inspire *community engagement for better healthcare*

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INSPIRE's Community Engagement Learning Network

Session #17: building ethical partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) to support community engagement initiatives.

Featured presenters: Tanisha Armstrong, MPH
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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

- Community-based organizations (CBOs) bring essential assets to community engagement efforts, including trust, relationships, cultural knowledge, community connections, and experience.
- Ethical partnerships require attention to power dynamics. Larger organizations often control funding, decision-making, data, and public recognition, while smaller organizations may feel unable to advocate for their needs because they depend on that funding to continue serving their communities.

- Equitable partnerships require shared decision-making from the beginning, inviting all partners to participate in designing programs, establishing priorities, identifying desired outcomes, and determining how resources and responsibilities will be shared.
- Funding equity means covering the true cost of the work. This includes providing fair indirect costs, considering advance payments and staff time, reducing administrative burdens, and ensuring that CBOs have the resources and infrastructure needed to deliver services effectively.
- Data and recognition should be shared. CBOs need access to the data they help collect so they can demonstrate their effectiveness, strengthen their organizations, and become future lead applicants. They should also receive meaningful public recognition for their contributions and outcomes.
- Ethical partnerships should build the long-term capacity of CBOs, not keep them dependent on short-term funding as subgrantees. Larger organizations should consider what technical assistance, infrastructure, and support would help CBOs grow into lead applicants and develop sustainable operations.
- Trust is essential to successful partnerships. Relationships built through honest communication, shared investment, and mutual respect make it easier to navigate difficult conversations, including disagreements and unexpected budget cuts.
- Funders have an important role to play in promoting equity by establishing expectations and accountability measures that ensure lead applicants appropriately resource their partners and demonstrate meaningful shared governance.



Action steps

Design partnerships around equity, not extraction

- Assess whether your current partnerships provide mutual benefit. Consider:
  - Who benefits most from the partnership — your organization or the community-based partner?
  - Are partners involved in decisions, or are they primarily asked to carry out plans that have already been developed?
  - Are the assets and expertise of each partner recognized and valued?
- Share data with community-based partners. Develop data agreements that allow CBOs to access and use the information they help collect to demonstrate their impact and strengthen their capacity.
- Provide shared recognition for the work. Include CBO logos on materials, acknowledge their contributions in press releases, and create opportunities for their staff to participate in interviews, presentations, and other public-facing activities.

- Build relationships that extend beyond individual grants. Consider how your organization can connect partners with other organizations, resources, and opportunities that support their long-term goals.

Resource and strengthen CBO capacity

- Ensure funding reflects the true cost of the work. Consider fair indirect costs, advance payments, staff time, and other expenses required for CBOs to deliver services.
- Ask partners what they need to succeed rather than making assumptions internally about what support they require.
- Provide technical assistance that helps CBOs build their capacity to lead, such as:
  - Grant writing support and assistance in identifying funding opportunities.
  - Software, technology, or other tools that make reporting and administrative tasks easier.
  - Support with budgeting, invoicing, and financial management.
  - Infrastructure and staff development to support organizational growth.
- Right-size reporting requirements. Determine which data elements CBOs actually need to report and help them (as needed) to develop tools and systems to collect and manage that information.

Build accountability for ethical partnerships

- Consider whether your organization's mission and values are reflected in the way you work with partners. Ethical responsibility extends beyond meeting grant requirements and achieving program outcomes.
- Be transparent about funding changes, limitations, and potential future opportunities. Agree on revised budgets and scopes of work together so that responsibilities and expectations remain clear.
- Establish expectations for shared governance, sustainability, and meaningful collaboration rather than relying solely on letters of support to demonstrate a partnership.
- Recognize that trust takes time to build and can be damaged by inequitable partnerships. Make space for honest conversations about power, past harms, and what each partner needs from the relationship.

> “We cannot let all of our relationships simply end when the funding ends. We have to build

beyond the funding cycle, and we also have to be building between funding cycles."

Resources for additional learning

- Ensuring Representation - The Center to Advance Consumer Partnership
- Foundational Expectations for Partnerships in Research | PCORI
- How CBOs and Healthcare Organizations Can Create Mutually Beneficial Partnerships for Equity - HealthBegins
- The PATIENTS Professors Academy

inspire partners

Organizations

Camden Coalition

Community Catalyst

cacp the center to advance consumer partnership

PFCCpartners Patient & Family Centered Care

INSTITUTE FOR PATIENT- AND FAMILY-CENTERED CARE® Transforming health care through partnerships

People with lived experience


Alan Coker


Burt Pusch


Laura Carroll


Rebecca Esparza


Savina Makalena


Stephanie Burdick