
NEXUS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE

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COMMUNITY VOICE & POWER

CREATING EQUITABLE & EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ADVISORY STRUCTURES

NEXUS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE

(NCEI) advances and strengthens communities through equity-based community engagement, both in the Twin Cities region and around the country.

We believe all community members, especially those who have been historically oppressed and ignored, should be engaged in and have authorship of their lives and futures.

THE ENGAGED LEARNING

SERIES brings together community engagement practitioners and those looking to learn more about community engagement to learn from one another. We convene people around opportunities and challenges emerging in the field, as identified by attendees and community engagement practitioners.

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As our collective understanding of institutionalized racism and racial disparities grows, more and more public institutions are turning to community-led processes to inform their decision-making as one way to counteract institutionalized racism.

Community advisory committees (CACs) are a long-standing practice that agencies have deployed to inform and vet important decisions. Yet CACs have also been dismissed by many as window dressing—a shield for institutions to hide behind as they push forward their own ideas and agendas. But CACs can hold value when implemented in ways that shift power to the community.

Nexus Community Engagement Institute convened a group of institutional and community leaders at an Engaged Learning Series event to discuss how people working within systems can use the CAC model to advance community-defined priorities. This document is intended to help institutional staff understand the foundational work that must happen to ensure CACs can be a meaningful vehicle for infusing community voice into critically important decisions.

GLOSSARY TERMS

INSTITUTION: An organization founded for a social purpose, including government agencies, universities or school districts, hospitals/health care systems, and museums, etc.

EQUITY: Access to resources and opportunities, full participation in the life and well-being of the community, and self-determination in meeting fundamental needs.

COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE: Members of a designated community (defined by geography, race, culture, etc.) that an institution convenes to guide a decision-making process. The intent for a CAC is to provide space for community members to inform decision-making about a specific question, opportunity or emerging issue.

GLOSSARY TERMS CONTINUED

WHITE SUPREMACY: The belief (conscious or subconscious) that white people are superior to Black, Indigenous and people of color, and that society and systems should operate under white behavioral and cultural norms. See Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun's [Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture](#).

CULTURE: Practices, beliefs, traditions and ways of knowing that create group cohesion and give people a vision across generations.

DOMINANT CULTURE: A culture that is valued and

reinforced above others within a particular society or entity in which multiple cultures are present (i.e., white dominant culture).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A process that includes multiple techniques to promote the participation of residents in community life, especially those who are excluded and isolated, by engaging them in collective action to create a healthy community.

POWER: The ability to act for personal and community benefit and determine outcomes.

STARTING POINT: A LACK OF TRUST

"It's hard to balance engaging community because of the trauma and history of being burned."

Because so many CAC processes have fallen short of community expectations, many community members have mixed or negative feelings about the continued use of this strategy. Only recently have agencies become more willing to publicly admit that institutional racism and white supremacy have been pervasive in historical and present-day decision-making. In addition, institutional decision-makers often view themselves as the experts on issues facing communities, dismissing community knowledge in favor

of their own perceived expertise. Poor communication, poor follow-up, and unclear lines of authority all contribute to a sense that CACs may not be spaces where community members can exercise their power.

Knowing that this is the starting place for community members and institutions alike, participants at the convening delved into deep conversation about what barriers to effectiveness still exist, and what changes in practice could help overcome them.



CULTURE

“White supremacy needs to be addressed each time it comes up in any form.”

Organizational culture is difficult to shift without intention. Many institutions have maintained white dominant culture, even as more Black, Indigenous and people of color work within them. This dominant culture mindset means that white staff don't always know the ways in which they are causing harm, setting up exclusive practices, or reinforcing white supremacy. Most white staff within institutions have not been forced to honestly assess their own identity and how

it might contribute to their ways of working with community members. The result is that attempts to integrate community voice can often lead to tokenization and require assimilation to whiteness. In this environment, efforts to create a sense of belonging can actually feel exclusive to people who don't identify with the dominant culture. As one participant put it, institutional staff need to develop an “ability to show up in a community without retraumatizing” community members.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES:

- Require institutional staff to learn about and understand the history of trauma, exclusion and racism that shapes the community perspective about their agency.
- Value lived knowledge and experience alongside academic or institutional knowledge and experience.
- Put people who are reflective of community in charge of running engagement and give them decision-making power.
- Understand that the community is not a monolith. Staff chosen to run a process should possess an ability to integrate a diversity of community perspectives, not just those of their own community.
- Encourage staff to practice self-awareness and resiliency. Ask people to consider how their identity shapes their interactions and to develop the ability to recover when they are challenged.
- Value long-term relationships rather than prioritizing short-term outcomes. This is often described as valuing transformational rather than transactional interactions.
- Provide opportunities to reflect on what is learned from community, capture those lessons, create mechanisms to institutionalize new approaches, and communicate these approaches back to those in community who offered them to the institution.
- If a certain physical space is known to create barriers to trust, hold CAC meetings in neutral community spaces such as libraries, schools, churches or mosques.

POWER AND TRANSPARENCY

“The intent is never there, or things change with leadership and the intent falls through.”

There is a general lack of satisfaction with the transparency around the purpose, authority, and constraints of CAC processes. Participants noted that institutions often are not clear on the purpose of forming a CAC, which

results in community frustration over what is perceived as wasted time in the process. Along with purpose, it is important to set clear expectations of participants and to define what power CAC members have in influencing

final decisions. Too often, the end product is determined before forming a CAC, and the community engagement is a box to check off rather than a true influence on the process. Finally, the participants said that many times

there are inflexible constraints that limit a CAC's power—state or federal regulations, for example—and that those constraints should be well communicated to CAC members.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES:

- Ensure leadership is open to change, learning from criticism and discussion of past harm, and acting based on community input. These are the most critical elements to ensure a CAC can be successful.
- Avoid convening a CAC if critical decisions have already been made that limit the ability of community to influence the process. Ask questions like: Are CAC members creating the committee's agenda, or are they simply reacting to the institution's agenda? Are CAC members engaged in a dialogue that will influence a decision, or are they providing feedback or input on the institution's decision? Is the CAC created before the project is wholly defined, or are member being asked to work within an existing structure?
- Center community culture in the design of a CAC process from start to finish. Consider culturally-relevant practices, such as elevating the role of elders, engaging young people, honoring cultural foods and traditions, and making time for relationship-building. Engaged community members can help define these practices.
- Outline at the outset what authority a CAC has, who will receive its recommendations, and how those recommendations will be incorporated into agency decision-making.
- Establish a continuous feedback loop between the final decision-maker(s) and the CAC so that members understand how their ideas influenced the process.
- Clarify any non-negotiable constraints that may present barriers before convening a CAC. Every member of a CAC should understand those constraints at the outset of the project.
- Make sure that all goals of the process are clearly stated—no goals should be kept secret from CAC members or the broader public.





POWER AND ACCESSIBILITY

“They don’t give money and power; they give coffee and donuts.”

There are many ways community members can feel undervalued in a CAC process. CACs can often require regular participation over months or longer, which means that some people most affected by a decision will not be able to participate. For those who do engage, one commonly expressed frustration is that CAC members typically are not compensated for their participation, while institutional staff are. This can result in community members

feeling that their time, energy and knowledge are valued less than institutional staff members are valued. Family responsibilities, transportation barriers, or childcare issues may prevent participation in the process. To the extent that community members question their real power in the process, these barriers are more likely to prevent regular participation.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES:

- Ask whether a CAC is the best way to engage the community in the decision at hand. Consult trusted community members in this decision. If staff do not have trusting relationships to consult, begin by building relationships with impacted community members to determine the best way forward.
- Offer other avenues of engagement, outside of the CAC process, through which community members can meaningfully participate with less commitment.
- Offer flexible participation, in recognition that CAC members are contributing valuable time to the process.
- Budget for community engagement and offer stipends for participation.
- Choose central community spaces for CAC

meetings that are accessible by public transit. Schedule meetings during non-business hours.

- Commit to unlearning ableism, working with the disability community to ensure

everyone can participate. If possible, designate a staff member to serve as an access coordinator.

- Offer additional supports like interpretation, childcare, and food.

INSTITUTIONALIZING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

“Agency staff turnover means commitment can change over time.”

In today’s employment market, people change jobs frequently. Turnover can result in the loss of goodwill between institutional staff and community members when staff leave—and their institutional knowledge leaves with them. If good community engagement practices are not well documented and

codified as part of a healthy operating culture, community relationships can be damaged or lost. Participants described a need to “institutionalize permanence” so that personnel changes do not affect an agency’s commitment to transparency, accessibility, and community-led decision-making.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES:

- Document community engagement practices that have and have not worked, as well as the history that shapes the community context.
- Make sure all staff—from top leadership to community-facing people—understand the importance of community engagement and the authority of the CAC.
- Embed resources, funding and job expectations for multiple staff to continuously build and maintain relationships in community.
- Ensure that multiple staff members are deeply connected to community members to establish continuity through transition periods. Prioritize these relationships during onboarding of new staff.
- Consider building in space for internally focused processes to support institutionalization, including ongoing professional development, community feedback audits, power analyses, and tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory.



FURTHER RESOURCES: Putting community members at the center of important community decisions results in better outcomes and fewer conflicts that can slow progress and stress relationships. Institutions can improve the way they interact with the community by paying attention to the ways that culture, transparency and accessibility are intentionally addressed and institutionalized. Learn more about this dynamic and complex field by accessing the following resources:

- [NCEI Impacts of Community Engagement Model](#)
- [Community Engagement Assessment Tool](#)
- [Trying to Engage Effectively with Community? Recommendations for a Large Organization](#)