

The nine dimensions of authentic community engagement

Community engagement is a powerful tool for organizations that want to create lasting and positive change. When done well, community engagement builds trust, advances health equity, creates cost-savings and efficiencies for healthcare organizations, and leads to healthy and thriving communities.

But all community engagement is not created equal. Too often, healthcare professionals and community members alike find that well-intentioned community engagement initiatives feel tokenistic, transactional, and unimpactful. What is often missing is an understanding of how to create **authentic partnerships** between organizations and communities.

INSPIRE¹ is a national partnership project made up of people with lived experience (PWLE) and organizations committed to advancing partnerships between healthcare organizations and community members/PWLE across the country. To do this, it is important for us to have a **shared understanding of who “community” is and what “community engagement” means.**²

It is also important that we understand what makes community engagement meaningful (or not).

Through a series of facilitated conversations with people with lived experience and the organizational representatives who make up the INSPIRE Core Team, we identified nine dimensions of authentic community engagement. We shared and validated these dimensions with other healthcare professionals and people with lived experience during project listening sessions.



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**Learn more
about INSPIRE**

Authentic community engagement is:

1 Asset-based

2 Diverse & inclusive

3 Equitable

4 Impactful

5 Integrated

6 Mutually beneficial

7 Resourced & compensated

8 Transformational & restorative

9 Trust-based

How do we get there?

On the following pages are some concrete practices healthcare organizations can adopt to strengthen their community engagement.



Image description: A diverse group of Patient Family Advisors sit around a conference table having a discussion.

1

Asset-based

Authentic community engagement starts by valuing two things: the assets and strengths of a community and the experience and expertise of PWLE. All people bring multiple types of experiences and skillsets to the table. The more we invest into building relationships, the better positioned we are to understand the unique strengths of the people we work with and the communities we work within.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 🔗 Practice **appreciative inquiry**³ approaches to research, story sharing, and other community engagement work. Instead of only asking “what was difficult, what went wrong?” ask “what worked well, what has helped?”
- 🔗 Engage PWLE in **community asset mapping**⁴ projects.

2

Diverse & inclusive

Authentic community engagement respects PWLE as equal members of a diverse team. It involves understanding the nuances and diversity of lived experiences and providing accommodations and pathways for engagement that are inclusive and accessible to all. By embracing diversity, organizations can foster a richer, more robust dialogue and ensure that all voices are heard.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 🔗 Be **intentional about diversity**⁵. Collect demographic data from people you work with in your community engagement initiatives and review this data routinely to understand if participation reflects the diversity of your community or service population.
- 🔗 Identify and address **barriers to participation**⁶ including accessibility, language, trust, and technology to ensure everyone has a seat at the table. This also supports equitable engagement.

3

Equitable

Authentic community engagement meets people where they are – figuratively and literally. It requires organizations to engage with communities in the ways, times, places, and formats that work best for community members. Authentic community engagement can advance health equity as an outcome of the process, and it can center equity in the process itself.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 📍 Hold meetings in locations that are familiar and convenient for community members.
- 📍 Ensure PWLE have **shared control**⁷ of setting meeting agendas and setting priorities.
- 📍 **Create an organizational culture that recognizes the expertise**⁸ of people with lived experience on par with other types of professional/educational credentials and experience.

4

Impactful

Authentic community engagement should make a difference. Both organizations and community members should see community engagement as a strategy to make meaningful improvements to things they care about. Feedback loops ensure that community members clearly understand how their work and partnership has led to improvements. To achieve the most meaningful change, community engagement should involve representatives who understand the issues and identities of the people being served. By designing solutions that address the most complex challenges, organizations can create positive ripple effects that benefit everyone.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 📍 Utilize **assessment tools**⁹ to measure the impact of your community engagement work, making sure you consider the perspective of organizational partners and community members in determining if/how initiatives are having an impact
- 📍 Integrate community engagement as a **quality improvement strategy**¹⁰ to increase access, lower cost, and improve patient experience and health outcomes.



Image description: A Black woman and older Black man, both smiling, dance together at a community BBQ.



Image description: Collaborative group discussion around a table with healthcare stakeholders and people with lived experience.

5

Integrated

Authentic community engagement should not be an afterthought or a mere sign-off after decisions have been made. Instead, it involves authentic partnerships with PWLE from the very beginning. By involving community members throughout the process, organizations can benefit from their insights, avoid tokenism, and ensure that decisions are made collectively. Community engagement should not only be integrated into the governance and decision-making processes of organizations, but it should also be continuous and ongoing.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 🔗 Develop initiatives across **the spectrum of community engagement**¹¹ and across organizational functions and departments so there are ample opportunities for co-design.
- 🔗 Prioritize **relationship-building**¹² so you have people to call on during any step of the process – this might just look like getting coffee to discuss a new program in early stages of design.

6

Mutually beneficial

Authentic community engagement involves creating space that is beneficial not just for organizations but also for the PWLE participating and the communities they represent. Both organizations and PWLE should have a shared understanding of the goals and scope of their work together, what each is expected to give, and what each is expected to get. Mutual benefit relates to the idea of impact but emphasizes the importance of benefit being experienced by both sides of the partnership – in the outcomes as well as the process.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 🔗 Invest in the personal and professional development of all team members – including PWLE.
- 🔗 Be intentional about **sharing the outcomes**¹³ of your community engagement work across your organization, team, community, and with the PWLE who supported the work.

7

Resourced & compensated

Authentic community engagement acknowledges and compensates PWLE for their time and expertise in an equitable manner. By formalizing their role as valued members of the team through contracts and fair compensation, organizations demonstrate their commitment to recognizing and valuing the contributions of PWLE. Organizations must also allocate the necessary time, staff, and financial resources to support genuine community engagement. By committing to the work required to achieve meaningful change, organizations can provide training and capacity-building opportunities for individuals traditionally excluded from decision-making processes.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 🔗 Provide **fair, equitable**,¹⁴ and **flexible**¹⁵ compensation for PWLE who partner with you.
- 🔗 Build **community engagement**¹⁶ into your organizational and program budgets – including materials, compensation for PWLE, transportation/translation/childcare, and dedicated staff time from people with the skills, experience, and desire to build relationships with PWLE.

8

Transformational & restorative

Authentic community engagement goes beyond project timelines. It involves building longer-term relationships that prioritize the health, hope, and well-being of the people and the community. It includes, but also goes beyond, trauma-informed approaches to partnership and engagement. By creating safe and empathetic spaces, organizations can foster trust, understanding, and a genuine concern for the overall welfare of the community.

Practices that bring this to life:

- 🔗 Change the default from doing to being. Focus less on what to do and more on how you do it.
- 🔗 Include **healing techniques and modalities**¹⁷ in your process of community engagement.
- 🔗 Take risks when it comes to prioritizing relationships. **See what matters to the community**¹⁸ – and value their skills and expertise.



Image description: Community members engage in conversation at a community health event.

9

Trust-based

Building trust is essential in authentic community engagement, as it is to all relationships. Organizations must follow through on commitments and close loops with honesty and transparency. Past harms experienced by communities should be acknowledged and repaired when possible. Recognizing that PWLE are the experts in their own lives and experiences, organizations should demonstrate commitment and authenticity throughout their engagement efforts by being open to hearing different perspectives and by adjusting their approaches based on feedback.

Practices that bring this to life:

- Adopt a commitment to be a **trustworthy partner**¹⁹ to PWLE by demonstrating accessibility, approachability, empathy, honesty, respect and humility.
- Be in it for the **long-haul!**²⁰ Trust is built through relationships and ongoing interaction, not through transactional exchanges.

The best time to plant a tree

As the old proverb goes, “the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, the second-best time is today.”

Community engagement is an ongoing process. While fully actualizing these nine dimensions of authentic community engagement is no small feat, each can be realized by taking small and actionable steps. By fully embracing these principles and practices organizations can build stronger connections, achieve more impactful outcomes, and create a more equitable future for all.



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