ATSDR's

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PLAYBOOK

2021

ATSDR
AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND DISEASE REGISTRY

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Foreword

Greetings,

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) is pleased to announce the Community Engagement Playbook ("the Playbook"). Since ATSDR was founded, we have worked with and learned a great deal from communities and tribes. The release of this Playbook reconfirms our agency's commitment to continue improving relationships during our site-based environmental public health work. Our goal is for communities to be our partners – not just bystanders.

Engaging communities is essential to ATSDR's environmental public health work. Collaborating is a two-way street between ATSDR and communities. We listen to communities to obtain first-hand knowledge and understanding of their concerns. With this knowledge, ATSDR provides people with evidence-based findings and tools to address their concerns, take actions to protect their health, and promote health equity.

For more than three decades, ATSDR has worked with communities across the United States to identify and reduce community exposures that might lead to harmful health effects. To date, we have taken action to keep people safe from environmental hazards in more than 6,000 communities. To fulfill our mandate from Congress and keep communities safe, we have responded to environmental health emergencies, investigated emerging environmental health threats, conducted research on the health impacts of hazardous waste sites, and built the capacity of and provided guidance to our funded state and local health partners.

The Playbook is the result of lessons learned and our commitment to improve our efforts with the community in mind. It presents a simple, clear framework for community engagement across the course of an environmental public health response and provides a menu of activities that can be tailored to the specific needs of a community.

We hope this Playbook will help you understand our community engagement commitment and efforts to support communities and tribes across the nation. Please share this Playbook with your colleagues and partners.

Sincerely,

Christopher M. Reh, Ph.D.
Associate Director
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

Preface

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) is committed to working with and involving communities and tribes to protect human health before, during, and after site-based environmental public health work.

In general, the goals of community engagement are to build trust, engage new resources and allies, create better communication, understand community health concerns, and improve health outcomes. Community engagement helps to improve environmental public health work when community input and insights are considered in the investigation design, data collection and analysis, health interventions, and information sharing activities.

This Community Engagement Playbook ("the Playbook") was created to guide you, public health professionals, and state, territorial, local, and tribal partners through the phases and activities of community engagement. The Playbook describes ATSDR's four **Phases of Community Engagement**:

Phase I
Setting the Stage

Phase II
Getting Started

Phase III
Keeping It Going

Phase IV
Wrapping Up

These phases roll out over the course of public health assessments and other types of site-based environmental public health responses (e.g., health studies, exposure investigations, public health assessments). Throughout the Playbook, we will refer to this work collectively as "environmental public health work." We also describe nine key **Community Engagement Activities** that may be used to bring the community's knowledge, needs, and preferences into the process. These activities also build community capacity by facilitating environmental health learning and community connections with other organizations positioned to support community goals. However, the Playbook is not intended to serve as a commitment from ATSDR to conduct all the activities in each community. The set of activities implemented in each community will vary based on many factors including community size, resource availability, and more.

Public health professionals and state, territorial, local and tribal (STLT) partners must work with the community and its leaders to determine the best approach for implementing the activities in this Playbook. We have made this Playbook publicly available to be transparent about our approach and to increase community awareness.

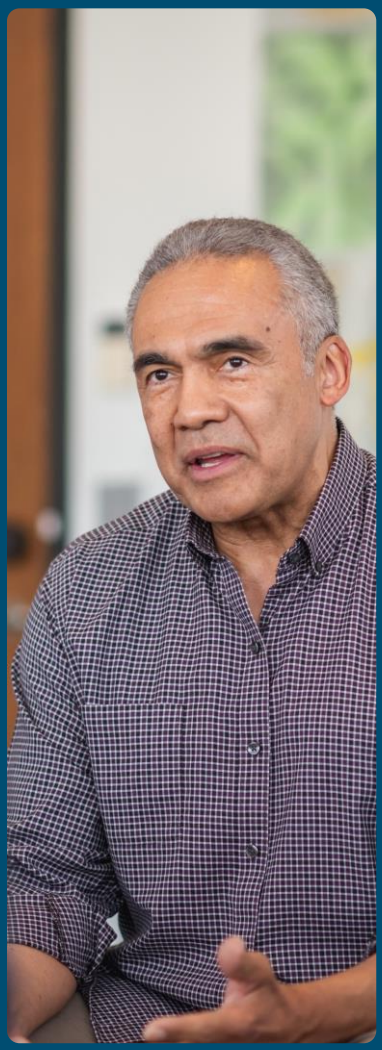
Throughout this document the term "community" also refers to tribal communities.

See **Phase I: Setting the Stage** for details.

Introduction

Cade Martin, 2009. CDC/Public Health Image Library.

Stepping In



The community of City Town just found out that their primary source of drinking water has been contaminated by chemicals.

It is believed that the contamination is due to chemical releases from a neighboring manufacturing plant. Many residents are worried and angry, others are confused, and some people think concerns are overblown. Community members churn over a series of questions. These include:

Are we going to get cancer?
Will my kids get sick?
Is the water safe to drink?
Did the contamination cause my skin rash?
How do I protect my family from ongoing exposure?
Who do I turn to for help?
Should I sell my house and move?

Then, community members hear on the radio that someone from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) is coming to town.

"Finally," they think, someone might be able to help us."

That is just one of many possible scenarios you may be walking into when you enter a community.

ATSDR defines **community engagement** as the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues that affect the group's well-being. The group of people may be connected by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations [HHS 2011]. (See section: **Glossary of Terms**).

The Larger Context

In the United States and its territories, there are thousands of communities affected by environmental contamination from a variety of sources.

In many of these communities, chronic contamination has been known to negatively affect people's physical and psychosocial health and safety [ATSDR 2020]. Environmental contamination can contribute to both short-term and long-term stress in affected communities—which can also pose a health risk. In fact, research shows that stress may put some people at greater risk for health effects from certain contaminants [Schmitt 2021]. When environmental contamination occurs, ATSDR can help determine what type of public health action to take (i.e., when, where, how, and for whom).

Although ATSDR's efforts vary in scope, size, and duration, a common thread is a strong focus on community engagement. This focus has enabled ATSDR and STLT partners to effectively identify, understand, and respond to the unique needs of communities and maximize their public health impact.

Developing the Playbook

The development of the Playbook involved a literature review, gap analysis, and synthesis of existing practice-based community engagement materials and models from ATSDR and beyond. The process explored materials from federal, state, and local governmental organizations, foundations, professional organizations, academic institutions, and public health associations.

ATSDR staff with expertise in community engagement and health education contributed activities, resources, and tools. ATSDR conducted focus groups with internal subject matter experts and funded STLT partners to obtain feedback on the Playbook content and design. In addition to the focus groups, ATSDR received written reviews of the Playbook from agency staff and partners.

Working Together

When conducting environmental public health work, you will likely join a team of experts to address public health issues related to environmental contamination. Your team may include environmental health scientists, epidemiologists, health communication and education specialists, community engagement specialists, regional representatives, and other experts.

Rarely can a single organization or government agency meet all the needs of an entire community. If the various organizations in a single community do not work well together, they may end up causing confusion. ATSDR staff often find that STLT partners and other agencies, like the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), may be working with the same community. This Playbook includes guidance on how to acknowledge and collaborate with other groups that have a presence within a community. It may be necessary to clarify each agency's role to avoid duplicating efforts.

Overcoming Challenges of Community Engagement

Differences of opinion – and sometimes conflict – about facts, interpretation of the facts, next steps, and communication are inherent to this work.

Media attention means that these differences will be amplified. Additionally, local and interpersonal politics may play a role in community engagement.

You may also find yourself engaging with communities whose previous experience with government agencies has resulted in distrust. When you recognize distrust, try to understand a community's perceptions, history, needs, and challenges. This may help you better understand the distrust. Work to develop relationships and find ways to align with community goals by maximizing opportunities to listen to concerns and help community members better understand how you will address their concerns. Slowly but surely, such actions contribute to building trust and credibility for ATSDR staff in the field.

Additionally, ATSDR's ability to respond to the full range of community concerns and preferences may be determined by our agency mission and resources. For example, ATSDR focuses on identifying how people might be exposed to environmental contamination within their community and determining whether those exposures could be harmful. However, some communities may approach environmental contamination from other perspectives (e.g., communities with cultural differences or those concerned with economic impacts).

To overcome challenges of community engagement, thoughtful planning, a transparent approach, and dedicated resources to meet the community's needs and your organization's needs are critical and necessary.

Despite the challenges, community engagement strengthens relationships between communities and ATSDR, and protects public health.

Glossary of Terms

Community Capacity
Community capacity refers to characteristics of communities that affect their ability to identify, mobilize, and address social and public health problems [AAHE 2012].

Community Engagement
Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people connected by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people [HHS 2011].

Community Needs Assessment
A community needs assessment is a systematic process for gathering, analyzing, and reporting data and information about the characteristics, capacity, needs, and concerns of a community [CDC 2018B].

Community Resilience
Community resilience is the ability of a community to adapt to changing conditions and prepare for, withstand, and rapidly recover from disruption [The White House 2015].

Cultural Awareness
Cultural awareness is being cognizant, observant, and conscious of similarities and differences among cultural groups [Goode and Dunne 2004].

Defining Key Concepts

In this section we introduce key concepts for community engagement. These concepts are relevant and ongoing through the phases of community engagement and should inform your approach to and evaluation of community engagement.

As you gain more experience conducting community engagement, you will likely deepen your knowledge and practice of these important concepts.

Empathy
The ability to understand and share the feelings of another [Oxford University Press 2020].

Environmental Justice
Environmental justice (EJ) is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies [HHS 2020].

Evaluation
Evaluation is a systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using data to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of programs and contribute to continuous program improvement [CDC 2019].

Health Equity
Health equity is when everyone has the opportunity to be as healthy as possible [CDC 2021]. Health inequities are reflected in differences in length of life; quality of life; rates of disease, disability, and death; severity of disease; and access to treatment [CDC 2020].

Health Communication
Health communication is the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health [The Community Guide to Preventive Services 2020].

Health Education
Health education is any combination of planned learning experiences using evidence-based practices that provide the opportunity to acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to adopt and maintain healthy behaviors [AAHE 2012].

Risk Communication
Risk communication is the exchange of information to increase understanding of health risks [ATSDR 2009]. Risk communication provides the community with information about the specific type (good or bad) and magnitude (strong or weak) of an outcome from an exposure or behavior. Typically, risk communication is a discussion of a negative outcome and the probability that the outcomes will occur [CDC 2018A].

Secondary Impacts
Secondary impacts refer to the psychosocial impacts on individuals and communities, including mistrust of public health and other institutions. The impacts also include the stigma of living in “contaminated” areas and conflicts in local groups about how to define and respond to a problem [ATSDR 2020].

Phases of Community Engagement

ATSDR's Phases of Community Engagement provide a simple, practical framework for organizing community engagement activities throughout the course of a typical site based environmental public health effort.

Phase I: Setting the Stage

How can ATSDR address community member concerns?

What is unique about the community?

What are the purpose and goals of the community engagement effort?

Phase II: Getting Started

How can ATSDR establish trust and credibility with the community?

Phase III: Keeping it Going

How will ATSDR follow through on commitments in the community?

Phase IV: Wrapping Up

How will ATSDR successfully share its findings and empower the community?

For each phase we will provide:

1. An **Overview** section,
2. An **Ask Yourself** section, with questions to consider when entering a community
3. A **Keep in Mind** section, to remind you of important considerations
4. A **Possible Community Engagement Activities** section, to consider based on the community's needs

It is important to note that, while some activities sit squarely in a specific phase, others are cross-cutting and will apply throughout your involvement with a community. Many activities will happen in parallel, making it critical to maintain good communication across stakeholders and efforts.

Phase I: Setting the Stage

Informing Planning and Goal Setting

When environmental contamination is identified at a site, or public health work begins, it is critical to start by understanding the community's concerns and using this information to inform the steps that ATSDR will take based on its mandate, mission, and priorities. While the decision to take on public health work may not always be yours to make, the degree and form of community engagement to employ requires thoughtful consideration.

No matter what stage of the process you are involved in—deciding whether to engage or how to engage—you will need to first have a basic understanding of the community, the environmental contamination it is faced with, and other community concerns.

Conducting media scans, collecting community demographic information, and developing a community profile will help you learn about the community, identify their concerns, and set the stage for determining how you can help. Community engagement specialists can bring this information to the site team and organizational leadership to inform decisions on whether to take on work at a site.

Ultimately, if ATSDR is going to do public health work in a community, you will need to get an in-depth understanding of a community's unique attributes, historical experiences, and goals to inform a successful engagement strategy.

Community engagement activities in this Phase will inform planning and goal setting for the duration of your public health work.

Ask Yourself

When Deciding Whether to Conduct Environmental Public Health Work…

- Are the community's health concerns related to ATSDR's mandate and mission?
- Were unique community concerns considered as part of the decision-making process?
- Do you have the organizational resources to support the successful implementation of community engagement activities?

Once You've Decided to Conduct Environmental Public Health Work…

- What are the purpose and goals of the community engagement effort?
- Are you making plans to meet with the community and its leaders to build relationships and to better understand and document their concerns?
- What type of environmental data will ATSDR be collecting and assessing?
- How are you communicating about agency public health plans (e.g., public health assessment/consultation/exposure investigations) and establishing expectations for ATSDR's role with the community?
- What unique aspects of the community will you account for when you plan your community engagement efforts?
- Will your engagement allow for the community to continue working toward their own environmental health goals?

Keep in Mind

ATSDR's public health work may not be the primary concern of the community. It is important to recognize the community's priorities and concerns, even when they do not align with the priorities and concerns of ATSDR.

Possible Community Engagement Activities:

- ❑ Developing a Community Profile
- ❑ Identifying Stakeholders

Community Engagement with Tribal Communities

Two important concepts to keep in mind when considering community engagement with tribal communities are tribal sovereignty and cultural competence. There are unique legal and political relationships between the federal government and Indian tribes.

These relationships are based on the U.S. Constitution, treaties, Supreme Court decisions, federal laws, and Executive Orders. These treaties, laws, orders, and decisions provide authority to the federal government for Indian affairs with federally recognized tribes. Each Tribal government can create and enforce laws and create Tribal government entities to carry out those laws. Public health professionals must be aware that federally recognized tribes may prefer to work with federal agencies, and state recognized tribes may prefer to work with state agencies [SAMHSA 2009].

Phase II

Phase II: Getting Started

Laying the Foundation for Productive Partnership

The early stages of engagement with a community present an opportunity to meet community stakeholders, establish trust and credibility, validate concerns, set expectations, and lay the foundation for productive partnerships. In the beginning your first communications with the community are informed by the work you've already done to objectively develop a community profile and identify local stakeholders.
In Phase II, it is important to

- Go to the community and meet with residents and local stakeholders,
- Assess community environmental health needs, and,
- Make no assumptions about the community's needs- ask, dialogue, and learn.

When conducting engagement in a community for the first time, focus on listening to community concerns and preferences, building relationships, and setting expectations for what ATSDR can and cannot do.

Ask Yourself

- What did you learn from the community profile that will guide your engagement?
- What else is needed to effectively engage communities?
- How will you set and maintain expectations for what ATSDR can and cannot do?
- How will you address the community's concerns?
- How will you clarify the roles of ATSDR and those of other stakeholders?

Keep in Mind

As you prepare to engage with a community, be aware of past community engagement and public health work and their respective legacies, including work ATSDR was not involved in. Some communities may have worked with, or are currently working with, other federal, state, or local agencies and may be further along in receiving support to address their concerns. Other communities may just be starting. Keep in mind there may be some trust and credibility issues or prior communication challenges to overcome. On the other hand, a community's positive interactions in the past may pave the way for smoother relationships in the present.

Possible Community Engagement Activities:

- ❑ Identifying Stakeholders
- ❑ Developing a Community Engagement Plan
- ❑ Gathering Information
- ❑ Sharing Information
- ❑ Developing Communication Materials and Identifying Communications Channels

Phase III

Phase III: Keeping It Going

Maintaining Trust and Communication Over Time

So, you have entered a community and hosted a successful kick-off meeting with community members. You can see that community members are optimistic about your involvement; your interest in their concerns, opinions, and ideas; and your objectives. However, it is one thing to come in to get things going. It is another thing to maintain trust and communication over an extended period of time.

You can capitalize on the momentum established during initial engagement activities by proactively maintaining relationships and communication within the community and following through on commitments. Sustaining engagement throughout the duration of your public health work will affect the community's willingness to engage in the work. Engagement will also affect the community's willingness to accept ATSDR's conclusions and recommendations. Community engagement activities during this Phase focus on listening to community concerns, strengthening relationships, communicating progress and updates, delivering health education and "train the trainer" activities when necessary, and building community capacity.

Ask Yourself

- How will you stay in regular communication with the community?
- How will you be transparent about goals, priorities, and commitments as they evolve?
- How can you communicate risk clearly, concisely, and accurately?
- What can you do to build community understanding of contamination-related health effects?
- How are the community engagement activities being received by community members? What needs to be changed, refined, further addressed?
- What can ATSDR do in collaboration with the community to create change, improve health and wellbeing, and promote community resilience?

Keep in Mind

Conflict happens. Community members affected by environmental contamination may feel angry, fearful, or distrustful. Difficult situations can arise when an audience is hostile towards you, ATSDR, or another person or organization involved. Do not judge when people express their feelings. Instead, listen empathetically. Acknowledge their feelings and concerns. Always respond in a calm and professional manner, regardless of what is expressed. Be open to new stakeholders and continue to gather and share information as needed.

Possible Community Engagement Activities:

- ❑ Maintaining Collaboration and Communication with Community Stakeholders
- ❑ Developing Communication Materials and Identifying Communications Channels
- ❑ Planning and Conducting Health Education for Community Members

Phase IV

Phase IV: Wrapping Up

Sharing Findings and Empowering the Community

As your public health work comes to an end, communicate about the wrap-up with the community and encourage them to continue activities to protect their health. Public health work during this Phase involves sharing public health conclusions and recommendations, summarizing public health implications, and sharing best practices for reducing and/or eliminating exposures to environmental contamination.
The community engagement goals of this Phase are to enable the community to be better informed, better connected, and more resilient than when you started engagement efforts. Although ATSDR may be scaling back the time and resources allocated for the community, you still have a responsibility to stay open to relationships and to respond to communications from residents, STLT partners, or stakeholders as any future issues arise.

Ask Yourself

- What is the best way to share and report public health findings, conclusions, and recommendations to individual residents and tribes, community leaders, local elected officials, groups, and organizations?
- How will you complete your commitments to the community?
- How will you build the capacity of local leaders to support the community, and further community engagement work as needed, while dealing with the environmental contamination?
- How can you transition and hand over any actions, activities, or responsibilities?
- How will you evaluate the effectiveness of community engagement activities?

Keep in Mind

To prevent tension or frustration resulting from unmet or misunderstood expectations, regularly repeat the constraints of the public health work and expected outcomes in a positive way to stakeholders. This communication will serve as a reminder of ATSDR's commitment to address concerns that are within the mission and scope of the agency. Finally, assist the community in identifying and connecting with other agencies and organizations that can help them address concerns that are beyond ATSDR's mission.

Possible Community Engagement Activities:

- ❑ Gathering Information
- ❑ Sharing Information
- ❑ Maintaining Collaboration and Communication with Community Stakeholders
- ❑ Developing Communication Materials and Identifying Communications Channels
- ❑ Evaluation of Community Engagement Activities

Phase IV

Wrapping up: Completing an ATSDR public health assessment

Residents of neighborhoods near a factory petitioned ATSDR to investigate health concerns related to unpleasant-smelling air. ATSDR responded by visiting the community, listening to concerns expressed by members of a local non-profit organization, and identifying partners at federal and state environmental agencies who provided air quality data for the neighborhoods. ATSDR reviewed and analyzed environmental public health air quality data and wrote a public health consultation report with our findings and recommendations.

As the ATSDR team began wrapping up their efforts in the community, they worked with federal partners to develop a community workgroup to address community concerns at the site. Then, the EPA selected the local non-profit organization to receive technical assistance and funding for two community environmental projects. The funding enabled the community to address their identified concerns. ATSDR was able to leave the community knowing that community members had contacts, information, and resources to better manage their environmental health concerns.

The best strategies for wrapping up environmental public health work have their origins in earlier phases of community engagement. You build community capacity when you

- Set and maintain expectations of what your work can and can't deliver,
- Identify community assets,
- Foster connections, and
- Develop collaborative and transparent relationships with community partners.

This ensures the community can continue to pursue their environmental goals after your exit.

Community Engagement Activities

Community Engagement Activities

As mentioned in the preface, this section provides public health site teams with a set of community engagement activities they can use to meet the needs of a community. Activities can be tailored for the capacity of your team and ATSDR's mission.
The number and type of activities you choose to implement, and in what phase you choose to implement them, depends on a variety of factors such as the community's capacity, needs, and preferences; the availability of resources; and the stage of the public health response.

The type and scope of public health work may determine which community engagement activities are most appropriate. In addition, some communities will have a high level of awareness about the environmental contamination or have a longstanding relationship with ATSDR or other government health organizations. In these communities, effective engagement may involve only a few of the activities presented below. In other communities, you may need to implement all of the activities. Public health teams, the community and its leaders, and other identified STLT partners should work together to implement the activities introduced in the Playbook.

To help you understand how you might implement each activity to make changes in your community, we provide the following sections:

1. An **Overview** of the activity
2. A **Keep in Mind** section (with helpful reminders related to the activity)
3. A **Where to Start** section (with immediate first steps to get things moving)
4. A **Tips from the Field** section to indicate:

Key Practices for Success	Areas to Exercise Caution	Risks to Avoid
✓	⚠	✗

5. **Callout boxes** (with additional information, case studies, checklists, and tools to support the activity)
6. An **Additional Resources** section (with links to information, tools, and templates)

Activities

To assist you in your planning, please refer to these page numbers:

Developing a Community Profile (Page 20)

Identifying Stakeholders (Page 22)

Developing a Community Engagement Plan (Page 24)

Gathering Information (Page 26)

Sharing Information (Page 29)

Maintaining Collaboration and Communication with Community Stakeholders (Page 31)

Developing Communication Materials and Identifying Communications Channels (Page 34)

Planning and Conducting Health Education for Community Members (Page 37)

Evaluation of Community Engagement Activities (Page 40)

Developing a Community Profile

A community profile is a narrative that describes the community affected by the environmental contamination at a site. The profile summarizes community concerns and demographic information and identifies community leaders and organizations, social determinants of health, and other important characteristics of the affected community. Developing a community profile can help you understand the community and prepare for your public health work. Creating a community profile is an essential first step and can help you develop a community engagement plan further down the road.

Keep in Mind

Geographic Information System (GIS) experts are a great resource and can help you obtain important demographic information. To ensure the information is accurate, remember to provide the latitude and longitude of the street address at the environmental contamination site. If known, you can provide information such as an EPA ID number.

Where to Start

- Clearly define and map the boundaries, geographic or otherwise, of the community you are working with.
- Use a community profile worksheet or community data worksheet to keep track of the information you gather. (See resource: **ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Community Data Worksheet**)
- Gather contact information for key agencies, community leaders, and stakeholders.
- Identify sources of community information that can add context and inform decision-making about your public health work. (See callout box: **Getting the Data**)
- Develop an inventory of existing community strengths, organizations, and resources that may be used to support your community engagement or public health work. This is also known as “asset-mapping.”
- Assess health equity, health disparities, environmental justice issues, and the needs of any identified special populations.
- Identify local facilities that may be good for hosting potential community meetings.
- Identify virtual platforms (e.g., Skype, Zoom, WebEx, etc.) that can be used to host meetings.

Tips from the Field

- Take advantage of the amount of information that is readily available about the community. Review everything you can (e.g., publicly available community data, news articles, and local social media posts).
- Remember that news and rumors travel fast, especially when a new agency enters a community. Build trust and credibility by working together with the community to develop a community engagement plan and list of stakeholders and STLT partners.
- Do not assume you know everything there is to know about a community. Truly understanding a community requires time, effort, and an open mind.

Getting the Data

Get as much information as you can to build a community profile. Remember, the information will help you better understand the community's needs and plan community engagement activities. What you include in your profile will depend on the data you need and the resources you have. The profile should be updated as you learn more about the community. Use the ATSDR Community Data Worksheet to help you understand the unique story of your community and identify gaps where community input and insight may be needed. (See resource: **ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Community Data Worksheet**)

Additional Resources

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Community Data Worksheet (ATSDR). A ready-to-use worksheet to organize initial data gathering efforts

CDC's Social Vulnerability Index: SVI Interactive Map (CDC). An interactive map that applies CDC's Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) to communities across the United States

Map Room (University of Missouri). Free mapping and reporting tools that support data and case-making needs across sectors

National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program (CDC). A collection of non-infectious disease and environmental health data from a nationwide network of partners

Phase I

Phase II

Identifying Stakeholders

Stakeholders are individuals of influence within a community and/or organization that have an interest in, or are affected by, environmental public health contamination or hazards. Every community has key stakeholders who serve as gatekeepers and/or key influencers to the rest of the population. Strategically identifying stakeholders increases the chances that your efforts will be well-received by more community members. Once you have identified community stakeholders, create a stakeholder catalogue or map to help you capture their unique attributes.

Unique attributes include:

- Affiliation
- Degree of influence
- Proximity to and relationships with other stakeholders
- Position on the environmental health issue at hand

Remember, stakeholders may have a diversity of views. Creating a stakeholder catalogue or map will assist you in completing your community profile.

Keep in Mind

Leverage the power of your network! The community and existing STLT partners are a great resource for identifying stakeholders. Always ask the community, tribal leaders, and STLT partners you engage if there is anyone else you should talk with or bring to the table.

Where to Start

- If you are new to a community, do a web search and use your network to get a sense of what organizations and government partners are already on the ground.
- If you have local contacts, reach out to them to better understand the different players and how they interact with each other.
- Create and actively maintain a detailed stakeholder catalog.

Tips from the Field

Build relationships with interested individuals to understand their concerns. As you engage with the community, you will learn which individuals live and work in the community. You will begin to identify those who are trusted within their community; have history in the community, particularly around the contamination issue; have influence over the community; and whose views will resonate with the community.

Be aware that some agendas or positions may represent individual views, but not the views of the community at large. Some views may be alienating or insensitive to certain groups within the community.

Make sure that stakeholders are aware that they do not speak on behalf of ATSDR, even if you are working with them.

Engaging the Appropriate Stakeholders

When conducting public health work, you need to ensure you have the right people at the table. The community can help you develop this list as you begin planning. Consider developing a stakeholder catalogue or map to capture important information for possible stakeholders and groups you identify. A sample list of stakeholders is included in ATSDR's Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool. (See resource: **ATSDR Communication Tool Kit: Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool**)

Additional Resources

ATSDR Communication Tool Kit: Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool (ATSDR). A template for mapping community stakeholders.

Community Health Assessment Toolkit (American Hospital Association). A resource that outlines a nine-step path for conducting a community health assessment and developing implementation strategies.

Identifying and Analyzing Stakeholders and Their Interests (Kansas University Community Toolbox). A toolkit for identifying and analyzing stakeholders that includes checklists and informational presentations.

Developing a Community Engagement Plan

A community engagement plan is a roadmap for how ATSDR will work collaboratively with and through community members, STLT partners, and stakeholders over the course of planned public health work. A community engagement plan dovetails with and supports the overall site work. See page 2 of the **ATSDR Community Engagement Planning Tool** listed in the resource section below. Your community engagement plan should identify engagement goals and objectives for each phase. The plan should also contain enough details to describe a clear course of action, a timeline for how and when to engage the community, a list of and descriptions of the types of community members you would like to engage, and a list of the communication materials you will need. Developing a community engagement plan can help you align your goals with the community's goals. In addition, it can increase accountability among all stakeholders in community engagement activities.

Keep in Mind

The earlier you start thinking about how you will evaluate your community engagement work, the better. Be sure to include evaluation components in your community engagement plan. (See activity: **Evaluation of Community Engagement Activities**)

Where to Start

- Leverage the information gathered in the community profile to define the scope of your community engagement efforts. (See activity: **Developing a Community Profile**)
- Create a flexible timeline for the development of engagement activities you choose to implement.
- Establish specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely objectives to measure progress and success. (See section: **Be SMART about your Objectives**)
- Seek input and feedback on the plan from colleagues, leadership, and your community or tribal stakeholders.
- Identify key audiences and communication objectives for each phase.
- Identify available resources to support the implementation of your plan (e.g., time, funding, and effort required by your team).

Tips from the Field

✓ Be transparent, inclusive, and collaborative in your planning process. Invite community stakeholders to collaborate on the plan's development. Welcome and incorporate their input and recommendations as relevant and appropriate.

⚠ Stay flexible. You will likely need to evolve and adapt your community engagement plan to the local needs and conditions. Be prepared to continually gather feedback from the community and STLT partners and revise your plan as necessary.

✗ Do not overpromise and underdeliver! Develop an approach at the beginning for how you will communicate your intentions and set expectations with your community.

Be SMART about your Objectives

Strong community engagement objectives allow you to effectively monitor progress towards goals. **SMART** stands for **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable or **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime bound. **SMART** objectives are statements of the important results you are working towards. Clearly defined objectives will keep you and your team on track. Clear objectives also allow you to set targets for accountability.

SMART Objectives

Specific	What do you hope to accomplish? Why do you want to accomplish it? What are the requirements? What are the challenges?
Measurable	How will you measure progress? How will you know that you have achieved your objective?
Attainable or Achievable	What are the logical steps, activities, and strategies required? Whom do you need to seek buy in from, and/or consensus with, in order to successfully implement activities?
Relevant	Why is this a worthwhile objective? What will happen if you do not accomplish this objective? Is this objective in line with your long-term goals?
Time Bound	How long will it take to accomplish this objective? When does this objective need to be completed?

Additional Resources

- ATSDR Community Engagement Planning Tool (ATSDR): A fillable planning tool to help you identify, over the phases of community engagement, CE goals, partners and stakeholders; key actions for information gathering and sharing; and CE activities, materials, and timeline, over the phases of community engagement.
- ATSDR Community Stress Resource Center (ATSDR). A toolkit containing guidance, tools, and a practical framework for reducing community stress and building resilience as part of a public health response to environmental contamination.
- Community Engagement Guide (Boston Metropolitan Area Planning Council). A guide that provides a framework for creating a public participation strategy.
- Writing SMART Objectives (CDC). A brief about writing SMART objectives, including an overview of objectives, how to write SMART objectives, a checklist, and examples of SMART objectives.

Phase II

Phase IV

Gathering Information

It is important to remember that "engagement" is a two-way dialogue. Community engagement activities that are not informed by ongoing dialogue with the community, stakeholders, and STLT partners can lead to distrust and feelings of injustice, particularly when activities are perceived as insensitive to community concerns and needs. Take a proactive approach to engage community members in collaborating and participating and employ effective listening skills. A proactive approach can help you understand how community members are thinking about and understanding the contamination. Remember that every interaction can improve or affect the relationships your team builds with the community.

There are many different formats for gathering information. When selecting your format, consider the goals and intended outcomes of the interaction.

Here are some common ways to gather information:

- Informal conversations, phone calls, and email communication
- Public meetings, availability and poster sessions, and other planning meetings
- Stakeholder interviews, also known as key informant interviews
- Focus groups
- Surveys and polls
- Booths at local events
- Public comment periods on official reports

Keep in Mind

It's important to stay flexible! The information you gather from community members should inform community engagement planning and any activities or changes made moving forward. Implementing community feedback in your public health work and community engagement activities is the best way to demonstrate that you are truly listening.

Where to Start

- Define your audience and determine the appropriate format for the type of information you want to gather.
- Identify exactly what you need from the interaction and develop supporting materials (e.g., an interview guide).
- Think through all logistics. Consider different ways to connect with the community, like small groups, public availability/poster sessions, one-on-one phone calls, etc. Ask yourself "What could go wrong?" for the specific format you choose and plan around it. For example, if you are doing a live stakeholder interview, make sure someone else is there to take notes. Having a note taker will allow you to focus on the conversation.
- Remember to ask, "Are there any other opinions on this?" and "Is there anyone else I should talk with?"

Tips from the Field

Develop strategies for ongoing dialogue with community members. Listen empathically and validate individuals' concerns. Create a safe space where people feel they can be open and honest. Remember that listening is a great opportunity to build trust and that community members are better placed to know whether a certain approach, activity and/or message will be well received and embraced.

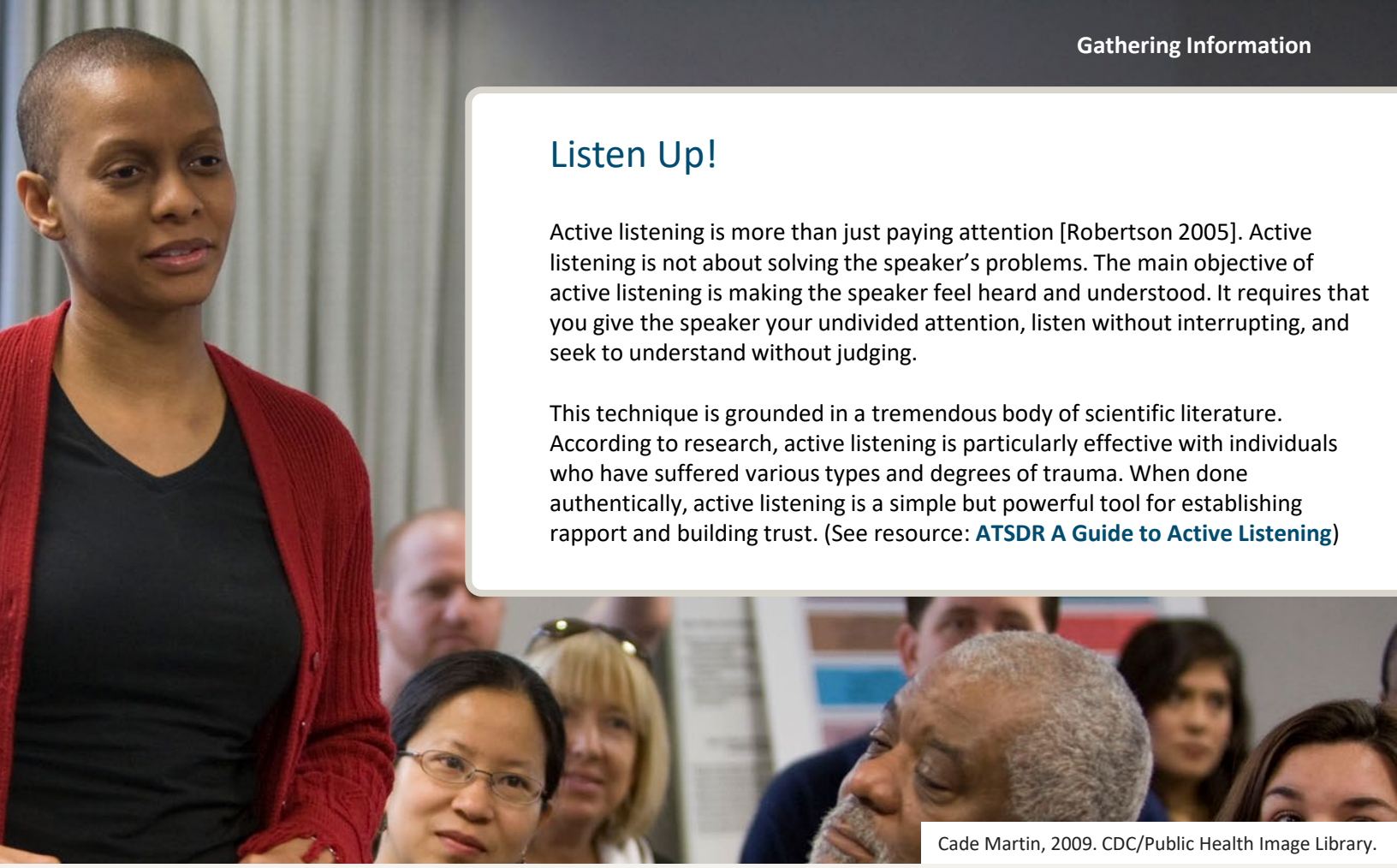
Recognize that when you ask for community members' opinions, they may share needs beyond ATSDR's scope of work. Be prepared to validate their needs and offer helpful resources. Maintain a network of federal, state, and local agencies, so that you can connect communities with other agencies with helpful resources outside of ATSDR's scope.

Guard privacy and be aware of information shared with you in confidence. **Do not** downplay the community's concerns, imply that the community is exaggerating, or imply that the community lacks perspective. Doing any of those things will lead you to lose trust and credibility. Instead, acknowledge their concerns and express empathy with the information they have shared, even if it is not directly related to the exposure.

The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA)

When you gather information during community engagement, keep in mind the legal restriction on systematic information collection from the public by federal employees. In 1995 Congress passed the Paperwork Reduction Act with the goals of (1) reducing the burden of data collection on the public; (2) improving data quality; and (3) strengthening privacy protections. When conducting focus groups, surveys, etc., the law requires any data collection process or instrument that will be administered, whether mandatory or voluntary, to 10 or more non federal individuals or entities within a 12 month period to be reviewed and approved by the President's Office of Management and Budget (OMB). For more information visit https://pra.digital.gov/.

*NOTE FOR ATSDR STAFF: CDC/ATSDR uses the Study Tracking and Reporting System (STARS) for the submission, review, clearance, tracking, and reporting of research and non research for the following activities: human subjects research (HSR) determinations; Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) determinations; data management plan (DMP) reviews; and contract, grant and cooperative agreement reviews (sometimes referred to as funding determinations) for HSR and PRA requirements.



Cade Martin, 2009. CDC/Public Health Image Library.

Listen Up!

Active listening is more than just paying attention [Robertson 2005]. Active listening is not about solving the speaker's problems. The main objective of active listening is making the speaker feel heard and understood. It requires that you give the speaker your undivided attention, listen without interrupting, and seek to understand without judging.

This technique is grounded in a tremendous body of scientific literature. According to research, active listening is particularly effective with individuals who have suffered various types and degrees of trauma. When done authentically, active listening is a simple but powerful tool for establishing rapport and building trust. (See resource: **ATSDR A Guide to Active Listening**)

Additional Resources

ATSDR A Guide to Active Listening (ATSDR). A guide for using active listening when gathering information from community members.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Community Concern Assessment Tool (ATSDR). A guide and template for assessing the level and nature of community concern as a result of environmental contamination.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Event Evaluation Form (ATSDR). A template for gathering feedback from attendees after an event.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Media Analysis Guide (ATSDR). Tips and pointers on how to do a quick media analysis to help you gather data about the site and determine the level of concern in the community.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Stakeholder Interview Guides (ATSDR):

- General Topic Guide for Community-Based Organization Interviews A guide for interviewing representatives of community-based organizations.
- General Topic Guide for Community Member Interviews A guide for interviewing community members.
- General Topic Guide for Industry Interviews A guide for interviewing industry professionals in a community.
- General Topic Guide for Policymaker Interviews A guide for interviewing policy makers.

ATSDR Community Stress Resource Center (ATSDR). A toolkit containing guidance, tools, and a practical framework for reducing community stress and building resilience as part of a public health response to environmental contamination.

Phase II

Phase IV

Sharing Information

A key component of public health work involves sharing information. Sharing information that is specific, concrete, easy to understand, and transparent can enhance the community's understanding and awareness of the history and extent of environmental contamination, the potential risks associated with exposure, and ATSDR's role in the public health response. Information can help empower people to act. In addition, information can prevent stress associated with not understanding who's involved and what's going on. A key topic for sharing information is setting clear expectations for what the community should and *should not* expect throughout the course of your engagement. When choosing how to share information, consider your goals and the intended outcomes of the communication.

Here are some formats for sharing information with communities:

- Informal conversations and phone calls
- Site visits
- Briefings and presentations
- Public meetings, public availability, and poster sessions
- Dedicated phone lines and email addresses
- Booths or tables at local public events

Keep in Mind

Involving the community early and often in your public health work will foster trust and give you the insight you need to target the right audience and craft tailored messages.

Where to Start

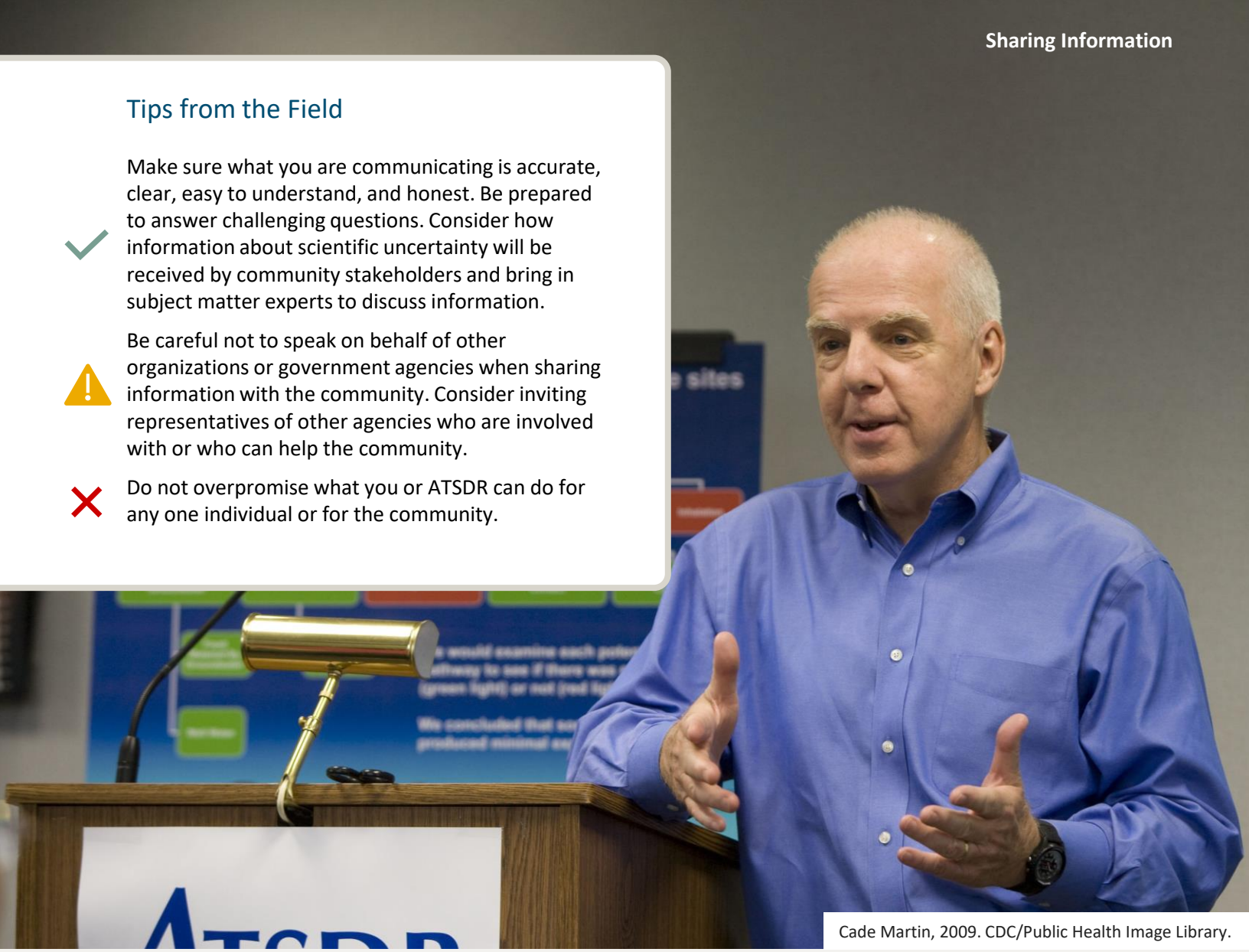
- Define your audience as early as possible. Consider identifying audiences with different needs, such as community members, state and local partners, and other interested stakeholders like local health care professionals, etc.
- Establish two sets of objectives for each identified audience: (1) what you wish to accomplish by sharing information and (2) how you want them to feel once they have that information.
- Based on the above, determine the content and format of your communication.
- Develop communication materials that include a clear description of ATSDR's role and process. (See activities: **Maintaining Collaboration and Communication with Community Stakeholders** and **Developing Communication Materials and Identifying Communications Channels**)
- Incorporate risk communication principles into your communication materials and messages. (See resource: **Environmental Health Resources Self Learning Module: Risk Communication**)

Tips from the Field

Make sure what you are communicating is accurate, clear, easy to understand, and honest. Be prepared to answer challenging questions. Consider how information about scientific uncertainty will be received by community stakeholders and bring in subject matter experts to discuss information.

Be careful not to speak on behalf of other organizations or government agencies when sharing information with the community. Consider inviting representatives of other agencies who are involved with or who can help the community.

Do not overpromise what you or ATSDR can do for any one individual or for the community.



Cade Martin, 2009. CDC/Public Health Image Library.

Additional Resources

ATSDR Community Engagement PowerPoint Template (ATSDR). A template for a PowerPoint presentation that can be used at community meetings.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Community Meeting Guidelines (ATSDR). Guidelines and tips for holding successful community meetings.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Guide to Materials Development (ATSDR). Guidance on different types of materials that can be developed and how to apply emergency risk communication principles.

Community Engagement Guide (Boston Metropolitan Area Planning Council). A guide that provides a framework for creating a public participation strategy.

Environmental Health Resources Self Learning Module: Risk Communication (ATSDR). A guide for providing a quick overview of risk communication and more detailed resources.

Maintaining Collaboration and Communication with Community Stakeholders

To maintain public trust and support through the duration of your public health work, you must keep lines of communication open. You can do this by providing regular updates on the status of your public health work and by conducting or participating in public health work in the community. A lack of ongoing communication or collaboration can lead to mistrust of the agency. Remember, saying "there is no update" is an update. There are many reasons why it may not be possible to be physically present in a community. In these cases, using the telephone, email, videoconferencing, and hosting virtual meetings to connect with community members and leaders can allow for ongoing engagement. The usual principles of relationship-building and maintenance apply (e.g., trust, reciprocity, empathy, and exchange). Your tactics must be adaptable to remote contact. When possible, engaging in person is always best.

Keep in Mind

Continue the collaboration! Identify opportunities for communication outside of meetings. This communication can go a long way in maintaining relationships. Depending on the needs of the community, you may want to consider providing routine and consistent updates by phone, email, or controlled correspondence.

Where to Start

- Seek opportunities to work with community members to enhance local understanding of environmental public health. You can do this by joining or organizing community health fairs, local health care provider medical education, health workshops, or participating in existing community events or fairs.
- Remember that regular collaboration is needed to keep the community aware of ATSDR's public health work. Regular collaboration also prepares STLT partners to receive our final report.
- Look at the calendar and identify any periods in your planned activities where you may be missing opportunities to continue the dialogue with community members.
- Establish frequent communication to keep in touch with stakeholders. Communication may involve the development of e-newsletters, listservs, and mailings.
- Proactively seek feedback from community members and monitor the community's perception of your work. Be prepared to adjust your approach based on community input.

Tips from the Field

Ask community members and STLT partners about community events, gatherings, and other happenings in the community. Local events can offer unique opportunities interact with community members and organizations.

Be careful not to focus all your communication on the contamination itself. People inherently want to know who is involved, so always introduce ATSDR, and clarify your role and the role of other stakeholders and government agencies.

Don't develop activities for the community without consulting and collaborating with community members first.

Cultural Awareness

Every person has a culture. Culture refers to the many customs and beliefs that shape our perspectives and create a lens through which we see others. We are our own experts in the cultural experiences that influence our lives. When we try to communicate with people from other cultures, we need to ask ourselves whether we are doing so in an effective and appropriate manner. It is impossible to become an expert in every culture. Still, we can become more culturally aware, understand our own cultural influences, and respect and value the differences of other individuals and groups. (See resource: **Guide to Cultural Awareness for Disaster Response Volunteers**)

Understanding Concerns and Dealing with Emotions

When a community member expresses concerns, do not panic! Listen and acknowledge their concerns. Although identifying the type and cause of the concern is helpful, how you manage, respond, and defuse the situation is key to maintaining relationships and accomplishing your public health goals and objectives. Keep the following tips in mind when having difficult conversations in a community:

1. **ACTIVELY LISTEN**. When a community member is speaking to you about their concerns, listen carefully and do not interrupt. Ask questions when appropriate. Be sure you have a reasonable understanding of the issue before moving on. (See callout box: **Listen Up!**)

2. **SHOW EMPATHY**. When working with community members, put yourself in their shoes. Take a step back from your own emotions and beliefs and try to see the issue from their perspective before responding.

3. **REMAIN CALM**. Conversations can be hard. Focus on maintaining a good attitude and stay positive. When a situation escalates, remaining calm and professional can establish trust and make finding a resolution much easier.

4. **COMMUNICATE**. Demonstrate an understanding of the community member's concerns and take proactive approaches to include their concerns in your public health work. Consider collaborating with community members from the start to determine most appropriate community engagement approaches and activities. Remember to keep lines of communication open. Provide community members with your contact information and regular updates. Ask regularly for their input.

Case Study: Enhancing Community Collaborations

A local environmental justice (EJ) advocate petitioned ATSDR to conduct a public health assessment on behalf of a group of neighborhoods located adjacent to and near a factory. Community residents expressed concerns about chemical air emissions and odors from the factory. Residents had health concerns about lung cancer, bronchitis, asthma, attention deficit disorders, skin rashes, nausea, vomiting, and headaches. For years, the communities had filed complaints with factory managers, city officials, the local health department, and the state environmental protection agency. However, the residents believed their concerns were not being addressed. ATSDR accepted the petition and visited the communities to meet with residents, community leaders, local EJ advocates, the local health department, and industry leaders. During discussions, ATSDR learned that the communities lacked trust in federal, state, and local agencies. In addition, residents wanted help engaging and bringing other agencies to the table. In conversations with factory management, ATSDR learned that negative media coverage was the reason that factory management was not willing to sit down with local EJ advocates.

ATSDR participated in community visioning sessions and planning charettes a structured, collaborative session in which a group comes together to develop a solution to a problem. The agency collaborated with the EJ advocate, community members, local elected officials, the EPA, the state environmental agency, the redevelopment authority, the local health department and school district, churches, and local universities. During the events, participants identified and ranked the communities' needs and assets.

This collaborative approach helped foster relationships between residents and local officials who were positioned to address environmental, public safety, housing, zoning, and workforce development issues. ATSDR's actions supported a more open dialogue between the residents and local officials.

Furthermore, ATSDR's community engagement efforts identified the need for health care provider education on air exposures and environmental odors and the need for community public education. Knowing the communities preferences, ATSDR chose to engage local chapters of the American Lung Association, American Cancer Society, and the Black Nurses' Association to deliver the health education.

Additional Resources

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Continued Contact During the Assessment Period (ATSDR). A guide to maintaining public trust and support during a public health assessment.

ATSDR Environmental Odors (ATSDR). This website provides answers to common questions on odors and health and approaches for addressing odors in your community.

Guide to Cultural Awareness for Disaster Response Volunteers (American Psychological Association). A guide with information to help volunteers become more culturally aware, understand cultural influences, and respect and value differences of other individuals and groups.

Public Health Assessment Guidance Manual: Chapter 4 Involving and Communicating with the Community (ATSDR). A guide on how to involve the community in the public health assessment process.

Sharing Leadership: A Guide to Stakeholder Engagement (Wisconsin Community Health Improvement Plans and Processes Infrastructure Improvement Project). A guide that focuses on who, how, and when to engage stakeholders.

Superfund Community Involvement Handbook: Chapter 2 Building a Foundation for Successful Community Involvement (EPA). A guide on building a foundation for community involvement that is based on trust, transparency, and a commitment to addressing community concerns.

Phase II

Phase III

Phase IV

Developing Communication Materials and Identifying Communications Channels

Effective communication is necessary to foster trust with a community. It is crucial that all community-facing communication be clear, relevant, easy to understand, and appropriate for the target audience. To be effective, communication must be sensitive to the needs and the experiences of the community. Communication must also be informative, honest, transparent, and use clear writing techniques. Thoughtful, timely, and regular communication, when done well, can help you earn the community's trust and establish your credibility.

Here are some types of communication materials for reaching community audiences:

- Fact sheets, consumer summaries, and tip sheets
- Radio spots
- Newsletters and updates
- Websites
- Fliers, brochures, and posters
- Advertisements
- Public service announcements
- Press releases
- Presentations

Keep in Mind

Many people remember information for a longer time when it is presented in a visual format. Graphics and visual aids are a great way to get attention and explain complex concepts.

Where to Start

- Before crafting any messages, refer to the Community Profile you created to make sure you understand the nature of the community's concerns, their communication preferences, historical components, and cultural sensitivities. (See activity: **Developing a Community Profile**)
- Identify key audiences to reach and develop personas for each audience. (A persona is a description of the type of audience. For example, a mother who also works outside of the home and is the primary caregiver for her extended family.)
- Identify the communication channels and networks through which these personas receive information they trust. If the channels include communication materials, look at how the information is presented.
- Develop variations of outreach materials to reflect the diversity, culture, and languages of the community. Keep in mind that different sub-groups may exist within a geographical area.
- Identify existing and influential communication channels. (See section: **Communication Channels**)
- Ask stakeholders to leverage existing channels for sharing information.
- Identify key influencers within the community who can help disseminate information and establish channels. (See activity: **Identifying Stakeholders**)

***NOTE FOR ATSDR STAFF:** All ATSDR media requests are handled by our Center (NCEH/ATSDR) Office of Communication. ATSDR staff should direct requests from the media to the Environmental Health Media mailbox at envhealthmedia@cdc.gov or by telephone at (770) 488-0700.

Tips from the Field

✓ Make messages as clear and simple as possible. Clear and simple messages improve comprehension across all literacy levels (See resource: **NCEH/ATSDR Clear Writing Hub**). Consider whether you need to develop written translations of your materials.

⚠ When reusing materials, be sure to make updates and tailor them to the needs of the intended audience.

✗ Do not assume that the easiest or most comfortable way of communicating for ATSDR is best for the community.

Communication Channels

Communication channels are the means through which people communicate, learn, and interact with each other. Examples of communication channels include newspaper, TV, radio, social media, email lists, groups and associations, religious groups, etc. Channels are as important as the message your materials contain because the channels you choose have an impact on the reach of your message. Channels may be better suited for specific messages or for specific audiences and should be tailored to the community needs. The table below lists several communication channels and offers suggestions on which channels are best for your communication messages.

Channel	Good for	Bad for
Face to Face	Deepening trust and relationships	Communicating with individuals and community members who are not in the same geographic area
Public Meetings	Receiving input from the community	One-on-one conversation; People with transportation limitations
Group or association meetings	Connecting with a specific type of audience	Broadcasting information widely at once; People with transportation limitations
Phone Calls	Addressing urgent matters	Communicating with more than one person
Video conferences	Communicating with individuals and community members who are not in the same geographic area	Communicating with individuals with limited technological skills or equipment; People with limited internet bandwidth
Emails	Updating large groups	Collaborating on time-sensitive matters
Webinars	Fielding questions from the community	Communicating with individuals with limited technological skills or equipment; People with limited internet bandwidth
Community Websites	Updating large groups	Collaborating or two-way communication; People with limited internet access
Reports	Summarizing technical information	Developing personal relationships
Blogs	Good for sharing personal experiences	Communicating in a formal tone; People with limited internet access

Additional Resources

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Community Concern Assessment Tool (ATSDR). A guide and template for assessing the level and nature of community concern as a result of environmental contamination.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Message Mapping Template, Worksheet and Checklist (ATSDR). Message maps to help health assessors develop messages specific to a community's situation.

CDC Guide to Writing for Social Media (CDC). A guide to help health communicators translate messages so that the messages resonate with social media audiences.

Health Communication Playbook (CDC/ATSDR). A resource for creating effective materials when communicating environmental health information to the public.

NCEH/ATSDR Clear Writing Hub (NCEH/ATSDR). A website to help you communicate clearly and effectively to all the audiences you serve.

Planning and Conducting Health Education for Community Members

Health education is any combination of learning experiences designed to help individuals and communities improve their environmental health literacy. The goals of health education are to increase awareness of local environmental conditions, potential exposures, and the impacts of exposures on individual and public health. Health education can also prepare community members to receive and better understand the findings of your public health work.

Some health education takes the form of shorter, one-on-one, or small group conversations with community members, STLT partners, and stakeholders. In the beginning of your public health work, you may need to constantly educate community members about exposure sources and exposure pathways –that is, how they may encounter harmful substances.

Later in your public health work, you may want to do a full community workshop or participate in existing community events to increase understanding about specific exposures related to the chemical of concern. Be sure to address how the harmful substance may be encountered, levels of exposure, and ways community members can prevent, reduce, or eliminate exposure. There may be other concerns that are not chemical-specific, such as environmental odors and community stress.

Keep in Mind

Health education is a professional discipline with unique graduate-level training and credentialing. Health educators are critical partners that advise in the development and implementation of health education programs. Public health work benefits from the skills that a health educator can provide. (See resource: **What Is a Health Education Specialist?**) If you don't have this training, see what you can do to build your skills and improve your one-on-one and small group educational conversations. Health educators may also work with other public health professionals such as health communication specialists. Health communication specialists develop communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health.

Where to Start

- Assess individual and community needs for health education. (See activity: **Developing a Community Profile**)
- Ask community members about factors that directly or indirectly increase the degree of exposure to environmental contamination. Factors may include community members accessing a hazardous site or the presence of lead in house paint, soil, or water.
- Develop a health education plan.
- Listen for opportunities to provide health education throughout your community engagement work.

Case Study: Uranium Exposure Education in a Tribal Community

Despite nearby mines being shut down, a tribal nation continued to face risks of exposure to uranium and radon. To help the community better understand how to reduce the risk of exposure, a group of federal and tribal agencies developed a uranium education workshop. The agencies established a vision and a set of strategies to ensure the workshop was technically sound and culturally appropriate.

The agencies ensured that they

- Offered the workshop in English and tribal languages,
- Developed materials at the average US reading level for broad accessibility,
- Invited all local tribal families to participate, and
- Piloted the workshop with three communities before finalizing the content.

Before the first pilot workshop, the agencies sought feedback on content, tone, and complexity from community health representatives from the tribe's department of health. The community health representatives provided many suggestions to tailor the presentation for tribal community audiences.

The workshop content was further refined after each pilot presentation. Working with local professionals and offering workshops as pilot sessions enabled the agencies to tailor content to the needs, preferences, and beliefs of local community members.

Chemical-Specific Resources and Interventions

CDC's National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) and ATSDR have many existing materials to help educate community members about specific chemicals. ATSDR's Toxicological Profiles and Tox FAQs provide a comprehensive summary and interpretation of available toxicological and epidemiological information on a substance. ATSDR's Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education Program provides a framework and practices to make sure early care and education sites are located away from chemical hazards. Consider leveraging or adapting these resources, as well as the following chemical-specific websites and interventions, when developing health education activities for your community, such as

Lead

- NCEH's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program Website
- ATSDR's soilSHOP Toolkit—A toolkit to help people learn if their soil is contaminated with lead

Mercury

- ATSDR's Don't Mess with Mercury — Mercury spill prevention materials for schools

Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS):

- ATSDR's PFAS Website

As noted above there may be other concerns that are not chemical-specific, such as environmental odors and community stress. Some helpful resources to address these concerns can be found here:

- Environmental Odors
- Community Stress Resource Center

Tips from the Field

✓ Develop health education materials that are culturally appropriate, with community input.

⚠ Be aware that your health education messages may be received by the community differently than you intend. Consider testing your messages with community counterparts before you use them widely. Be aware of community beliefs about health and the environment, so that you can develop culturally appropriate health education materials. Your awareness will help you design, plan, and implement activities that are protective of health and respectful of community beliefs. (See callout box: **Cultural Awareness**)

✗ Avoid stigmatizing (devaluing) communities living in "contaminated" areas [ATSDR 2020].

Additional Resources

CDC Learning Connection (CDC). A source for information about public health training.

Characteristics of an Effective Health Education Curriculum (CDC). A list of characteristics that you can use to develop an effective health education curriculum.

Community Environmental Health Education Presentations (ATSDR). A collection of presentations designed for health educators to use in face-to-face sessions with community members to increase environmental health literacy.

Promoting Environmental Health in Communities (ATSDR). A guide that includes talking points, PowerPoint presentations, and covers the basic concepts of the environment, toxicology, and health.

What is a Health Education Specialist? (Society for Public Health Education - SOPHE): A description of a health education specialist including areas of responsibility and competency.

Phase IV

Evaluation of Community Engagement Activities

The purpose of evaluating community engagement activities is to determine if the process of developing, implementing, and monitoring the public health work is participatory in nature. It helps assess how community members and partners were involved throughout the entire process [HHS 2011].

Evaluating community engagement involves collecting and analyzing information about

- How community members', STLT partners', and stakeholders' input has been solicited and responded to,
- What kind of learning has occurred, and
- Responses to and satisfaction with community engagement activities.

Learnings from evaluations can be used to improve future community engagement activities.

During the early phases of community engagement planning, consider how you will establish baseline data, data sources, and accurate data collection. The data will reflect community members' and STLT partners' responses to and satisfaction with your community engagement. Explore if there are existing community satisfaction or customer satisfaction surveys available to use.

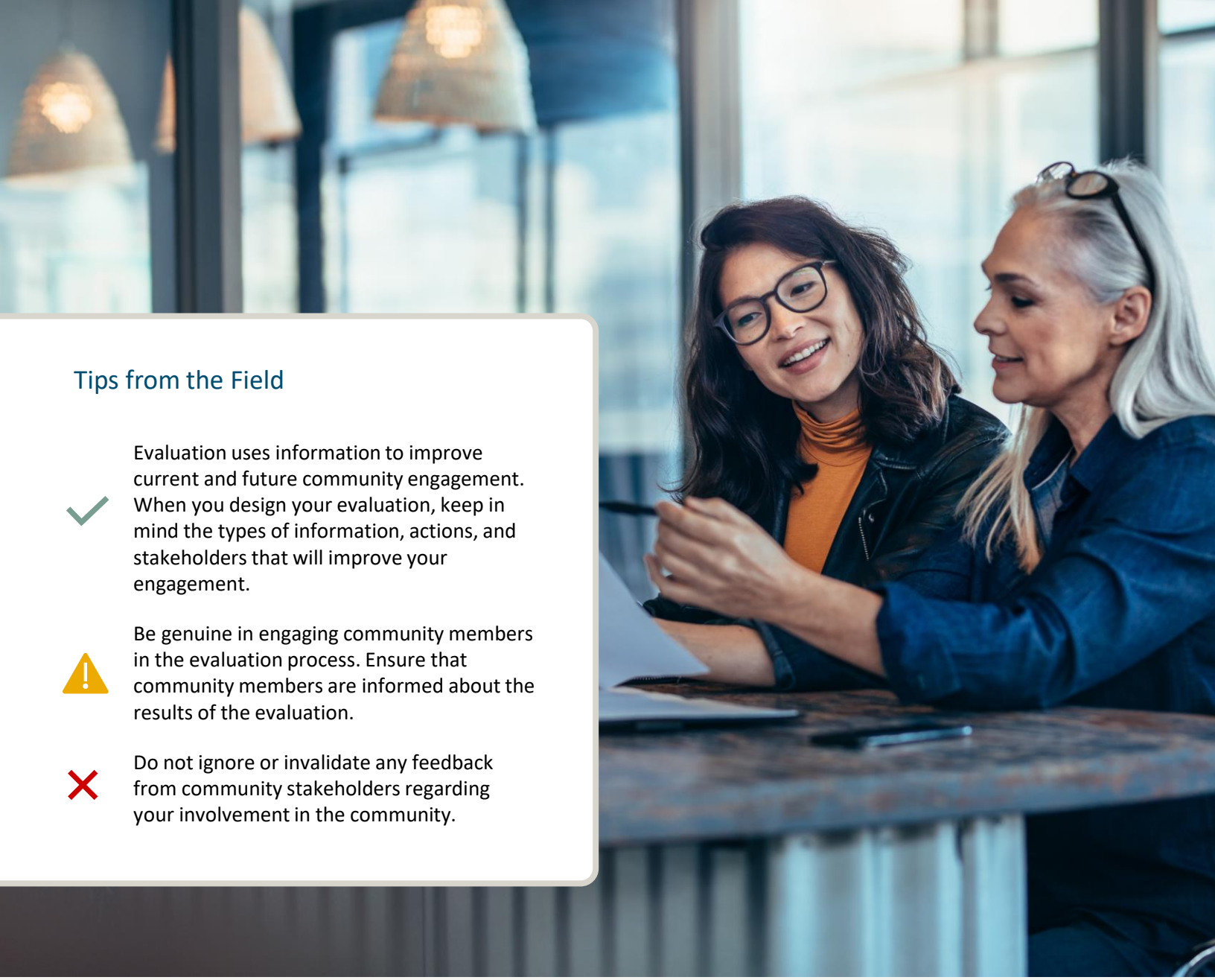
When relevant, you should evaluate community engagement activities as part of a larger evaluation to assess the public health work being completed.

Keep in Mind

Information collection by ATSDR employees is subject to Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) restrictions. Consider how you will appropriately get feedback about your community engagement. You may consider using existing community satisfaction survey instruments that have received PRA permissions.

Where to Start

- Investigate how findings from previous community engagement evaluations apply to the community and your public health work.
- Collaborate with evaluation experts to determine what kind of evaluation method best suits the given initiative.
- Define the goals, objectives, and desired outputs and outcomes of community engagement activities.
- Gather credible evidence from the community that strengthens the results of the evaluation and its recommendations. Source evidence from people, documents, and observations.



Tips from the Field

Evaluation uses information to improve current and future community engagement. When you design your evaluation, keep in mind the types of information, actions, and stakeholders that will improve your engagement.

Be genuine in engaging community members in the evaluation process. Ensure that community members are informed about the results of the evaluation.

Do not ignore or invalidate any feedback from community stakeholders regarding your involvement in the community.

Additional Resources

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Customer Satisfaction Survey Questionnaire (ATSDR). A customer satisfaction survey that can be used after providing information to community members about a site.

ATSDR Communication Toolkit: Memo on Proposed Indicator Set (ATSDR). A proposed set of indicators to be collected at sites where ATSDR is engaged in activities that involve communicating with communities.

Developing an Effective Evaluation (CDC). A workbook that provides guidance for applying the CDC framework for program evaluation, including tips, templates, and worksheets.

Identifying and Determining Involvement of Stakeholders (CDC). A brief guide to identifying and determining how to involve stakeholders in an evaluation.

Principles of Community Engagement: Chapter 7 Program Evaluation and Evaluating Community Engagement (ATSDR). A guide to evaluating community engagement efforts.

Cade Martin, 2009. CDC/Public Health Image Library.

Final Thoughts

It's Worth It…

Make no mistake, community engagement is important! Effectively engaging with communities can be a labor-intensive effort for everyone that is involved: ATSDR, STLT partners, and community stakeholders.

However, community engagement helps you gain a better understanding of people's concerns and needs, encourages participation in your work, and promotes the delivery of public health findings that people can use to make health decisions and the adoption of behaviors to protect their health. In addition, community engagement activities can build trust, minimize the negative secondary impacts of a public health response, reduce community stress, and strengthen community resilience.

Community engagement helps to improve public health work when community input and insights are considered in the investigation design, data collection and analysis, health interventions, and information sharing activities. It can also help public health professionals avoid ethical pitfalls and make way for long term partnerships. Finally, effective community engagement can help identify areas for improvement in how research findings are used to bring about change. This insight may ultimately lead to the general public being more receptive to public health work and reaping greater benefits.

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Disclaimer

The individuals shown here are fully vaccinated and following COVID-19 guidelines in their area. Refer to the CDC website for current recommendations