The Colorado Health Foundation™



Evolving Our Practice of Community Engagement

A few months back a grantee shared with me the hard news that their property had been defaced with hateful speech. At the time, they were trying to figure out resources for staff who never turn off – in the midst of experiencing the pandemic from the frontlines, receiving an influx of funding resources and trying to keep their heads above water. While I found myself pining for in-person interaction, I recognized what they needed was someone to listen.

Complexities with the coronavirus and the ongoing racial injustice we're experiencing as a nation present more obstacles than I can count. While I have my moments of being utterly overwhelmed by it all, we're challenging ourselves – as individuals and as an organization – to look at these obstacles as opportunities.

We recognize that we cannot advance health equity without first addressing systemic oppression founded on racism and racist principles. We recognize that advancing health and racial equity means getting to know communities more and more. And we recognize that increased isolation and loss of social connection makes community engagement more important than ever – even if it's over the phone or web.

We see this as an opportune moment for us at the Foundation to reflect on our community engagement practices and refine them to create more meaningful relationships in service of our mission. This is a moment for us to learn and to grow.

And in this moment, it's critical that we show up for Colorado communities as a listening ear, connector and thought partner so we can better understand their most urgent needs. Living into our community engagement practice necessitates understanding community context and how it's evolving in light of the current

climate of our country, our state, our communities and even our homes.

While program officers typically spent nearly 40% of their time engaging in face-to-face interactions before the pandemic, there is a whole spectrum of ways in which we can learn about community and form meaningful relationships in our present world. In other words, there is no one way to do the work. We must be nimble in order to do our best, and strengthen our relationships in community, right now.

It's no surprise that our preferred way of connecting is face-to-face. Yet, we know that it is more important than ever that we remain invested in listening, centering community voice and understanding what is happening within Colorado communities. Just because we're physically distant doesn't mean that we can't be socially connected. Instead, it's a time to deepen social connections, develop new ones and move forward. Together.

As a result, we've been continuing to build our community engagement practices – understanding that the process of community engagement is as important as the outcome of it. Listening to and engaging with community requires taking time to reflect and process what we're learning and what that means for the relationship, the community and the work.

Some of the key considerations that we have learned this past eight months are:

- **Don't make assumptions about how and when community wants to engage**
    - Early in the pandemic, many of us made the assumption that folks in community weren't interested in talking to us because they were tapped addressing the pressing needs of those around them. However, folks appreciated a simple email or phone call checking in on them to see how they were doing. The crises organizations are dealing with have ebbed and flowed over time, and the support they need continues to vary.

- **Pay attention to preferences of engagement and what new ways we can engage and learn**
    - Our practice leans heavily on one-on-one connection, either in person or over the phone. With so many doors closed, we're paying more attention to how folks are connecting with each other over social media. Staff members who shied away from using such things as Facebook, are signing up for their own accounts so that they can stay connected and learn about what's happening.
    - We're placing greater ownership on ourselves to more proactively learn about community. This helps us understand the historical and current context and other facets of the community, especially when we're unable to connect with folks directly.
- **Listen and enter conversations from a place of curiosity**
    - We're eliminating barriers for connection and engagement as much as possible, and focusing on relationships that work for those in community. We're putting emphasis on listening and asking questions to learn. This helps us gain a clearer picture of how we can provide necessary supports.
- **Build on and leverage existing relationships and continue to engage with those you have not yet met.**
    - We're relying on folks on the ground in community to help us to understand impacts of the pandemic, but also connecting with new folks that we haven't worked with before. In fact, conversations about the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic helped guide our response and how we reallocated funding in 2020 to address community need.
    - We're honoring the need to continue expanding our network. We're using this as an opportunity to learn about and work with new individuals and networks, especially those who are most closely connected with the communities we center on.

- **Center our efforts on health and racial equity**
    - Health and racial equity exists at the core of our community engagement work. We're learning from community about the inequities they are experiencing, and use this learning to inform our strategic decisions on advancing health equity and addressing systemic racism.

Along with these key considerations, we continue to hold ourselves accountable to our Community Engagement IMPACT Practice Model, which provides the guardrails for who we stand for and how we show up. We must also hold ourselves accountable to community, understanding the heavy weight they are carrying with them, and navigating that in a way that positions us to respond effectively.

We will remain humble and honest – recognizing that where we'd like to be is not necessarily where we are. We know that we don't have all of the answers, which is why we approach our community engagement practice with openness to seek out different perspectives. We are dedicated to ensuring your voice is heard and that we can work together with your community's best interest at heart.

Our modes of communicating may have shifted over the past several months, but we are and will be committed to engaging with you. It's through working with you, learning from you and listening to the needs of your community that keep health equity in focus.

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Blog

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