

Group Health Foundation Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

Established in 2008, Community Council seeks to foster a trusted gathering place where people engage in dialogue, inquiry, and advocacy to build a vibrant region for everyone. Our vision is a community where all people come together to create the future they want. Community Council's region encompasses Columbia and Walla Walla counties in Washington and the Milton-Freewater area in Oregon.

For most of its history, Community Council has sought to fulfill its mission through its study/action model of positive community change. The study process, which is open to all, begins with the identification of a complex regional challenge, followed by an intensive 26-week study period, followed by two years of advocacy for recommendations developed during the study. Community members drive the entire process. This model has proven successful, and community members and leaders in our region look to Community Council as playing a key role in facilitating solutions to complex cross-jurisdictional and cross-sector challenges.

More recently, Community Council has sought to expand outreach and community engagement through Community Conversations. Community Conversations, developed in collaboration with Blue Mountain Community Foundation, Sherwood Trust, United Way of Walla Walla County, and Pomegranate Center, took place in 2016 and brought residents together to identify shared values, create a vision for the future, and determine regional priorities. From May to September of 2016, we held six large workshops and numerous small roundtable discussions, heard from over 600 residents and gathered over 800 ideas for the future of the region. Through this process we identified five regional priorities (education, economy, health and wellbeing, natural environment, and safety), and two core values (diversity and civic engagement). This report is based primarily on lessons learned from that effort.

1. How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?

Community Council regards civic engagement as central to all of its work and therefore prioritizes the process of engagement over any particular outcome. While many government processes require a component of community outreach in order to satisfy procedural requirements, Community Council relies on community outreach as a way to create solutions that will truly benefit as many people as possible. We also believe that the broader our outreach and more diverse the population that we engage, the stronger and more lasting our impacts will be. We regard outreach and engagement as things that we can always do better, and continually seek to improve our ability to bring different people together in settings that allow for real listening, learning, and collaboration. A local Port economic development official recently stated that while the Port provides the physical infrastructure, Community Council builds the social infrastructure.

Community Council's ability to build trust and maintain positive relations in the community is due, in part, to our commitment to being non-partisan, transparent, and welcoming to all. Community Council was established as a forum for collaboratively addressing challenging topics that, in other settings, could devolve into partisan division and result in a dead-end or solutions that are not broadly desired. We engage community members, including key leaders, from the start, build collaborative processes, and communicate clearly to the community. One of our founding members described our process as building a "political bomb shelter" because of the open, inclusive, and transparent way that solutions to problems are developed and pursued.

In terms of reaching out to members of our community that we have not reached in the past, we deliberately build partnerships with leaders who work with different segments of our population – segments that we otherwise would not be able to reach. We recognize that some leaders are fairly obvious as they are vocal advocates for the communities they support, but there are also "silent leaders" – folks who are not as publically vocal but who are highly respected as leaders within their communities. In addition to working with a variety of community leaders, we also rely heavily on "trusted messengers" for outreach and to encourage people to attend community workshops. "Trusted messengers" are people who have established relationships of trust with various community populations and who can act as a liaison to engage residents in the work that we do. The importance of building layers of social networks – community leaders, silent leaders, and trusted messengers – cannot be overstated in terms of our ability to successfully engage a diverse population in our work! It allows us to build broader and more inclusive coalitions, which is the foundation of a strong and healthy community.

2. How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your communities?

Community Council does not have a programmatic agenda, nor is there a specific population subgroup that we serve. Instead, our organization is primarily concerned with facilitating a process of community engagement – bringing the community together to identify issues of regional significance and identifying solutions, then working towards implementation of those solutions.

For the Community Conversations project, our approach to community outreach was multi-layered. We began by identifying key partners who shared the same process goals (inclusion, diversity, transparency), serve the same geographic area, and were also interested in learning of the community's priorities in order to inform their own programmatic or philanthropic agendas. Those key collaborators became the Coordinating Team. Building solid partnerships with key organizations also helps build a broad base of community support and brings a greater set of talents and diversity of perspectives into the process. Further, establishing partnerships early helps to avoid the problem of duplication of effort, which can be burdensome for practitioners and wearisome for community members, not to mention confusing to all!

The Coordinating Team worked to define procedures and meeting logistics, and identified key leaders to form a Convening Group. The Convening Group was comprised of community leaders,

including “silent leaders”, who have broad and deep social networks throughout the region. That group acted as a link between the Coordinating Team and on the ground activities and concerns in specific communities, and met as needed to provide guidance and feedback on the process and support community outreach.

3. How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community work?

When designing and developing Community Conversations, we wanted to engage more community members than we do through our study/action process. Though it is a proven successful model, participation tends to be limited to those who have flexibility and time to take part in the intensive process. That means professionals who are participating as part of their job, retired people and older folks who do have significant work and family responsibilities. For the most part, the people who participate tend to be white and of relatively high socioeconomic status. For Community Conversations we sought to engage those who do not typically participate in our study/action process, or don't participate in many planning processes. That meant young people, young families, and Latinos. In order to engage those populations we knew we needed different modes of outreach, different meeting logistics, and a real commitment to making sure that everyone is heard. We have learned that many people want to participate in conversations about the wellbeing of their community, but first they need to feel that their participation will matter and their voices will be heard.

Trusted messengers were invaluable when it came to encouraging Latinos to attend workshops. There may be a perception among Latinos in this community that their voices don't matter and their participation is not relevant, which may make them reluctant to attend large public meetings. Trusted messengers let community members know that at these meetings their voices would matter and their participation was valuable. At the workshops, the facilitator's key role was to make sure that everyone had a chance to speak, that everyone else listened to that person (comments were written on tablets at the front of the room in English and Spanish), and that no one had more floor time than another. The facilitators were skilled at managing the various groups, encouraging participation and discouraging over-participation.

We also developed a workshop formula to remove barriers and encourage participation. All but one of the workshops were held in the evenings, after work hours. All meetings were held at neutral locations where everyone would feel comfortable (fairgrounds, community centers, schools). We provided qualified child care so that young families could attend and know that their children were well-cared for. We also provided meals so that people could fully engage without worrying about dashing home to prepare a meal. (Community Council tends to provide meals at many of its events because we believe that sharing a meal together is a way to build community.) Finally, we also provided simultaneous professional Spanish interpretation (via earbuds) at each of the workshops, as needed.

While interpretation services are important so that Spanish-speakers can follow and participate in a conversation, we also recognize that structure still places non-English speakers on the periphery of a conversation where they receive information rather than direct its flow. In order to address that limitation, we held one workshop entirely in Spanish in a neighborhood community center. The conversation was facilitated in Spanish by a well-regarded and trusted community member, and interpreted into English for the attendees who did not speak Spanish. This meeting was a significant success as it was clear that participants felt safe sharing their concerns. It was also evident that some community members do not feel they have access to structures of power through which they can address their concerns; we need to create new opportunities to participate in community decision-making.

4. What about your organization's way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships?

As an organization, Community Council seeks to be self-reflexive and put its values into practice in all of the work that we do. Further, we recognize that structural change often comes from the top down, and in order to engage a more diverse population in our community events, we need to have more diverse leadership. For example, our past President, who is Latino, was instrumental in broadening Community Council's outreach. He grew up in the region (at one of the local labor camps) and is a highly-respected businessman. He emphasized the importance of showing Latinos that their voices matter and the central role they should play in shaping the future of the region. He also recognized the potential loss of not creating structures through which to engage them in the community-building work that we were already doing. While Community Council certainly had intentions of better engaging the Latino community, his leadership, vision and energy gave that agenda more force.

Community Council has made a concerted effort to build a more diverse board of directors and staff. Over the past several years our board has become more diverse in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Having a more diverse board allows Community Council to reach different segments of the community, and brings new perspectives to our work. It also means that we cannot expect all board members to offer the same skill sets, so instead we try to identify their particular passions and allow for a diversity of roles so that everyone plays to their strengths; not everyone can be a big donor or leverage a major gift, but everyone can be a champion for the organization!

We have also sought to have a more diverse staff. We were lucky to receive a large grant that allowed us to expand our staff last year. Since a central goal is broader engagement with the Latino population in our region, it was important to us that our new staff member be bicultural and bilingual. We knew that we could not achieve the kind of community engagement we sought without a staff member who has the cultural competency to bring new perspectives and new ways of engaging community members.

5. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps?

One of the unanticipated challenges that we had was the effects of a well-publicized Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) crackdown that made many Latino residents afraid to attend public meetings. We had one workshop that was intended primarily for Latino residents, and no community members showed up. In the absence of community members, the Coordinating Team and trusted messengers enjoyed a lovely meal together. The point here is that we are always operating within a larger sociopolitical context that we do not always have control over. It is important to be aware of how the broader context that affects people's ability to engage.

Another lesson we learned was that when engaging young children, be sure to work with talented and trusted youth leaders and build highly structured processes. During Community Conversations we sought to engage children by asking them what they valued in our region and to put their ideas to paper through drawing their "treasures". We worked with local non-profits to find a time to work with children in this effort. Unfortunately, the exercise was poorly structured and we ended up with a lot of drawings of poop emojis. The project worked much better when we engaged kids who were a bit older – 4th grade through 7th or 8th, the group was smaller, the activity happened indoors, and there was a more serious vibe going into the project.

6. What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

We held a final celebration for Community Conversations in September 2016 to share the top priorities with the community, and bring people together in a spirit of thanks for the work that had been done by the community. The level of turnout for the event and the community spirit was remarkable. About 250 community members came to that event, including an unprecedented number of Latinos, many of whom had never before attended a public meeting.

The meeting began with a shared meal at communal tables, followed by comments by various community leaders as they unveiled the community's priorities. After that, community members were asked to have a group conversation according to the priority that was most significant to them. At those smaller conversations, people were asked to share why that priority was important to them. Those conversations were emotionally charged as people shared their personal stories and expressed their desire to make improvements that would benefit everyone. People spoke in the language they felt most comfortable (Spanish or English), creating a wonderful sense of connection and community!

Perhaps even more significant is the positive response that the strong Latino turnout generated among the white leadership in the community. Longtime community members said they had never seen that level of engagement among the Latino population, nor had they had such personal conversations across social and economic divides in our community. In our region, political leadership (governmental, non-profit, business) is almost exclusively white. This is beginning to change, and to see that change embraced by current leadership bodes well for the future of the region.

Since those community meetings, new Latino community leaders have emerged and have begun to organize for Latino representation more powerfully (two local jurisdictions have recently elected Latino/a city council members). While Community Council certainly does not take credit for these important and auspicious changes, we are pleased to be a part of this cultural and political shift.

Finally, we are encouraged by the fact that Community Conversations set a new standard of community outreach and entities in our region have begun to adopt our model of engagement to improve their ability to engage diverse voices. We are currently working with our local community health department to incorporate these practices into what we are calling Community Health Conversations – discussions about the well-being of our community informed by data. The Community Health Conversations will serve as the foundation for their Community Health Needs Assessment, and their subsequent Community Health Improvement Planning process. Our shared goal is to engage a diverse population in identifying challenges and creating solutions that improve the lives of all.