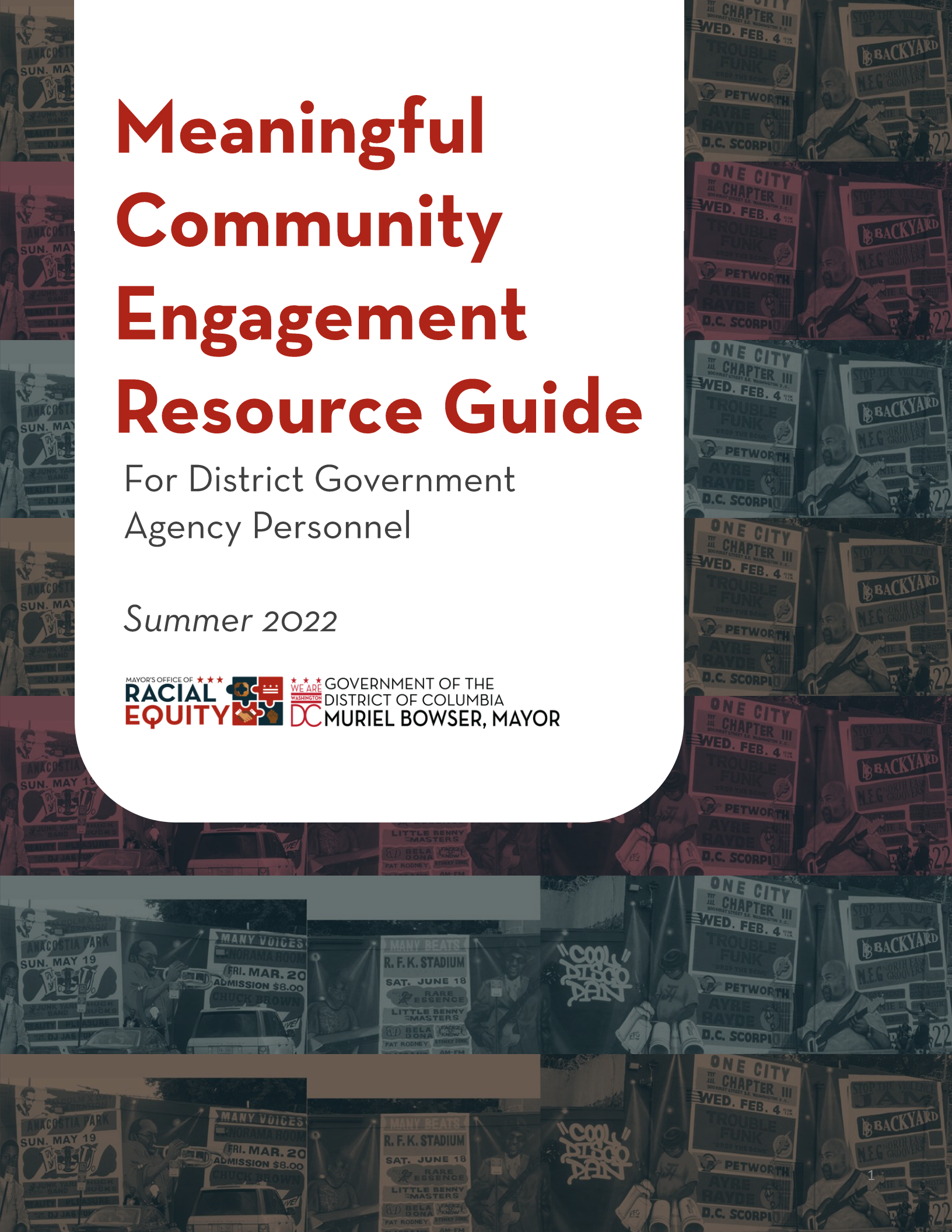


# Meaningful Community Engagement Resource Guide

For District Government  
Agency Personnel

*Summer 2022*

MAYOR'S OFFICE OF  
**RACIAL EQUITY**  **WE ARE WASHINGTON DC** GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR



# Meaningful Community Engagement Resource Guide for District Government Agency Personnel

Summer 2022

Government of the District of Columbia

## Office of Racial Equity (ORE)

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@oredc\_



@OREDC\_



DC Office of Racial Equity

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# A Message from the Mayor



Dear colleagues:

Over the past two years, the pandemic challenged us in ways most of us could not have imagined. It also brought inequities and injustices in our communities into sharp focus as systems shaped by generations of discriminatory policies caused outsized harm to the health and well-being of people of color here in Washington, D.C., and across our nation.

As we continue to recover from the pandemic, our government is committed to rebuilding a more prosperous, inclusive future for all Washingtonians. It will require us to focus on equity in our work -- just as racist policies like redlining were not created by chance, we will only eliminate racial inequities by intentionally undoing their legacy.

Last year I established the Office of Racial Equity (ORE) – the District’s first – to develop an infrastructure that puts racial equity at the forefront of District policy and programs and carries forward a citywide focus on advancing a racially equitable D.C. ORE’s work is to amplify a racial equity lens and accelerate change. Still, we all have a role to play in upholding our shared values of diversity, opportunity, and equity.

Critical among these roles are community voices. Community engagement is a cornerstone of our democracy, a cornerstone that needs to reflect the diversity of our residents’ experiences and backgrounds if we are going to make progress on closing equity gaps together. Many of you already engage our communities in deep and meaningful ways. Wherever you are in your community relationships, I encourage you to strengthen them and keep them at the heart of your work. If the pandemic taught us anything, it’s that we’re all in this together and that together we can do so much more.

Undoing hundreds of years of discrimination will not be simple or easy, but it is necessary and overdue. The crisis of the pandemic will not be the last challenge we face. We know that when we invest in and expand opportunities for every Washingtonian to thrive -- no matter where they live or what their background is - we build a stronger, more resilient D.C. And we all win when everyone has a fair shot.

Thank you for helping us to lead this change,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Muriel Bowser". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Muriel" and last name "Bowser" clearly legible.

Muriel Bowser,  
Mayor, District of Columbia

# A Message from the Chief Equity Officer



Dear Partners,

In February 2021, Mayor Muriel Bowser established the Office of Racial Equity (ORE) with the charge of developing an infrastructure to evaluate policy decisions and District programs through a racial equity lens. The ORE also carries forward the implementation of the Racial Equity Achieves Results “REACH” Act (D.C. Law 23-181).

The Act includes several provisions designed to operationalize racial equity across government, such as racial equity training for District employees and the development of Racial Equity Action Plans. Meaningful community engagement is a critical component of applying a racial equity lens.

As Mayor Bowser stated, “we have a unique opportunity to double down on our efforts to put racial equity at the forefront and revitalize systems to ensure a more inclusive and prosperous future for all Washingtonians.” Opportunity also brings with it the acknowledgment that government must work to repair harm and eliminate structures that reinforce differential experiences and outcomes by race. We must begin by normalizing conversations around race, racism, and racial equity.

In my first year as Chief Equity Officer, many have asked about my vision for the Office. The vision will build upon the Mayor’s priorities and existing agency strategies and goals. Racial equity, nevertheless, requires prioritizing the voices and needs of those most affected by racial inequities. So, my goal is to foster a collective vision, one that includes:

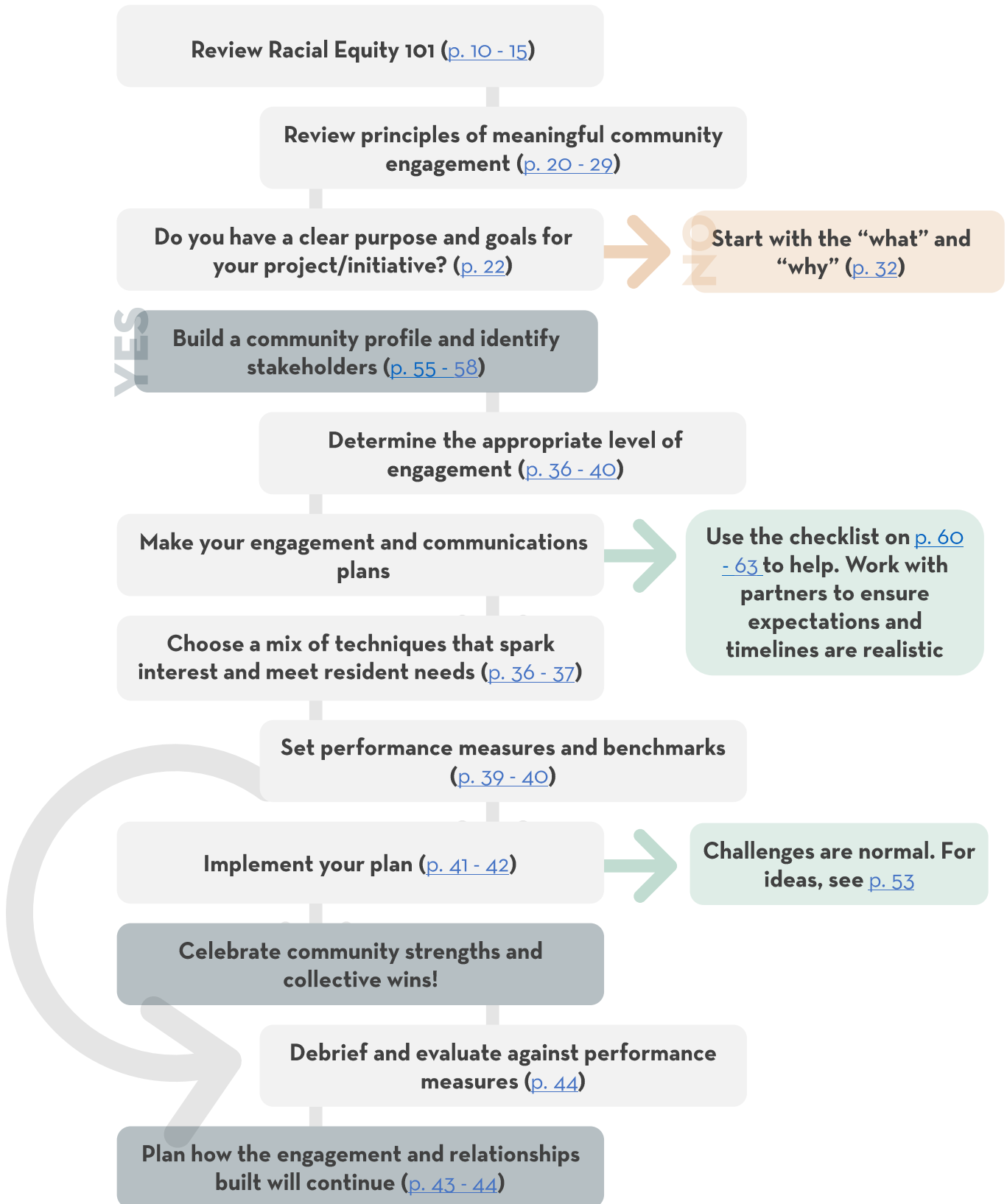
- Acknowledging the cumulative and ongoing impact of historical trauma on communities of color, especially Black people living in the District;
- Shifting our individual and collective understanding of the impact of racism and what anti-racism and racial equity are and mean;
- Acknowledging the intersections of race and other social categories or experiences;
- Analyzing which communities will benefit and which communities will be harmed by policy decisions, according to race; and
- Targeting solutions and distribution of resources to residents that have experienced systemic and institutional oppression.

I am pleased to be a part of a team of directors who have initiated landmark projects across District government to achieve our vision for racial equity – when one’s race or ethnicity will no longer predict opportunities, outcomes, or the distribution of resources for residents of the District, particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) residents.

Sincerely,

Amber A. Hewitt, Ph.D.  
Chief Equity Officer, District of Columbia Government

# Meaningful Community Engagement Guide Quick Reference



# INTRODUCTION

**“We have a unique opportunity to double down on our efforts to put racial equity at the forefront and revitalize systems to ensure a more inclusive and prosperous future for all Washingtonians.**

*- Mayor Muriel Bowser, District of Columbia*

# Introduction

## About the Office of Racial Equity

Mayor Bowser established the Office of Racial Equity (ORE) in 2021 to coordinate and accelerate the District's efforts toward achieving racial equity. One of the ways ORE does this is by supporting agencies in **applying a racial equity lens to District policy decisions and programs**. In its simplest form, a racial equity lens is a set of questions we ask in decision-making processes to bring the lived experiences of people who have been impacted by racism and those who will be most impacted by a decision into the conversation at hand.

ORE also carries forward the implementation of the Racial Equity Achieves Results "REACH" Act (D.C. Law 23-181), which directs ORE to produce racial equity tools for agencies to use in their core operations, for example when they develop performance-based budgets, programs, policies, rules, or regulations. Like a racial equity lens, a racial equity tool is a set of questions that helps decision-makers design and deliver policies and services which are intentionally equitable.<sup>1</sup>

## About the Meaningful Community Engagement Resource Guide

The Office of Racial Equity developed this Meaningful Community Engagement Resource Guide with input and feedback from Washington, D.C. community-based organizations (CBOs) led by Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) residents.\* This Guide is meant as a

resource for District government agencies to help generate authentic and community-centered community engagement practices. This Guide aims to encourage meaningful community engagement practices that actively and intentionally inform and involve District residents and communities in the policy and program decisions which most impact their lives. **Meaningfully engaging District communities is a crucial step toward embedding a racial equity lens in government** because it helps center the voices of BIPOC communities in the design, delivery, and implementation of policies, programs, budgets, and initiatives.

This Guide is not intended to be exhaustive; agencies should tailor the information to meet resident and customer needs while keeping community priorities, preferences, and experiences in mind.

## Why is This Guide Needed?

While it is commonly accepted that community engagement is essential to good governance, well-intentioned local governments, professional institutions, and other decision-making groups don't always meet community needs or expectations. This can include knowingly or unknowingly excluding stakeholder groups, underinvesting resources in engagement, or conducting surface-level engagement to check a required box. As a result, communities can feel excluded from some of the most meaningful elements of community change, including ownership of policy issues or the ability to impact outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

This has sometimes fostered a sense of mistrust of government in the communities

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\* BIPOC is first-person language and is used to recognize the institutional, structural, and systemic forms of racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and people of color.



# Introduction

## Meaningful Community Engagement Guide Goals

### This Guide aims to:

- Connect the concepts and practices of **racial equity** with **meaningful community engagement**;
- Provide **resources that build the capacity** of District government agencies to engage in meaningful community engagement; and
- Give **examples of what meaningful community engagement** can look like and ways to engage District residents who have historically been excluded or who have not participated in planning processes.

most hurt by exclusionary policy and practices. These communities are frequently **Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC)**, and often, “distrust is shaped by individual and collective experiences of injustice.”<sup>3</sup> An engaged community is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy, and community engagement has been found to improve government service outcomes and individual wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> By providing a structure to meaningfully engage residents in the design, implementation, or revision phases of a project, program, budget, or initiative, District government can improve outcomes for everyone.<sup>5</sup>

In short, **we serve residents better when we**

**understand and respond to what they want and need.**

While all District government agencies strive to meet the needs of the communities they serve, effective and meaningful community engagement practices vary significantly by agency, cluster, and even team. This guide provides information and resources to help agencies enhance their community engagement practices and encourage District government staff to consistently involve the communities most impacted by their work as full partners in the planning and development processes.

For community engagement by District government staff to be meaningful, it should be guided by the following values:<sup>6</sup>

- Honor the wisdom, voices, and experiences of residents served, particularly in BIPOC communities;
- Treat residents, specifically BIPOC communities, with integrity and respect;
- Be transparent about agency motives and power dynamics, especially in discussions with BIPOC residents;
- Intentionally engage, listen to, and amplify voices from BIPOC communities in the processes that lead to governmental decisions; and
- Engage in continuous organizational self-reflection and be willing to learn, grow, and change.

# RACIAL EQUITY 101



**“Racial equity is about applying justice and a little bit of common sense to a system that's been out of balance. When a system is out of balance, people of color feel the impacts most acutely, but to be clear, an imbalanced system makes all of us pay.”**

- *Glenn Harris,  
President, Race Forward  
and Author, Colorlines*

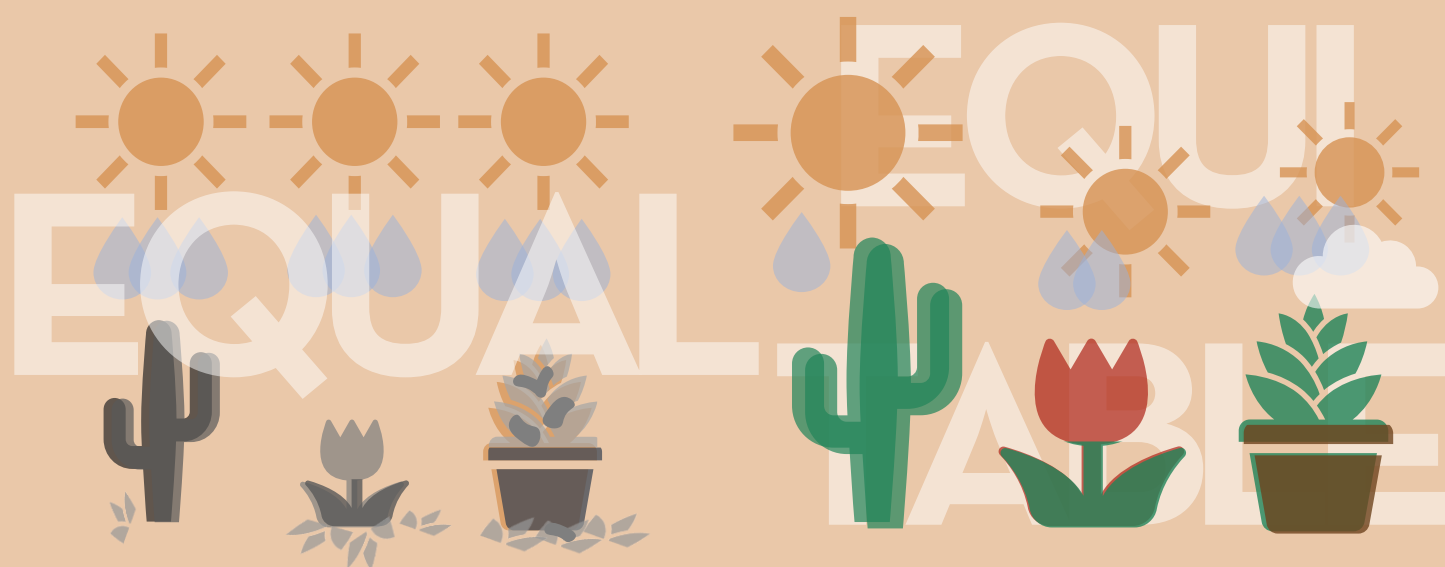
# Racial Equity 101

## What is Racial Equity?

Racial equity is defined as “the condition that would be achieved if one’s racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares.”<sup>7</sup> **Racial equity is both a process and an outcome.**<sup>8</sup> As a **process**, we apply a racial equity lens when those most impacted by structural racial inequity are meaningfully involved in creating and implementing the institutional policies and practices that affect their lives. As an **outcome**, we achieve racial equity when one’s race can no longer be used to predict opportunities, outcomes, or the distribution of resources for residents of the District.<sup>9</sup>

Racial equity is not the same as equality. Equality implies sameness, e.g., everyone receives the same treatment, resources, and opportunities. Equality does not consider what individuals may already have, what they may need, or what they may want. Equity instead asks what individuals need to thrive and live meaningful lives to their full potential.

For example, in the image below, there is a cactus, a rose, and a fern. Treating the three plants equally would mean giving them all the same amount of water and sunshine. This would result in the plants being unhealthy and unhappy because they require different growing conditions. Treating the plants equitably, however, focuses on what each plant needs individually to thrive and prosper—in this example, giving the fern more shade or the cactus more sunshine. Advancing racial equity in the District requires us as a government to do the same: to consider the needs and desires of individual communities to thrive so that everyone has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.



# Racial Equity 101

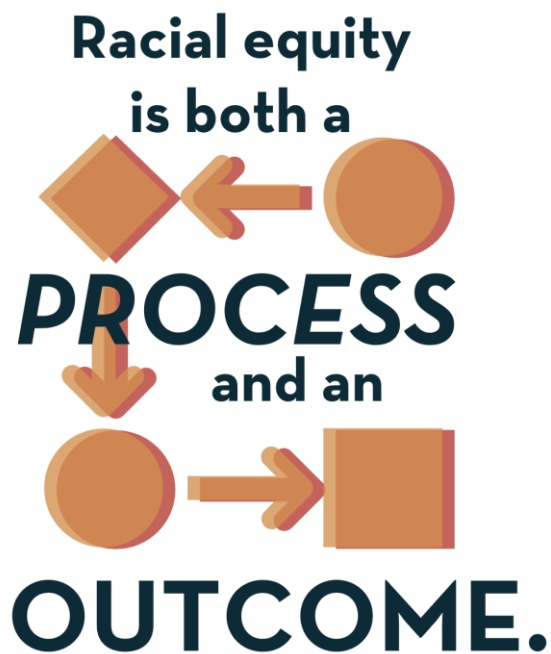
This approach is tied closely to **targeted universalism**.<sup>10</sup> As District government, our universal goal is for all residents to thrive. Some residents might be farther away from thriving than others and thus require more attention or accommodations. Different approaches are needed for all residents to thrive; targeted universalism replaces the “one-size fits all” approach (such as the equal water and sunshine on the previous page) with an individualized approach to fit different needs and desires (the tailored levels of sun and water).

**An example of targeted universalism within District government services would be the Department of Small and Local Business Development’s (DSLBD) “Just Cannabusiness Salons.”** Now widely understood as a public health issue, substance use disorder under the U.S. “War on Drugs” disproportionately criminalized BIPOC individuals in the

U.S. for the past forty years and contributed significantly to the U.S. mass incarceration crisis.<sup>11,12</sup> At the same time, a wave of state laws across the country are legalizing marijuana for recreational use, which is likely to include Washington, D.C. in the near future.<sup>13</sup> In response, DSLBD hosts listening and networking sessions targeting residents who have been most hurt by the historical criminalization of marijuana to help remove barriers to business opportunities when marijuana is legalized for recreational use, especially returning citizens. Once recreational sales are legal, it is anticipated that returning citizens and veterans will qualify for preference points on applications for marijuana-related business licenses issued by D.C.’s regulatory body.<sup>14</sup>

## What Does it Mean to Apply a Racial Equity Lens?

A racial equity lens can help us work toward racial equity in a more targeted way. A racial equity lens is a process of promoting anti-racist practices in our decisions, designs, projects, policies, and programs by centering the voices, needs, leadership, experiences, and talents of residents of color in the District.<sup>15</sup> This approach requires us to ask ourselves a series of questions throughout the decision-making process to identify and interrupt the potential for unintended and undesirable consequences based on race or ethnicity, regardless of where the proposal will take place or who it is intended to serve.



# Racial Equity 101

## What is the Connection Between Racial Equity and Meaningful Community Engagement?

Meaningful community engagement is an integral part of racial equity because it ensures that people who are the most impacted by racism can be involved in the development and implementation of solutions that address and heal the harms of racism. Community engagement allows time and space for policymakers to draw directly on the first-hand knowledge of residents with lived experiences. Authentic community engagement is a deep and lasting relationship between government and the communities it serves, which is why community members and trusted community leaders must be involved in planning as early as possible to ensure that projects, programs, initiatives, and budget decisions align with their communities' needs. Carefully planned and meaningful community engagement welcomes community members to be agents of change and can enhance program and policy sustainability.

Meaningful community engagement practices can lead to:<sup>16</sup>

- More racially equitable policy development and service delivery;
- Greater empathy for the day-to-day experiences of District residents;
- Improved relationships between the community and government;
- Community awareness and understanding of policy issues and choices which impact their lives;
- Community buy-in and higher levels of community ownership of shared projects and policy solutions;
- An ongoing channel for feedback on and evaluation of existing policies and programs;
- Opportunities to build on and develop individual and community assets and capacities and to foster shared goals and understanding;
- Reduced conflict within and between stakeholder groups when individuals and communities can hear and understand each other's points of view and build consensus.



*Pictured above: Friends of Anacostia Park Executive Director Richard Trent speaks as Anacostia Parks and Community Collaborative members and Office of Racial Equity staff listen during a 2022 tour of the Anacostia watershed hosted by the Anacostia Watershed Society.*

# Racial Equity 101

## Understanding Racial and Historical Trauma

To avoid creating or recreating harm and to confront historical traumas as part of community healing, District government must be trauma-informed in its interactions with residents. BIPOC residents, especially low-income BIPOC residents, often experience higher levels of stress and hardship, also referred to as burdens or inequities, which can cause trauma.<sup>17</sup> **Many of these stressors and hardships have roots in structural discrimination and disparate impacts, or unfair treatment and unfair outcomes based on race.** Many of these stressors stem from and are worsened by long historical patterns of exclusionary laws and practices, broken government promises, and inconsistent public services.<sup>18</sup> Trauma can also stem from individual experiences of racial discrimination and racial microaggressions. BIPOC residents are more likely to experience intergenerational harm from traumatic historical events, such as the Atlantic slave trade or, more recently, civil wars in Guatemala and Ethiopia.<sup>19</sup> Evidence suggests that high levels of stress from traumatic events not only create biological changes in the individual, but can also create changes to DNA which can be passed down for as many as five generations, impacting children and grandchildren who did not directly experience the event.<sup>20</sup> Harmful myths about inherent racial differences in resilience and pain tolerance can further traumatize BIPOC individuals and communities when their pain is not taken seriously.<sup>21</sup> **These traumas can be experienced at both the individual and community levels and can compound.**

## Practices of Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement



Source: Adapted from Urban Institute, 2018<sup>26</sup>

# Racial Equity 101

Part of being trauma aware and trauma-informed in community engagement includes understanding that **trauma is a pervasive public health issue that can impact anyone, but BIPOC residents may experience additional traumas based on their race.** Moreover, District government may have historically played a role in that trauma. For example, in the early 1800s, District government targeted Black residents with oppressive, discriminatory policies such as curfews and registries.<sup>22</sup> Under the District’s “Black Code,” the local government could and did sell free Black residents into slavery if arrested without freedom papers.<sup>23</sup> Because of these laws, there may be District residents with ancestors only two to three generations removed who were enslaved at some point during their lives. This is not the only example of historical trauma; agencies are encouraged to create historical timelines to promote staff awareness and prevent future harm.

Trauma is not permanent: individuals and communities can and do heal. Trauma is not powerlessness: **BIPOC communities and individuals who experience trauma often draw upon cultural strengths to resist and protect themselves from harm,** such as traditional wisdom, strong family bonds, and celebrations of cultural pride, among other assets. Cultural strengths have been shown to be powerful protective factors in Black, Hispanic, and indigenous communities against the harmful effects of racism and discrimination.<sup>24</sup> **When it comes to the role of District government in being trauma-informed, building on and celebrating community strengths is just as important as confronting previous harm.** This is sometimes described as using a strengths-based approach or asset-based community engagement.<sup>25</sup>



*Pictured above: Leaders from the Anacostia Parks and Community Collaborative, Charles Drew Elementary School, and Ward 8 Woods speak about Marvin Gaye Park as members of the Office of Racial Equity listen.*

# MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW



**“When we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else’s oppression, we’ll find our opportunities to make real change.**

- *Ijeoma Oluo,*  
*Writer*



# Meaningful Community Engagement Overview

## What Has Community Engagement Historically Looked Like?

Historically, community engagement in Washington, D.C., is unique. In a very direct sense, residents were excluded from meaningful civic participation until they regained the ability to elect their local government through the Home Rule Act in 1973. In the years prior, D.C.'s local government was congressionally appointed and controlled and did not have much power – or desire – to respond to community demands, especially those of Black residents.<sup>28</sup> D.C. residents had lost all voting rights following the Civil War due to fear of Black political power; the same fears played a central role in the fight against restoring Home Rule.\*\*

Even more explicitly, Black residents were excluded from full civic participation in DC through the 1950s. Racial housing covenants were legally enforceable in the District until 1948, and discriminatory lending practices, petition covenants, and resident associations kept many neighborhoods intentionally racially segregated until recent decades.<sup>29</sup>

Black residents became a majority of D.C.'s population in 1957.\*\*\* Nonetheless, many Black residents remained unable to meaningfully engage in civic life for other reasons, many of them related to race. For example, when former mayor Marion Barry ran for the Ward 8 Council seat in 1990, roughly half of the men in the predominantly Black Ward 8 were believed to have been incarcerated or being processed through the

criminal justice system.<sup>31</sup> District government agencies should be aware of the District's history as they meaningfully engage D.C. communities today.

## What Does Meaningful Community Engagement Look Like Today?

An inclusive definition of community engagement is “a two-way process by which the aspirations, concerns, needs, and values of [residents] and communities are incorporated at all levels and in all sectors in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery, and assessment; and by which governments and other business and civil society organizations involve [residents], clients, communities, and other stakeholders in these processes.”<sup>32</sup>

Several District agencies and offices practice forms of meaningful engagement which can be adapted and applied. Examples include:



The [Mayor's Office of Community Relations and Services \(MOCRS\)](#) is composed of frontline public servants who directly link residents to District government. They coordinate and conduct community [walk-throughs](#) which allow residents and stakeholders to voice concerns directly to District leadership on-location in their communities.

\*\* In the lead up to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in the early 1960s, some “[legislators] wondered if the right to vote wouldn't be thrown away by giving it to a city where more than half the people are colored.” *Chocolate City*, p. 344.

\*\*\*Anti-segregation laws were on the books dating back to 1872 in Washington, D.C. Still, racial segregation was allowed in private businesses in D.C. in practice until the Supreme Court mandated an end to segregation in 1953.<sup>30</sup>

# Meaningful Community Engagement Overview

DC | **HEALTH** [DC Health](#) has been conducting community health needs assessments ([DC CHNA](#)) and community health improvement plans since 2014. Meaningful community engagement is a core element in DC Health's community health work, from its multi-sector advisory board, community conversations, and informant interviews, to full community surveys and accessible public information. DC Health centers racial equity in its [Health Equity Report: District of Columbia 2018](#).



The [Department of Energy and the Environment](#)

([DOEE](#))'s Air Quality Division hosts a semi-monthly community workshop series titled, "Clearing the Air." The goal of "Clearing the Air" is to give the public an inside look at the District's Air Quality Division—everything from the science of air pollution to the laws and regulations that protect public health from harmful emissions—while also providing a space for residents to bring questions and concerns directly to DOEE staff. DOEE works with community members to invite residents in areas with air quality concerns, and the agency posts these workshop recordings and presentations on its [website](#) to be accessible to future audiences.



The [Department on Disability Services \(DDS\)](#) plays a leading role in communities of practice both inside District government and across sectors to build linguistic and cultural competency among state/territorial

intellectual and developmental disability systems. DDS and its partner agencies have focused on engaging and building trust with historically underserved groups. DDS also launched an annual all-Spanish language [conference](#) in partnership with community-based organizations to provide information, resources, and support to individuals with disabilities and their families while building greater awareness and understanding among District agencies of the unique experiences and needs of Spanish-speaking residents with disabilities. The Spanish language conference is now in its fourth year; DDS launched its first all-Amharic event in March of 2022.



The [Mayor's Office of Community Affairs \(MOCA\)](#) provides

guidance and oversight to the thirteen constituent service offices of the Executive Office of the Mayor.\*\*\*\* MOCA builds relationships with constituencies to establish partnerships, coordinate events, town halls, forums, and projects in support of carrying forward mayoral initiatives at the community level. MOCA offices regularly engage residents directly and in turn advise government agencies on communities' intersectional needs. Throughout the COVID-19 public health emergency, MOCA helped to recruit and coordinate the COVID-19 Community Corps and DC Senior Vaccine Buddies programs through which volunteers canvassed communities with low vaccination rates to provide information about vaccine eligibility and assist in scheduling appointments.

\*\*\*\* The thirteen constituent offices are the: Mayor's Office on African Affairs; Mayor's Office of African American Affairs; Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs; Mayor's Office of the Clean City; Mayor's Office of Fathers, Men, and Boys; Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs; Mayor's Office of LGBTQ Affairs; Mayor's Office of Nightlife and Culture; Mayor's Office of Religious Affairs; Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens Affairs; Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs; Mayor's Office of Volunteerism and Partnerships; and Mayor's Office of Women's Policy and Initiatives.

# Meaningful Community Engagement Overview

Today, MOCA continues to deepen its engagement with a series of Open House events throughout all 8 wards to introduce residents to staff, resources, and partnership opportunities. MOCA offices continue to remove barriers facing historically marginalized communities to engage government and prioritize meeting residents where they are and bringing services to diverse communities.



*Pictured above: Community leader Ms. Brenda Richardson of the Anacostia Parks and People Collaborative speaks as Chief Equity Officer Dr. Amber Hewitt listens during a 2022 tour of the Anacostia watershed hosted by the Anacostia Watershed Society.*

# EIGHT PRINCIPLES AND BEST PRACTICES OF MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



**“We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.**

**- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement

## Building and administering a District **WITH** residents, not **FOR** residents.

Whether you are still developing your community engagement plan or have already been engaging residents for years, the following principles and best practices can help to provide a launching point, guide your work, or check your assumptions. Some of the principles and best practices may feel obvious because they are so central to delivering good government.<sup>33</sup> We often take things that are in front of us for granted - our brains are constantly filtering information and cutting corners to avoid being overloaded<sup>34</sup> - which is why we must intentionally apply a racial equity lens and frequently revisit our guiding principles. The following principles and best practices are meant to help foster healthy, lasting community partnerships; they are not exhaustive.

### Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement

1. [Be clear about who you plan to engage, your work, and your goals](#)
2. [Understand racial and historical trauma](#)
3. [Prioritize trust](#)
4. [Make information and engagement accessible](#)
5. [Keep decision-making transparent and accountable](#)
6. [Be aware of positional power and power sharing](#)
7. [Build a consistent and inclusive community presence](#)
8. [Engage with cultural humility and respect](#)

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement

## 1 Be Clear About Who You Plan to Engage, Your Work, and Your Goals

- **Identify communities before conducting outreach.** The term ‘community’ is often too broad to be meaningful: do you need to consult with youth or seniors? Residents of Ward 1 or parents of K-5 aged children districtwide? Setting some parameters in advance helps to clarify the work, makes it more likely to reach desired partners and is more respectful of residents’ time and expertise.
- **Clarify your project and resident engagement goals** before conducting outreach to the target communities.
- **Make goals and anticipated community engagement timelines and touchpoints clear** in requests to residents and community partners so they can respond and prepare accordingly.
- **Remember that your definitions may vary from community partner definitions.** Before embarking on a new project or program, ask community partners to share their understanding of their respective communities/groups, their group needs and priorities, and group experiences and strengths. Establishing standard terms early on helps avoid false assumptions, recognizes residents’ individuality and dynamism, and ultimately leads to better outcomes.
- **No definition of community will be complete or perfect;** we must constantly ask ourselves and our partners whose voices are missing.

For an adaptable template to build a community profile, please see the [Appendix \(p. 55\)](#).

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement



## Understand Racial and Historical Trauma

- Trauma-informed community engagement means government staff “**realize how widespread trauma is, recognize signs and symptoms, respond by integrating knowledge into practice, and resist further harm.**”<sup>35</sup> Experiences of trauma do not define the individual, the community, or the ability to overcome trauma.
- **Approach communities with a strengths mindset.** Your agency may be working in a particular neighborhood in response to resident needs, but that does not mean the neighborhood is deficient. Every community has unique assets, gifts, and strengths to build from and celebrate.
- **It is not the residents’ responsibility to teach District staff about historical traumas.** District staff should research and become familiar with community experiences to recognize and understand past harms and avoid repeating past mistakes. A recommended exercise is to make a racial equity historical timeline of the agency’s work. (Ex: City of [Milwaukee](#))
- **Be aware of your messengers.** The background, experiences, and/or job title of the person representing the District could unconsciously influence how the audience perceives the proposal, idea, or questions posed.
- **Center race in community engagement in ways that make Black, Indigenous, and other people of color feel included and welcomed.** Include white people in discussions about racial equity and reinforce the roles we *all* have in advancing racial equity.

### To Learn More about Racial Trauma

- [Understanding Racial Trauma](#), Newsy, a four-minute introduction video on the topic of racial trauma
- [Clinical Research Sheet](#), International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, summarizes the clinical research on racial trauma in a short, easy format

### To Support Trauma-Informed Community Engagement

- [Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement](#), Urban Institute, provides strategies and practices for trauma-informed community engagement

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement



## Prioritize Trust

- **Authentic community engagement moves at the speed of trust.** Trust takes time and energy to build and may have already been broken within the communities with whom we seek to partner.
- **A lack of trust is often the rational reaction to past harm.** While we cannot undo the past, we can actively avoid repeating it.
- **Building trust** requires clear and effective communication, agreed-upon shared goals, a plan for community touchpoints with clear roles and expectations, transparency in decision-making, accountability and follow-through, and above all, respect.
- **Without follow-through and action, agreements we make with communities are empty.** Trust is hard-won and easily lost. No one is perfect, but we can all strive to be authentic, intentional, humble, honest, and committed to building lasting community relationships.
- **Balance urgency with long-term planning.** The most sustainable changes are cultivated over time, but this does not negate the importance of immediate needs. Building trust and understanding the communities we work with is an investment in our shared goals.

### Additional Resources

- [Rebuilding Trust in Government](#), Deloitte, gives tips to rebuild public trust based on agency business areas and functions
- [Trust Me](#) (Ep.266), Freakonomics Radio, the theory and science behind trust and civic engagement, featuring Robert Putnam.



# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement



## Make Information and Engagement Accessible

- **Information should be accurate, easy to read, and tailored to the community in language and style.** Make information as accessible as possible by using community-preferred methods alongside traditional government channels like websites and email, for example, sharing flyers or word-of-mouth via church groups or parent associations.
- **Reduce barriers to participation as much as possible.** Physical access to a meeting or event is a significant barrier to consider, but not the only one. Access also refers to financial, linguistic, technological, informational, cultural, and other barriers. Barriers to full engagement can be meetings that are always held during business hours, always hosted on WebEx or Teams, or full of acronyms and terms unfamiliar to residents.
- **Accessibility strategies** include skilled facilitation, meeting outside of District business hours, providing childcare, providing multiple channels for participation (such as online, in person, written, audio or video messages), interpretation for the visually or hearing impaired, interpretation for residents with limited English proficiency, meeting in spaces that are familiar and welcoming to the target community, and offering compensation for residents' time and expertise when possible and appropriate.

### Additional Resources

- [Inclusive & Accessible Virtual Engagement](#), Greater Portland Council of Governments, tips for working with specific populations, such as seniors and visually impaired or blind persons, and information on a range of digital tools to make virtual engagement accessible
- [Guide to Accessible Public Engagement](#), Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, lists accessibility considerations for various community engagement techniques (e.g., webinars, open houses, advisory boards) to help plan accessible events

**Don't forget our local experts** in the Office of Disability Rights, Office of Human Rights, Department of Aging and Community Living, and the Mayor's Office of Community Affairs offices if you need assistance making your events accessible for specific populations.

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement



## Keep Decision-Making Transparent and Accountable

- **Engagement should start early** in the planning and development processes when objectives are still being identified so that community members can help to meaningfully shape ideas.
- To foster trust, **promptly provide community partners with complete project information** to allow for input *before* final decisions are made.
- **Be clear with partners about how they can provide input**, how their input will be considered and incorporated, and any final decision-making timeline. Contributors should be notified about how their input was incorporated (or not) and why.
- Any **final decisions** about a proposed plan should be **shared with community partners** openly and transparently.

Sometimes, there will be constraints on the planning process, for example, federal requirements or confidential information. Be **upfront with partners about limitations from the beginning** and open to discussing these limitations.

Agencies implement and sometimes propose policies transparently through rulemaking, which involves notifying the public about a proposed change, collecting comments, weighing and responding to them, and taking final rulemaking action. **Agencies can and should engage impacted communities by going beyond the formal requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act** to discuss the proposed rule/policy change with impacted communities *before* publishing it. When a rulemaking is proposed, agencies should reach out to potentially affected parties to seek input. The burden of checking the *D.C. Register* should not be entirely on residents or community groups.

### Additional Resources

Please see resources under the “[Design](#)” stage for specific information-sharing techniques. (p. 36)

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement



## Be Aware of Positional Power and Power Sharing

- As District government and public servants, we have access to many forms of power. **Positional power is the ability to influence other people, their outcomes, and/or distribute resources based on one’s rank or position in a formal institution**, for example, a teacher in a classroom or a company CEO.
- **When residents and stakeholders are seen as collaborators and community experts in District decision-making, we share power.** This paves the way for residents to gain agency over decisions that directly impact their lives which is a fundamental goal of racial equity.
- **Power dynamics - or influence - also exist within and between community-based groups, whether formal or informal.** We must be aware of these dynamics when coordinating community conversations to make space for all residents to engage and participate equitably.
- To avoid perpetuating the status quo, **expand outreach beyond residents with whom we may regularly engage based on their positions within community organizations** or their frequent participation in District business, i.e., the “usual suspects.”
- Resident opinions and priorities may differ. **Be prepared for and accept differing opinions** and have strategies to **reconcile differences equitably.**

### Additional Resources

For a discussion on power-sharing and collaborative governance, please see the “[Design](#)” stage. (p. 36)

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement



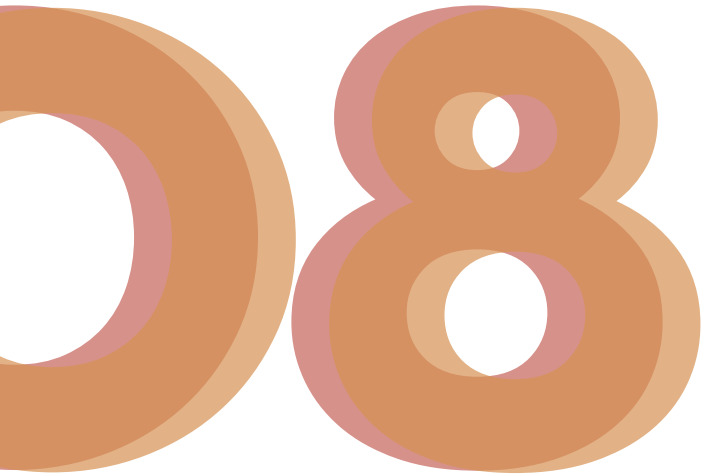
## Build a Consistent and Inclusive Community Presence

- Establish a **consistent practice to help build a constant presence**. For example, stay present through an agency newsletter, by attending regularly scheduled community meetings, creating a community advisory board for your agency or office, or holding regularly scheduled town halls or other community events.
- Participate in **community events and activities in a professional capacity to establish a presence and build cultural competence**. If possible, participate in a personal capacity as well by volunteering or joining a local club. This demonstrates that our intent is not to parachute in only in times of crisis or when we need something from residents.
- Not everyone may be able to make a weekly or monthly commitment - annual events, holiday celebrations, and other seasonal activities are also good opportunities to get out of the office and into our neighborhoods. **Please remember that community presence is not the same as intentionally cultivating relationships.**

### Additional Resources

- [DC Public Library Calendar](#), music, book talks, children's events, training opportunities
- [NextDoor Event Calendar](#) often lists hyperlocal events like ANC community walks

# Eight Principles and Best Practices of Meaningful Community Engagement



## Engage with Cultural Humility and Respect

- **Cultures are not mutually exclusive.** They have no intrinsic value (i.e., it is neither better nor worse to be a techno versus a jazz fan), nor are individuals defined by their cultural groups. Authentic engagement values differences of experience and ideas.
- Belonging to or identifying with one social identity **does not mean two individuals with shared social identities will identify with each other.**
- When possible, **offer skilled facilitation** to foster full engagement by promoting constructive discussions and compromise.
- Avoid planning events on or around cultural events or holidays **except in celebration of them.**

### Additional Resources

- [Cultural and Linguistic Competence Policy Assessment & Infusing Principles, Content and Themes Related to Cultural and Linguistic Competence into Meetings and Conferences](#), National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University

Some principles adapted from Queensland Government [Community Engagement Toolkit for Planning](#).

# STAGES OF MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLANNING



**“We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”**

**- James Baldwin**

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning

If we think of the principles of community engagement in the last section as necessary ingredients, the steps below form a general recipe that can be followed and adapted to plan for meaningful community engagement that centers racial equity. Plans will vary significantly by agency, audience, and topic; the key takeaway is to make a plan! Make a plan that clearly maps out **when** and **how** you will meaningfully engage residents and community stakeholders in each step of your work to foster sustainable partnerships, including decision-making and follow-up. A meaningful community engagement plan should include the following stages:<sup>36</sup>

- Stage 1: Preparation
- Stage 2: Design
- Stage 3: Implementation
- Stage 4: Evaluation

On the next several pages, we describe each stage, recommended steps, and questions to consider.



# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 1. Preparation – The “Who,” the “What,” and the “Why”

One of the core principles of meaningful community engagement is to clearly identify your goals and desired outcomes before engaging: you are creating a roadmap, so you need a destination. This will help identify the key stakeholders and clearly communicate your goals and intentions to community members.

### The “What” and “Why”

Start by clearly defining the **purpose** of the agency program, project, initiative, or budget decision. Next, consider why the community needs to be engaged and how engagement will inform the project.

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#### Key Questions to Consider

- What proposal are you considering and why? What is it in response to?
- What does your agency/department expect will be the outcomes of this proposal?
- What is the goal of community engagement for this project? To inform? To consult? To improve services? To meet a requirement?
- Why would the community want to engage on this issue?
- How will the activity specifically benefit the community?
- Do your agency’s priorities align with stakeholder priorities?
- Are there any limitations that will impact your meaningful community engagement efforts (time, resources, team capacity, prior commitments, legal barriers)?

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#### Key Actions to Consider

- Develop an **elevator pitch** for your proposal. Can you communicate your main goals and desired outcomes in 2-3 minutes or less? Is it clear and easy to understand?
- Define what success would look like for community engagement for this project and how community participation will feed into the overarching project plan.
- Decide how information and feedback will be provided to stakeholders, community members, community-based organizations, and who will coordinate.



# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 1. Preparation – The “Who,” the “What,” and the “Why”, cont’d

### The “Who”

Before engaging, you should map out which residents and stakeholders need to be engaged and to understand the landscape of players and see where there might be gaps, or who may be missing from the conversation.

#### **Key Questions to Consider**

- Who will be impacted by this proposal? Who might benefit or be burdened?
- Are there community members who already engage on this issue? Are some voices louder or more organized than others?
- Who might be at risk of exclusion? How will you engage these individuals?
- What assets and resources already exist in the communities who will be impacted?
- Has District government already engaged these communities on this issue or similar issues?
- What government services are already established in these communities?
- What government promises might have already been made (or broken) in the community?
- How is your agency currently viewed by these communities? How would it like to be viewed?

#### **Key Actions to Consider**

- Look at available District and community data to learn about the communities of interest, their demographic profile, and any previous related projects or engagement.
- Connect with community-based organizations and other agencies which serve residents in the target communities. (Don’t forget to ask if anyone has already conducted a community needs assessment.)

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 1. Preparation – The “Who,” the “What,” and the “Why”, cont’d

### The “Who”, cont’d

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#### *Key Actions to Consider, cont’d*

- Think through the types of residents within the target community who need to be reached for the engagement to be representative. (For example, if your goal is to speak with K-12 parents District-wide, you may wish to engage parents who represent voices from each Ward, single parents, intergenerational families, parents with different income levels, and so on. If the community engagement plan shows you will only reach double-parent households in Ward 3, you may need to modify or expand outreach strategies, meeting times, or community partners.)

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#### *Additional Resources*

- For an adaptable community mapping tool, please see the [Appendix. \(p.55\)](#)

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 1. Preparation – The “Who,” the “What,” and the “Why”, cont’d

### The “Who”, cont’d: Community Partnerships

Identify **community stakeholders, organizations/groups**, and **potential partners**. Community members might not always be residents of the immediate neighborhood or the District. For example, some staff from community-based organizations might live outside the District but are essential voices, nonetheless.

#### *Key Questions to Consider*

- Which community groups have an established presence? Who are their constituents?
- Which individuals might have other forms of influence or reach?
- Are any of your existing community partners stakeholders? Do they have the relationships and capacity to support your community engagement on this topic?
- Who are the community ANC commissioners, civic association members, resident council members?
- How will you identify and contact community stakeholders, organizations/groups, and potential partners?
- What resources are needed for community stakeholders, organizations/groups, and potential partners to assist with engagement efforts?

#### *Key Actions to Consider*

- [Map out](#) community organizations and networks by constituency and geographic reach. From there, identify the groups’ respective reach and influence and any existing networks and relationships with each other. Identify any potential gaps or holes in this map.
- Identify current and planned engagement activities of other agencies and actors in the community to find opportunities to collaborate and avoid duplicating efforts.
- Using the list of resident profiles you created in the last step, ask trusted community partners which voices are missing.
- Start developing a communications plan to update and add to later.

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 2. Design - The “How”

### Level of Engagement

By this stage, you should have a clear idea of who you plan to engage and goals for what the engagement will lead to or create. The next stage - Design - plans out how you will execute. That is, what kinds of community engagement activities and methods to use to reach your goals, as well as what benchmarks are available to help you stay on track and assess the success of your engagement later.






First, determine the **level of participation**. We can place stakeholder roles, available resources, and tools on a spectrum to help us plan which community contributors and engagement techniques best fit each situation. More meaningful forms of community engagement can lead to more mutually agreeable and sustainable results, but they also take significant planning and investments of time and resources.

### Participant Input

Instances in which it might be appropriate for local government to defer to community decisions include placing policy issues on a ballot referendum or co-writing a grant with community partners who will implement the proposed programs. Collaborative governance which looks at issues through a racial equity lens is most appropriate to situations where the agency has already conducted a racial equity impact assessment (REIA) and is equipped to co-define the issue, its root causes, and viable solutions with community partners.

Other factors may impact the level of engagement you plan for, such as legal requirements, staffing issues, or environmental factors, such as the recent pandemic. Regardless of what level of community engagement you plan for, community and government roles and constraints should be clearly communicated internally and externally from the start.

# Levels of Community Engagement

	 <b>Inform</b>	 <b>Consult</b>	 <b>Involve</b>	 <b>Collaborate</b>	 <b>Defer To</b>
<b>What it Means</b>	There is <b>no real participation at this level</b> . Government provides the public with the unbiased, complete information necessary to understand the issue/decision and form their own opinion.	To obtain <b>community feedback</b> on proposals or decisions. To gather input.	To <b>work directly with the public throughout the process</b> to incorporate community concerns and assets into plans.	To <b>partner with the public in each aspect of the decision</b> , including developing policy/programmatic alternatives and identifying preferred solutions.	To encourage democratic civic participation and racial equity via <b>community-led decision-making</b> .
<b>Public Participation Goal</b>	To tell the community about the policy, program, budget, or initiative.  <i>“Here is what’s happening.” or “Here’s an update.”</i>	The agency will offer the community a limited menu of options to choose from and comment on.  <i>“Here are the ideas we have. What do you think?” “Your opinion matters.”</i>	The agency plans for community members to help shape options and make a shared decision.  <i>“Here is an issue/problem. What are some ideas you have?” “How can we do this better?”</i>	Your agency will partner with the community in each aspect of the decision-making process, starting with identifying the challenge and possible solutions.  <i>“We value your leadership and expertise as we work together to address this issue.”</i>	The agency will defer to the decision made by the community being served.  <i>“You are already leaders on this issue. How can we support you and make a deeper impact together?”</i>
<b>Promise to People</b>	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed and seek your feedback on drafts and proposals. We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns. If your input was used, we will report back on how it influenced the final decision.	We will gather your concerns and aspirations to add them directly to our proposed solutions. We will report back on how community input influenced the final decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions. Your advice and recommendations will help shape final decisions.	We will help to shepherd resources and implement what you decide within our government’s legal framework.
<b>Sample Tactics/Techniques</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Factsheets</li> <li>• Websites/social media</li> <li>• Phone hotlines</li> <li>• Press releases</li> <li>• Bulletin boards, shop fronts, flyers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Public meetings</li> <li>• Public comment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops</li> <li>• Summits</li> <li>• Listening sessions</li> <li>• Community mapping</li> <li>• Community events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community advisory committees</li> <li>• MOUs with community groups</li> <li>• Open planning processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participatory budgeting</li> <li>• Community-led taskforces</li> <li>• Ballot referendum</li> <li>• Participatory research</li> </ul>

Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation [Spectrum](#) of Public Participation, Arnstein’s [Ladder of Participation](#), and Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership [tool](#) by Rosa González

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 2. Design - The “How”, cont’d

### *Key Questions to Consider*

- Who has the final decision-making power?
- How and when will input from participants be collected and used?
- Who will have access to the information gathered and how will it be analyzed?
- Who will conduct the analysis?
- How will process and outcomes be evaluated?
- How and when will decisions based on this input be made?
- How will you record and report back to participants on how public input was used?

### *Key Actions to Consider*

- Make a plan for how participant input will inform the project. Work backward to determine what kinds of software or other resources are needed to collect and store information, when, and how.
- Develop a timeline for community touchpoints. Some of the dates might change after consulting with community partners, which is normal. The goal is shared expectations around time frames.
- The level of community engagement and how much time you have will often influence which engagement and facilitation techniques are used. The links below offer a wide range of ideas beyond town halls. A mix of approaches is best to maximize participation.

### *Additional Resources*

- [Design Thinking Bootleg](#), Stanford Design School, a toolkit with dozens of design thinking activities to use with community partners.
- [Action Catalog](#), Engage2020, a catalog of almost 60 community engagement techniques that can be filtered by engagement goal, skill level, number of participants, and other factors.
- [Community Toolkit](#), Community Places, 20 pages of community engagement ideas, including the strengths and weaknesses of each technique.
- [Community Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond](#), Urban Institute, engagement techniques for times when it is not possible to meet in person.

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 2. Design - The “How”, cont’d

### Outcomes and Performance Measures

Setting project targets early will make it easier to identify if and when course correction is needed and to improve future engagement. Benchmarks and indicators don’t have to be limited to the engagement process itself; community engagement is an essential source of information to develop the performance measures you will eventually use in the larger policy, program, or initiative.

### Key Questions to Consider

- What preparation have you done so far? Do you have the resources for your plan? Do you have a defined community and identified stakeholders? What are their needs and priorities?
- How can you track the implementation progress of your plan? What are some ways to gauge how well the work is getting done?
- How will you know if you’ve achieved your community engagement goals after completing your plan?
- What other benchmarks and measures does your agency or community partner already collect that might help?
- Who will be responsible for tracking and evaluating your progress? How will you involve community members?
- How will you be able to track racial equity? Are there racial equity outcomes that can be added to these measures if they are not already planned?

### Key Actions to Consider

- Develop outcomes that go beyond measuring outputs.
- Map out when and how you will gather data on your performance measures in advance. An important step is discussing potential measures together with community members. Many lessons may be learned throughout the planning and engagement process, which is why racial equity is often defined as a process of centering residents who are most impacted by the creation of a program or policy.
- Gathering community input on how the project is progressing doesn’t always have to use formal surveys. Polls can be as simple as one question on an index card or small sheet of paper with multiple choice options printed in each corner so that participants can rip their selected corner on their way into or out of a meeting.

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 2. Design - The “How”, cont’d

### Outcomes and Performance Measures, cont’d

#### ***Additional Resources***

- [A Guide to Evaluate Civic Engagement](#), Minnesota Department of Human Rights, p. 27-29 lists sample evaluation measures to adapt for community engagement
- [EDGE tool](#) from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement and the [Community Engagement Assessment Tool](#) from Nexus Community Engagement Institute are self-assessment tools which can be used to inspire reflection and internal performance measures
- [Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement](#), UNICEF, p. 39-44, sample indicators which can be used to inspire performance measures



# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 3. Implementation - The “Do”

This stage is similar to traditional event planning. If you haven’t done so yet, develop a **schedule** that brings together the previous steps – how and when engagement will occur, how and when data will be collected, when information will be communicated and how. Agree upon staff and partner roles and responsibilities. Establish a system to **capture information** on the implementation process, e.g., draft satisfaction survey forms or create the folders and trackers which will later be used to document and analyze community ideas. Identify when and how you will **provide feedback** to the community or communities, so they are able to see how their participation and ideas are being used in decision-making. Don’t forget to plan for **accessibility**. If meetings will be in person, consider which accommodations will make participation as easy and accessible as possible. Government spaces are simple and free for government staff to use, but they do not put everyone at ease. Residents who engage are giving the gift of their time and knowledge; agencies should **consider ways to acknowledge their contributions**, which might include providing gift cards in appropriate circumstances. Before offering financial incentives such as gift cards, consider whether the gift card amount appropriately values the community’s expertise.

### *Key Questions to Consider*

- What might be barriers to participation and how can they be reduced?
- If you meet in person: Will you provide childcare? An option to participate online? Is the meeting space easily accessible by public transit? Is it a space that is known and comfortable to your target community?
- How will you recognize participants for their time and expertise? Gift cards and other incentives may be appropriate in certain circumstances but need advance planning.
- Do you have interpreters available for residents with low English proficiency or residents who are deaf or hard of hearing?

### *Key Actions to Consider*

- Connect with the Office of Disability Rights and the Office of Human Rights to ensure the project’s website is accessible and to discuss ways to improve accessibility at in-person meetings.

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 3. Implementation - The “Do”, cont’d

### ***Additional Resources***

- If your agency does not have a policy on gift cards or other forms of compensation, consider drafting or adapting one. If you will be starting a gift card policy from scratch, ask your Agency Financial Officer (AFO) to request and review a copy of the “Stored Value Cards” policy from the Office of the Chief Financial Officer.
- Sample engagement plans: [Community Engagement Guide](#), City of Peterborough, p. 8-11 provides sample planning worksheets
- [Example community engagement plan](#), Queensland Government, Tool 2.7 (p. 24) gives a sample engagement plan that can be adapted

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 4. Evaluation - Review and Improve

By now, it might feel like you've made it through your whole plan, but the work is not done yet. The evaluation stage is critical to improving the way we engage residents as a District. Hopefully you identified target program outcomes and other measures in Stage 2 to be able to take stock of what went well and what can be improved for next time. If your team did not develop measures in Stage 2, still take the time to debrief with colleagues, even if it's informally. Taking a moment to reflect in Stage 4 can also be thought of as preparation for ongoing engagement. Ideally, the community relationships built and strengthened during this project will continue into the next phases of your initiative and beyond. Racial equity is both a process and an outcome: meaningful community engagement is a key part of the process.

### **Key Questions to Consider**<sup>37</sup>

- Overall, how well did it go? Did you meet your goals and targets set in Stage 2?
- Were you able to successfully reach your intended audiences? How do you know?
- Did community members receive sufficient information and time to engage?
- Was feedback from the community negative or positive? Do community members feel like they were treated with respect?
- Do community members feel like they received adequate follow-up regarding how their input was used to inform the proposal?
- How did the policy, program or initiative change to reflect community input?
- Where could community members be engaged sooner or play larger roles next time?
- Which community members are interested in participating in the evaluation stage and how will they be involved?
- How will you share final results and findings with community members? The public? Other agencies?
- What can be learned from this experience to replicate? To adjust practices for future engagement?
- How will the project or initiative remain accountable to the community when it moves to its next phases?

# Stages of Meaningful Community Engagement Planning



## Stage 4. Evaluation - Review and Improve, cont'd

### *Key Actions to Consider*

- Create an evaluation plan, even if it's brief or informal. There might not always be time for a robust monitoring and evaluation plan but keeping track of what works and what doesn't makes us better stewards of public time and resources.
- Involve community members in the evaluation. Their feedback will be key to improving engagement in the future.
- Create a plan for sharing final reports, results, and other findings with community members. Where appropriate, plans should also include ways to share this information with the general public and interested agencies across District government.
- Organize documentation and community contact information in one place that can be easily accessed by other teammates for future reference.

### *Additional Resources*

- [Measuring Success](#) resources, The Institute for Local Government, worksheets, and tools to guide evaluation.
- [Capturing Results Worksheet](#), Tamarack Institute, a simple worksheet to inspire staff debrief sessions.

# Acknowledgements

The Office of Racial Equity developed the first draft of the Meaningful Community Engagement Resource Guide in coordination with BIPOC-led community based and social justice organizations. Community input and feedback were used to shape a second draft of this Guide which ORE refined through workshops with community-facing DC government staff as well as expert interviews with residents. The Office of Racial Equity thanks the residents and organizations of Washington, D.C., who gave their time, energy, and thoughtful input into helping create this guide. We also acknowledge and thank the residents who've engaged with District government long before the Office of Racial Equity was established. Our District motto, "Justitia omnibus," or justice for all, is not possible without you.

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[Committee of 100 on Federal City](#)  
[DC Initiative on Racial Equity](#)  
[EmpowerDC](#)

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R. B. Kahn, District Resident

[Ward 3 Housing Justice](#)

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[DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities \(CAH\)](#)  
[Department of Energy and Environment \(DOEE\)](#)  
[Department of Corrections \(DOC\)](#)  
[Department of Health \(DC Health\) \(DOH\)](#)  
[Department of Human Services \(DHS\)](#)  
[Department of Insurance, Securities, and Banking \(DISB\)](#)  
[Department of Public Works \(DPW\)](#)  
[Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services \(DYRS\)](#)  
[Department of Employment Services \(DOES\)](#)  
[District Department of Transportation \(DDOT\)](#)  
[Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education \(DME\)](#)  
[Office of the Deputy Mayor for Operations and Infrastructure \(DMOI\)](#)  
[Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development \(DMPED\)](#)  
[Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice \(DMPSJ\)](#)  
[Office of Planning \(OP\)](#)  
[Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants \(OVSJG\)](#)

# Glossary of Frequently Used Terms

For sector-standard definitions of racial equity terms, please refer to our partners at the Government Alliance on Racial Equity (GARE) and the D.C. Council Office of Racial Equity (CORE).

[Government Alliance for Racial Equity Glossary of Terms](#) (p. 57)

[CORE Racial Equity Glossary](#)

# Sources

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# ***APPENDICES***

We encourage you to use the resources on the following pages electronically or in print as you are preparing to engage with communities.

# Potential Benefits and Challenges of Meaningful Community Engagement

Engaging community members and stakeholders in the decision-making processes that affect their communities is critical to advancing racial equity. Authentic and meaningful community engagement is not always easy, but it is worth the effort. Whether you are seeking internal buy-in for a community engagement plan that centers racial equity, or experiencing some common engagement challenges in the field, the following ideas are meant as starting points to help enhance benefits and mitigate common challenges of meaningful community engagement.<sup>38</sup>

# Potential Benefits and Challenges of Meaningful Community Engagement

## Benefits of MCE & Strategies to Enhance Them

### ***Promotes legitimacy and increased support for plans and projects***

- Stay accountable to residents. Be available and follow through after engagement activities to report on how resident ideas were used and how implementation is progressing.
- Be transparent. Have clear objectives and plans.
- Welcome pushback as part of the natural exchange of ideas. Accept there is rarely ever one viewpoint or one answer.
- Mean what you say.

### ***Builds stronger relationships between BIPOC communities and government institutions***

- Establish a consistent and inclusive community [presence](#).
- Select appropriate venues for meetings and be culturally [aware](#) of norms and practices in the community being engaged.

### ***Increases the District government's problem-solving capacity***

- We live in a city of local experts. Choose mixed engagement [strategies](#) which foster open exchange between residents, other stakeholders, and District government.

### ***Democracy in action***

- Celebrate the role stakeholders are playing in solving real, important, difficult issues.

### ***Stronger programs and racially equitable outcomes***

- Collect or use data disaggregated by race and ethnicity to identify potential inequities.
- Acknowledge racial equity is both an outcome and a process that takes time and effort.

# Potential Benefits and Challenges of Meaningful Community Engagement

## Potential Challenges & Mitigation Strategies

### ***Attracting, maintaining, and sustaining interest and engagement***

- Start talking to community partners as soon as possible about the project. Community champions can help raise awareness and interest.
- Create roles for community partners that reflect their level of interest and the scale of the project to help share and sustain ownership.
- Make clear value propositions. Whether it's gaining leadership experience or investing in their neighborhood, residents should have something to gain by engaging.
- Learn about past efforts which may have resulted in broken promises or nostalgia.
- Create welcoming spaces. Where possible, infuse the arts to add interest and fun.

### ***Scheduling to maximize participation***

- Not every session or contact needs to be an in-person or virtual meeting. Not every session needs a PowerPoint presentation. Are there other ways to engage residents and share information that meet their needs?
- When appropriate, build on existing events. For example, if you are working with a group of ANCs on a hyper-local issue, ask if it's possible to introduce your initiative during one of their standing meetings.
- Some activities should be scheduled outside of District business hours to reach more residents but attending an evening session might still mean missing work for some residents. Consider offering gift cards or other tokens of appreciation for extensive participation.
- Allow for multiple ways to participate in meetings such as calling in, streaming video, or live tweeting.

### ***Access challenges (transportation, childcare, online access)***

- If the community you are working with includes parents, consider offering on-site childcare during in-person events.
- Schedule in-person meetings at locations that are easily accessed by multiple modes of public transit and publicize Metro or bus stop names and numbers.
- If community members will need internet access to participate in certain activities, consider meeting in or near a library.

# Potential Benefits and Challenges of Meaningful Community Engagement

## Potential Challenges & Mitigation Strategies, cont'd

### ***Communication (outreach, familiarity with topic, skilled facilitation, low-English proficiency residents, residents with disabilities)***

- Consider who the messengers are for your outreach. Where appropriate, supplement your own outreach by having community partners share information with residents and stakeholders.
- Make a communications plan that includes the outreach methods preferred by your community partners. Social media provides great tools, but every platform has a different audience.
- Add strategies to re-engage community members who have become disengaged.
- Ensure agency websites and materials are language access and Americans with Disabilities Act compliant. For example, many people have low vision and need colors to be of high contrast and fonts to be scalable or at least 10-11 points, even for footnotes.
- Check in with participants throughout meetings and interactions to see if anything needs to be repeated or explained, especially for highly technical topics with lots of jargon.
- Consider creating one-page explainers, infographics, or other easy-to-use background materials to accompany longer reports and presentations.
- Avoid acronyms and use [plain language](#).

### ***Limited staff time and capacity***

- In the long-term, plan for community engagement as part of the regular budget cycle as an investment in a more racially equitable D.C.
- In the short-term, adjust staff workloads where possible to allow the time and energy needed for ongoing, meaningful engagement.
- Partner with local organizations to increase capacity.

### ***Mismatched expectations and differences of opinion***

- Try to anticipate who your audience will be and what their priorities are so that you are prepared to address questions and concerns.
- Set clear event expectations and participation guidelines at the beginning of each session. When time allows, consider setting shared ground rules together at the start of meetings.
- Model positive, receptive behavior. Address the substance of concerns directly and not the tone.
- If the goal is finding consensus, try breaking the issue into smaller steps and start with the easier or less controversial pieces to establish common ground.

# Template for Building a Community Profile

It's a best practice to get to know your target community before launching an engagement strategy. How does the community refer to itself? Who is considered a 'member' of the community? No group is a monolith - if your agency's goal is to speak with communities of color, ask *which* communities of color? Do you need to speak to parents? *Which* parents?

Whenever possible, these are questions that should be asked to a range of community partners to better understand who you will be working with, what they value, and any historical interactions with District government. That said, it's possible to do a bit of homework first. If your target community is in one geographic area, census data and [opendata.dc.gov](https://opendata.dc.gov) are good places to start.

The following sample questions are *suggested* starting points. Take what serves you and modify to fit your needs. Don't forget to keep track of organizations and community members you contact when building your community profile.

The template begins on the following page.

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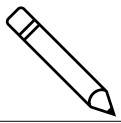
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# Template for Building a Community Profile

<b>General Information</b>	
Date this profile was created and/or last updated	
Community's self-identified name (how does the community refer to itself?)	
Other community names	
Estimated population size	
Does the community have geographical boundaries? Where?	
If the community is not geographically bound, what unites this community?	
Who is considered a member of this community?	
Who are considered leaders of this community? What are their roles?	
Does this community face any longstanding challenges, or have they identified any urgent issues?	





# Template for Building a Community Profile

## Social and Economic Characteristics

Fill in with percentages where possible.

	Community Members	Community Leaders	All DC Residents (Comparison Group)
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### US Census Race/Ethnicity

Race: Black or African American			
Race: White			
Race: Asian			
Race: American Indian or Alaska Native			
Race: Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander			
Race: Other			
Ethnicity: Hispanic			
Median Age			
Gender (Man/Woman/Non-Binary)			
Percentage Who are DC Residents			
Households Living on Low Incomes (200% of Federal Poverty Level or Less)			
Non- or Low-English Proficient Households			

### Community Participation and Priorities

Has your agency worked with this community before? If yes, how?	
How does the community describe the past relationship with your agency or division of your agency? With District government?	



# Template for Building a Community Profile

<b>Community Participation and Priorities, cont'd</b>	
How does the community feel about your issue area or proposal? Are there differences of opinions within the community?	
How might the community be impacted by your proposal?	
What are the community's top priorities? Is there disagreement within the community on these priorities?	
How is the community already addressing these priorities?	
Are there possible barriers to participation? (ex: childcare, work schedules, language)	

<b>Community Strengths and Assets</b>	
Are there any prominent organizations or groups (formal and informal) in this community? How often do they meet?	
How do the groups or organizations listed above work together?	



# Template for Building a Community Profile

<b>Community Strengths and Assets, cont'd</b>	
What roles could these groups or community leaders play in your proposal?	
What are some of the main information channels in this community? (ex: church, Facebook, barbershop, word of mouth)	
Are there any important physical spaces in this community?	
What are some community member skills, talents, or experiences that could inform your proposal?	

# Planning for Meaningful Community Engagement Checklist



## Planning for Meaningful Community Engagement Checklist

### Before Engaging

#### *Define the “what”: clearly identify overarching goals*

- Have clear **outcome goals**. What is the policy, program, or initiative you ultimately want to achieve?
- Determine **what can and cannot be changed**, i.e., any constraints such as other District commitments, how funds can be used, or legal requirements. Be prepared to discuss constraints and requirements with community partners.
- Understand what **resources are available** for the whole project as well as the community engagement portion, including staff time and capacity.
- If there are enough resources, decide what **kinds of tokens of appreciation** of community time are available and appropriate. Develop or review a gift card policy.

#### *Define the “why”: clearly identify the motivation for engaging community members*

- Clearly define your **goals for engaging the community** and why. Is it to share information, to get feedback, or to partner on a new program? (see [levels of engagement, p. 37](#))
- Consider **why** community members or potential partners might want to **engage on this issue**. Engagement should not be to the sole benefit of the District government.

#### *Define the “who”: understand the community context and identify potential champions*

- Identify **which communities will be most impacted** by your goals and any other stakeholders who might benefit from, be burdened by, or have interest in your project.
- Learn more about these communities** to understand their histories and contexts. Create community profiles which include basic demographic data ([p. 55](#)).
- Map out** community leaders and community-based organizations who are **potential stakeholders**. Learn about any dynamics between groups.
- Find out if there are **existing community-led efforts** or work by other agencies related to your initiative or goals. Is it possible to build on existing research or resources?



# Planning for Meaningful Community Engagement Checklist

## Before Engaging, cont'd

### Co-create the “how”: set specific and actionable goals together with community partners

- Begin reaching out to potential partners **as early as possible**. Learn more about existing community assets, needs, and priorities.
- Set **clear expectations** and goals for your community engagement work. Learn what is expected of your agency and this project.
- Create an **engagement plan** and share key dates with partners to ensure timetables are realistic. Agree on community partner roles. Try to include some shorter-term ‘winnable’ goals. **Be transparent** about any limits or constraints on the project.
- Find out community partners’ preferred communications methods and **create a communications plan**. Develop **key messages to the community** that make the project clear and show how the issue is relevant to their daily lives.
- Work with community partners to develop performance measures and other **benchmarks for engagement**. Consider ways to track racial equity outcomes. Create an evaluation plan. Determine **how data will be collected and stored**.

## While Engaging

### Create welcoming and inclusive spaces

- Choose **engagement methods which best meet the needs** of community partners. Continuously ask whose voice might be missing. Adapt and change outreach and facilitation methods as needed to maximize participation and maintain interest.
- Consider **how your own social identities and experiences might shape** your views on the project’s topic, how you engage others, or how your messages may be perceived.
- Engage with respect and an open mind. Be yourself. Have cultural humility and be conscious of power imbalances.
- Be aware of **barriers to participation** and **actively reduce** them. (For example, transportation, work hours, residents with children, residents living with disabilities)
- Remember to **celebrate** community involvement and community assets.



# Planning for Meaningful Community Engagement Checklist

## While Engaging, cont'd

### *Prioritize transparency and build trust*

- Ensure information is timely, accessible, and helpful.
- Close feedback loops** by reporting back to partners on how their input and ideas are being used to inform the project. Respond to questions and concerns in a timely manner.
- Check in with community partners** after events to make sure needs and expectations are being met. Offer multiple ways to provide feedback (at least one of which is anonymous).
- Don't forget to **track any information** needed to assess against your performance goals later.

## After Engaging

### *Stay accountable*

- Share findings** or final reports and materials with community partners. **Credit contributors.**
- Evaluate** how things went using your original performance goals. **Debrief** with community partners and staff. Celebrate successes and acknowledge any setbacks. Consider capturing notes for any later reporting.
- Record promising practices** and other learnings from engagement that may be helpful across District government.

### *Deepen relationships*

- Discuss **next phases** of the initiative with community partners and explore ways to continue working together.
- Make sure **community partner contact information, proposed records, and any other engagement files** are properly documented and stored where teammates can access them later.

Some items adapted from: University of Michigan, Edward Ginsburg Center, "[Check Yourself](#)", Tamworth Borough Council, "[Community Engagement Framework](#)"

