# Meaningful Community Engagement for Workforce Planning

## The Intent of This Tip Sheet

While the recommendations in this document are not exhaustive, it does reflect some key elements of a meaningful engagement process. If you have practices that have worked in the past to engage a broad and diverse participation of community members, stakeholders and partners, consider these recommendation to help enhance your work.

## Why do Community Engagement?

It is important to have community engagement and make good faith attempts to involve residents, stakeholders and other workforce programs in the planning process. A planning process without community engagement risks missing the mark on the needs of the community.

## Benefits of Community Engagement?

1. Legitimacy and increased support for plans and projects. When you work with stakeholders and community, you receive the buy-in and support necessary to implement good projects.
2. Bringing people together can create an opportunity develop new resources and partnerships that will help serve your program participants more effectively.
3. Through a good faith planning process, we can begin to address equity concerns. We will not resolve those issues in one planning process, but an honest and transparent process will allow for new voices to emerge that may have previously not been at the table. When government does not shy away from difficult topics such as needs of target populations, cultural and language barriers etc., we can become a part of the solution to economic disparities.
4. This could lead to better projects. No matter how knowledgeable staff is, how much data they have, we can never fully be aware of the community concerns and voices without community input. Communities know their neighborhoods best and can offer insight on how to best access/deliver services/programs.

The intent of the planning process is to be inclusive and reflective of the programs and people you serve. For a robust process, we propose adhering to four basic principles:

## The Four Principles:

1. Ask yourself who is missing?
2. Make a targeted outreach plan
3. Go where people are
4. Make the process accessible and meaningful

### Who is Missing?

The California Department of Education has provided you with a list of stakeholders you can engage in the process, from required regional consortia members to organizations that serve low income social service program recipients, immigrants and refugees among many others. Develop relationships with these leaders to identify the barriers they have accessing your services, identify target population needs and generally what are the barriers to employment target populations face.

* Other non-traditional stakeholders may include:
  + Disability rights groups
  + Faith organizations
  + Immigrant rights groups
  + Youth and foster youth advocates
  + Social and economic justice organizations
  + Ethnic based organizations
* Consider engaging faith based organizations, many tackle social justice and economic justice issues.
* Create many entry points for community engagement. This can include knowledge sharing, opportunities to educate new partners on workforce and asking for feedback etc.

### Make a Targeted Outreach Plan

While it may be easy to replicate an old process or take shortcuts, doing it right will be worth the work. Given the State’s increased focus on underserved and vulnerable populations, this work requires an equitable and successful engagement process. Pay special attention to target audiences, identify the best tools to conduct outreach, and have clear objectives and resources.

* Leverage existing networks of community based organizations and expand your reach. Make sure you make a good faith effort to reach diverse communities, and don’t be afraid to ask for advice from your partners that have a history of robust engagement processes.
* Attend/participate in community meetings or cultural events. This will be the best way to learn about the issues that matter to your community and the language and context in which they talk about them. This is important, be sensitive to the experiences that others in your community are living through. Be open to learning, and be mindful of power dynamics due to race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and class or gender differences.
* Aside from the planning process, create opportunities to have “meet and greets” with community groups and other stakeholders, so they can become more familiar with each other’s programs, and hopefully build other partnerships. Get to know groups, and avoid working with groups that are not representative of the communities you are seeking to serve through your programs. Don’t over rely on the groups you know or those that are easily identifiable, despite their good work, they likely aren’t the only advocates in town.
* Build in incentives for participating in the planning process. Many of the individuals you want to participate will be working families or low income. Host your meetings in the evening and on weekends and whenever possible work with partners to help provide childcare.
* In California more than one-third of the workforce is foreign born and speak languages other than English. Provide interpretation at community meetings, engage your partners in making sure that the process is accessible. This will help increase participation and help communities feel more welcome into the process.

### Go Where People Are

Work with partners to identify events already happening in your community. Turnout at community events can be difficult but if you plan ahead, and use community events to get the word out that will be a big help. Possible partners that can help you get out the word include libraries, churches, adult education partners (they have students that you may or may not already be serving) and of course your community partners.

Given the language barriers that many will face, think about outreach to non-English speakers beforehand, including the use of community radio shows, community newsletters, and your partner groups.

* Use diverse social media techniques to help share information on the planning process, what the workforce system is, how people can be involved and why their voice matters.
* Host your community engagement meetings/events at neutral sites, and make use of community spaces such as community centers, adult schools etc.
* Work with community organizations and education partners to help structure your meetings in the most constructive way possible.

### Make the Process Accessible and Meaningful

It’s a good idea to allow a neutral facilitation of your community engagement meetings when vulnerable populations are involved. While not required, it’s highly recommended particularly if there isn’t much trust or existing relationships. Creating a safe space where community members, leaders and stakeholders can have open conversations is important to the process. Often a neutral facilitator can help accomplish that safe space. The facilitator should understand the local community, facilitation should be comprehensive, not transactional. For example, a conversation on types of workforce trainings isn’t about just identifying a list, it should also be accompanied by conversations around barriers that currently prevent people from accessing programs/services, and supportive services necessary.

* Be clear about the expectations around stakeholder engagement, equity inclusion and partnership. Work to proactively identify barriers to meeting those expectations and dedicate resources to address those needs.
* Communicate key decision points in your planning process, workgroup committees, deadlines, plan draft dates, public comment period, any votes etc.
* Structure your meetings to make sure you have representation from various communities, and be mindful to not structure meetings in such a way that their voices are marginalized during difficult conversations.
* If there are sub-contracting opportunities for community partners, be transparent about the process and encourage them to participate.
* Consider establishing an equity workgroup to ensure you are long-term mindful of serving and working directly with targeted populations in your community.
* Proactively help cultivate new leaders. Leaders in your community serving community can become your strongest allies, and best advocates.