

## INSPIRE's Community Engagement Learning Network

Session #14: Engaging people with lived experience on organization boards and governance committees in ways that are inclusive and impactful

Featured presenters: [Camden Coalition](#)  
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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

- Integrating people with lived experience (PWLE) into organizational boards and governance committees requires intentional design, not just good intentions. Organizations must proactively address recruitment, onboarding, compensation, and ongoing support to avoid tokenism and ensure meaningful participation.
- Building trust over time is foundational. Governance participation is most successful when it grows out of sustained relationships, such as through a community advisory committee that serves as a pipeline to board membership.

- Compensation for governance participation is a necessity, not a perk. Organizations should pay PWLE for their time and provide flexible compensation structures to avoid jeopardizing participants' public benefits.
- Authentic engagement requires creating psychological safety, reducing jargon, using plain language, and making structural accommodations. Meaningful participation means PWLE help shape decisions, not just observe or advise from the margins.
- Leadership buy-in and organizational infrastructure — including bylaws that formalize community member roles — help sustain this work over time, regardless of staff turnover.



## Action steps

### Embed commitment to community engagement across the organization

- Reflect on and clarify the “why” behind integrating PWLE into governance. Ground your commitment in the organization’s mission, not just grant requirements.
- Consider writing board representation of PWLE into your organizational bylaws or other governing documents so that the commitment persists through leadership transitions.
- Embed community engagement expectations in mission statements and strategic plans to signal organizational commitment and guide staff accountability.
- Avoid treating community engagement as a standalone budget line that is easy to cut. Instead, integrate community engagement activities and compensation for PWLE into all program proposals, contracts, and grants as a core component of the work.
- Develop a community advisory committee or similar structure that can serve as a pathway to board membership, allowing relationships and trust to develop before individuals step into more formal governance roles.

### Create psychological safety and support authentic participation

- Train staff who work alongside PWLE to be culturally competent, trauma-informed, and genuinely invested in making everyone feel valued - not just present.
- Acknowledge and actively address power dynamics in governance settings. Establish shared norms for meetings that create space for PWLE to speak, ask questions, and challenge assumptions.

- Be transparent with PWLE about their role and the scope of their decision-making authority. Clarity about what they can influence -and what is out of scope- builds trust.
- Use plain language in all meeting materials and discussions. Avoid jargon or define it clearly when it cannot be avoided.
- Offer thorough onboarding and ongoing support that includes:
  - Pre-meetings to build familiarity with the organization, key staff, and other board members
  - Plain-language board materials and glossaries of key terms
  - Introductions to all departments and staff — including leadership, IT, and finance
  - A “board buddy” - a fellow board or committee member paired with the new participant to serve as a consistent point of contact

## Compensate and remove barriers proactively

- Compensate PWLE for their full time, including preparation and follow-up, not just time spent in meetings.
- Anticipate and address logistical barriers before they become reasons people cannot participate:
  - Provide transportation support (e.g., ride services or reimbursements)
  - Offer hybrid meeting options
  - Consider caregiving reimbursements and scheduling accommodations
  - Provide internet access supports (e.g., hotspots) for participants without reliable connectivity
- Work with your financial and legal departments to build compensation systems that are flexible and do not inadvertently reduce participants’ public benefits (e.g., SSI, Medicaid, SNAP). Options like gift cards, smaller installments, or donations to organizations of their choice can help.

## Pursue co-creation as the goal

- Aspire toward co-creation and shared decision-making, not just input or consultation. The most meaningful governance integration happens when community members help shape programs, policies, and priorities alongside organizational leadership. This can happen by:
  - Engaging PWLE from the beginning of new initiatives, not in the middle or at the end. Early involvement shapes better outcomes.
  - Ensuring shared clarity of all parties (board members, organizational leadership, PWLE, etc.) on roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority.
  - Build systems that document insights and recommendations offered by PWLE and create a feedback loop process to follow up on whether recommendations were acted upon and what the impact was.

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“We don't do community engagement just as pop-up focus groups or listening sessions; we build ongoing structures and relationships over time.”

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## Resources for additional learning

- [Integrating PWLE into Governance and Operations - INSPIRE](#)
- [Supporting Participation - INSPIRE](#)
- [Engagement of Co-Designers – Casey Family Programs](#)

# inspire partners

### Organizations



### People with lived experience



Alan Coker



Burt Pusch



Laura Carroll



Rebecca Esparza



Savina Makalena



Stephanie Burdick