results or no results at all. This causes further distrust between the community and causes harm. Keep the lines of communication open so people feel like their time, experience, and expertise are valued.

One way to instill trust is outlining a few short-term outcomes that residents will be able to see and feel pretty immediately. In the walk audit example, work with your local planner or engineer to determine what quick fixes can be made. Something as simple as relocating a trash can from a busy sidewalk to a more open area can improve walkability. This is also quick, low-cost solution compared to large infrastructure improvements. For longer term projects, outline each step of the process so community members can follow along. Not everyone knows or understands that some changes may take a long time, so transparency is key. Be proactive and create a communications plan so you can follow up with people throughout the project. Let people know how and when to expect updates and who to contact if they have questions. Don't place the responsibility on community members to reach out to you. Show that you're committed to keeping in touch and delivering the results the community desires.

Most importantly, the people who live in the community will be there long after you leave. Community leaders will still be spearheading their own initiatives, advocating for change, and looking out for their neighbors. Find ways to continue supporting their efforts by

connecting them to resources, sharing their information, and checking in from time to time. Your support will go a long way in bringing about meaningful change.

- *Schedule time in your calendar to check in with partners and community members on a regular basis.* Even if there are no changes, let people know that the project is continuing and you will check in periodically. Community members and partners will appreciate your communication and transparency.
- *Fund community-led projects and initiatives.* Community-based groups are often the ones working to make change on a long-term, consistent basis. These groups might be formal organizations or a group of neighbors. Oftentimes, community groups do not have the same access to resources as larger organizations and government agencies. Community-based organizations run by people of color face even more barriers to accessing resources. If you or your organization are able, consider funding community-led projects and initiatives. If you cannot offer funding support, see if you can connect community groups with organizations that have resources like grant programs, meeting space, materials, and technology. You can

also offer to volunteer or promote their events through your networks. These acts of solidarity will help you maintain relationships and ensure that important work can continue after you have left.

- *Make community engagement the norm.* Community engagement should not seem like a separate part of your work, it should inform your work on an ongoing basis. The goal of community engagement is to have community members provide direction and guidance based on their



needs, so you should be checking in consistently to make sure you are on track. Consider adding community engagement updates to team meetings as an accountability measure. You can also appoint or hire a community engagement liaison to be a bridge between community members and your agency or organization. Ideally, this person would be someone who lives in the community and who can provide an on-the-ground perspective. However, working with a community liaison does not mean that all the community engagement falls on them. You must stay actively involved and engaged on a consistent basis. Your involvement can also include advocating for community members to hold positions of power on a larger scale like serving on a local board on council. Respecting the power of community members can help turn a legacy of mistrust and mistreatment into a future of collaboration and solidarity.

Safe Routes to School Tip

Find opportunities to show the importance and impact of Safe Routes to School beyond the school community. Consider sharing Safe Routes to School highlights at PTA meetings, school board meetings, and city council meetings. This can help increase support for your program, influence Safe Routes to School policies, and raise awareness about the program's benefits.

Guiding Questions:

- How will the community know and feel the results of your engagement?
- How can you continue showing up for the community?
- When and how will you check in with community members to update them on projects?
- How will you stay connected with community partners?



Case Study: Sustained Engagement Brings Sidewalks to Muscoy, California

When the Safe Routes Partnership began working with community members in Muscoy, California, the goals were clear: to uplift environmental justice and improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. Muscoy is a predominately Latinx and low-income community in an unincorporated area of San Bernardino County. Community members experience one of the worst air quality ratings in California's Inland Empire along with several barriers to safe walking and biking. Lack of sidewalks and safe crossings around schools was of particular interest to community members. In 2018, a parent group began organizing to address traffic safety concerns around schools and contacted a local assembly member to discuss Safe Routes to School. The Safe Routes Partnership ended up partnering with the parent group and youth leaders to advocate for improved school infrastructure. Together they performed bike counts, walk audits, and implemented community engagement grant funded project for a pop-up safety demonstration. After these events, the Safe Routes Partnership continued working with community members to apply for California's Active Transportation Program (ATP) to secure funding for a sidewalk project. The highly competitive ATP application process involved robust community engagement with community members working alongside local partners, elected officials, school staff, and grant writers. In 2021, Muscoy was awarded funding for sidewalk infrastructure improvements around local schools with one of the highest scores out of all statewide applicants. Their success was the result of community members' advocacy efforts along with sustained engagement from community partners. Although there is still a way to go in making Muscoy more walkable and bikeable, this win is an encouraging first step and demonstrates the power of sustained, community-centered engagement.



CONCLUSION

Community engagement is a practice, and the more you do it, the better you will become. You won't always get it right. You will make mistakes along the way – and that's okay. Plus, communities are always changing. What might have worked a few years ago might not work now. The important part is connecting with community members to figure out what does work. As you refine your practice, be open to exploring new ideas with your community collaborators. Be intentional about committing to community engagement through all the ups and downs. And keep your engagement focused on the people whose lives will be most impacted by your project or program. When everyone works together, meaningful change is possible.



ENDNOTES

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