



AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Racial Equity in Advocacy, Fact Sheet #7

September 2020

This fact sheet is the seventh in the *Racial Equity in Advocacy* series for social policy advocates addressing unequal opportunities by race. Each fact sheet will provide information equipping advocates to embed a racial equity lens into their work to close gaps and improve outcomes for communities of color. Please see the [first fact sheet](#) in the series for a review of key terms and concepts.

Community engagement is the heart of equity-focused policy. People should have a **voice** in the policies that impact them, and they should have influence (or **choice**) in the decisions made about them. Meaningfully including the community affected by your policies **actively mends dehumanization**. Where dehumanization degrades and diminishes communities of color, community engagement restores dignity, respect, and empathy to communities of color as they become *partners*, not *subjects*. Where dehumanization pushes communities of color to the margins of society, authentic engagement brings them back to the center.

Data Collection

As advocates go through the process of identifying a problem and finding solutions, they would be remiss to leave the community out of their process. When advocates use data to define a problem, without consulting the community they are researching, they often miss additional information that would help them better understand the problem. As data selection takes place, community input should be sought to help identify the root causes of disparities. Moreover, early community engagement helps to prevent under-sampling in survey data. Without this engagement, the needs of subpopulations can be underestimated, and the population becomes “invisible.” We will discuss how community members can actively shape what and how data is collected in the [Community-Based Participatory Research](#) fact sheet.

Policy Analysis

To establish culturally appropriate and inclusive policies, the policymaking process must also be inclusive. Policy analysis without community engagement is weaker, has less value, and is ultimately less impactful. Not only is it important to involve the community in data collection, they should also have a voice in your analysis in order to provide context, determine needs, and propose solutions **that they know will work for them**. Are the voices of all groups affected by the policy at the table? Have they been present at every key decision-making step of this policy (e.g. solidifying the vision, deciding the strategy, and determining results and desired outcomes)?

Opportunities for Engagement

Authentic community engagement means their voices are heard at all points of the planning process. As you proceed with the strategic planning for a piece of legislation, building out a new body of work, or setting your policy agenda for the year, it is vital to create opportunities for the broader community to participate in the process. There are numerous activities and tasks involved with an advocacy campaign and the community should be involved with as many of them as possible to avoid tokenizing their participation. These activities can include drumming up support for a bill among legislators, building public awareness of an issue, social media outreach, and coalition meetings to build consensus and hash out issues among partners.

What advocacy activities does your organization conduct and how can you partner with the community in carrying them out? Ask yourself about the advocacy activities the community is poised to lead. Consider focus groups, listening sessions, surveys, polling, twitter chats, or blogs vehicles for community input and feedback. If you are providing regular updates about planning efforts, you can use websites, emails, meeting minutes, speaking engagements at local events, or locally broadcasted television and radio interviews.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a highly effective tactic for gathering data about a community, exploring the details of an issue, and gathering feedback from the community about a policy or plan. For focus groups to be effective, you must ensure that participants are truly representative of the community. It may be necessary to hold multiple focus groups on the same topic or research question with various demographic groups.

To begin, you will want to know who comprises your community by age, race/ethnicity, and gender. At a minimum, your focus group should include representation in the community (e.g., if the community is 25% Black, your focus group should also be 25% Black). However, it is sometimes appropriate to oversample a specific demographic. For example, if you are seeking to alleviate poverty in the community, it is appropriate to look at the data on age, race/ethnicity, and gender by poverty rate. Therefore, if 25% of the community is Hispanic, but 50% of those in poverty are Hispanic, then your focus group should be 50% Hispanic.

It is best to connect with a community-based organization (CBO) that can recruit the participants for your focus group. The CBO, as a trusted resource to the community, will be better positioned to describe the purpose and intent of the focus group to engender interest. After the focus group has occurred, it is important to keep the CBO involved with your plans for the information you gathered. For example, share drafts of your reports with the CBO so that they can ensure it accurately reflects the voices and input of the community. If you will be using direct quotes, you will need to work with the CBO to seek the permission of the participant(s).

The Way Forward

Policy without community input often misses the mark and can result in unintended consequences. Therefore, it is our hope that you will make community engagement a significant part of your data collection and analysis. Examine your current processes to determine whether you have included opportunities to include meaningful community participation. Then develop a plan to deepen your engagement and grow the community's voice in your work. Start with activities that are manageable for your current resources and partner with CBOs that are trusted in the community. Review the [Building Partnerships](#) fact sheet for helpful information.