

Community Involvement

What is Community Involvement?

Community involvement is a process in which individuals, community groups, and/or civic associations take part in an organized program or activity that affects them.

There are three goals of community involvement:

- to provide local opinions and suggestions concerning the planning and implementation of the program;
- to participate in the decision-making process; and
- to assist in carrying out the work of the program, normally without remuneration

Community involvement empowers participating individuals, groups, and associations to effectively address community issues and concerns. For individuals, community involvement may include learning and applying new skills, and gaining self-efficacy or self-actualization. This, in turn, improves the program, increases its legitimacy in the community and promotes the general welfare. On another level, community involvement creates social capital that enhances democracy and civil society.

How has Community Involvement Changed?

The nature of community involvement has changed dramatically. One hundred years ago at the beginning of the 20th century, most

Americans lived in homogeneous communities, whether a small town or an ethnic neighborhood in a city. The Progressive Era brought together small local groups of relatively well-educated people to work for social reform through well-established membership organizations that were often local chapters of a national federation. Men and women belonged to single-gender organizations, and major ethnic and religious groups had separate associations to take care of their own. People had loyalty to their community organizations, attended meetings regularly and spent many years in them. The volunteers were virtual amateurs who had the leisure time to devote to community issues and charitable work. They got by on good intentions, common sense and a little help from their friends.

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, most Americans live in suburban areas that are more heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, religion, and social class. The proportion with a college education has increased and people maintain contact with others having similar interests through cell phones and the Internet. Community and charitable organizations are more issue specific, bringing together men and women, and people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds into a common cause. Many of these organizations have full-time administrators and a professional staff to obtain funding, manage programs, and deliver services. Volunteers join up for a project with one organization and then move on to another project with another organization. The volun-

teers either apply already existing skills and expertise to the program or receive orientation, training, and technical assistance to carry out various functions.

What are the Components of Community Involvement?

Community involvement has three major components:

- the organizations running the program
- the volunteer community members who are not paid staff
- the stakeholders who have a vested interest in the program

Organizations

A wide variety of organizations run programs that involve community members. Some may be partners and/or a source of volunteers. Examples are:

- government—boards, task forces, committees
- non-profit—health/human/legal service agencies, clinics, centers
- charitable foundations and philanthropies (if they directly manage the program)
- religious organizations
- educational—PTA, school boosters, alumni
- mutual benefit—ethnic, veterans, sports, hobby, self-help
- fraternal/sororal—Masons/Eastern Star, Odd Fellows/Rebekahs
- business associations—Jaycees
- service clubs—Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, Junior League, Zonta
- social movements/advocacy groups—environment, civil/women's/gay rights
- political groups—Common Cause, Christian Coalition

Many organizations claim to be community based. Being community based may include the following characteristics:

- located in community service area
- local autonomy and decision making
- leaders are local people
- staff are local people
- members/clients are local people
- funding is from local sources

Volunteers

Unpaid individuals who become involved in community programs may be motivated by some of the following reasons:

- free time—retirees, students, people laid off or not in labor market
- commitment to a cause—religious, social activists, community improvement
- work opportunities—experiential learning, in-service training, job testing
- avocation—do something different, do something meaningful
- networking—leaders, outreach
- social status—often well educated, middle or upper income

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are individuals, or groups, in the community who have a stake or vested interest in the process or outcome of the program. Stakeholders may have the ability to influence support for or policy decisions concerning the program. Possible stakeholders include:

- funders
- clients
- providers

- government agencies
- non-profits
- businesses
- schools
- law enforcement/legal system
- health care system
- human services system
- media

Ways to Get Involved

Members of the public can get involved in community organizations in several ways. The list below goes from minimal financial involvement to leadership and decision-making responsibilities:

- Donating money
- Attending public events like rallies and community hearings
- Volunteering to staff the office, answer phones or handle correspondence
- Helping out with a fund-raising effort through mass mailings, phone solicitations and special events
- Doing research and writing grant proposals
- Serving on committees that focus on specific problems or activities
- Getting involved in planning processes like creating goals or defining problems
- Taking leadership roles such as serving on board of directors

Challenges to Community Involvement

Community involvement faces several challenges: citizen participation, inclusion, decision making/empowerment, project organization, and project leadership.

Citizen Participation

Theories of collective action hold that people work for a general good if they perceive an economic incentive or social recognition for their participation. The two main economic barriers are lack of time and lack of transportation. Setting convenient times for people to meet is key since they often have tight schedules. In general, professionals and providers prefer early morning meetings, managers and administrators prefer lunch, and workers and people with children prefer early evening. Transportation problems can be avoided by holding meetings in a central location near bus or subway stops, creating car pools and even offering gas mileage for those who must drive far to attend. Volunteers cherish social recognition for their efforts. Acknowledgement can range from receiving a plaque or a mention in a newsletter to being the spokesperson at a TV interview. Unsolicited letters of appreciation to employers, partner organizations and constituency groups raise the visibility of the volunteer and his or her contributions.

Inclusiveness

The challenge of inclusiveness is not whether citizens or consumers should be part of a decision-making process or a community activity, but rather which citizens or consumers should be involved and how they are selected. In general, existing participants come from the better educated, middle- and upper-class business, professional and managerial groups. The selection

process is self-perpetuating in that ‘volunteers’ are either nominated by existing members or self-nominate because they are already involved in the organization. As a result, volunteers are not always representative of the population of stakeholders. Recruitment efforts must draw from both existing vested interests and organized groups—that is, stakeholders—and independent individuals and representatives from other organizations and groups that can bring fresh ideas and approaches. Most people and organizations are simply unaware of opportunities to participate. The solution may require a staff member or consultant who can help develop and implement an outreach, recruitment and retention plan.

Decision Making/Empowerment

The key issues in decision making/empowerment are a commitment to consensus or compromise, whether citizen input is advisory or authoritative and what is being governed. While communities would like to act collectively, with various interests yielding to the general will, compromises among interest groups might be a more pragmatic approach to decision making. One problem is that consumers don’t always want what objective self-interest and rational choice theories point towards. They may be willing to agree to a provider or business demand in exchange for support for a community good, such as street lighting. In addition, neither providers, businesses nor consumers are monolithic forces.

Bringing all the stakeholders to the table at once may introduce rivalries and hidden agendas that thwart the decision-making process. Some organizations, such as businesses, may show up early to learn what is afoot and then not return until some concrete plan is on the table. Others, such as advocacy groups, may be highly involved in program development but disengage once the

decision is made. Finally, one premise of empowerment is that community boards should have the authority to reach a decision and make it stick. Most boards that actually exercise substantial influence over the facility or program budget are able to implement citizen’s ideas. Citizens are willing to allow experts and professionals to make individual treatment or case-level decisions but want a voice and part in setting organizational and systems-level policies and programs.

Project Organization

Many advocates for consumer participation are more ideological and value oriented than pragmatic and performance oriented. Advocacy groups tend to be successful if they maintain an informal, non-bureaucratic structure. When working with or within a larger organization, citizen participation and leadership depends heavily on the presence of a supportive staff. Staff can assemble information not readily accessible to community members as well as provide continuity and expertise. Consumer boards that have their own staff are more likely to implement citizen views. The concerns of the funding agency to insure its investment and attain its goals is precariously balanced against the needs of the community-based organizations to be self-directing and free to use their discretion in problem solving. A memorandum of understanding between the sponsor and recipient organization could define situations under which spheres of authority would be established and disputes would be mediated before the sponsor intervenes directly in the management of the program.

Project Leadership

Many projects expect community leadership to emerge and a local champion to rise to the occasion. This may be typical of small, independent

grassroots efforts that respond to a specific event or threat to the community. Emergent leaders actively involve participants and are take-charge types. On the other end are community leaders designated by the funding agency or the grant recipient. Such a leader must be able to share information, control dominant personalities, solicit input from quiet participants, minimize blame, and help keep discussions focused. Appointed leaders should provide opportunities for community members to spend time outside of meetings working on program tasks. Community leadership, then, is situational and depends upon the social and organizational environment in which the program exists.

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