


## Community Meeting Guidelines

Connecting with communities directly at the beginning of the assessment process—whether in a group setting or one-on-one—is essential for building a strong and collaborative relationship with each community. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) uses a variety of different formats for community meetings when first connecting with a community including interviews, public availability sessions, and other types of meetings. These guidelines are focused on public meetings, which are the method most commonly used by ATSDR to communicate with community stakeholders and residents. However, many of the tips listed below may also apply to other types of community interactions.

### Setting the Stage for Successful Public Meetings

- **It is important to have some understanding of the community**—demographics, history related to environmental issues, their health concerns—**before convening a public meeting** (Use the Stakeholder/Partner Outreach tool to reach out to partners ahead of the meeting and the Media Analysis Guide to review media coverage of the environmental issue).
- **Invite all respected community members to come to the meeting**, making sure to include those with whom you have established a good working relationship.
- **Setting expectations** is vital for establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with the community. This applies to setting expectations for the meeting and for ATSDR's role in the community moving forward. Important points to cover in the initial meeting could include:
  - Brief description of who ATSDR is.
  - Explanation of ATSDR's role at the site and a description of the expected outcomes of ATSDR's work at the site. (This can be framed in contrast to what other agencies such as EPA would do.)
  - Explanation of what ATSDR cannot do at the site.
  - Provide existing baseline data on the site to the community to establish expectations.
  - How the community can get involved.
  - How to stay in touch with ATSDR site team members.
- **The ATSDR video, *The Health Assessment process and your community*, is a useful tool for expectation setting.**
- **Be prepared to address basic questions about the contamination and how community members can protect themselves, if needed.**
  - What is known about the risk posed by the contaminant at this time?
  - What do I do if I was at or near the impacted area where contaminant has been found?
  - How do I know if I have been exposed to the contaminant?
  - How can I protect myself and my family?
- **Avoid the use of jargon.** Using technical jargon to impart information about ATSDR's activities or in response to questions can cause misunderstanding by community



members and can alienate the very audience with whom ATSDR is trying to establish positive relations. If a technical phrase must be used, explain what it is. Review what you plan to say with ATSDR health educators, health communicators, or a trusted lay person before you present to the community. Sometimes it is hard to tell what terms are confusing to others.

- **Know that the degree of community concern may be high and may or may not be related to the actual level of risk that the contaminants pose to community health.** It is essential that you understand the level of concern the community has about the situation and the reasons behind that concern before meeting with the community. You will want to adjust your messaging, tone, and approach to ensure that you are fully addressing the community's concerns, and so that they feel they are being heard. See the ATSDR Communication Toolkit User's Guide, the Community Concern Assessment Tool, and the Media Analysis Guide for more guidance. The following are tips for communication in communities with a high level of concern.
- **Express empathy, honesty, and humility.** Empathy, honesty, and humility will help to build trust with communities where there is a high risk (actual or perceived) and high community concern but currently low trust levels between community members and officials.
- **Open lines of communication and ask for feedback.** Make sure community members know how to contact you by phone and email. This can help forge positive relations and can help foster a collaborative working environment. Remember that you are there to receive information as well as disseminate it.
- **Be sure to listen.** Listen to what is being asked by community stakeholders and

members and answer their questions as directly as possible. Building trust is vital to community involvement but can be challenging. When community members feel that ATSDR is actively listening and responding to their questions, it paves the way for building trust and buy-in on the part of community stakeholders and members, and building credibility for ATSDR.

- **If known, let people know how the chemical exposure may affect different people/populations.** It is also important to remember that chemical exposures have different effects on the body depending on one's age, sex, preexisting health conditions, disability, chemical sensitivities, and so forth. When discussing hazardous exposure, indicate whether there will be a greater or lesser impact based on an individual's characteristics or health status.
- **Consider what tools you will need to communicate at the meeting ahead of time.** Depending on your style and comfort level, you may want to use talking points or a PowerPoint presentation. You also may want to provide meeting attendees with fact sheets or other materials.
- **Review fact sheets and other materials for plain language ahead of time.** Plainly worded materials will help ensure that the information you are conveying is clearly communicated and understood by your audience.
- **Consider translating or adapting English language materials for different audiences and determine whether you need a translator at the meeting.** Depending on the community you are serving, you may need to translate or adapt materials so that your messages will be understood. You may also want to have a translator at the meeting. These decisions should be based on community demographics and discussions with

key community leaders. Community partners may also be able to help facilitate or assist in the translation/adaptation process and/or provide a translator.

## More About Using Fact Sheets

General (not site-specific) fact sheets can be used to assist you in introducing the community, the media, and other stakeholders to ATSDR and its mission and work. You can distribute the fact sheets as is, or you can excerpt pertinent information and place it in site-specific fact sheets as needed. In addition, you can mail the fact sheets to familiarize the recipients with the information before a meeting or you can give them out at the meeting. You should only distribute fact sheets pertinent to the health concerns of a specific site.


You may also need to develop site-specific fact sheets to briefly summarize the information that ATSDR currently knows about the site and describe ATSDR's current and future plans for the public health assessment process, including plans to meet with the community.

The Guide to Materials Development handout in this toolkit provides more details on how to develop materials, cleared materials that may be useful, and templates.

## Resources

Additional information about engaging with communities is available at these ATSDR websites:

- **PHAGM's Engaging the Community Section**—In this section in PHAGM, you will learn about the goals and phases of the community engagement process. You will also learn about valuable strategies, actions, tools, and activities to work with the community.  
([https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pha-guidance/engaging\\_the\\_community/index.html](https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pha-guidance/engaging_the_community/index.html))
- **Community Engagement Playbook**—This playbook will guide you through the phases and activities of community engagement. <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/community-engagement-playbook/php/about/index.html>
- **ATSDR Communication Toolkit**—This toolkit will help improve your communication efforts with local communities.  
<https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communications-toolkit/about/index.html>
- **Public Health Assessments**—describes what this type of evaluation considers, the types of information it evaluates, and how the evaluation is used. It also includes information about how the community can get involved in the process.  
<https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHA/Product.aspx?tools=n#publicHealthAssessments>
- **Public Health Consultations**—describes what this type of evaluation considers, the types of information that it evaluates, and how the evaluation's recommendations are used.  
<https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHA/Product.aspx?tools=n#publicHealthConsultations>
- **Exposure Investigations**—describes how an exposure investigation is one approach ATSDR uses to develop better characterizations of past, current, and possible future exposures to hazardous substances in the environment. ATSDR also uses exposure investigations to evaluate current and potential health effects related to those exposures.  
<https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHA/Product.aspx?tools=n#exposureInvestigations>
- **Public Health Advisories**—describes how ATSDR evaluates and responds to a hazardous substance release into the environment that poses an immediate and significant danger to people's health.  
<https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHA/Product.aspx?tools=n#publicHealthAdvisories>



ATSDR also has a set of cleared messages that you can use to help you clarify its role in the community, set expectations, and effectively communicate risk.