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**CREATING A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

Community engagement is defined as “Engaging individuals and groups from the community to participate in a policy design and development through providing information, asking for feedback and reaction, and collaboration to empower decision making and action.” Community engagement allows those who are affected by or interested in an issue to be involved in decision-making.

For the Aging Network, the concept of community engagement aligns with the founding principle known as “The Aging Difference,” in which the people design the system that will serve them. Creating a Community Engagement Strategy is an important first step in the development of the 3-year aging plan and should define objectives, identify stakeholders, and describe engagement activities. A successful strategy ensures a variety of ideas and viewpoints are collected and used to guide the planning process. This document offers suggestions for creating a community engagement strategy to be used for the 2022-2024 Aging Plan.

**Step 1: Establish a Clear Purpose**

The public input process provides opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to the decision-making process as well as to learn about your agency’s programs and the aging plan process. Community engagement enhances relationship-building, helps identify community strengths and weaknesses and creates a vision for the future. When creating your engagement plan, these objectives are all important:

* **Convey information** – describe your agency’s programs and services and explain the aging plan process – by the people, for the people
* **Consult with the community -** discover needs, hopes, dreams, and a vision for future generations
* **Generate ideas** – brainstorm with each other and improve or develop new relationships
* **Empower stakeholders** – the community shouldfeel ownership in the plan

**Step 2: Define Stakeholders**

It is important to hear from as many people as possible and that there is representation from all groups of people in your community. You may need to use targeted, network-based outreach to engage people who typically don’t get involved but are crucial in getting an accurate picture of the community.

**Primary Stakeholders:**

* Those currently utilizing your services – older people and their caregivers
* Those who are eligible but do not utilize your services – find out why
* Engage those who have historically not been involved
* Be intentional in connecting with diverse populations

**Secondary Stakeholders:**

* Partner organizations
* Community agencies/organizations who you have not formed partnerships with
* General public – look for representation of all points of view
* Local leaders and respected community members - request their help in getting others to participate

**Step 3: Choose engagement activities**

Engagement activities should be varied in scope and nature in order to capture as many viewpoints as possible. Choose activities that will meet your stated purpose and best engage your stakeholders. Select activities that will appeal to all people who represent the community, not just those who already use your services.

* Facilitate large group activities such as listening sessions mixed with one-on-one interviews and focus groups.
* Hold events in-person (when able) and online and at various times of the day, meeting the needs of any interested participant.
* Ensure engagement activities include a way to convey information, consult with the community, generate ideas and empower ownership.
* It may be necessary to personally invite and/or offer incentives to individuals or groups that are important to hear from, such as minority groups and others who historically don’t participate.
* Use all methods to get the word out (mailers, flyers, emails, social media, PSAs, partner agencies, etc.).

**Virtual Community Engagement**

While traditional methods of gathering input may not be possible during the pandemic, there are many alternative methods that can be effective in hearing from your stakeholders as demonstrated below. Restrictions on the usual listening sessions and community forums will likely lead to using new, virtual methods that may reach people who were not able or not interested in attending in-person meetings.

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| **METHODS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT** | |
| **In Person** | **Virtually** |
| Interviews | Phone or video interviews |
| Focus groups | Virtual focus groups |
| Listening session | Virtual listening session |
| Presentation with small group discussions | Zoom meeting with breakout rooms |
| Live polling at a public meeting | Live polling during a webinar |
| Surveys to hand out | Online surveys or by mail |

**Ideas for virtual engagement:**

* **Hold interviews** (by phone or video) to learn the person’s thoughts and ideas on designated topics. Reach out to those who you have served or better yet, interview someone who has not used your services. Interviews can be conducted by board members, volunteers or members of various coalitions. Supply a common set of questions but allow the interviewer to follow-up with their own questions for more detail or clarification. Interviews work well with two people, one to ask questions and one to take notes on the conversation.
* **Virtual listening sessions** can be done on various virtual platforms. The facilitator guides a conversation based on a series of questions and responses are recorded. Participants can share using chat or be unmuted to share verbally. Breakout rooms could be used to divide into small groups discuss designated topics with a facilitator, then bring the group back together again.
* **Virtual focus groups** can be done via phone or video conference. Ask an existing group or group of invited persons to discuss a designated topic to collect information for your plan. A focus group is more controlled than a listening session and allows for the topic to be discussed at greater length/detail.
* **Online surveys** are a quick and easy way to collect information but don’t allow for as much flexibility, context or detail in the information you gather. Be sure to include an educational component and develop a plan for reaching the maximum number of people. Print copies should be available to send to people who are not online.
* **Send postcards ask people to participate.** Ask if they want to share their thoughts and ideas by phone, a letter or survey and let them know about other engagement opportunities.
* **Walking tours** are a creative way to provide hands-off outreach. Post signs along a walking path outdoors or hallway indoors explaining the plan and direct the viewer how and where to participate further.
* **Create a dedicated webpage** to keep all information in one place for people to easily find surveys, short educational videos, schedule of upcoming events, place to ask questions, comment and see others’ comments, etc.
* **Create an “engage tab” on website** for poll questions, surveys, one-word cards (“what comes to mind when you hear “senior center” or “meal site” or “older person” etc.).
* **Hold virtual “office hours”** when people can call to ask questions or share ideas. By designating certain days/times and a specific topic(s), it might be the impetus for people to engage.
* **Pre-record “brown bag lunches”** on various topics that people can watch to help understand programs and the aging plan process. Upload them to your website, Facebook or YouTube channel. Encourage viewers to comment or schedule a virtual conversation, allowing them to share their thoughts or ask questions.
* **Record videos of public officials** giving a presentation or sharing their thoughts on an existing program or ideas for something new. Share them widely and ask for comments.
* **Facebook has options for engaging with the public** :
* [Facebook Live](file:///C:\Users\jmahoney\AppData\Roaming\Microsoft\Word\facebook.com\formedia\solutions\facebook-live) - Go live on Facebook to broadcast a conversation, Q&A or virtual event. When broadcasting live, your community has the opportunity to join the conversation and ask questions, comment, react, or just follow along in real time.
* [Facebook Events](https://www.facebook.com/help/572885262883136) – gives you a dedicated place to post information and ideas and allows “attendees” to comment and see other people’s comments