



# Working Together To Make Meaningful Change

A Toolkit For Engaging Communities Across Colorado



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The Safe Routes Partnership is a catalyst for the creation of safe, active, equitable, and healthy communities—urban, suburban, and rural—throughout the United States. Founded in 2005, the Safe Routes Partnership advances safe walking and bicycling to and from schools, to improve the health and well-being of kids of all races, income levels, and abilities, and to foster the creation of healthy communities for everyone.



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•••▶ Welcome to the Colorado Community Engagement Toolkit! This resource is for individuals, organizations, and government agencies that are working on community engagement in Colorado. Some of you might already be working within a specific community and are looking to refresh your engagement strategy. Others might be coming from an outside agency or organization and want to build relationships with a new community. Regardless of your community engagement background, there is something in this toolkit for you!

We've created this toolkit to help you develop and deepen your community engagement process using this basic framework:

1. **Reflect** on your role as a community partner.
2. **Research** the community where you are working.
3. **Partner** with other organizations to build community relationships.
4. **Plan** thoughtful, culturally-responsive community engagement experiences.
5. **Implement** your community engagement activities and events.
6. **Sustain** your community engagement beyond a single project or initiative.

This framework is designed to be people-centered, meaning that the people who live, work, and play in the community will be at the heart of this process. We encourage you to take the time to move through each step and focus on building relationships along the way. Getting to know the community you are working with will make your community engagement more equitable, authentic, and effective. Remember, there is no one size fits all approach to community engagement. Find ways to adapt these ideas and resources to fit the unique needs of the community you are working with. Let community members take the lead. They already have the skills and knowledge to help inform this process, so connect with them early and often. Now let's get started!



## •••▶ How To Use This Toolkit

You can use this toolkit in a few ways:

- **Review the Basics** - Read this guide for an overview of key points on community engagement.
- **Learn from Example** – Check out community engagement highlights from across Colorado!
- **Go Deeper** – Explore the links for tools, worksheets, and additional resources. Use the reflection questions at the end of each section to push your own thinking around community engagement.



# Introduction

Community engagement is working collaboratively with a group of people who share a vested interest in a particular topic or issue. When community engagement works well, it can lead to tangible changes that improve the lives of community members: opening a grocery store in a neighborhood with limited access to fresh produce, building sidewalks to allow children to safely walk to the local park, or a school district adopting a Safe Routes to School policy. Community members can feel these changes in the ways they live, work, learn, worship, and play. This results in an increased sense of belonging and social connectedness, which improves the overall health and livability of the community.

This toolkit offers tips and strategies for engaging communities as you work together to make meaningful change. We begin by looking at how your role as a community partner impacts the community. Then we discuss how you can build your understanding of the community by conducting community research. Next, we explore how to leverage partnerships in your community engagement strategy. We round out the toolkit with creative ideas for engagement activities and strategies for sustaining community engagement long-term. Each section links to additional resources and a series of guiding questions to help you improve your practice.

## Colorado Community Engagement Resources

Individuals, organizations, government agencies, and community-based groups across Colorado are working to dismantle systems of inequity. This work includes advancing programs and policies that reduce racial, economic, and geographic disparities to ensure that all people living in Colorado have what they need to thrive as defined by them. We encourage you to check out these Colorado-specific resources around equitable community engagement and partnership building. These resources frame equity in a local context and offer best practices for working with diverse communities in Colorado.

- [Colorado's Authentic Community Engagement to Advance Equity<sup>1</sup>](#)
- [Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Tools & Resources<sup>2</sup>](#)
- [Colorado Community Partnership Principles Guide<sup>3</sup>](#)
- [Strategic Anchors - Working Definitions<sup>4</sup>](#)
- [Colorado Main Street Community Building and Partnerships Toolkit<sup>5</sup>](#)
- [Colorado Equity Alliance<sup>6</sup>](#)
- [Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition<sup>7</sup>](#)



# Reflect



As someone working on community engagement, you play a unique role. Ideally, your role is to help to bring meaningful changes that improve the health and well-being of the community. But beyond your good intentions, it's also important to consider how community members view your role. Perhaps you hold a different level of decision-making power than community members, like the power to impact state policies versus local policies. You might not live in the community where you are working. You might be from a different racial or ethnic background than people living in the community. You might have a set of priorities that do not completely align with what the community wants. You might have a lot of energy, while community members are feeling community engagement fatigue.

Here's the good news: there are things you can do at each stage of your community engagement process to address some of these barriers. You can begin by reflecting on your role as a community partner. We created a list of [Pre-Community Engagement Reflection Exercises](#) that will help you define your purpose for working in a specific community, identify your strengths and weaknesses as a community partner, and examine how your own power and privilege might impact the community you are working with. We encourage you to go through the list of questions thoughtfully and honestly, and to use the opportunity to spark deeper discussion.

If you are already working within a specific community, this reflection exercise is still useful. Take this time to reflect on your community engagement work so far and explore opportunities to improve. You can also invite community members and partners to do a reflection session with you. For example, if you are running a Safe Routes to School program and you have been working with the same school or school cohort for a number of years, you can pull together various Safe Routes to School champions (administrators, teachers, parents and caregivers, crossing guards, etc.) to assess how well you are incorporating engagement into your program. You might find that you are doing a great job of reaching a certain group of students, but other students are not as active in the program. Use the reflection activity to brainstorm ways to eliminate barriers to participation within your program structure.

Reflecting on your role is especially important if you live outside of the community where you are working and/or if you are a white person working in a predominantly community of color. Many communities of color and low-income communities have a history of working with individuals, government agencies, organizations that did not have the community's best interest in mind. Policies like redlining, the forced removal of Indigenous people from their lands, and the continued over-policing in Black communities have led to mistrust, frustration, and fear.



These actions are also the direct result of institutional racism and white supremacy. Racism and white supremacy impact everything from education to public health to transportation to climate change - and its effects on communities of color are profound and harmful. Members of impacted communities might be wary of working with government or outside organizations. They might question if your work together will bring positive changes, especially if that has not happened in the past. It is your responsibility to learn about how your government agency, organization, or institution has impacted the community you are working with, and how your role is tied to that history. Be mindful of this from the start and continue to consider your impact throughout the engagement process.

- **Use reflection as a team-building exercise.** If you are working in a team, use this time to learn more about your team members and their experiences with community engagement. This is a great way to identify what ideas, resources, and expertise each team member brings to the table and determine areas where you need support. Consider organizing this reflection session as a team coffee chat or lunch break to get out of “formal meeting mode.” If you want to add a fun twist to your reflection, ask people to respond to the questions through an art piece or other creative mode of expression.
- **Create a list of community engagement standards or norms – and commit to following them.** The legacy of inequity in communities of color and low-income communities requires you and your team members to commit to doing a better job at community engagement. As a part of your reflection process, create a list of community engagement commitments you will make to ensure that you are working in solidarity with the community. The [Pre-Community Engagement Reflection Exercise](#) outlines a process for generating community engagement commitments and provides commitment statement examples. Be sure to ask community members for their engagement commitments or see if they would like to work on creating a list together. Revisit your commitment statements throughout the engagement process to see if you are following through or if you need to make adjustments. Check-ins will hold you and your team accountable for doing what you say you are going to do.

## Redlining

Redlining refers to the discriminatory practice of denying loans, mortgages, and insurance to people based on race and ethnicity. The United States has a long history of redlining practices which have limited the ability of people or color, specifically Black people, to access home ownership. The legacy of redlining is still felt today as [Black homeownership continues to lag behind white homeownership](#)<sup>8</sup> and [predominantly Black neighborhoods are considered less desirable](#).<sup>9</sup> To learn more about redlining, listen to this [interview](#)<sup>10</sup> with The Color of Law author Richard Rothstein.



### ●●●▶ GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What is your agency or organization’s history of working in this community?
- What is your purpose for working with this community?
- What will you do to make sure your work has a positive impact on the community?

# Research

In the previous section, we discussed the importance of understanding the history of the community where you are working. This section expands on that idea by exploring how to conduct community research before planning engagement activities. By community research, we mean getting to know where you are and who you are working with. It does not necessarily involve official research practices and protocols, although it can if you prefer those methods or your work calls for it. Community research can be going on a walk around the neighborhood, visiting a local museum, or riding the bus around town. It can also be having coffee with a community member, attending a faith-based service, or volunteering at a community event outside of the scope of your own work. The information that you gather from these experiences should guide your overall engagement strategy. We will go into this more in detail later in the toolkit.



You can also do community research if you are already working in a community you know really well. In fact, it's a good idea to continue your learning because communities evolve. There are always new things to learn, new places to explore, and new people to meet. Your community research might focus more on observing what has changed, what has stayed the same, and what opportunities there are for you to deepen your existing relationships. You can also use this time to nurture existing relationships. Invite a community partner to go on a walk or have a meeting at a local park. This will keep your community connections strong and expand your knowledge of where you are working.

Community research is also a critical part of building trust with community members. As we mentioned earlier, many communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color, have been negatively impacted by systemic inequities. Some communities might be hesitant and reluctant to trust government agencies and organizations, even if these partners do not intend to do harm. Community partners must understand this history and legacy of mistrust and work to dismantle systems of inequity if they want to make meaningful change. This means learning about the history of the people who live in the community and understanding how that history impacts the present day. Also remember that just because people share a common background does not mean they want or need the same things, or that they have all had the same experience. Some community members might have had positive experiences working with government agencies and outside partners. Others might have had more negative experiences that impact their willingness to engage. Look for opportunities to hear people's individual stories so that you are building comprehensive knowledge as opposed to centering on one collective narrative.



Another way to build trust is by being intentional about listening. During your community research phase, you might find yourself having conversations with community members. This will continue throughout your engagement process. It is important to be an active listener right from the start. Active listening involves listening without interrupting, paraphrasing what is being said, and withholding judgment. It also involves putting your own thoughts and ideas aside while someone else is speaking. A main benefit of active listening is that it builds empathy and allows you to see someone else's point of view, even if you don't agree with them. Practice active listening to show that you value people's thoughts, ideas, stories.

As you move forward, you might begin having deeper conversations with community members. Some of these conversations might be contentious, emotional, or more personal in nature. Be prepared for what you will do in these cases. If someone gives you negative feedback or tells you “no” about something you want to implement, how you respond can make a big difference. One possible response is acknowledging what the person is saying before continuing the conversation. A phrase like, “So what I hear you saying is...” can be helpful in creating productive dialogue. Remember, active listening is a learned skill so your best chance at improving is by practicing.

Now it's time to think about starting your community research. We suggest focusing on local activities that get you out on the ground and give you a sense of what everyday life is like. Have fun with the process and be open to exploring new ideas. You never know what you will discover or who you might meet!

- **Take a walk to ride around the neighborhood.** Online maps can be helpful, but they do not provide the same experience as being in the actual place. Pick a day to explore a neighborhood. You can choose a few destinations in advance but it's also fun to walk or ride around and see what you discover. Pop into a coffee shop, hike a local trail, or sit on a park bench and take in what is going on around you. There is no right or wrong way to do this, just put on some comfy shoes and get out there!



- **Hop on public transit.** Taking a ride on the local bus or train will not only offer great sight-seeing, but it will give you deeper insight into how transit-riders experience getting around town. If you normally travel via other modes besides transit, you might not know what it's like to wait 20 minutes for the bus when it is snowing, or what it's like to carry a full cart of groceries on the train because there is not a grocery store near your house. So choose a few routes and go on different rides. Pay attention to who else is riding, where the busy hubs are, and some of the potential barriers to safe and easy transit. Transit workers and riders offer valuable perspectives that are often unheard, so use this chance to connect with them.
- **Do historical and archival research.** Every place has a story. Learning about these stories will help deepen your understanding of where you are working and who you are working with. Find opportunities to explore the local history and stories. This could mean visiting the local historical society, looking through newspaper archives at the library, attending a museum exhibition, walking a heritage trail, or just chatting with a long-time resident. Colorado also has a number of online resources to learn about the state's rich history. [History Colorado](#)<sup>11</sup> offers various online exhibits including ones on [Colorado's Mexican history](#)<sup>12</sup> and [American Indian history](#).<sup>13</sup> Many cities and towns have similar online resources that provide local historical context.



- **Attend a community event other than your own.** Sometimes we are so focused on our own work that we miss out on opportunities to attend different events and meet new people. Attending a community event outside your scope of work will help you understand what a community needs and what they value. For example, attending a local cultural festival will teach you a lot about the kinds of food, music, arts, and traditions that the community enjoys. Or you can volunteer at a local food and clothing drive to get a better sense of the community's essential needs. You can then incorporate some of those elements into your own engagement activities. These kinds of events also offer opportunities to build partnerships with local leaders and other community organizations.
- **Learn about the differences within communities.** There can be a lot of diversity within one community. For example, if a community has a large immigrant population, it's important to learn about all the different immigrant groups that live there. Another example is looking at intergenerational differences to understand how people of all ages live, work, and play, even if they are from a similar racial or ethnic group. Looking at the diversity within communities will help you create a more well-rounded and responsive community engagement approach where everyone is included. As you do your community research, think about ways to learn about different groups you might engage. Where can you learn about young people? Older adults? Women? Disabled individuals? Consider these questions when determining where, when, and how you conduct your community research.
- **Strike up a conversation.** This may sound simple, but sometimes the best way to get to know someone is to talk to them. Chatting with someone face-to-face, or even through phone or video call, is the first step in building a meaningful relationship. Your conversation might not even be related to what you are working on. Just take the time to get to know someone. Find out about their interests, what they enjoy doing around their neighborhood, or what they like to eat. And remember, communication is a two-way street. These conversations should not be like an interview. Let the conversations flow organically, and hopefully a new relationship will blossom!





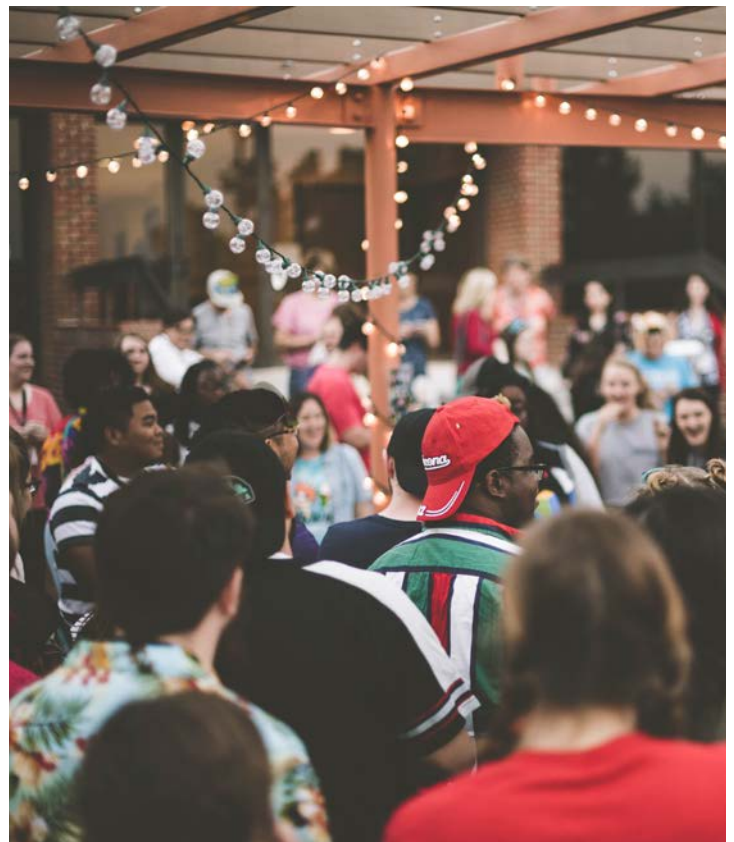
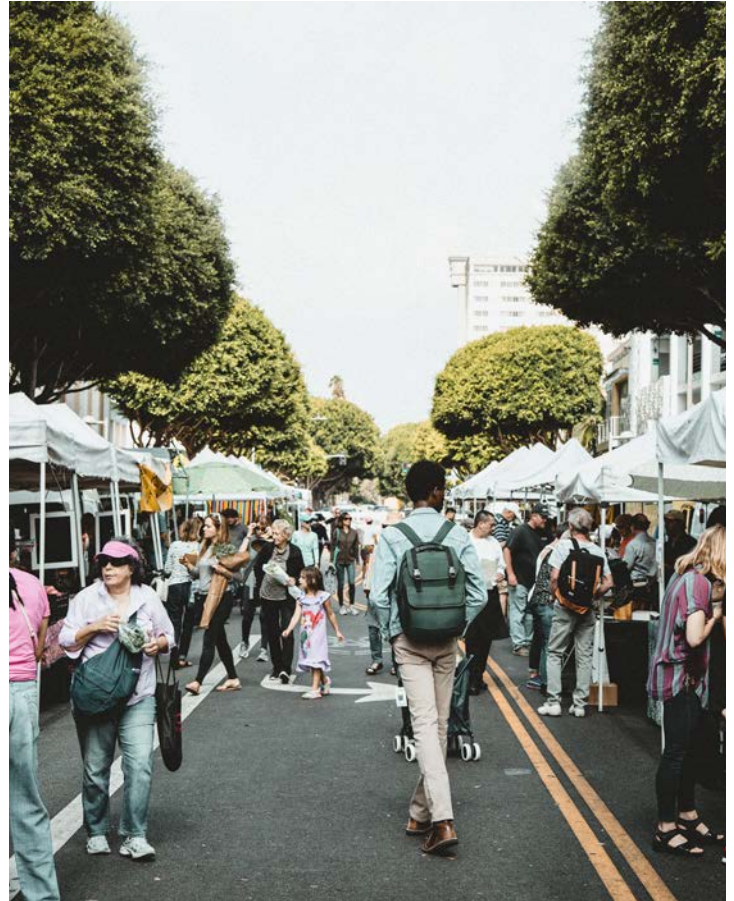
## •••▶ Which Community Events Should I Attend?

Community gatherings, civic events, and celebrations can tell you a lot about how people live, work, and play. School board meetings and city council meetings offer valuable insight into what policies are being prioritized on a local level and who has power and influence in the community. When you attend these meetings, pay attention to who else is in the room, who is missing, which voices are being uplifted, and which voices are unheard. Are people of color participating? Women? Disabled individuals? Youth? Are the people making decisions representative of the community they are serving? If you see people who are not participating in the process, figure out what the barriers are and how you can reduce them in your upcoming events.

Check a local community calendar for upcoming events you can attend. Keep in mind that some events and celebrations might be spread through word-of-mouth or outside of standard, English-dominant communications channels. See if there are newspapers or radio/TV stations aimed at different racial or ethnic groups. Familiarize yourself with holidays and celebrations of different religions and cultures. Look for events that are unique to the community and show off what makes that place special.

Here are a few examples of events to get you started:

- Arts and cultural festivals
- Farmers markets
- Faith-based services (if open to the public)
- Food and clothing drives
- County fairs
- Craft fairs
- Parades
- High school sports games
- Community walks and bike rides
- Open Streets events
- Food truck events
- Movie nights
- Community gardens
- City/Town Council meetings
- School board meetings
- Youth council meetings.





## ••••▶ Conducting Community Research For Statewide Initiatives

If you are working on a statewide initiative, you can conduct research on the individual communities that make up the population. There are lots of ways to group communities together – race and ethnicity, age, geographic area, gender, disability, language, etc. If you are working on a team, assign each team member a community to research and report back to the group. For example, one team member might look into rural communities while another might focus on youth. Although on-the-ground research is ideal, in a large state like Colorado this might be a challenge. You might have to conduct the bulk of your community research online. Visit the city or town's website to get started. You can also explore local maps to get a sense of what is in the area. This is also an ideal time to connect with potential project partners and community-based groups who you might end up collaborating with in the future. These partners can include elected officials or local government staff. Schedule a few calls to get to know each other. Ask someone to give you a virtual tour. Check out a community calendar of events and see if there are virtual events to attend. There are a lot of ways to learn about a community without being there, you just have to get creative!



### ••••▶ Guiding Questions:

- What do you already know about this community? How did you gain this knowledge?
- What do you want to know about this community? What are you curious about?
- How can you learn more about this community? Where can you go? Who can you talk to?





# Partner



Community engagement is a team sport. As a thoughtful team player, support community-based ideas instead of insisting on doing things your own way. Your community partners will bring their own set of resources, knowledge, and expertise that will expand your capacity to make a meaningful impact. Community partners can connect you to residents, share information, and offer on-site event support. On a deeper level, you can collaborate with your partners to develop and implement programs, pass policies, and advocate for social change.

Prioritize building partnerships with community-based groups. Groups led by residents, or others with deep roots in the community, bring a sense of “ground truth.” They can ensure that your engagement is culturally-relevant and that the community’s perspective is being valued. A community group might be a gardening club, a knitting circle, and dance troupe, or a group of neighbors running a mutual aid. They do not necessarily have to be part of a “formal” organization. Check out this list of potential community partners in [Appendix B of the Colorado Main Street Community Building and Partnerships Toolkit](#).<sup>14</sup>

Also look to build relationships with stakeholders and decision makers, including elected officials and others who hold “official” decision-making power. In many cases, getting their buy-in is necessary to create change. For example, if you are looking to increase physical activity among youth, see if there is a school board member who can be your champion. A school board member can influence policies to include more physical activity during the school day. If you gain decision-maker support, remember the importance of holding them accountable for doing what they say they are going to do. One way to do this is by staying connected with their staff. Many elected officials and other decision-makers, like school administrators, work with staff who manage day-to-day operations like creating schedules and meeting agendas. Building relationships with their staff will make it easier to follow up on next steps and streamline communications.

Coalition-building is another community engagement strategy to increase your reach and influence. Coalitions work together to develop a common approach to address a specific problem. They are composed of different stakeholders with diverse areas of expertise that have a shared goal. Coalitions are useful if you want to grow a movement within a community. For example, a group of different youth and biking organizations might form a youth bike coalition to increase the number of kids biking. The coalition can work together to develop a youth cycling curriculum, organize bike rodeos, or be a united voice in advocating for bike education in schools. This is just one example but there are many options and structures for organizing a coalition. Check out these resources for more information:

- [University of Kansas Community Tool Box: Coalition Building Sections](#)<sup>15</sup>
- [Developing Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide](#)<sup>16</sup>
- [Sierra Club Magazine - How to Build Diverse Coalitions](#)<sup>17</sup>
- [Colorado Center on Law and Policy - Coalition Building Tools](#)<sup>18</sup>
- [Liberating Structures Menu](#)<sup>19</sup>
- [Colorado Regenerative Recovery Coalition](#)<sup>20</sup>

While it might be common for certain sectors to work together, there are many potential partnerships between groups and individuals who on the surface might not seem completely aligned. When you dive a bit deeper, you'll find that your interests probably do overlap in some way. If you are working on a physical activity campaign, reach out to a local dance or yoga studio. Engage farm and agricultural groups in food and nutrition initiatives. Invite a local arts collective to create decorations for your outreach table. You also find ways to support other groups' initiatives so the partnership is mutually beneficial. Be up front about what you can bring to the partnership. Not only will this benefit your work, but the entire community benefits if everyone is working together. Here are a few creative partnerships to consider that might work outside your direct area of interest:

- Artists and arts organizations
- Youth-led groups: Youth councils, Student Government Associations
- Environmental organizations
- Farmers and agricultural organizations
- Small business associations
- Local sports leagues
- Animal rights groups
- Senior centers
- Voting rights groups
- Rotary clubs
- Motorcycle/biker clubs
- Scout troops
- AARP
- YMCA
- LGBTQ groups
- Disability advocacy groups



## Supporting LGBTQ Coloradans

LGBTQ Coloradans face many barriers to health and safety in their everyday lives. [One Colorado](#) is the state's leading LGBTQ advocacy organization working to support LGBTQ individuals and their families. Visit their website for more information and resources on LGBTQ health, safe schools, transgender equality, marriage equality, immigration, and more.



## ••••▶ Partnering With Trusted Community Leaders

Every community seems to have that one person who knows everyone and everything. The woman who sits on her front porch and knows all the kids that walk to school. The barber who hears all the neighborhood gossip from customers. The community elder who carries generations of stories. These are people who tend to have trust and influence in the community despite not holding official leadership roles. They know how things work, they are well-connected, and they are invested in the well-being of their community. Other community members seek out their advice, value their opinion, and follow their lead when it comes to important issues. As you begin building partnerships, pay attention to who has the community's ear and who really has the power and influence to get things done. Then try sparking up a conversation with this person or ask to be introduced by another community member. Listen to their ideas and accept their honest feedback. You may find that your approach to something is totally off the mark – and that's okay! Trusted community leaders will help you find the best approach and help connect you with other people. Learn about working with trusted community leaders by reviewing the recording and slides from Safe Routes Partnership's [Community Engagement for Safe Routes to School Virtual Training](#).<sup>21</sup>



## ••••▶ Partnering With Young People And Youth Organizations

Young people often face barriers to participating in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Building meaningful partnerships between adults and young people is key to shifting these power dynamics. Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) created a youth engagement model centered on shared leadership between young people and adults. They incorporated art, storytelling, and digital media into youth engagement projects on improving the built environment. Youth participants in Denver created hot spot maps, photo voice displays, and digital stories about social and environmental change. They shared their work with wider audiences during community celebrations, art-making events, photography exhibitions, and videos. CDPHE uplifted young people not only as leaders, but as creators, decision-makers, and change agents. Read more about their process in their [Authentic Youth Engagement Toolkit](#).<sup>22</sup> You can also view CDPHE Youth Advisor Sedona Allen Moreno's [digital story](#)<sup>23</sup> about leading this built environment project and Future of Denver Youth Collaborative's [digital story](#)<sup>24</sup> about engaging young people. Here are a few other youth engagement resources to explore:

- [Positive Youth Development Approach](#)<sup>25</sup>
- [Colorado 9 to 25: Standards for Youth Engagement](#)<sup>26</sup>
- [Safe Routes for Youth: Engaging Teens in Vision Zero](#)<sup>27</sup>





# Plan

At this point, you might be thinking about different community engagement activities to implement. This means it's time to make a plan! Your plan should include a variety of opportunities for people to participate and should take into account the different needs of the community. Your community research should inform your plan. Details like event format, meeting time, promotional materials, and even the food you serve should all be determined based on what works best for community members. You might find that you need to offer multiple engagement activities that are geared to different audiences but have a similar goal. For example, if you are gathering community feedback on a transit plan, your engagement activities may involve online surveys, in-person outreach tabling, and listening sessions. Having a menu of engagement options makes it easier for different voices to be heard. Inviting community leaders and partners into the planning process will also help ensure that your activities suit the community's needs. Check out the [Safe Routes to Parks Checklist for Community Engagement](#)<sup>31</sup> for more information on planning inclusive community engagement activities.



- Be mindful of the squeaky wheels.** Community engagement can get overtaken by the same, and usually loudest, voices. These “squeaky wheels” tend to drive decision-making due to a number of factors: having more money, having more political influence, or having greater privilege than other community members. In some communities, this looks like homeowners dominating conversations about affordable housing while leaving out tenants. In other communities, it might be wealthy white residents having outsized influence compared to poorer residents of color. It can also look like English-speaking residents making a majority of decisions while leaving out members of the communities who speak other languages. When creating your community engagement plan, be mindful of which voices you always hear from and who is being left out. If certain groups are being left out, find out why that is, then craft a plan to break down those barriers. It's okay for some engagement activities to be centered on people who you don't always hear from, that's actually a good thing! It shows that you are serious about bringing tangible changes to communities who are often overlooked and under-resourced. Take a break from catering to the squeaky wheels and concentrate on the unheard voices.



- **Get creative with space.** Choosing the right location to host activities is the difference between reaching your target audience and leaving people out. Open your mind to new ways of thinking about space. If you usually host events in the same places and are seeing the same faces, try using a new location. Spaces like grocery stores, hair and nail salons, barber shops, bus stops, health clinics, and other places that offer essential services can connect you to people you might not normally see at a traditional public meeting. Or consider meeting people in outdoor spaces like park pavilions, sports fields, pools, apartment courtyards, or playgrounds. Exploring new gathering spaces will also help you build partnerships with different people from sectors: business owners, transit workers, gig workers, entrepreneurs, faith leaders, etc.
- **Make it easy to participate.** As you plan your activities, you should always be thinking about how to make it easy for people who face the most barriers to participating. Think about the people who you want to engage – a single dad, a Spanish-speaking business owner, a disabled transit rider, a farmer. When you design your activities, ask yourself, “What might make it hard for this person to participate?” Offering childcare, food, transportation, and translators can be helpful, but also find out from community members what they need in order to participate in the process. They might share something you had not even considered. Be proactive about building accessibility into your plan so you don’t have to fix mistakes afterwards. This will set you off on the right foot from the beginning and should bring you some goodwill within the community.
- **Don’t overcomplicate it!** Oftentimes we get bogged down in planning processes that are too long and too complex. Be mindful of how much time you spend trying to outline a perfect engagement plan. Instead, focus on what makes the most common sense and what will be the best experience for community members. And it cannot be restated enough: collaborate with your community leaders and partners each step of the way. Your community engagement plan will be better for it!







## •••▶ Spectrum of Public Participation

There are a lot of ways for community members to participate in decision making. One way to determine the appropriate level of participation is by viewing it as a spectrum. The International Association for Public Participation created a [Spectrum of Public Participation](#)<sup>32</sup> to help people define what role the public can play in decision making processes. It also provides promises you can make to the public at each level of the spectrum. In some cases, you might just need to inform the public about something. For example, if you are working on a Safe Routes to School program, you might want to inform people about what Safe Routes to School is and how it can be used to keep students safe. As you move through the spectrum, the decision-making impact of community members increases. This does not mean that the “Inform” level is bad, it just means that there are different ways for people to participate. You might find yourself moving through different levels throughout one engagement process. In the Safe Routes to School example, you might consult with parents and caregivers, school administrators, and other stakeholders on the details of your program. Community members may end up deciding on the final implementation, or maybe they become collaborators and you take official charge of the program. The key is to plan intentionally for public participation and be clear about your intentions at every level of the spectrum. Colorado also uses a [Youth Engagement Continuum](#)<sup>33</sup> that follows a similar structure for working with young people. We encourage you to use both tools throughout the engagement process.



## •••▶ Guiding Questions:

- What are the barriers to public participation and how can you address them?
- How can you incorporate different levels of public participation into your engagement plan?
- Who do you see and hear from all the time? Who is missing?

# Implement

Once you have a team of partners and a plan in place, you can begin implementing community engagement activities and events. These activities and events can take many forms – community meetings, listening sessions, workshops, street fairs, bike rides, cultural festivals, the sky’s the limit! Just be sure to keep the community at the heart of whatever you are doing. Design experiences that foster a sense of belonging and social connection. Create opportunities for community members to teach you something instead of you always playing the educator role. And work with trusted community partners to ensure your activities are culturally-responsive and accessible.

Also, remember to have fun! Not every community gathering has to be a formal meeting. In fact, it should not be. Think about creative ways for people to participate outside of traditional meeting structures. Can you use play and model-building as part of a community design charrette? Can you incorporate local art and history into your walk audit? Can you make a community cookbook with favorite recipes from residents as part of a healthy eating campaign? There are a lot of possibilities if you think outside the box, or if you ask community members what types of activities they are interested in. Getting community input will make it more likely that community members will participate in whatever activity you are planning. It will also show that you respect community members as decision-makers and collaborators. Check out this recording of Safe Routes Partnership’s webinar, [Colorado Moving Forward Together: Engaging Your Community in Safe Routes to School Programs](#)<sup>34</sup>, featuring [Growing Up Boulder](#)<sup>35</sup>, for creative youth engagement ideas. You can also explore this collection of the [Safe Routes Partnership Community Engagement Cards](#).<sup>36</sup>

- Value the quality of the experience over the quantity of events or participants.** The word “community engagement” can conjure up images of packed public meetings, crowded street fairs, and volunteers scrambling to collect hundreds of survey responses. If this is your vision of community engagement, it’s time to expand your perspective. It’s the quality of the experience, not the number of participants, that counts. A high-quality experience might be a large health fair, but it can also be a small gathering of community leaders who meet to address local health concerns. When designing an engagement experience, consider the intended audience and outcome. If you want to collect a lot of baseline information about the community’s health and safety concerns, a large-scale survey may be the way to go. If you are interested in more in-depth feedback, organize a few small gatherings where people can share more in detail. Offering different ways to participate will make your engagement experiences more accessible and will take some of the pressure off of you to hit high target numbers. Find out what the community values in an engagement experience, and what “high-quality” means to them, then plan accordingly.





- **Add an artful infusion.** Arts-based engagement activities are a fun way to boost public participation and increase accessibility. Work with your team and community partners to incorporate art and creativity into your engagement efforts. Can you expand your walk and roll initiatives to include dance and movement? Can community members draw or sculpt their ideal transit system as opposed to filling out a survey? Can you hold a public meeting at a local gallery or museum instead of using a standard meeting room in a government office building? If you're not an artist, no problem! Most communities have a collection of local artists, arts organizations, or creative individuals who enjoy working on public projects and who can bring fresh ideas to the table. Invite them to lead activities, design promotional materials, document events, and collaborate as thought partners. Many cities and towns also have an arts department in their local government who can provide guidance on artist engagement, including how to budget for artist fees and materials.
- **Celebrate and support local.** People take a lot of pride in their local community. From recommending favorite taquerias to cheering on local sports teams, community members love to share what makes their community special. Find ways to celebrate and support local businesses, organizations, sports teams, and other community favorites during your engagement activities. If you are serving food at a community meeting, order from a local restaurant. Partner with a local sports team on a physical activity initiative. Decorate your meeting and event spaces with photos of local places and portraits of community members. These special touches show that you did your homework on the community, you value what makes the community unique, and you are serious about fostering a sense of belonging. Your trusted community leaders can help you generate ideas and give recommendations for incorporating some local flair to your engagement.
- **Ask community members what they like.** It is tempting to plan activities that are big and flashy, but that might not be what community members need or want. Ask them what kinds of activities they like instead of making assumptions. Some people will prefer large groups while others prefer smaller, more intimate settings. Virtual engagement has made it possible to reach different communities, but some people might still enjoy in-person experiences. Some people enjoy activities that they can do with their friends and family. Others might like a one-on-one coffee chat. You will learn this as you talk to community members. The most important thing is being open to creating a variety of engagement experiences that incorporate the community's ideas.

## Mark Your Calendar

When organizing meetings and events it is important to consider how work and school schedules, holidays, religious celebrations, or other cultural traditions will impact public participation. Gatherings and events might need to take place outside of the 9 - 5, Monday - Friday work schedule in order to accommodate students and people working. Additionally, if you schedule a meeting during a holiday, some community members might not be able to attend. Even the food you offer at a community event might be impacted by religious or cultural traditions, or just personal preference. Keep a calendar on-hand to check for scheduling conflicts and work with your trusted community leaders to align your events with other celebrations, religious observances, and school events. Also, just ask people what works best with their schedule and then plan your events accordingly.

## Communicating With Diverse Audiences

Throughout the engagement process, you will communicate with a number of different audiences. Sharing information about an upcoming traffic safety meeting, mounting a social media campaign to encourage walking and biking, and even casual conversations with community members all require effective communications skills. Part of increasing effectiveness is making sure that you are connecting with your intended audience, and if you have multiple audiences, that means using multiple communications strategies. Even for a group with a shared background, there can be key differences between how people like to communicate. For example, older Latinx residents might prefer face-to-face interaction while the younger Latinx generation might prefer social media or communicating via text. Again, this is where all your community relationships come in handy! Your trusted leaders and community partners will be able to share effective strategies for communicating your message. Here are a few additional resources on creating effective and accessible communications strategies for different audiences:

- [ADA Best Practices Tool Kit for State and Local Governments](#)<sup>37</sup>
- [Effective Tools for Communications and Leadership in Indian Country](#)<sup>38</sup>
- [National Congress of American Indians Tribal Communications Resources](#)<sup>39</sup>
- [Expert Panel Meeting on Communicating about Overweight/Obesity with Hispanic Audiences](#)<sup>40</sup>
- [Reaching and Engaging with Hispanic Communities: A Research-Informed Communication Guide for Nonprofits, Policymakers, and Funders](#)<sup>41</sup>
- [Authentic Youth Engagement Toolkit](#)<sup>42</sup>
- [Liberating Structures](#)<sup>43</sup>

And here are a few communications questions to consider:

- Who are you trying to reach?
- What message are you trying to share?
- What might make it hard for a community member to receive your message?
- How can you reduce these barriers to communication?



## Disability Etiquette

When implementing community engagement activities, you must ensure that disabled individuals are able to participate. This includes making sure that disabled individuals are able to get to your event and fully participate while they are there. [Rocky Mountain ADA Center](#)<sup>44</sup> offers [Public Transportation and Disability Etiquette trainings](#)<sup>45</sup> in partnership with [Denver Regional Mobility & Access Council \(DRMAC\)](#)<sup>46</sup>. You can view their most recent training on DRMAC's website. DRMAC also offers information on connecting with Local Coordinating Councils and other groups around Colorado who work to promote transportation mobility and accessibility for all.



## ••••▶ Post-Community Engagement Reflection

After each community engagement activity, take some time to reflect on how things went. This will help you determine any adjustments you need to make for your next activity. Involve community partners and community members in the reflection process. They might have other thoughts that you did not consider. Here are a few post-engagement reflection questions:

- How did the process go?
- Who did we hear from?
- Who were we still not hearing from?
- What could we do differently/better?

### Youth Share Their World Through Photo Voice Projects

Photo voice is people using photographs to document their environment and everyday experiences and share them with others. This method can be used in lots of different ways - research, data collection, social justice demonstrations, news articles, or simply as a way of bringing people together. Most importantly, photo voice lets an individual control their own narrative by sharing the world through their eyes. For example, asking someone to document what health and safety looks like through their own words and images can be a powerful form of storytelling and advocating for social change. What looks like health and safety for one person can be very different from what it looks like for another. Remember, a picture is still worth a thousand words! To learn about implementing a community photo voice project, visit the [Authentic Youth Engagement Toolkit](#)<sup>47</sup> for a step-by-step guide.

### Intersection Murals Bring Art and Safety to Southwest Denver

Intersection murals are creative ways to fuse art, safety, and community building. They often bring awareness to infrastructure and personal safety concerns in a particular neighborhood while highlighting a community's artistic and cultural assets. [Denver Community Active Living Coalition](#)<sup>48</sup> is working to bring intersection murals to the city's Southwest Westwood neighborhood. The murals are designed by local artists and represent themes and elements that are important to community members. Check out these videos of intersection mural installations at [Castro Elementary School](#)<sup>49</sup> and [Westwood Park](#).<sup>50</sup>

### ••••▶ Guiding Questions:

- Who is the main audience for your activity or event?
- Why are you doing this activity or event?
- What might make it hard for people to participate?
- How is this activity or event working towards meaningful change within the community?

# Sustain



Follow through, or lack of follow through, can make or break your relationships within a community. If you are clear with your intentions at the start of the engagement process, community members should know what to expect from the result of your work together. For example, if you are organizing a walk audit, let people know what will be done with the results, what changes they can expect to see, and when the changes will happen. That last part is very important especially if it will take a long time for changes to be made. You don't want to leave community members wondering why a problem was not addressed. Then, follow up periodically to let people know how things are progressing. Too often community members participate in programs, studies, and meetings only to see limited results or no results at all. This causes further distrust between the community and causes harm. Keep the lines of communication open so people feel like their time, experience, and expertise are valued.

One way to instill trust is outlining a few short-term outcomes that residents will be able to see and feel pretty immediately. In the walk audit example, work with your local planner or engineer to determine what quick fixes can be made. Something as simple as

relocating a trash can from a busy sidewalk to a more open area can improve walkability. It's also quick and low-cost in comparison to large infrastructure improvements. For longer term projects, outline each step of the process so community members can follow along. Not everyone knows or understands that some changes may take a long time, so transparency is key. Be proactive and create a communications plan for following up with people throughout the project. Let people know how and when to expect updates and who to contact if they have questions. Don't place the responsibility on community members to reach out to you. Show that you are committed to keeping in touch and delivering the results the community desires.

Most importantly, the people who live in the community will be there long after you leave. Community leaders will still be spearheading their own initiatives, advocating for change, and looking out for their neighbors. Find ways to continue supporting their efforts by connecting them to resources, sharing their information, and checking in from time to time. Your support will go a long way in bringing about meaningful change.



- **Schedule time in your calendar to check in with partners and community members on a regular basis.** Even if there are no changes, let people know that the project is continuing and you will continue checking in periodically. Community members and partners will appreciate your communication and transparency.
- **Fund community-led projects and initiatives.** Community-based groups are often the ones working to make change on a long-term, consistent basis. These groups might be formal organizations or a group of neighbors. Oftentimes community groups do not have the same access to resources as larger organizations and government agencies. Community-based organizations run by people of color face even more barriers to accessing resources. If you or your organization are able, consider funding community-led projects and initiatives. If you cannot offer funding support, see if you can connect community groups with organizations that have useful resources. You can also offer to volunteer or promote their events through your networks. These acts of solidarity will help you maintain relationships and ensure that important work can continue after you have left.
- **Make community engagement the norm.** Community engagement should not seem like a separate part of your work, it should inform your work. The goal of community engagement is to have community members provide direction and guidance based on their needs, so you should be checking in consistently to make sure you are on track. Consider adding community engagement updates to team meetings as an accountability measure. You can also appoint or hire a community engagement liaison to be a bridge between community members and your agency or organization. Ideally, this person would be someone who lives in the community and who can provide an on-the-ground perspective. However, working with a community liaison does not mean that all the community engagement falls on them. You, too, must stay actively involved and engaged on a consistent basis. Your involvement can also include advocating for community members to hold positions of power on a larger scale. This approach can be an opportunity to transform a legacy of mistrust and mistreatment into one of collaboration and solidarity.



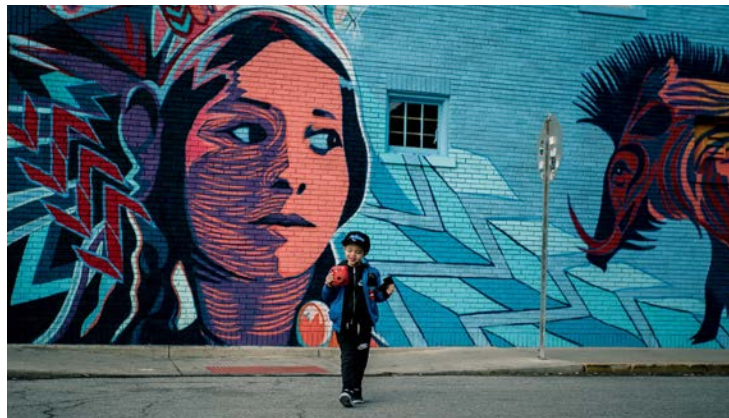
#### ••••▶ Guiding Questions:

- How will the community know and feel the results of your engagement?
- How can you continue showing up for the community?
- When and how will you check in with community members to update them on projects?
- How will you stay connected with our community partners?



# Conclusion

At its core, community engagement is about relationship-building. Without meaningful community relationships, your engagement efforts will never be as effective as they can be. Whether you are working with a new community or continuing long-term engagement work, look to community members to guide the decisions that impact their lives. Learn from them, listen to them, and trust them to lead this process.





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