

Partnering with Community-Based Organizations for More Broad-Based Public Engagement

This publication is for local government officials interested in collaborating with local community-based organizations to enhance the breadth and depth of participation by community residents in local decision-making. Interviews with both local officials and community leaders throughout California were used to generate guidance for those who are getting started or want to enhance their relationships with more of their community.

Why Partner?

Many local officials report that the residents they see participating in their public meetings are a narrow slice of the whole community.¹ To address this challenge, many local agencies use a strategy of nurturing relationships with community-based organizations (CBO) to better reach and engage a broader cross section of residents. The important benefits they cite from these partnerships include the ability to:

- Extend the agency's education and outreach capacities so more residents are aware and informed
- Balance the most involved advocates with perspectives representing more of the community
- Reduce misperceptions and mistrust, and reduce contentiousness
- Identify broader community-based resources and recommendations
- Develop communication channels for keeping people informed over time
- Enhance the cultural competency of engagement plans, and increase the ability to translate issues into relevant questions/framing and accessible language
- Reach people emotionally as well as physically

Local government agencies using this approach have learned that being very intentional about the purposes and parameters of their partnerships can make a dramatic difference in their effectiveness.

Types of Community-Based Organizations

All jurisdictions have non-profit organizations committed to improving the quality of life in their community. Examples include parent-teacher organizations, congregations, sports leagues, adult education programs

¹ 76 percent of city and county officials say that public meetings are dominated by people with narrow agendas. [Testing the Waters](http://www.ca-ilg.org/research-public-engagement-local-government-decision-making), May 2013 report with findings from 900 California local officials, available at: www.ca-ilg.org/research-public-engagement-local-government-decision-making. The link has a companion report of research conducted among 500 leaders of civic organizations.

and service clubs such as Rotary or Kiwanis. These kinds of organizations can complement those that may already participate actively in public meetings, such as the chamber of commerce and neighborhood associations.

Partnerships are often sought as a way to elicit unheard perspectives on how an issue or problem is experienced, which can enhance specific policy directions or recommendations. Some agencies have a practice of sharing lists and information about community-based organizations across departments as a way to leverage past investments in these relationships. Instead of developing a new outreach effort and list for each new issue and decision process, they have a ready cross section of the greater community already oriented to some aspect of local decision making. It is also helpful to investigate and acknowledge existing collaborations and networks between organizations to understand how information flows in the community.

Clarifying Purpose and Alignment

The desired demographic and geographic audiences are often the starting point for deciding which community organization(s) will be the most effective partners.



It is also important to identify the purpose and what type of public education and public input is desired. Many officials find this continuum from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) a useful way to summarize different types of engagement:

The best way to determine the right fit is by having an exploratory discussion to assess how the group’s focus matches the audiences, topics and activities the local public agency is contemplating for engagement. If after meeting with a community organization, it turns out that there is not an immediate fit for a partnership, valuable information about that part of the community’s perspective will still have been gained. At times, it may be important for a period of relationship building, both organizational and personal, to take place before a new partnership is launched. The local agency may financially support some of the staff work or other costs involved in the CBO’s partnership activities. If a grant is sought to help pay for the outreach and engagement efforts, the CBO should be involved in the planning and budgeting for its activities.

Types of Partnerships

Planning departments, health and human service departments, metropolitan planning organizations, public information officers and many other local agency offices are employing CBO partnerships. Frequently, local agency staff have limited time to be present in multiple communities

Sample Roles in a Partnership

The Community-Based Organization:

Help get desired sector(s) of the community to attend and actively participate in community conversations, possibly serving as a co-hosting partner.

The Local Government Agency:

Design public conversations in such a way that the invited input is meaningful and will be used in decision-making.

Together:

Ensure that communications, information and accommodations support the intended audience and that outcomes are shared with the community.

often enough to build the kind of rapport that invites engagement, so they connect and partner with a range of CBOs in various ways. Common examples of CBO partner tasks include:

- Expand awareness of upcoming public engagement processes
- Co-host public input sessions in locations more familiar to community members
- Help agency staff understand the community's current level of understanding about an issue so materials can provide helpful background context
- Help adapt information about the issue into language and a format that make sense to nontechnical experts and people with varying levels of education
- Translate information and provide bilingual facilitation if appropriate
- Recruit attendees and provide any needed support such as transportation and child care
- Help with reporting back to the community about how their input was used in the final decision and ways that they can stay involved and informed

Depending on the extent of the work involved, many agencies provide some kind of compensation to the community organization for their efforts. Sometimes a local community foundation or other funder may help underwrite such costs.

Creating the Right Conditions

When forming a working partnership, as with developing any relationship, no single “formula” exists for developing effective plans, communications and trust. Instead, both local officials and community leaders shared that the following conditions were an important starting point:

- There is adequate advance dialogue between the agency and the CBO to determine the *mutual* interests of the partnership. The desired community engagement needs to be positioned so that it aligns with the community organization's as well the local agency's priorities.
- The local government agency's decision-makers are on board and committed to the intended outcome of the partnership. They are making an authentic request for community input that will be seriously considered in the decision-making process.
- The partnership is based on mutual respect for what each party brings. For example, the CBO can provide insight into which attitudinal barriers different sectors of the community may have about interacting with local government. If there is a history of mistrust, it helps to bring it out in the open.
- The local agency and CBO(s) have clearly defined roles and expectations for each other.
- The agency is prepared to support the information and communication needs of the broader cross section of the public who tend to know far less than more experienced advocates and local government enthusiasts.

“Are you thinking about these community groups as constituents to be managed or placated — or as genuine partners collaborating with you on a shared goal of expanding participation?” — City official

Local officials' experience suggests that the most effective partnerships were used for the whole decision-making cycle: the front-end public introduction of the issue, the community input and dialogue, and the reporting out of how public input was used in the final decision. Another helpful practice when entering into the relationship with the CBO is to set up periodic checkpoints to review milestones and correct

course on the outreach as needed. Include an explicit debrief of what worked well and what can be improved for the next time. In summary, local officials and CBO leaders should honestly share their respective goals and needs and then work out a mutually accepted plan for tasks and task completion, for meetings and other communications, for CBO partner compensation (where appropriate), for how decisions will be made in relationship to shared work, and whether and how they plan to assess the work done once completed.

*“I get a call asking: ‘Can you get 50 parents to the meeting?’
First I want to talk about what people in the community care about.”
— Leader of a large nonprofit organization*

Navigating Around Common Pitfalls

Partnerships tend to work well if they are based on mutual goals, clear communication and trusting relationships. But many times the partnership between a local agency and community-based organizations hits trouble spots. Here are some of the most commonly reported pitfalls and helpful practices to enhance the likelihood of success.

Common Pitfalls	Helpful Practices
Treating the CBO as a “supplier” for one-way communication to the community, especially to enlist support for an existing recommendation.	Develop processes for two-way communications about mutually defined concerns — without assuming what the final policy recommendation will be.
Unrealistic expectations for the CBO partner — not enough time or resources allocated for robust engagement.	Start early, establish shared understanding about what is feasible, and consider using a network of multiple CBOs.
Selecting organizations that already have a fixed point of view that limits discovery of common ground.	Look beyond the most visible groups engaged in public dialogue, and find those interested in general quality of life in the community.
The recruitment worked but the meeting process and/or information did not match the audience.	Partner with the CBOs to develop materials and questions that make sense to the broader community.
There is a perception that decision-makers do not treat the new community voices brought in through the partnership with equal respect.	Involve decision-makers in the goals for the community engagement and what kinds of input they will be receiving and can listen for.
Partnership agreement is too vague. It’s unclear who has responsibility for which part of the process.	Create an explicit set of responsibilities for the CBO and the local public agency, and revisit as needed.
The community feels “used” spending time providing input with no information about outcome.	Explain decisions and next steps. Continue to invest in opportunities for two-way communication.

Busy local officials are often encouraged to focus their activities on concrete short-term deliverables with high likelihood for success. Because it takes time to nurture and sustain partnerships with community organizations, some tend to make this practice a lower priority. Others may have had past experiences where some aspects of the partnership worked well but other aspects did not, and they are reluctant to re-engage in something that was not an unqualified success. However, elected local officials and staff may choose to recognize the longer-term value of such partnerships and the more informed, inclusive decision-making — and public trust — that can result from these efforts. They can embrace a learning-oriented mindset and work with community partners to reflect on and improve public engagement processes.

Resources to Learn More

Why Engage the Public? - www.ca-ilg.org/document/why-engage-public

Beyond the Usuals - www.ca-ilg.org/BeyondUsuals

Expand Your Community Connections - www.ca-ilg.org/expanding-your-agencys-community-networks

Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local Officials - www.cailg.org/PublicEngagementKeyQuestions

Clergy and Congregations - www.ca-ilg.org/document/local-officials-guide-working-clergy-and-congregations

Immigrant Engagement Guide - www.ca-ilg.org/local-officials-guide-immigrant-civic-engagement

About the Institute for Local Government

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