TIPS FOR ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

Community engagement is increasingly important for nonprofits and, reflecting this trend, funding applications often request a description of how community input is integrated into the project. To go beyond buzz words and truly engage communities is to revisit the organization's core values, reflect the community's diversity in the composition of the board, ask for input from community members, and invest significant time in communication.

Tip #1: Do your homework. Before setting up a first meeting, research the community, potential participants and their organization(s); be familiar with other organizations that are working on similar issues.

Tip #2: Make it convenient. When you meet with community members, go to their location. Not everyone works from 8:00–5:00; consider the participants' schedules and cultures and be willing to meet in the evening or on the weekend. Provide food and possibly child care.

Tip#3: Remove Barriers. Represent your organization with people who have skills in relationship building and open communications. Invite someone to attend the meeting who is involved with both organizations who can navigate both cultures. Acknowledge that there may be old wounds or stereotypes. It may take considerable time and effort to build a real relationship based on mutual trust and understanding.

Tip #4: Listen more than you talk. Be an active listener: fully concentrate on what is being said and repeat back what you think you heard in your own words.

Tip #5: Gather new perspectives. Ask questions: What are the community's needs and how might your organization help? Try to understand the issues and what the members of the community hope to achieve. Discover whether there is a possible connection to your organization's mission.

Tip#6: Be open to new ideas. Don't go to a meeting with all the decisions made and with preconceived goals for the outcome. Embark on community engagement only if you are genuinely willing to listen and adjust to meet the community's needs.

Tip #7: Avoid tokenism. Engage community partners as full *partners*, not just advisors, to help you plan and implement projects in new service areas.

Need a hand engaging communities? WE CAN HELP!