

Federal Policy to Advance Racial, Ethnic, and Tribal Health Equity

Key Actions for Prioritizing, Valuing, and Incorporating Community Voice in the Work of Government

Achieving health equity—the state in which everyone has an opportunity to attain their full potential for health and well-being—requires efforts to address inequities around access to quality health care, education, employment opportunities, and more. The National Academies assembled an interdisciplinary committee of experts to analyze federal policies that contribute to such inequities, specifically for racially and ethnically minoritized populations. The resulting consensus study report, *Federal Policy to Advance Racial, Ethnic, and Tribal Health Equity*, provides recommendations for change.

WHY ARE COMMUNITIES SO IMPORTANT FOR ADVANCING HEALTH EQUITY?

Communities are comprised of the places, organizations, and social networks that help shape conditions that impact health and well-being. Community members have a deep understanding of the strengths and needs of their neighbors and local infrastructure, including what is necessary to advance health equity locally. Therefore, policymakers should understand and treat community experience and knowledge as evidence, as well as meaningfully engage affected communities in all policy- and decision making.

Few technical and scientific federal advisory bodies recognize community expertise as essential for designing,

DID YOU KNOW?

In addition to the numerous benefits community involvement brings to policies themselves, research demonstrates that civic engagement and belonging, fostered by meaningful community engagement, have powerful effects on population health, well-being, and equity (see Conclusion 7–5 in the report). **The very act of involving communities in making decisions about their future health may itself have a positive impact.**

implementing, and evaluating programs and services that impact health. Embracing community knowledge as evidence for designing and implementing new and amended federal policies is a foundational requirement.

WHAT DOES MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE?

Policymaking increasingly promotes obtaining and integrating input from affected communities, but the actual process is often one-sided and superficial. A misunderstanding of what constitutes community engagement or involvement, as well as a lack of

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

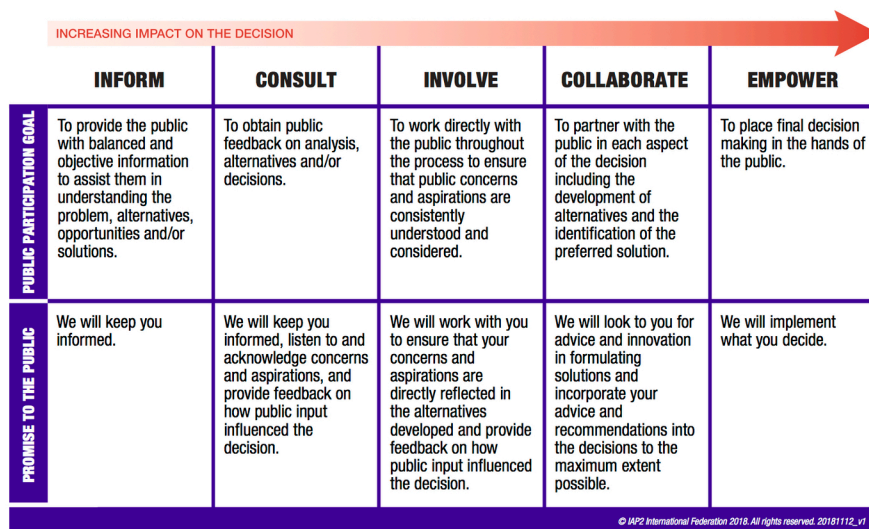


FIGURE 1 The International Association for Public Participation’s Spectrum of Public Participation Model.
SOURCE: © International Association for Public Participation, www.iap2.org.

PRINCIPLES FOR EMPOWERING AND ELEVATING COMMUNITY VOICES IN POLICYMAKING

1. Prioritize meaningful community input by moving past simply keeping communities informed and toward a more substantive level of input
2. Ensure effectiveness, efficiency, and equity in the way that community input is collected
3. Maximize information sharing across federal agencies while maintaining data privacy
4. Within each federal agency, maximize the sharing of information among federal, state, local, and tribal government counterparts

accountability mechanisms, makes conducting meaningful community involvement challenging. Figure 1 demonstrates an approach that can help promote productive and fruitful partnerships, as well as build community power as the role of communities moves to the right in the figure.

IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT FOR ALL POLICYMAKING?

Just as federal policies that do not explicitly focus on health can impact health and well-being, community

involvement and evidence can positively impact all policies, not only those that are health focused. The examples below demonstrate the positive impact of community engagement across numerous fields:

- Evidence shows that federal policy changes and investments can improve educational outcomes and provide direct benefits at a local level. However, optimal changes will vary across geographies, so community involvement in identifying and implementing these changes is critical (see Conclusion 4-2 in the report).

- A lack of adequate representation in clinical research limits the identification of safety or effectiveness issues that might be specific to populations that are not well represented (see Conclusion 5–5 in the report). Recent efforts to ensure inclusion are part of a broader recognition that community voice in health care is essential.
- The 2018 Farm Bill, due to sustained efforts from a group of 170 tribal governments, increased federal funding for a reservation-specific version of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and a demonstration project providing tribes more flexibility when purchasing food. These changes allow tribes to protect and build traditional food systems and respond to dietary needs with culturally appropriate food.

HOW CAN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PRIORITIZE, SUPPORT, AND CENTER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Community representation and advisory practices, integrated with accountability measures and enforcement mechanisms, should be central when changing or developing policies to advance health equity. Congress should also request that the Government Accountability Office develop a **report to assess the ways in which federal community advisory boards currently operate and outline promising methods** to improve their function among government agencies (see Recommendation 4 in the report).

Learn more about the report and its recommendations at www.nationalacademies.org/health-equity-policies.

Health and Medicine Division