

Building Communities with Strong Families



Promoting Citizen Participation

Community building that leads to positive outcomes for children, youth, and families involves citizens, especially neighborhood residents and those who are affected by programs and services. Although the tasks accomplished by collaborations are important, even more important is the “social capital” that is created when people plan and decide their own future and form relationships with each other.

This factsheet outlines the first steps in community building for children, youth, and families — getting the participation of all key stakeholders in our efforts. The first section explains the importance of promoting broad participation in community building efforts. Guidelines for getting the right people to the collaboration table are then given. Suggestions for reducing the barriers to involvement also are outlined.

What Do We Mean by “Participation”?

Community building means a new way of doing business. In the past, a small group of agency representatives often met together to plan programs and services for clients who needed them. Clients may have been asked about their needs in a focus group or through some other form of needs assessment. But they were given little opportunity to influence the planning and implementation of efforts.

Participation means connecting “citizens” to the process of planning and making decisions about community-based programs and supports for children, youth, and families. The term “citizens” covers a broad range of possible stakeholders who have not traditionally been involved in collaboration. They include neighborhood residents, clients or consumers of human services, the parents of children and youth receiving services, and youth themselves. It also includes representatives from education, business, religion, and health care.

Why do Community Building Efforts Need to be Participatory?

Many benefits come from involving citizens in community building efforts. The primary one is that it works!

Christopher Gates of the National Civic League, describes three frameworks that guide planning and decision making in communities. Figure 1 shows the traditional way for community decision-making.

“All changes should be introduced with the fullest consent and participation of those whose daily lives will be affected by the change.”

— Margaret Mead

“Tell me and I will forget.

Show me and I may remember.

Involve me and I will understand.”

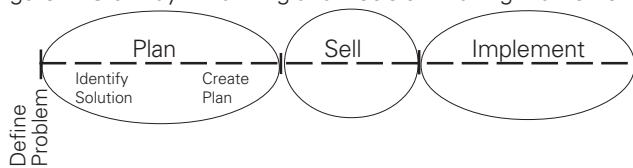
— Anonymous

“Movement from planning ‘for’ to planning ‘with’ people.”

— Patrick Boyle

In this model a few key leaders define the problems, identify solutions, and create plans. They then tell and sell the plans to the community who implement them as outlined. Leaders are confident that their wishes will be accepted or at least not opposed.

Figure 1. Old Way—Planning and Decision-Making Framework



Although many leaders believe that planning by a few people saves time and energy, this approach does not work in today's world. People generally have grown to distrust those who are in power. In addition, many citizens have had some experience with participating in community decision-making. They are no longer willing to accept decisions without being a part of the process, especially on issues important to them.

Figure 2 depicts how things really happen using the traditional approach in today's society. A few select community leaders still develop the plan and make decisions. But much more time and energy are spent selling the plan to the community. So much time and energy is spent selling, that momentum for implementing the plan lessens. Implementation may never occur.

Figure 2. Reality—Planning and Decision-Making Framework

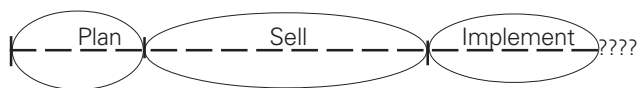
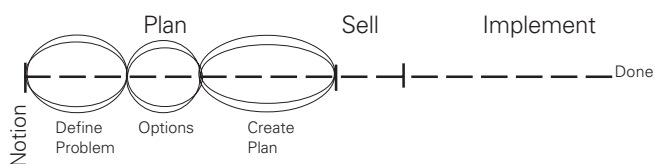


Figure 3 portrays a new way of planning and making decisions. The process begins when one or several individuals have a notion but not a well-defined idea about the problem or its solution. They test their notion with all key stakeholders. Then together they define the problem, identify solutions, and create a plan. In the end much less time is spent selling the plan because key stakeholders already own it and are primarily confirming the plan they created together.

Figure 3. New—Planning and Decision-Making Framework



As a result of involving citizens, community building efforts reap several benefits. First, participation results in better decisions about how to address the needs and enhance the strengths of the children, youth, and

families in the community. Second, in the long run, the process of positive change is speeded up in the community because those involved will help diffuse and legitimize the plans to the rest of the community. Third, participation in planning and decision-making builds human and social capital. Citizens become informed and prepared for leading change in the community.

How Do We Begin to Involve Citizens in Community Building?

The first step for involving citizens is for professionals to assess their own attitudes and beliefs about participation. Professionals who are not comfortable with citizen involvement or lack the needed skills to facilitate that involvement may resent citizen participation and try to maintain rigid control.

Checklist 1, titled “Citizen Participation: What Do I Believe?” gives professionals an opportunity to evaluate their beliefs about citizen participation. Responses indicate whether or not professionals are willing and open to citizen involvement. Few people are able to answer yes to all the questions. How professionals respond indicates the kind of training or orientation needed to work effectively with citizens.

The second step for involving citizens is to identify and recruit potential participants to the collaborative. Checklist 2 provides a list of guidelines for facilitators to follow to successfully involve citizens. Begin by identifying citizens as potential members of the collaborative. If you are a new group, two or three people can begin generating a list of potential participants. The worksheet, “Planning Guide for Citizen Participation,” is a guide for brainstorming. An existing collaborative that would like to increase citizen participation will also find the worksheet helpful.

How Do We Reduce the Barriers That Limit Citizen Involvement?

Professionals may not be the only group hesitant to involve citizens in planning and decision making. Citizens also may need education and support to effectively participate in this process.

Researchers have identified common characteristics of individuals and families with limited resources. This information may help facilitators of collaborations to better understand the situations of some citizens. They also might find ways to overcome the barriers created by these characteristics. People who have limited resources may:

- Live from crisis to crisis and have a short-term orientation.

- Experience high levels of stress.
- Be socially or geographically isolated due to lack of reliable transportation.
- Lack positive role models and see welfare as the only alternative.
- Suffer from low self-esteem in a culture that prizes material success.
- Lack hope for the future; not expect improvement.

The following tips can help groups overcome barriers that limit citizen participation:

- Meet in locations that are central and familiar to citizens. Offer rides if necessary.
- Meet in “barrier-free” buildings to help those with physical limitations. Provide translators and bilingual materials for those for whom English is a second language.
- Avoid meeting agendas that focus on narrow agency interests and that are formal, lengthy, and disorganized. Create a clear meeting agenda with broad member input. Keep an action focus and keep the meetings at a reasonable length.
- Find meeting times that accommodate the needs of citizens in the collaborative.
- Reduce out-of-pocket costs of participating. Instead, offer payment for expenses such as child care, meals, or transportation. Schedule short meetings before or after work.
- Avoid intimidating language, stiff formalities, discrimination, and tokenism. Define organizational jargon and acronyms. Use a more informal meeting style. Ask more than one or two people to represent large sectors of the community.
- Promote sharing of and equal access to information. Orient and train members. Create a “buddy system” in which new members are mentored by long-time members. Use a variety of media to communicate information because some members may not read very well.
- Develop leadership among citizens on the collaborative. Seek out and nurture existing or natural leaders. Provide training and mentoring. Promote positive role models and job shadowing.
- Allow time for the group to form and build trust. Serve snacks or meals during meetings. Celebrate the diversity among group members.

Summary

Effective community building involves consumers and residents in creating services and conditions needed to secure their children’s and community’s future. Involving citizens, parents, youth, and business people who have full lives is challenging but worth the effort. Those who form and facilitate collaborations need to intentionally recruit representatives from diverse cross-sections of the community. They then need to find ways to reduce the barriers that limit people’s participation.

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Adapted from: Institute for Family-Centered Care
Prepared by Karen Shirer, assistant director, Iowa State University Extension to Families. Edited by Carol Ouverson, communication specialist.

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CHECKLIST 1

Citizen Participation: What Do I Believe?

Check box if your answer is yes.

- 1. Do I believe that citizens bring unique expertise to our relationship?
- 2. Do I believe in the importance of nonprofessional participation in decision-making at the program and policy level?
- 3. Do I believe that citizen perspectives and opinions are as important as professionals?
- 4. Do I believe that citizens contribute to the collaborative in a way that no one else can?
- 5. Do I consistently let others know that I value the insights of citizens?
- 6. Do I work to create an environment in which all members of the collaborative feel supported and comfortable enough to speak freely?
- 7. Do I listen respectfully to the opinions of citizens?
- 8. Do I believe that non-professionals can look beyond their own family's experiences and needs?
- 9. Do I clearly state what is required and expected of consumers and residents in their collaborative roles?
- 10. Do I understand that personal demands may require parents to take time off from the collaborative?
- 11. Do I feel comfortable delegating responsibility to citizens and consumers?

How many boxes did you check? _____ boxes

If you checked most or all of the boxes, you are very positive about citizen participation in community building efforts. If you did not, think about those questions you left unchecked and identify some ways to improve upon this area.

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CHECKLIST 2

Guidelines for Successfully Involving Citizens in Collaboration

- ◆ Make a plan for identifying citizens to participate.
- ◆ Support professionals in better understanding the value of citizens.
- ◆ Orient both non-professionals and professionals to community-building processes.
- ◆ Hold meetings at times and locations convenient for citizens who you want to participate.
- ◆ Pay citizens for their time, expertise, and expenses.
- ◆ Clearly identify an individual to be the primary contact for reimbursement and other issues. Be certain this person understands that timely reimbursement is essential.
- ◆ Provide accurate, timely, clear, and jargon-free information prior to meetings.
- ◆ Provide clear information about the goals of the collaborative and of individual members.
- ◆ Match seasoned participants with inexperienced, new participants to ensure that new members feel supported in their roles and have the opportunity to share their new and fresh ideas.
- ◆ Balance membership on subcommittees between non-professionals and professionals. One citizen on a subcommittee is not enough.
- ◆ During and after meetings, specifically recognize the value of all members' participation.
- ◆ Incorporate a "family leave" policy into the practices of your collaborative so family members can choose an inactive role but maintain their membership should family circumstances require some time off.
- ◆ Consider shared leadership—citizen and professional co-chairs.
- ◆ Recognize that some citizens may require more support than others to participate in a meaningful way. It is worth the effort.

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Planning Guide for Citizen Participation

<i>Individual or Organization</i>	<i>Who Individual Represents</i>	<i>Why This Person Would Support The Effort</i>	<i>Skills and Resources Individual Has</i>	<i>Tips for Recruiting This Individual</i>	<i>Pre-involvement Information Needs</i>	<i>Notes</i>

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