



HOW TO APPROACH COMMUNITY MEMBERS & ORGANISATIONS

Sometimes researchers start with clear ideas of the work that is needed and aren't sure exactly who they should work with. Coupled with some of the work identified in this web site about understanding the principles of a partnership and assessing readiness and capacity to change, this section identifies some steps and tools to learn more about the community and approach potential community members and organisations. The following strategies will help you get started.

Step 1: Identify the community

A community is a group of people with shared identity and similar characteristics. They can be defined in terms of physical spaces, such as living in particular neighbourhood, or by shared elements, such as a health condition or a shared hobby. It is important to understand how the community defines itself so that you can work from their perspective. This helps you understand what makes them a community and the resources that they hold. Note that step 1 is also covered in the previous resource of ensuring the community is represented.

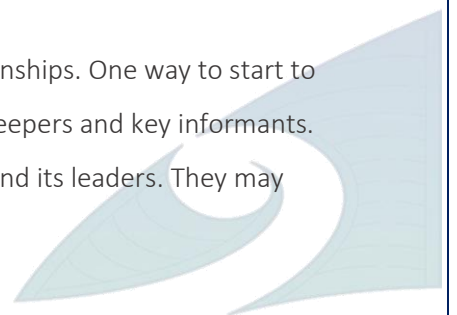
Step 2: Get to know the community

If you aren't aware of the community, you probably need to do some homework and find about it. Learn about the community's strengths, needs, history, culture, leaders and resources. This learning with help to show your interest in the community and your willingness to learn and be culturally humble.

Learning about the community is ongoing and takes time. A simple web search may provide some basic statistics and yet it isn't sufficient. You can read some of the local history or talk to community members. Check to see if partnerships already exist and what you might learn about them. Learn about previous work and how those worked and if there were any problems. Also, realize that you cannot determine the community's true priorities without obtaining the community's perspective.

Step 3: Connect with Gatekeepers and Key Informants

Entering a community can be daunting if you don't have established relationships. One way to start to establish relationships and learn about the community is to talk with gatekeepers and key informants. Gatekeepers are key opinion leaders who know the community, its issues and its leaders. They may





be leaders themselves. They usually work within the community and are well respected and well-known. Other people are key informants; these people aren't members of the community although have spent significant time and gained some detailed knowledge about the community. During this process make sure you are respectful and observant of the culture of the community. Finally, makes sure you do not force your agenda; rather explore possibilities and see if it is a relationship that can be built on trust and common interests.

Step 4: Meet Community Stakeholders and Possible Partners

Hopefully some of the people you talk with in step 3 will help you plan a community meeting to share your thoughts about the project and needs. These meetings can help you get to know each other, let the community assess your sincerity and trustworthiness, and generate interest and support for the project. First impressions are very important are here are some suggestions for running them:

1. Listen to community members as they discuss their concerns and priorities. Good listening is critical as it helps to establish trust and shows your willingness to work with the community.
2. Do not force your agenda or dominate the speaking time. Also, don't counter argue with community members' viewpoints about the issues. It is important to provide a broad overview of your project goals and what you hope to accomplish; just don't make it a one-sided conversation.
3. Ask for feedback; seek about various viewpoints and alternative perspectives. The goal is to understand the community's needs and concerns. The community may support your perspective, but don't be surprised if you have a different perspective about the project. The next steps should be decided together.
4. Be honest about what you want to do and what the project can and cannot do. Community members don't easily forget the promises you make and will hold you accountable for these false promises.
5. Keep showing up. It takes time to establish a strong and trusting relationship.

Source: Giachello AL, Ashton D, Kyler P, Rodriguez ES, Shanker R, Umemoto A, eds. 2007. Making Community Partnerships Work: A Toolkit. White Plains, NY: March of Dimes Foundation.

