

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

To better understand best principles and practices of community engagement that Michigan organizations can use to advance health equity, the Michigan Public Health Institute conducted an environmental scan of community engagement efforts across the country. The below information summarizes key findings from that work. This document is part of a larger report called Collective Impact & Community Engagement: Phase 1 Environmental Scan

The most common, important principles we discovered during the first phase of the project are listed on Table 1 below and on the following pages. The table describes how the principles are used in communities, both problematic and promising practices, as well as quotes from our interviewees highlighting the importance of the principle. We understand these are a starting point that will be continually refined as we work alongside community advisors in the next phase to understand how these principles are applied in real-life.



I think there’s a lot of hypothetical in theory about best practices, I think that in putting them into practice is incredibly challenging.

—Lori Peterson, KII



Table 1. How to Apply Principles and Practices

Principle	Problematic Practices	Promising Practices	Real-life Examples
Avoid tokenizing	<p>Only allowing 1-2 PWLEI to join group puts pressure on them to represent everyone from their community and creates competition for these limited seats.</p> <p>Asking the same community member to share their story at different conferences/events.</p>	<p>Employ multiple methods and forums for community involvement, one of which could be community advisory boards;</p> <p>Including PWLEI on the team early so they are involved in determining goals.</p>	<p>“But then there’s sometimes, and particularly when folks are tokenized. They’ll identify one person who they’ll just always call upon because they were great public speaker or they connect to the audience. And quite often sometimes people are chosen because they can move the room to tears. And I’ve definitely seen folks be exploited, particularly for fund raising purposes.”</p> <p>—Diane Sullivan, KII</p> <p>“You don’t invite one white male to represent all white men. You don’t invite Jeffrey Dahmer to represent white men.”</p> <p>—Laura Brennan, KII</p>

Table 1. How to Apply Principles and Practices (continued)

Principle	Problematic Practices	Promising Practices	Real-life Examples
Avoid harm /mitigate trauma	<p>PWLEI quickly invited to join professional projects/ committees and asked to share their personal experiences which can trigger a trauma response.</p> <p>PWLEI are invited to a committee but not given an opportunity to speak or heard when they do share.</p>	<p>Prepare the professionals: understanding the key principles, trauma, structural racism impacting the community in the past, today, and the future.</p> <p>Remain open, ask questions, and step back.</p>	<p>“The work is upon us to get people to understand that we belong in these spaces when there’s a conversation about us that we absolutely need to be in these spaces. But we have to consider the trauma that brings on us when we have to constantly be looking for outside validation that we have value, that we’re worthy because in these spaces some people just don’t see us an equal human being.”</p> <p>—Diane Sullivan, KII</p>
Build trusting relationships	<p>Building relationships takes time, clear communication, setting of expectations, recognition of power dynamics, and accountability. When this process is rushed, relationships often become transactional and tokenizing.</p>	<p>Transparency on roles, responsibilities, timelines, budgets, etc.</p> <p>Allow ample time, space, and resources; follow through – don’t ignore the input; acknowledge missteps, including past marginalization; minimize communication of hierarchy.</p>	<p>“You have to ensure adequate time and space for building strong relationships and trust...you have to clarify the purpose and importance of working together and hear from everybody when you’re working on what that purpose is. You have to discuss your values and your priorities and your perspective. You have to be transparent and community centered when your co-designing.”</p> <p>—Laura Brennan, KII</p>
Be accessible	<p>Meetings often happen at times and locations that are best for professionals (conference centers, business day hours, etc.).</p> <p>Partners at meetings tend to use terms and acronyms common in their sector but that is not familiar to everyone attending.</p>	<p>Develop and use shared language (avoid jargon).</p> <p>Accessible location and time; consider childcare, transportation, and technology needs.</p>	<p>“[the goal is] not to fill in peoples’ emptiness, but it’s [to] remove barriers so people could be part of the solution.”</p> <p>—Dan Duncan, KII</p> <p>“We make sure that research findings are presented in ways that community members understand they can access it... and why the dredging up of this pain matters.”</p> <p>—Meme Styles, KII</p>

Table 1. How to Apply Principles and Practices (continued)

Principle	Problematic Practices	Promising Practices	Real-life Examples
Be fair	Professionals with schooling, credentials, and certificates are often thought of as the only ‘experts’ and everyone listens to their opinion.	<p>Everyone deserves to be compensated for their time; professionals meeting during work hours are paid for their time and expertise as part of their job. PWLEI should not be asked to volunteer.</p> <p>People with lived experience of inequity are valued and treated as experts.</p>	<p>“It’s tough for me to even think about the trauma that I’ve been through in sharing my story, which is why I’m super cautious.”</p> <p>—Diane Sullivan, KII</p>
Shared power	Democratic voting practices for ‘shared decision-making’ does not usually allow PWLEI to vote honestly.	<p>Practice collaborative leadership – lead the process, not the group.</p> <p>Practice active coalition maintenance.</p> <p>Avoid overly narrow goals.</p> <p>Social capital creation/ community organizing.</p> <p>Preparing people with lived experience of inequity to lead.</p>	<p>“Nobody empowers me, I have the power, I just have to make sure that I can connect with the power and that I’ve got the tools and the supports in place so that I can exercise my power. I can lend power. I can share power, but I can’t empower people. They have the power.”</p> <p>—Diane Sullivan, KII</p>

Acronyms used in this table:

KII = Key Informant Interview

PWLEI = People with Lived Experience of Inequity



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