

There's a better way: public agencies centering equity in community engagement

"There are a lot of different forms of leadership in our community that sometimes, as a public agency, we may not necessarily recognize. Part of the work that we're doing is to elevate those voices, add more chairs to the decision-making table. We can have more meaningful conversations, meaningful decision-making processes, and develop solutions and strategies that are based on the lived experience of the folks that we're trying to serve."

- Vicente Lara, Monterey County Health Department

Genuine, local-level engagement between public agencies and the communities they serve is crucial to meeting the needs and priorities of people experiencing health inequities, particularly communities of color and low-income people. Many root causes of health inequities are shaped by decisions made and implemented by local government, from opportunities to access safe, stable and quality housing, to education, transportation, and employment. As research affirms the role of community power in achieving health, it's clear that the health of communities is closely linked to their ability to influence the decisions of local government.^{1,2}

We know that current engagement approaches fall short and do not always uncover the needs and priorities of groups who are systematically denied access to power and resources. Communities of color and low-income people are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, resulting in profound consequences. Without intentionally adopting engagement approaches that aim to shift power, public agencies will continue to perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequities.

Moving towards equity-centered community engagement requires a paradigm shift. It involves deep investment in both sides of the engagement equation: strong grassroots coalitions that represent diverse people and interests, and government bodies that listen to and work with those coalitions.³ Recently, we have seen substantial energy and resources flowing to the first side of the equation: building grassroots power to influence policy and public decision-making. But will grassroots organizing produce meaningful change if the government is not responsive and receptive to it?^{4,5}



What do we mean by equity-centered community engagement?

This brief focuses on how public agencies can improve their decision-making by effectively involving the people they serve. We come to this work with an underlying value that public agencies should be working toward equitable outcomes across focus areas, including housing, transportation, education, and health. Achieving equitable outcomes means ensuring that everyone has the resources that they need to thrive, regardless of race, income, and any other characteristic. It recognizes that many people, particularly communities of color, have been, and continue to be, disproportionately harmed by exclusionary decision-making practices of government. These harms can be truly and fully reversed only when people who have historically been excluded by government from decision-making are intentionally and meaningfully involved. As we discuss in this brief, equity-centered community engagement refers to a range of inclusive practices that aim to center people who have not historically had a seat at the decision-making table, with the ultimate goal of making decisions that lead to equitable outcomes.

Elections are, of course, another vital way communities have a say in how their government functions. Protecting voting rights and increasing election turnout undoubtedly are important strategies to strengthen the relationship between communities and local government. But elections are not sufficient on their own. Legislatures enact laws that shape how our society functions, and government agencies make crucial decisions about interpretation and implementation of laws. This is why it is important to pay attention to how agencies interface with local communities.

This brief summarizes what we know about the current state of public agency community engagement practices and identifies examples that center equity in their design and implementation. This piece builds on the existing literature that makes the case for and provides guidance on equity-centered community engagement by government agencies ([see our list of recommended reading to learn more](#)). We focused our research on two sectors in California that have been under increased pressure to transform their engagement practices in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reignited movement for racial justice: public health and education. However, we believe these examples of innovation illuminate opportunities for public agencies of all kinds.

The agencies featured here are diverse in terms of geography, political climate, and populations served. We chose to focus on communities that are relatively small or less resourced because we were curious about places that aren't usually highlighted for centering equity in their work.

To ensure laws are administered fairly and public resources are deployed equitably and effectively, it is important for public agencies to engage constructively with the communities they serve, fully recognizing the ways that historic and ongoing patterns of discrimination have created and perpetuated health inequities.⁶ This will involve shifting from top-down engagement practices that entail minimal consultation with affected communities towards true partnership with communities that entails delegating power and leadership to those affected by decisions.⁷

What's not working in public agency community engagement practices

There is limited systematic research on how government agencies engage the public. Public agencies generally do not track community members' participation in decision-making, and few academic researchers seem to study this area. The little existing data shows that public participation and engagement is low overall,⁸ with one self-report survey finding less than five percent of Americans have participated in a public meeting (the most common form of engagement conducted by local government agencies).⁹ The people who do participate tend not to be representative of those who live in the community. Instead, public meetings are disproportionately attended by white people, men, homeowners, and older people.^{10,11} Meetings also tend to be dominated by people opposing proposals under consideration.^{12,13} Together, this results in decision-making processes where communities of color, low-income people, and other people of marginalized identities continue to be excluded.

The way public meetings are designed goes a long way toward explaining low and unrepresentative participation rates.^{14,15} Public meetings held by local governments tend to be:

- Scheduled at inconvenient times, during the day or early evening on weekdays, which favors government staff and people whose job it is to participate (like developers and professional advocates) over the broader public.
- Held in a single central location, like downtown or the county seat, that is difficult for some community members to reach.
- Held in settings guarded by police or sheriff deputies, creating a deterrent for people concerned about law enforcement interactions.
- Unpredictable in length and often going on for hours, with little certainty about when a specific item will be heard.
- In formats that favor people who are comfortable with public speaking and communicating in English only.
- Focused on narrowly-defined decisions about complex processes, leaving little room for dialogue or nuance. The public usually has a single opportunity and mode for engagement: a brief, time-limited public comment period, in front of a room of experts, officials, media, and professional advocates.
- Increasingly hostile, aggressive, and, as one source described, "traumatic," with participants attacking others who voice opposing opinions.

With the shelter-in-place public health orders at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, most local government agencies in California moved their meetings online, bringing hope that this could reduce some barriers to participation (while also potentially introducing new technological barriers). But a 2021 analysis of online public meetings found that the same people over-represented at in-person meetings are also over-represented online.¹⁶



What equity-centered engagement looks like

While the typical public meeting format leaves much to be desired when it comes to engagement, many public agencies are leading the way with equity-centered engagement practices. We explored what public agencies are doing to bring people who have historically been marginalized by government to the decision-making table, and we identified several common principles and practices:

- **Designing context- and issue-specific engagement:** Instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach, engagement is designed to fit the needs of the people who are potentially most affected by particular decisions, and the nature of the issue being decided. For example, a school district looking to understand how to serve the needs of families it doesn't usually hear from may have more success engaging families one-on-one in conversation, rather than trying to engage them in a large town hall setting.
- **Ongoing engagement:** Public agencies focus on developing strong relationships and a deeper understanding of needs, rather than providing transactional opportunities for public comment.
- **Intentionally seeking feedback:** Given the imbalance in who is already most engaged with local governments on decision-making, agencies intentionally plan their approach to engaging communities of color, low-income communities, and others who have been historically excluded.
- **Hosting in non-traditional settings:** Formal engagement efforts take place outside of a traditional public hearing at a municipal building. Public agency representatives look for opportunities to bring the engagement to the community, rather than vice versa.
- **Providing value:** Engagement efforts provide something of value to participants, such as compensation for their time and expertise or opportunities for community building.
- **Incorporating arts and culture:** Equity-centered engagement often weaves in artistic or cultural expression, for example, by working with artists to create pieces that prompt community dialogue about issues and potential solutions, and by inviting participants to provide their input by drawing, painting, spoken word, or other artistic expression that reflects their values, needs, and desires for their community.
- **Meeting people where they are:** Agencies meet people where they are in terms of needs and priorities even if they may seem "outside of scope" or not relevant to agency priorities, such as when residents ask for public safety solutions from a transportation agency.
- **Shifting decision-making power:** Agencies strive to move away from merely consulting the community to shifting decision-making power to the community.¹⁷



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Shasta County Health and Human Services Agency has a community organizing team that builds relationships with community members and works with them to find solutions to a wide range of identified problems. The organizers also build the capacity of their colleagues across programs to connect and collaborate with the community.



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Napa County Health and Human Services Agency facilitates a bilingual annual town hall in Calistoga where the agenda is resident-driven, not agency-driven. The agency documents the discussion and shares the data back with the community for their own use.



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San Juan Unified School District uses mini buses to meet people in their homes and community centers to share district and school initiatives and listen to student and family challenges and priorities.

Making the change: moving towards equity-centered engagement

Equity-centered community engagement is not a choice but a necessity for public agencies. Adopting new equity-centered engagement practices may require a public agency to change cultural and structural norms that maintain business as usual. Leadership and staff could be resistant to change for any number of reasons, including lack of time and resources, concerns about what it might mean to share power with the community, or a fixed perspective on how to achieve their agency's priorities. This resistance is often compounded by bureaucratic systems that are misaligned with the goals of equity-centered engagement. Our research found that changing norms toward equity-centered engagement requires committed leadership and systems reform.

Committed leadership

Making equity-centered engagement a regular agency practice requires strong support from the top because leaders drive agency culture and influence staff mindsets. Agency leaders also have the formal decision-making authority needed to change systems and structures. For example, leaders can:

- Set the expectation that agency success is dependent on community engagement.
- Recognize and value community members as experts on their needs and solutions.
- Prioritize the time and resources necessary for building community relationships.
- Be intentionally inclusive, especially around race and culture, in internal and external facing work.
- Acknowledge historic and ongoing ways that decision-making has produced or maintained racial and other inequities and recognize that this may have rightfully led to community distrust in the agency.
- Model power sharing with community members in decision-making processes.



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Walnut Creek School District, in partnership with the National Equity Project, is working to “release power” and provide opportunities for underrepresented families and students to set district and school priorities. To do this, the District is proactively engaging in “empathy interviews,” which allow for open-ended conversations with students and families about their needs.



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Napa County Health and Human Services Agency sees engaging residents as crucial for agency accreditation requirements,¹⁸ including developing Community Health Assessments, Community Health Improvement Plans, and Community Health Action Plans.

Systems reform

To ensure a culture of equity-centered engagement outlasts any individual leader, it's important to bake engagement norms into how the agency does business. Examples include:

- Community engagement should be explicitly named in agency goals and objectives, job requirements, and performance metrics.
- Agencies should provide training and professional development opportunities for staff to learn about equity-centered engagement and should prioritize hiring staff who reflect the communities they serve.
- Agencies should partner with community-based organizations to build the capacity of community members to participate in decision-making processes.
- Those with bargaining and internal policy-making power should review their public contracting regulations, labor union agreements, and other procedural rules to ensure they support, rather than impede, community engagement.

Conclusion

This brief highlights how agencies can use equity-centered engagement practices to shift from top-down decision-making to greater partnership with the communities they serve, producing meaningful benefits for both. When agencies move towards centering marginalized groups in their engagement practices, they lay the foundation for better decisions informed by higher quality and more representative input. That, in turn, makes it far more likely that local policies, programs, and investments dismantle inequities and nurture healthy, thriving communities.



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In the Monterey County Health Department, the leaders placed the unit responsible for community engagement in the Administrative Bureau, which works across the health department. It was strategically located there to be able to work with all the bureaus, finding opportunities for engagement that cut across departmental silos.



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Cajon Valley Union School District created an Office of Family and Community Engagement to build relationships between families and the school and empower parents to share their concerns and priorities.



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The Community Engagement Initiative builds the capacity of county offices of education and school districts across the state to implement effective, equitable, and culturally-responsive community engagement practices that advance student success.¹⁹



Suggested Readings

Facilitating Power. (2019). [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#).

Organizing Committee for Assessing Meaningful Community Engagement in Health & Health Care Programs & Policies. (2022). [Assessing Meaningful Community Engagement: A Conceptual Model to Advance Health Equity through Transformed Systems for Health. NAM Perspectives](#).

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Gilman HR, Lucero L, Schmitt M., et al. (2022). [Revitalizing Civic Engagement through Collaborative Governance: Stories of Success from Around the United States](#).

California Department of Public Health, Environmental Health Investigations Branch, [Engaging Communities for Health Equity and Environmental Justice](#).

Berkeley Media Studies Group & The California Endowment, [Monterey County: Health in All Policies](#).

Full Frame Institute. (2022). [Community Bill of Rights and Centering Community Self-Assessment Tool](#).

Endnotes

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- ⁷ Facilitating Power. (2019). *Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership*. California: Facilitating Power.
- ⁸ American Academy of Arts and Sciences. (2020). *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century. Recommendation 3-1: Make Public Meetings More Accessible*. Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- ⁹ Sahn A. (2023). *Public Comment and Public Policy*. Working paper.
- ¹⁰ Sahn A. (2023). *Public Comment and Public Policy*. Working paper.
- ¹¹ Einstein KL, Palmer M, & Glick DM. (2019). Who participates in local government? Evidence from meeting minutes. *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(1), 28-46.
- ¹² Sahn A. (2023). *Public Comment and Public Policy*. Working paper.
- ¹³ Einstein KL, Palmer M, & Glick DM. (2019). Who participates in local government? Evidence from meeting minutes. *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(1), 28-46.
- ¹⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences. (2020). *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century. Recommendation 3-1: Make Public Meetings More Accessible*. Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- ¹⁵ Berkovitz C. (2019). *Is a Better Community Meeting Possible?* New York, NY: The Century Foundation.
- ¹⁶ Einstein KL, Glick D, Godinez Puig L, & Palmer M. (2023). Still muted: The limited participatory democracy of Zoom public meetings. *Urban Affairs Review*, 59(4), 1279-1291.
- ¹⁷ See Facilitating Power. (2019). *Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership*. California: Facilitating Power.
- ¹⁸ See Public Health Accreditation Board.
- ¹⁹ See Community Engagement Initiative.