Capacity Building Through Effective Meaningful Engagement

A TOOL FOR LOCAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS

How to Use This Booklet

This booklet is intended to help local and state government officials create or expand their plan for engaging meaningfully with the communities most affected by their actions. The plan will depend on existing levels of engagement with affected communities, level of community interest, available resources and other factors; therefore, no two approaches to meaningful engagement will be exactly alike. The examples included here are not intended to be blueprints for what "successful meaningful engagement" should look like in all situations, but instead help spark ideas as you develop your plan for meaningful community engagement.

WHY IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

Pursuing the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people potentially impacted by environmental policies or laws is a central tenet of the Environmental Protection Agency. It means:

- People have an **opportunity to participate in decisions** about activities that may affect their environment and/or health.
- The public's contribution can **influence the decision maker**.
- **Community concerns** will be considered in the decision-making process.
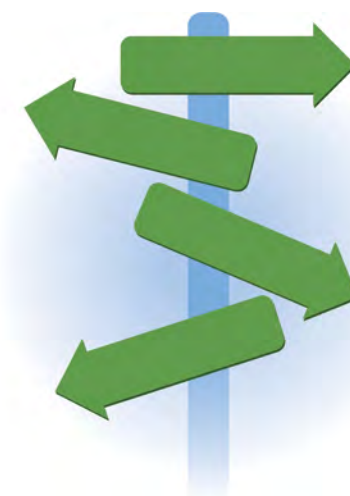- Decision makers seek out and facilitate the **involvement of those potentially affected**.

WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF WELL-DESIGNED MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT?[1]

- **INCREASES THE LIKELIHOOD OF ACCEPTANCE** for projects and solutions.
- **GENERATES SOLUTIONS** that are more effective.
- **EMPOWERS AND INTEGRATES PEOPLE** from different backgrounds.
- **BUILDS LOCAL NETWORKS** of community members that are committed to helping make the project and solutions come to fruition.
- **INCREASES TRUST** in community organizations and governance.
- **CREATES OPPORTUNITIES** for discussing concerns.

1 Penn State University and the College of Agriculture Sciences' Center for Economic and Community Development. (n.d.). *Why community engagement matters*. Retrieved from **https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/why-community-engagement-matters**. Adapted from Bassler, A. (2008). *Developing Effective Citizen Engagement: A How-to Guide for Community Leaders*. Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

EMPOWERED DECISION-MAKING TOOLS

ACCESSIBILITY
DISTRIBUTING
CROSS-CULTURAL FORMATS
CAPACITY BUILDING
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
MULTIPLE LANGUAGES
INFO
EMPOWERMENT
QUALITY INPUT
TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION
TRANSPARENCY
FEEDBACK LOOPS
ADVISORY BOARDS
COMMUNICATE
LIMITATIONS
CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:
Increasing Impact on Decision Making

The Spectrum can help you identify what type of engagement you are planning and whether it is possible and desirable to use a more inclusive form of engagement. Note that a single effort can appropriately use multiple types of engagement (e.g., inform the public about an opportunity to volunteer for a committee that collaboratively engages to answer specific questions).

IAP2 SPECTRUM OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION[2]

International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist organizations in establishing and communicating clear expectations regarding the intent of projects. The Spectrum is organized around the principle that the level of public participation is directly tied to the level of potential public influence on the decision or action being considered.
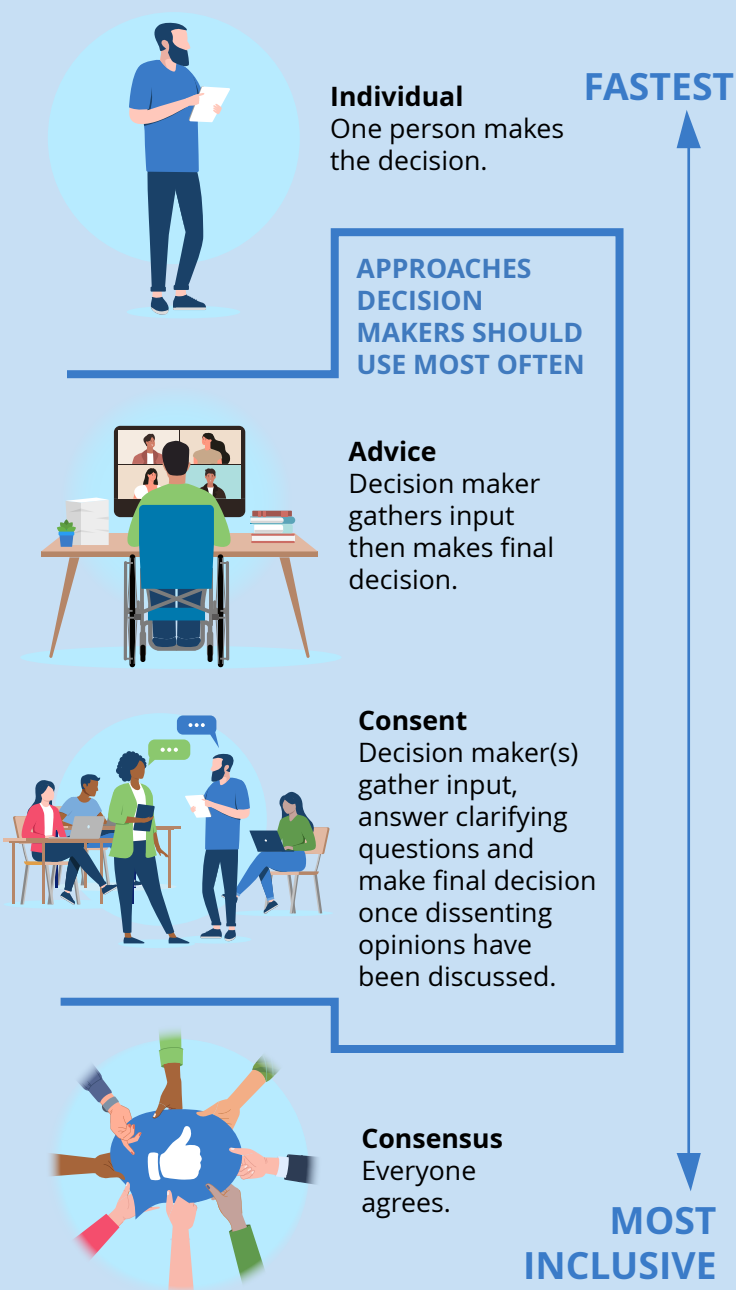
INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE	We will keep the public informed.	We will keep the public informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with the public to ensure that its concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to the public for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate its advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what the public decides.

2 International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). The Spectrum of Public Participation. IAP2

APPROACHES TO MAKING DECISIONS
EMPOWERED DECISION MAKING WHILE MAINTAINING ENGAGEMENT

Is it more important to make your decision quickly or inclusively? The chart below illustrates the different approaches you, your team and communities can take toward making inclusive decisions. While streamlined decisions might be quick at first, more inclusive decisions can often be more durable and lead to less opposition or roadblocks later.

AUGUST METHOD[3]

Individual
One person makes the decision.

FASTEST

APPROACHES DECISION MAKERS SHOULD USE MOST OFTEN

Advice
Decision maker gathers input then makes final decision.

Consent
Decision maker(s) gather input, answer clarifying questions and make final decision once dissenting opinions have been discussed.

Consensus
Everyone agrees.

MOST INCLUSIVE

3 August Inc. (n.d.) Empowered Decision Making. Retrieved from
https://www.aug.co/decision-making.

Compass to Meaningful Engagement

Identify
Identify impacted communities and opportunities for local partnerships.

Educate
Educate yourself and your organization on the unique needs and aspirations of the communities affected.

Inform
Inform the public of upcoming or ongoing projects that may affect them through multiple widely accessible information streams.

Involve
Authentically communicate with the community to receive their input on your proposed project by offering multiple opportunities to solicit feedback.

Engage
Create an ecosystem of continuous and purposeful communication with community members and other interested parties.

Evaluate
Evaluate and adjust your engagement practices based on feedback from community members and other interested parties.
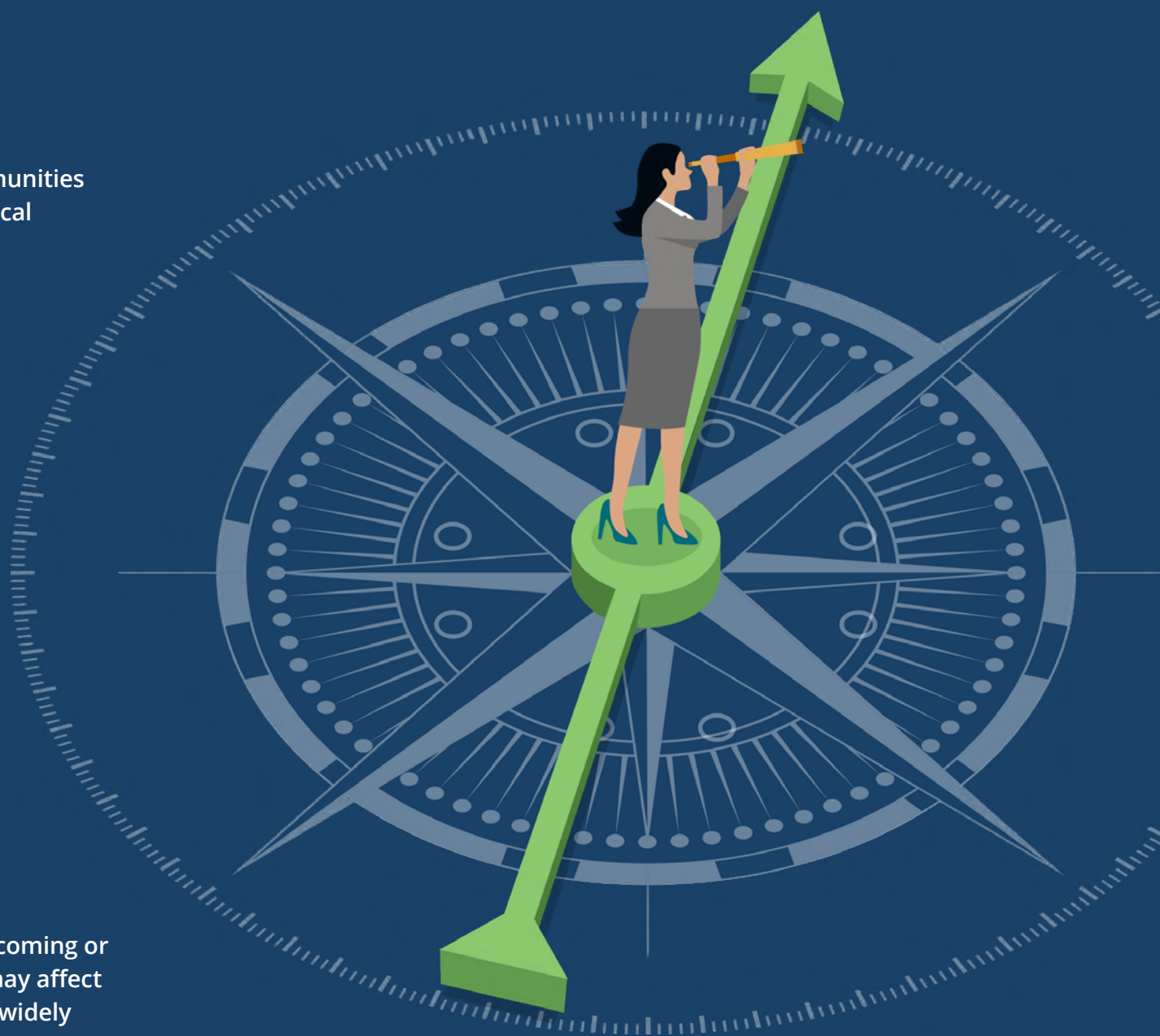
Roadmap to Building Trust Within the Community

1 Setting the groundwork

A. Outline prior engagement efforts and develop a list of best practices and available resources.

B. Leverage existing relationships with community partners and organizations to ensure diverse perspectives are represented.

C. Confer with members of the community to identify and prioritize knowledge gaps, community-specific concerns, aspirations and any shared goals.

D. Consider what entities will be essential in the decision-making process to enact change.

E. Create a set of standard operating procedures on communication norms with your community members, partners and other interested parties.

2 Establish and maintain positive relationships with all community partners involved or potentially affected

A. Build a coalition or advisory board that includes community members to continue initial outreach conversations and create a space for collaborative brainstorming and sharing experiences.

B. Create opportunities of various formats to provide feedback and express ideas.

C. Ensure that all materials use plain writing and are available in English and other appropriate languages.

D. Ensure that outreach activities provide sufficient background information so that individuals from the community can productively engage.

E. Maintain honesty and transparency in the process by explaining limitations in authority and by providing opportunities for community feedback and clear explanations for how community input has been incorporated into the final product or why it cannot be incorporated.

3 Manage and resolve conflict throughout the engagement process

A. Develop accessible, effective and inclusive methods of communication and decision making while empowering communities to voice their concerns freely and in a constructive manner.

B. Establish clear roles and responsibilities to organize and provide structure for decision making.

C. Establish a feedback process to incorporate continuous and authentic input regarding adjustments to your engagement plan.

D. Consider the potential need for a facilitator to provide support with difficult conversations or strained community relationships.

4 Create a Community Engagement Plan

A. Develop a plan with community involvement that outlines the benefits and disbenefits that the local community will receive and defines when and how community engagement will occur throughout and beyond the entirety of the project. This plan should include:

1. Community engagement goals
2. Decision-making criteria
3. Reporting mechanisms
4. Accountability measures
5. Timeline
6. Community concerns and goals
7. Established metrics and data collection systems
8. Levers for change
9. Strategies for reducing community burden

5 Establish consent on the Community Engagement Plan

A. Host consultations on the final draft Community Engagement Plan and inform communities, ensuring the opportunity to provide feedback before finalizing.

B. Empower communities by accepting feedback often, offering multiple ways to submit comments including written and oral.

i. Your engagement plan should outline how your efforts are intended to mitigate the potential risks to the community that can arise throughout the project timeline, which can include project and process impacts, public criticism, lack of participation, as well as community confusion.

ii. By taking a proactive approach to identifying and addressing potential concerns before they arise, you can best ensure the effectiveness of your Community Engagement Plan.
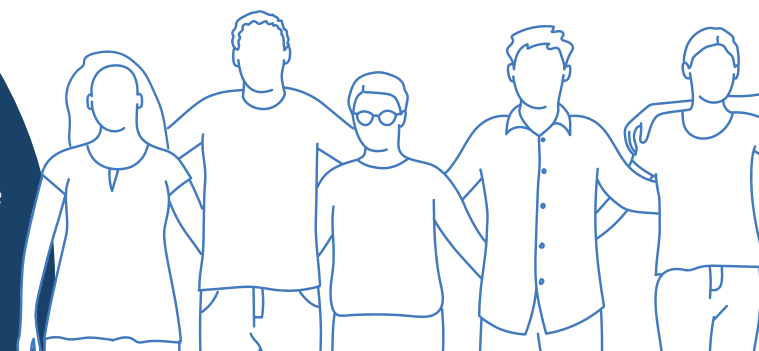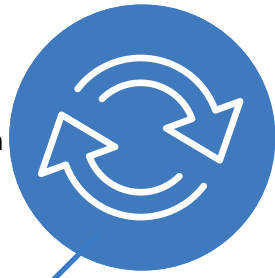
6 Build momentum for implementing the Community Engagement Plan

A. Inform additional community partners and decision makers of the Community Engagement Plan and fairly emphasize alignment of project and community goals.

B. Collaborate with local governing bodies to increase support and ensure feasibility.

C. Consider piloting elements of the plan with community members to gauge early successes.

8 Drive the process to maintain ongoing engagement

A. Develop a cadence for welcoming community feedback throughout and beyond the life of the project, providing milestone updates and creating opportunities for continued engagement.

B. Open several channels of communication such as large and small group meetings, public comment periods, newsletter dissemination, coffee chats and online or paper feedback. Establish a plan for conflict resolution (mediated/facilitated/etc.). Use plain language infographics or short videos distributed through social media to raise awareness.

C. Inform community members of future projects and opportunities for collaboration.

D. Community engagement is crucial to systemic change, but can be difficult at times to incorporate and involve a variety of voices at the decision-making table. The Feedback Loop process can help.

   i. The Feedback Loop process can engage residents and community members, particularly in marginalized groups where voices are often not heard or considered, by creating a community-centered approach and a sense of shared ownership within the community — resulting in continuous input and improvement.

   ii. A Feedback Loop process is a recurring cycle where the output of a system is used to adjust its inputs or operations, enabling continuous improvement.

7 Gather feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the Community Engagement Plan

A. Consult with community members on progress and process to date.

B. Identify obstacles to greater public participation and engagement.

C. Identify areas of improvement for future projects and develop lessons learned.

D. Ensure clear and measurable outcomes are being properly reported and effectively communicated to communities.

E. Solicit feedback on and assess the effectiveness of engagement strategies.

Community attendance has been shown to increase on average by 70% when the Feedback Loop process was implemented.[4]

4 Jackson, K. T., et al. (2018). Community Engagement : Using Feedback Loops to Empower Residents and Influence Systemic Change in Culturally Diverse Communities. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 9(2), 1-21. Retrieved from *https://www.gjcpp.org/en/article.php?issue=30&article=179*.

Example Engagement Strategies

At the US EPA, we work through partnerships that seek to create communication and collaboration across jurisdictional and cultural boundaries. Our ethic of working together reinforces community bonds, strengthens our nation's social fabric and fosters community prosperity while improving public health and our environment. By building stronger relationships and reaching out to underserved and overburdened communities, we can more effectively promote public health and the environment through treating fairly and honoring all the communities we serve. To that end, the examples below are intended to inspire local and state governments to meaningfully engage the public in a more inclusive and accessible manner. While the examples below may not necessarily align with the timing and resources available, the overarching engagement techniques are applicable.

ENGAGING WITH THE CAUSE THROUGH ART AND LITERATURE

1 The 2022 EPA Clean Air Act Excellence Award Recipient: City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law Center for Urban Environmental Reform — "Mayah's Lot," by Charlie LaGreca & Rebecca Bratspies

■ **CONCEPT**
Creating accessible information for the public through art and literature.

■ **BACKGROUND**
Before members of a community are motivated to engage, they need to make a connection between the topic at hand and themselves. An innovative graphic novel uses storytelling to help students make this connection. Written by Rebecca Bratspies and Charlie LaGreca under the auspices of the CUNY Center for Urban Environmental Reform, "Mayah's Lot" is the first book and video in the "Environmental Justice Chronicles"— a series of graphic novels that tell the story of young people who organize their community to advocate for environmental justice. Students learn basic civics, leadership, some science and the importance of community cohesion. Students create their own comic books, then develop and implement an environmental justice campaign that builds change within their own community.

Cover image of "Mayah's Lot," the first installment in the "Environmental Justice Chronicles." Art by Charlie LaGreca.

Multiple approaches were employed before the comic books were developed.

■ **RESULTS**
"Mayah's Lot" has grown into a video and curriculum, as well as a teacher training program, that has engaged thousands of students in classrooms across New York City, the United States and beyond, as well as a teacher training program. "Mayah's Lot" has been incorporated into Chicago's Curriculum Equity Initiative and the Urban Waters and Groundwork USA Environmental Justice Curriculum, a Subject-to-Climate lesson plan and is featured as a teaching resource by many organizations, including Children's Environmental Health Network.

Source: Bratspies, Rebecca M., Mayah's Lot: Teaching Environmental Justice With Comic Books (August 22, 2019). Forthcoming chapter in The Media Method: Teaching Law With Pop Culture (Christine A. Corcos, ed.), Available at SSRN: *https://ssrn.com/abstract=3441397*.

CREATING ACCESSIBLE CONTENT TO FOSTER ENGAGEMENT

2 University of Louisville Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute, KY

■ CONCEPT
Creating accessible information for the public through art and literature.

■ BACKGROUND
Launched in 2018, the University of Louisville Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute is dedicated to bringing a holistic approach to researching the relationship between humans, their environment and their communities. The institute collaborates with the Louisville Metro Government, other universities, federal grantors, philanthropic donors, corporations and K-12 schools.

■ RESULTS
• Development of video abstracts to provide a visual element to research articles.
• Development of personal testimonies as part of masking campaign, including a social media push and virtual forums.
• Support of an open repository of local data governed by community volunteers.
• Development of interactive online media to connect residents to environmental health research, as well as virtual and in-person meetings.

• Collection of wastewater data from the public which was published weekly online to help residents understand risk.
• Creation of an online Science Communication Live Office Hour for community members to join, learn and ask questions.

Source: *https://louisville.edu/envirome/thecoimmunityproject/2021OutreachRecap.pdf*.

ENGAGING COMMUNITY BY BRIDGING BARRIERS

3 California Department of Public Health's Environmental Health Investigations Branch

■ CONCEPT
Navigating cultural and linguistic barriers in community engagement.

■ BACKGROUND
Local health departments told the California Department of Public Health's Environmental Health Investigations Branch (EHIB) about lead poisoning among immigrant children from imported makeup called "surma" or "kohl" that is used for cultural practices. The Western States Pediatric Environmental

Health Specialty Unit partnered with the EHIB to publish fact sheets based on EHIB's work with community members.

■ PROCESSES
• Leaders in Northern California's Afghan communities played key roles in the development, field testing and dissemination of the fact sheets.
• EHIB first interviewed community leaders on surma use among adults and children.

• EHIB determined that multiple surma fact sheets were needed because of important cultural nuances, including different names for surma, ways it is applied, and beliefs around its purpose and benefits.
• Community leaders recruited participants for focus groups and field testing of the fact sheets in mosques and other community spaces, which helped EHIB to address some cultural myths

around surma in the educational messages.

■ RESULTS
Using professional translators and native speaker reviewers:
• EHIB developed seven fact sheets, each targeted to different immigrant and refugee populations using appropriate languages, terms and images.
• EHIB also provided lead-free eye pencils to community members who exchanged them for surma products containing lead, so that their cultural practices could continue.

• An Afghan community leader and a local doctor also recorded a satellite Afghan TV call-in show in Dari and Pashto to raise awareness about lead in surma with a global audience.

Source: *Engaging Communities for Greater Equity and Environmental Justice (ca.gov), Page 50*

DOWNSTREAM MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

4.1 EPA Office of Radiation and Indoor Air (ORIA) Schools Program: Schools Health and Indoor Environments Leadership (SHIELD) Network

■ CONCEPT
Providing a framework for training instructors on how to train other individuals in their organization, also known as the train-the-trainer framework.

■ BACKGROUND
The SHIELD Network recruits, coordinates, organizes and consults with a multi-disciplinary group of community leaders and interested parties to advance principles and practices that achieve healthier indoor learning environments and support the development of environmental quality programs in school districts nationwide. EPA convenes the SHIELD Network, consisting of the top leadership in the healthy school's movement, several times a year partnering with the EHIB to publish fact sheets based on EHIB's work with community members.

■ PROCESSES
• Established in 2013, members were recruited by the US EPA

Office of Radiation and Indoor Air (ORIA) Indoor Environments Division (IED) Schools Team and invited to join based on their strong track record of school indoor air quality (IAQ) activities and results and a demonstrated sustained commitment to healthy and sustainable indoor learning environments.
• Several times a year, SHIELD hosts interactive action-learning events intended to connect and inspire the group in service to create healthier indoor learning environments.
• In 2014, the SHIELD Network designed one way of moving

school staff toward mastery by helping to develop and deliver the original IAQ Tools for the Schools Professional Training Webinar series.
• Since then, they have developed three webinar series consisting of more than 30 live and on-demand offerings. The series were developed to address the specific areas school partners have committed to actively achieving dramatic results in health, academic and building performance.

■ RESULTS
• At least 5,000 school champions are in action to achieve transformative health, academic and facilities improvements by committing to IAQ mastery.
• The development of tools and recorded trainings accessible to those unable to join live.
• A membership of 130 of the top leadership from every sector in the healthy schools movement.

4.2 School District Faculty Coaching

■ BACKGROUND

Indoor Environments Division (IED) recruits school districts from across the country who have effective indoor air quality (IAQ) programs. IED works to empower them to serve as peer mentors to other school districts nationwide as faculty speakers in the IAQ Tools for Schools Professional Training Webinar Series. As the teams meet school district personnel through conferences and engaging events for interested parties, strong candidates are welcomed into the training program to serve as models.

■ PROCESS

IED began recruiting and coaching School District "Faculty" Mentors in the early 2000s. District Faculty began as IAQ Tools for Schools Excellence Award Winners who then served as Model Presenters during annual IAQ Tools for Schools Symposium events. These Symposium workshops trained 400-500 school community members and other interested parties on implementing IAQ Plans and achieving improved environmental and health outcomes in schools. After the Symposiums ended in 2011 due to reductions in funding, current and new district faculty have been active in providing technical expertise on the IAQ Professional Training Webinar Series and during conference presentations nationwide.

■ RESULTS

Development of program activities, such as:

• Highlighting their districts as featured presenters on the IAQ Tools for Schools Professional Webinar Series.

• Preparing Case Studies and Program Spotlights about their district IAQ programs.

• Featuring their school districts IAQ programs as examples in guidance materials.

• Supporting them to become Master Class members by taking all 10 original webinars in the series and then inviting them into the SHIELD Network.

• Encouragement of peer-to-peer mentorship.

4.3 Direct Technical Assistance and Training to School Districts

■ BACKGROUND

IED consults with subject matter experts to provide direct technical assistance to school districts to address their unique and specific needs for improving IAQ in their schools.

■ PROCESS

• **2020:** Added a webinar series focused on creating a healthy learning environment.

• **2021:** Hosted additional webinars on ventilation in schools and the importance of monitoring IAQ in schools.

■ RESULTS

• Developed a three-part webinar series to address the specific areas interested parties in the network have committed to actively address to achieve dramatic results in health, academic and building performance.

• Developed a 10-part webinar series to provide robust foundational technical knowledge to start, improve or sustain an IAQ management program.

• Developed 16 webinars on the foundational technical knowledge to build capacity to take immediate action.

• Develop a webinar series focused on sustaining healthy learning environments.

• All webinars are offered both live and on-demand to accommodate those who cannot join in real time.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

2003 Public Involvement Policy

Superfund Community Involvement Handbook

Community Action for a Renewed Environment (CARE)

EPA's Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving Model

Making a Visible Difference in Communities

Environmental Justice Primer for Ports

EPA Office of Community Revitalization

EJ Collaborative Problem-Solving Grants (EJ CPS)