

## INSPIRE's Community Engagement Learning Network

### Session #8: Navigating conflict in community engagement programs

**Featured presenter:** [National Health Care for the Homeless Council](#)

December 2025

Every month, the Community Engagement Learning Network brings together a nationwide team of community engagement (CE) professionals and people with lived experience to host group discussions about improving CE efforts, present best practices for launching and maintaining CE initiatives — drawn from experts in the field, and foster community-building among participants.



#### Key takeaways

- Conflict is a normal and unavoidable part of collaborative work, especially in spaces that center lived experience, shared leadership, and systems change.
- Conflict is often driven as much by emotions and assumptions as by the surface-level issue. Feelings of being unheard, unsupported, or unsafe can intensify disagreements.
- Taking time to pause and cool down before resolving conflict helps to prevent emotions from driving communication and decision-making.

- Apology, accountability, and mutual understanding are essential for repairing harm and rebuilding trust after conflict and when approached intentionally, conflict can strengthen relationships, deepen trust, and improve teamwork.
- There are several strategies that can help groups to prepare for conflict including:
  - Making time for relationship building
  - Creating community agreements and documented resolution processes
  - Investing in communication and conflict resolution training.



## Action steps

### For everyone (professionals leading CE and people with lived experience)

- Normalize conflict as part of authentic partnership work to help reduce fear of difficult conversations.
- Use explicit appreciation (e.g., “thank you for coming back to this conversation”) to recognize the emotional labor of conflict resolution.
- Support shared accountability by naming harm, encouraging apology, and reinforcing that conflict is about repair, not winning.
- Name when you do not feel supported, safe, or heard in moments of conflict, especially when power dynamics are present.
- Take a pause during tense moments so that emotions can settle before continuing difficult conversations. Return to the table after conflict when you feel ready, rather than disengaging completely.

### For professionals leading CE

- Collaborate with the PWLE you work with to create group agreements that address how to handle conflict. Consider establishing a documented grievance policy to create a shared understanding of how conflicts can be addressed within the organization.
- Provide communication and conflict resolution training for PWLE you work with.
- Build in regular relationship-building opportunities (check-ins, retreats, informal connection) so that trust exists before conflict occurs.

---

“Conflict becomes a doorway to deeper understanding and stronger community.”

---



## Resources for additional learning

- [Oops, Ouch, Whoa Protocol](#)
- [12 Skill Summary of Conflict Resolution - CR Network](#)
- [IPFCC - Developing Group Agreements with PFACs](#)

# inspire partners

### Organizations



### People with lived experience



Alan Coker



Burt Pusch



Laura Carroll



Rebecca Esparza



Savina Makalena



Stephanie Burdick