Principles of Authentic Community Engagement

> "Relationships we develop with our coalition partners must be transformative, not transactional." -- Reverend Dr. William Barber

What does it mean to "authentically" engage the community? While the words "authentic engagement" are often used, there does not seem to be a commonly shared definition of authentic engagement.

A group of stakeholders—including grantees, MDH staff, training and technical assistance providers, and Voices for Racial Justice—worked together to develop the following principles to guide the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) community engagement work. These principles are grounded in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Principles of Community Engagement and informed by Public Health Accreditation Board standards and measures. When working with the community, consider these as set of principles to guide the work, rather than a checklist of everything that should be done. It may be that a few of these are most relevant for a particular engagement effort.

Foster trust

1. **Immerse yourself in the community**. "Establish relationships, build trust, work with the formal and informal leadership, and seek commitment from community organizations and leaders" to co-create (create together) solutions. (Source: CDC Principles of Community Engagement)
2. **Listen deeply**. Listening can uncover key community concerns, allow for rarely heard voices to be included, build understanding, generate new solutions, and build the foundation for collaborative action.
3. **Recognize different kinds of groups**. People self-organize. For instance, communities organically organize beyond community-based organizations (e.g., soccer league, faith communities, barbershop patrons, farmers market vendors, walking groups, retirees who gather daily at the local café, student councils, etc.).
4. **Understand the historical context of previous attempts of engagement**. What are the stories of success, lessons learned, barriers, and tensions?
5. **Notice assets**. Sustain efforts and support community ownership by using an asset approach, where community power and strengths are at the base of the work and the tool to develop capacity within communities and within your organization.
6. **See different experiences**. Recognize, respect, and appreciate the diversity/differences within and across communities. Intentionally address awareness of the factors affecting communities' ability to exercise their power (like historical trauma, oppression, disenfranchisement, etc.) while co-creating, planning, designing, and implementing approaches to engage a community.

Support community-led solutions

Ensure the population impacted by the problem is involved in co-creating solutions.

7. **Work with communities**. The goal of authentic community engagement is to work WITH communities, NOT FOR or on behalf of them, or to do things TO communities.
8. **Agree on the process**. Discuss and negotiate the expectations, values, purpose, and role of both the institutions/systems and the stakeholder communities at the very beginning of any engagement process.
9. **Understand each partner's individual and community interests**. All partners should be able to identify why they are at the table and the constituencies with which they are connected. A partnership will benefit when all partners have relationships with other members of their community.
10. **Allocate resources** for community members to be active participants, so that community engagement is valued for its contribution to the process (e.g., offer stipends, childcare, food, interpreters).
11. **Balance power**. Stakeholders should be aware of any working assumptions, and of power dynamics and how they impact the development, sustainability, and success of partnerships. Stakeholders should be intentional in addressing power imbalances, especially those affecting the ability of the community to act as an equal partner.
12. **Share power**. Be ready to share power (release control of actions and/or interventions) with communities, and be flexible and creative to meet changing challenges. Reflect on the benefits that come from shared decision-making in strong partnerships.
13. **Create positive experiences of contribution**. Communities are healthier when they can influence decisions that positively impact their living conditions. Reflect back to participants how their participation has made a difference.
14. **Recognize the contributions of the community**. Publically share the contributions of community partners when sharing success stories.

Public health improvement requires social change

15. **Leave the community stronger**. Ensure you design engagement efforts to strengthen the community. Ask the community to define the improvement or how the process can strengthen their community.
16. **Stay in it for the long term**. Community collaboration requires long-term commitment from organizations and their partners. Note that some public health work might be project-based, but that the department will exist over time. The end of a particular project many not mean the end of engagement opportunities with other public health department activities.
17. **Address racism**. Authentic community engagement intentionally addresses issues of race, institutional and structural racism, and discrimination and exclusion, and embodies "cultural humility."
18. **Remember that self-determination is a right**. "Remember and accept that collective self-determination is the responsibility and right of all people in a community. No external

entity should assume it can bestow on a community the power to act in its own self-interest." (Source: CDC Principles of Community Engagement)

19. **Expect tension**. Partnership in a change process will sometimes result in tension. Partners will challenge and hold each other accountable for staying true to principles for engagement and to shared goals to improve the opportunity for health.

20. **Address challenges**. Develop a plan to address conflict, being intentional and strategic to transform challenges into opportunities.

21. **Welcome new accountabilities and opportunities to transform practice**. Prepare to be held accountable by new partners for a new set of expectations. These expectations may add complexity to your work, but they also demonstrate that community members value public health work and have a vision of how it can contribute to the issues their communities face.

22. **Strengthen relationships among participating groups to build power for change**. Intentionally find ways to strengthen relationships and mutual accountability among partners, setting the stage for future cooperative efforts to strengthen the conditions that create health.