

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity

www.reversechildhoodobesity.org

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCE GUIDE

What It Is

This resource guide provides information on engaging local residents and other constituents to play meaningful roles in efforts to build healthy, opportunity-rich communities where children and families thrive. The information includes tools and resources to facilitate community engagement, particularly in underserved urban, rural, and suburban areas, in creating and implementing policies and environmental changes to foster physical activity and healthy eating.

Background

Community engagement is critical to advancing equitable, sustainable solutions to the obesity crisis facing our nation, and low-income children and children of color especially. A leading cause of childhood obesity is poor access to resources that promote healthy living — from grocery stores that sell healthy, affordable foods to school environments that promote physical activity to neighborhood infrastructure that affords safe, practical opportunities to play, walk, and bicycle. An array of local, state, and national policies that strengthen neighborhood environments is essential to reverse the epidemic. Community residents have crucial insight into the needs and priorities that must drive these policies, the local strengths that can be tapped to turn policy into action, and the interventions likely to succeed.

Moreover, the process of community engagement itself strengthens the fiber of a community.¹ When residents are involved in every step of policy change, from framing the issues to interpreting the data, to determining solutions, relationships develop, social networks grow, and the sense of possibility blossoms. Health improves, too: Research demonstrates that a population can achieve long-term health improvements when people become involved in their community and work together to bring about change.²

Community engagement is an ongoing process that involves people in solving problems, making decisions, determining policies, and shaping programs that affect the places where they and their families live, work, study, and play. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states: “Community engagement 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.”³ Angela Glover Blackwell, CEO and founder of PolicyLink, describes the role of community members in the policy change process in this manner: “Policy change efforts fall short if residents and those directly impacted do not have voice, participation, and agency in the change process. The highest form of participation is to become an agent of change on your own behalf. Community participation is crucial at every stage: in identifying the problem so that its roots and impacts are fully understood; in crafting solutions, so that they are authentic and likely to be effective; in developing policy so that it will actually accomplish change and spread the best practices as identified by those who will be impacted; in advocating for policy so that the community and residents feel their power, hold



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professional advocates accountable, and set up an accountability infrastructure (holding elected officials and government accountable) for the future; and measuring results so that the results that are measured matter.”

Community engagement is a strong value and fundamental practice of public health.⁴ Successful advocates and community organizers recognize it as a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental changes that will improve the health of members of the community. The case study of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP), presented in this resource guide, illustrates the point. Organizers of CCROP, which spans an eight-county region with a high concentration of Latino immigrants, many of them poor and undocumented, approach community engagement as a major component of environmental policy change. CCROP leaders and staff view local residents as important partners, not recipients of aid.

Authentic, meaningful community engagement requires a clear definition and understanding of the targeted community. Community is a fluid concept: It can be defined by shared demographic or cultural characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, and gender; or by geographic boundaries such as a neighborhood, or by social, economic or political affiliations such as a school district or a labor union. A person may be a member by choice, happenstance, or birth, and may associate with several communities at a time. In identifying the targeted community, a meaningful engagement strategy takes into account these complex dynamics, the range of cultural and religious identities even in a single community, the relationships within and among sub-groups, and the disparate health impacts on particular groups.

Meaningful engagement also requires inclusion of broad representation from the targeted community. Obesity prevention strategies best reflect the priorities and address the needs of a given community when diverse opinions, insights, and expertise are voiced and heard. Participants may include parents, teachers, or other concerned individuals, or representatives from community-based organizations, schools and other local institutions, faith-based organizations, and local businesses. Trust among the players is essential.

True community engagement is a long-term process. The community participates at all stages and in all significant aspects of the community-change effort, including planning, developing strategy, mobilizing public and political support, crafting policy, implementing solutions, and shaping programs over time. The process should include training and development opportunities, to strengthen participants’ skills and capacity to advocate for, lead, and own efforts to transform their community into a healthy place for all.



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¹ Blackwell, A.G., Minkler M., Thompson M. "Using Community Organizing and Community Building to Influence Policy." In *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health 2nd Edition*, Meredith Minkler (ed). Piscataway, NJ; Rutgers University Press, 2004.

² *Community Involvement in the Federal Healthy Start Program*. PolicyLink. 2000.

³ Principles of Community Engagement. 1997. CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement. <http://www.cdc.gov/phppo/pce/>.

⁴ <http://www.health.state.mn.us/communityeng/intro/index.html>.



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