

# Barriers to Public Participation

Community Engagement Subcommittee

Environmental Justice Task Force Presentation | January 14, 2020

**Assignment Objective:** Identify existing and perceived barriers, and the sources of those barriers, for meaningful and authentic community engagement in state government processes across and within government agencies and program types such as fiscal, policy, etc., programs.

## I. Access

### Lack of Access to Information

***When printed materials are the central mode of communication, many people are excluded.***

- Print materials that are unreadable
- Print materials unreadable for people who are older or sight-impaired
- The lack of large print, braille, interpreters
- Text-heavy documents/materials (not in plain English)
- Use visuals as much as possible to convey the message (instead of relying on heavy text, even if the text gets translated into other languages).
- Translated print materials (while important) does guarantee information access because some folks may not be literate in their native tongue or the translation vendor does literal translation (that does not accurately express the true meaning) or uses formal or complicated terms (versus colloquial word choices).
- Best practice in terms of translating text materials into other languages is to use “transcreation” instead of direct translation services. Transcreation is the process of adapting a message from one language to another, while maintaining its intent, style, tone, and context.
- Printed information sometimes becomes obsolete or outdated – hard to get up to date information.

***Focus on English excludes people who speak other languages.***

- Limited proficiencies (with English for example)
- Low quality translation/interpretation and English-only speaking staff who can't assist

### Lack of Access to Meetings

***Arrangements to get to the meeting can cost more than the meeting is worth.***

- Traveling to meetings that are geographically distant from the people impacted by the topic of the meeting
- Cost of travel
- Meetings not accessible for those living in rural areas
- Meetings not accessible for those without reliable cell service or internet connection
- Temporally and spatially accessible meeting spaces
- [Lack of] Childcare

- Inaccessible meetings: no food, no childcare, lacking transportation, lacking language interpretation

***The environment at the meeting can be unwelcoming or exclusive.***

- People aren't sure if they are invited or welcome to the meeting
- Shame for not knowing what is going on
- For ethnically diverse communities, a conventional mainstream public meeting format may not be culturally sensitive or appropriate.
- English-speaking presenters at meetings with LEP communities may not have the training or knowledge on how to present while accounting for interpretation (they speak too fast, with jargon, etc).
- There may not be upfront work to help build knowledge capacity of the community around a specific technical topic before bringing them into a meeting (particularly an advisory committee type meeting where they will provide recommendations/inputs). Thus community members may not feel comfortable sharing ideas if they do not have the foundational background info first.
- The physical room arrangement can have some participants in more powerful seats than others. "galleries" in meetings might discourage participation.

## II. Apathy/Burden

- People don't feel responsible for what's happening in their neighborhoods.
- Participation burnout – community members have already commented on an issue multiple times and do not see any improvements/response/actions
- [People] Feel like their voices don't matter or that the government doesn't care about them
- Difficulties prioritizing what to care about and invest time in
- People have more pressing issues in their lives
- Multiple agencies are trying to work in the same communities but are not coordinating among themselves to provide a more integrated engagement approach (where it makes sense) that reduces redundancy.

## III. Communication

***Effectively communicating the issue and supporting information in a way that's understandable to a broad variety of people isn't prioritized.***

- Difficulties prioritizing what to care about and invest time in: How can people find out what is meaningful for them?
- Effectively communicating why this work matters and how it affects Washington residents' daily lives, while keeping in mind that everyone is busy and has competing priorities
- The bureaucratization of communicating the message
- Technical language and jargon isn't understandable to the layperson

***The engagement process and opportunities aren't effectively communicated.***

- Can't figure out how or where to give comment(s)
- Be transparent early and throughout the program planning process the boundaries for the program that is set

## IV. Potential for Influence

***While agency process may include community engagement, it does not support external influence on the decision making process.***

- Inflexibility, unwillingness to change
- Government fear of losing power or control can shut down the public process
- State government norms – keeping up with the status quo
- Lack of follow up from the government
- Communities questioning whether or not they actually have power and if engaging with the government is a good use of their time as a result
- Waiting to work with communities until decisions have been made – informing communities about decisions, rather than involving communities early and often.
- Legislature provides predetermined decisions but expects community engagement to inform outcomes
- Norm that the technical experts know best, and community comments aren't "informed by science"
- Devaluing indigenous knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge that may come in the form of public comment compared to western science to inform processes and decisions; not creating space and time for incorporating TEK and indigenous knowledge early in the process
- For Tribes – the misconstrued notion that participating in a government's public engagement process can serve as a replacement for government-to-government consultation and tribal engagement.

## V. Representation

- Government agencies working with a small group of communities, so their work is not actually representative of the community
- Agency staff don't represent community members, limiting trust and cultural/communication skills
- Nonprofit staff may not truly represent the communities they serve (are they actually from the community?) or community leaders may not represent all diverse voices within a community.
- Same folks who have easy access to participating in government's community engagement activities may show up multiple times in different events – so the same voice is continually being heard. Such folks have a voice to hear, but the government is not doing extensive outreach to engage a more diverse set of community members.
- Who can represent certain groups:
  - For example, some Tribal Nations may have specific procedures on who is able to represent them publicly (e.g. elected tribal leader, departmental staff, etc...). Having a tribal member present may not sufficiently meet the definition of engagement or representation for some or many Tribes.

## VI. Process

- The decision-making process – how do we decolonize the decision-making process? How do we support power-sharing and community self-empowerment?

- Government staff with less authority not having the power to listen and make significant changes even if they would like to.
- Lack of working early and often with folks impacted the most
- [Lack of] Investing in black and brown communities
- Government not recognizing intersectionality [intersectionality of agency programs, how different agencies influence each other]
- Jurisdictional and sector/department silos
- Process of mutual learning and dialogue that builds relationship versus one-time listening session - Create or participate in opportunities for mutual learning between community and agency staff

***Novel processes/results of engagement aren't accommodated in agency plans***

- Lack of creativity or thinking outside of the box in terms of community engagement
- Identify creative avenues to help address key community recommendations that may fall out of your agency's program scope or authority.
- "Do meetings the Black way" [Agencies expect all cultures to adapt to their culture, rather than meeting people where they are]
- How do we do more of something we're not used to?

***Agency timelines do not accommodate change or the amount of time meaningful engagement and relationship building takes.***

- Artificial deadlines – lack of understanding within gov. processes that deadlines are often more adjustable than they seem.
- Lack of empowerment of gov. employees to ask "what is actually driving this deadline? Where and how can we create more space to be responsive to/engaging of communities?"
- The government rushing the decision-making process, perception that the timeline is immovable.
- Sometimes the timeline is immovable – for legislative deadlines, budgeting, etc.
- Conducting an engagement as an afterthought or later in the process vs building it into the process from the very beginning and have it evolve throughout the process
- Ensure that there is a continuous loopback mechanism in sharing back with the communities how their input informed decisions, plans and tools.

## VII. Resources

***Accurate amounts of time and money for meaningful engagement are not allocated when budgeting projects.***

- Lack of budget or resources for community engagement efforts. For example, if people are being asked to travel or contribute significantly, there is often no compensation for their time, cost burden, or expertise.
- Government resources not allocated properly.
- Hire staff that reflect diverse lived experiences from communities that the agency/organization wants to serve
- Provide technical assistance to community grantees (especially small CBOs) to build their capacity in managing your agency's grant funding and reporting (but also identify areas of

improvement in the contracting process within your agency to ensure that it is not overburdening the CBOs).

## VIII. Sovereignty

Sovereign Tribes may see government processes at a different level than what their sovereign status warrants. For example, most state-Tribal relations happen at a formal government-to-government process or through formal consultation processes. If these processes are not elevated to the status of a Tribe's sovereignty, many Tribes will choose not to engage for fear of engaging being used against them.

## IX. Trust

- Community context – the historical relationship of the public with government agencies and how that leads to the current level of trust
- Lack of listening skills among agency representatives
- Be present in the community and support their community-led work, not just come into the community when you need something
- As a government staff not from the community, learn about and be sensitive the historical and current trauma that communities of color have faced

## X. Types of Knowledge

- Many agencies don't believe the public can provide meaningful input, and have the colonial mindset that only academically-oriented individuals can be the experts
- Don't value community engagement to invest resources to do it the right way or do it at all
- Real or perceived sense of what you need to be "competent" enough to participate
- Prioritizing quantitative or science-based data over qualitative data
- Evaluate the weight of public comments
- Which comments hold more weight?
- Are public comments actually valued?
- Perception that "we have the right people at the table" already and the lack of ability to see the gaps in participation/involvement. For example, if one is used to only seeing white people in a room, then will that person notice if there are no people of color/non-white people present? Or when there IS a POC/non-white person in the room, will their opinion/comment/input be valued as highly as a white person's?
- Recognize and honor the expertise that each person brings to the table – either from the government or community – and that we are here to learn from each other.
- Indigenous knowledge systems are often multi-generational and are constructed and validated by different norms than Western Science.
  - Also considerations over the ethics of sharing culturally sensitive Indigenous knowledge, how it is being recorded publicly, and how it is being used.