

INSPIRE's Community Engagement Learning Network

Session #11: Building organizational infrastructure and processes that authentically engage and support people with lived experience

Featured presenter: [Common Ground Health](#)

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Every month, the Community Engagement Learning Network will bring 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

- Authentic engagement of people with lived experience (PWLE) depends on organizational infrastructure that is intentionally designed to support it such as: staff roles and capacity, internal workflows, and decision-making processes.
- Trust with PWLE is built (or broken) through everyday interactions across roles; for example, timely responses, clear communication, and consistent follow-through.
- Staff supporting engagement need specific competencies including facilitation, active listening, translating community input into action, and navigating ambiguity.

- Effective engagement models provide multiple, flexible pathways for participation (e.g., advisory roles, project-based input, leadership positions), and routine check-ins with PWLE about how and at what phase they want to engage (e.g. do they want to help write the initial draft, or just review it after it's been drafted) rather than assuming static roles.
- Creating a sense of belonging requires intentional practices, such as offering prep sessions and debrief time before/after meetings, using plain language instead of technical jargon, and designing meeting environments that honor cultural practices and norms and accommodate real-life needs (e.g., allowing children to be present).
- Power dynamics are shaped not only by who is present, but by who controls agendas, funding, and decision-making. Organizations must explicitly examine and adjust these dynamics to ensure PWLE influence is substantive.
- Compensation for PWLE is essential but often operationally challenging; organizations must establish clear processes with finance teams (e.g., payment timelines, vendor setup, reimbursement mechanisms) to avoid delays that can erode trust.
- Trust is built through consistent, small actions over time—such as responding to requests, solving logistical challenges, and closing feedback loops—which signal reliability and reinforce that PWLE contributions are valued and acted upon.



Action steps

For people with lived experience

- To grow your impact, work with organizational partners to explore how PWLE can be engaged in decision-making processes, setting meeting agendas, shaping priorities, and influencing final decisions.
- Share how you prefer to engage (e.g., meeting formats, frequency, level of involvement), your areas of interest (e.g. attending advisory meetings, tabling, contributing to written materials, etc.), and ask for options if the current structure or opportunities don't meet your needs or align with your interests and skills.
- Work with organizational partners to identify and improve internal infrastructure that creates barriers to engagement (e.g., slow payment systems, unclear decision-making processes, lack of staff training).
- Name when processes feel rushed, overly technical, or disconnected from community priorities, particularly when organizational timelines limit meaningful participation.
- Set boundaries around your time and emotional labor, and ask for support, clarification, or adjustments when expectations are unclear or unsustainable.
- Communication openly about power dynamics—for example, when institutional staff control agendas or decisions—ask for changes that increase transparency and shared decision-making.

For professionals leading community-engaged research

- Audit your internal infrastructure to identify barriers to engagement (e.g., slow payment systems, unclear decision-making processes, lack of staff training) and work across departments to address them.
- Build staff capacity by training team members in facilitation, communication, and community engagement practices, and assign roles based on skill sets (e.g., pairing strong facilitators with community-facing work).
- Design engagement opportunities with flexibility by offering multiple ways to participate (e.g., standing meetings, short-term projects, leadership roles) and regularly asking PWLE how they want to be involved.
- Plan thoughtfully for meetings and conversations by: offering preparation and debrief opportunities, openly addressing norms and power dynamics, embracing cultural traditions, and providing appropriate accommodations.
- Engage PWLE in core organizational processes—not just programs—by including them in agenda-setting, governance discussions, hiring panels, and decisions about external partnerships or funding opportunities.
- Work with finance and administrative teams to create accessible compensation processes, including timely payments, simple invoicing or stipend systems, and clear communication about how and when PWLE will be paid.
- Create structured feedback loops by documenting how PWLE input influenced decisions, sharing updates regularly, and being transparent when input cannot be acted on due to constraints.
- Track and assess representation by collecting data on who is engaged, identifying gaps, and setting concrete targets to ensure community members have equitable presence and influence.

“Instead of in a transactional perspective of, 'give me the feedback I need and that's it', we take a transformational approach. How are we transforming our relationships and engagement to create meaningful improvement for the community -beyond just the project.”



Resources for additional learning

- [Common Ground Health's YouTube archive](#)
- [Hiring and Training Dedicated and Skilled Staff - INSPIRE CE Practice Library](#)
- [Integrating PWLE into Governance and Operations - INSPIRE CE Practice Library](#)

inspire partners

Organizations



People with lived experience



Alan
Coker



Burt
Pusch



Laura
Carroll



Rebecca
Esparza



Savina
Makalena



Stephanie
Burdick