

Tip Sheet—Engaging the Community

The Importance of Community Participation

Creating healthy communities and strong local public health systems requires a high level of mutual understanding and collaboration. To accomplish this, communities must find ways of working together that create stronger connections throughout the community and provide access to the collective wisdom necessary to addressing community concerns.

Successful community-driven processes include:

- **Inclusiveness** — All of the stakeholders must be genuinely included throughout the process.
- **Comprehensiveness** — Every aspect of the issue must be addressed. Many initiatives fail due to approaches that are too shallow or narrow.
- **Local Ownership** — Linking expertise and "common knowledge" leads to sustainable policies and ensures that each participant has a genuine sense of ownership and responsibility.

To develop a truly community-driven initiative, genuine community involvement is required at every stage of the process. Technical expert knowledge is not adequate for creating healthy communities and strong public health systems. Technical knowledge does not address the essential questions of what values and vision to pursue and what issues are important for community health. For that, the wisdom that can only be generated through community dialogue is needed.

The following are just a few of the benefits of community engagement in MAPP:

- Connecting and communicating with community members **creates a truly community-driven process.**
- **Ongoing community resident commitment and participation** builds ownership in the process and its outcomes.
- Community engagement and empowerment through the MAPP process may **benefit community involvement in other community initiatives.**
- Community-driven processes lead to collective thinking and ultimately may produce **more innovative, effective, and sustainable solutions** to complex problems.
- Community residents and subpopulations may gain a **better awareness of themselves, the area in which they live, and their own potential for improving their quality of life.**

Principles and Guidelines for Community Engagement The following core principles and guidelines provide the basis for involving community residents in the MAPP process:¹

Principles:

- People should have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.
- A public participation process, by definition, belongs to all the stakeholders, including future generations.

Guidelines:

- The public participation process must provide participants with the information they need in order to participate in a meaningful way.
- The public participation process should address the interests and meet the process needs (time, venue, etc.) of the largest possible number of participants.
- The public participation process should seek out and facilitate the involvement of all stakeholders.
- The public participation process should communicate to all stakeholders how input affects the decisions made.

Tips for Community Engagement in MAPP

One of the primary tools recommended for community engagement is dialogue. Dialogue can be defined as the skillful exchange or interaction between people that develops shared understanding as the basis for: building trust, fostering a sense of ownership, facilitating genuine agreement, and enabling creative problem solving.

Dialogue is important to the fundamental shift occurring in public health — from a government-driven to a community-driven approach, because:

- **Dialogue provides skills for effective communication** that lead to better shared understanding between public health departments and the wider communities they serve, including a better appreciation of the issues that community residents feel are important.
- **Dialogue cultivates attitudes of openness, empathy, and equality** that can enrich a broad-based community health improvement process.
- **Dialogue facilitates collaboration** among the local public health system partners that are responsible for improving the quality of public health services.
- **Dialogue develops sensitivity** to issues and individual perspectives, thus improving interaction among community members.
- **Dialogue promotes a new sense of leadership** that enables community residents and organizations to come together to ensure that resources and needs are aligned to promote health.

Effective dialogue requires learning and practicing skills. There are formal training programs for dialogue, however much can be achieved through skill-building activities at the beginning of the session. Tips for incorporating dialogue practices into your MAPP process include the following:

1. Prepare the space creatively
2. Sit in a circle or horseshoe (where people can see one another)
3. Begin with a "check-in" that allows every participant to contribute a response to a basic question without interruption (e.g., What do you think is the most important issue we face?).

4. Encourage "reflective listening" by having participants restate the ideas of the previous speaker before making new contributions to the dialogue. This promotes clarity of ideas and validation among participants.
5. Use a line of a poem or song that highlights certain principles of communication. For example:

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?
- Lao Tzu

6. Encourage participants to listen for "what is trying to happen." This can encourage a larger, more systemic perspective.
7. Summarize by going around the circle and having someone record the main points.
8. Close the process respectfully with a one- to two-word "check-out," whereby each person summarizes his/her thoughts about the discussion.
9. Have the group state what worked for them in the meeting and what might have been better. This serves to underscore the group's ownership of the process.

For other suggestions and practices see [The Spirit of Dialogue](#) by Daniel Martin (listed in [Community Engagement References and Resources](#)).

Challenges in Engaging the Community

Below are some of the common challenges communities may need to overcome in order to conduct a truly community-driven process.

- **Reaching populations and individuals that traditionally may not have had the opportunity to participate in such a process.** The reasons for their lack of participation are rarely as simple as "they have not been invited to the table" or "they are not really being listened to." Make sure invitations to participate are perceived as genuine. Once community members are participating, community organizers should demonstrate that they are truly listening to the discussions. Barriers of mistrust and cultural differences should be gradually faced and explored. To the degree that MAPP is successful in engaging previously disenfranchised voices, the process will be truly community-driven and the results of the process will be truly community- owned.
- **The dialogue process may be time-consuming and resource-consuming.** To overcome this barrier, consider using already existing resources or mechanisms where possible. For example, as part of the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment activities, the MAPP Committee will hold discussions with many community residents and organizations. Instead of always convening separate meetings, consider using time on the agendas of regularly scheduled meetings (e.g., PTA). This helps to gain broad input and requires only limited resources. Conduct a short dialogue at the beginning of the meeting

with the expressed purpose of developing a better understanding of diverse perspectives, then continue with the rest of the agenda.

When considering the time-consuming nature of engaging the community, keep the following in mind:

- Sometimes a more effective and efficient use of time is gained when basic issues are clarified and the group has developed a shared understanding. Dialogue can be used strategically to help a group make the best use of its time.
- In our increasingly fast-paced lives, it is often difficult to take the time to hold a dialogue and truly listen to each other. It is necessary, therefore, to keep in mind the benefits that ultimately will be gained from taking the time to establish community connections and build a community-driven process.

Negative feelings and disbelief regarding a "community-driven process" may be present.

Change can often elicit negative feelings and skepticism. Since these are often the result of apprehension and uncertainty, it is important to allow space for them. Suggestions for dealing with skepticism follow:

- The facilitator should acknowledge that some people in the group may have such feelings. Empathy is important for encouraging dialogue.
- Some limited (agreed-upon) time may be allotted to explore assumptions behind these feelings; this can occur at the beginning of a meeting or when the feelings surface during the process. Attitudes — such as openness and curiosity — are essential aspects of a dialogue.
- Ultimately, negative feelings and disbelief are overcome when a new approach is demonstrated to be successful. Successes and "small wins" should be celebrated and, with patience, the negative attitudes will eventually be transformed into support for the process.
- Due to skepticism, many community residents may resist becoming engaged in the process and, therefore, may not attend community meetings. Encouraging discussion among community residents about the process through informal day-to-day mechanisms may help to overcome this. The MAPP Committee and other participants in the process can play an important role in "spreading the word."

How does the community become TRULY engaged? Engaging the community is not something we do. Rather it is something that happens when our intentions are to:

- build trust in one another,
- become comfortable together,
- learn how to understand each other,
- create working relationships that cut across traditional boundaries, and
- develop a sense of identity with those with whom we are working.

As noted, this process requires not only these intentions, but also skills and tactics. (Revisit the "Tips for Community Engagement throughout the MAPP Process" listed above.) The following suggestions also may be useful:

- Be clear about the purposes and goals of the engagement.
- Understand the various aspects of the community to be engaged — its history, economic conditions, demographics, etc., as well as its previous experience with community initiatives.
- Establish relations with existing leadership in the community.
- Be flexible.
- Be prepared to make a long-term commitment.

Community engagement requires far more than merely issuing an invitation to participate. Conveners — including all representatives of the MAPP Committee — must be willing to change their perspectives and to listen to community participants with a positive and responsive attitude. Community residents are likely to carefully observe conveners of the community process to see if positive attitudes and open-mindedness are present. Very often it is the unexpected act or gesture of sincere empathy from an organizational representative that can change a group's dynamic from that of discussion of an initiative to dialogue about the underlying issues. Both community residents and MAPP Committee members will be equally challenged to engage in dialogue and reveal and possibly change their assumptions and opinions.

Conveners of the community process will need to confront the mental barriers that have often impaired their ability to partner with those who: "have no expertise," "do not understand the complexity of the issues," "need our resources and our help," or "have been resistant to previous overtures." They will have to search for ways to best engage each particular community, and find their own understanding of the legitimate and vital partnership roles that the community should play throughout the MAPP process. All participants will need to demonstrate patience and a continual willingness to reframe the problems until a shared understanding begins to emerge.

For more information, click to see the [References and Resources](#) section. The document, *Principles of Community Engagement* by the Public Health Practice Program Office, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1997) may be especially useful.

Customized from the following reference: Public Participation and Accountability Subcommittee, National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. *The Model Plan for Public Participation*. Washington, DC: Nov 1996.