Getting to the Heart of It:
The Power of True Engagement for Population Health

Executive Summary

For effective population health improvement, one of the most essential elements for success is meaningful and effective engagement of key community stakeholders. However, the reality is, this is not widely practiced. The learning guide is designed to help population health improvement initiatives better understand stakeholder engagement, determine their stakeholders, identify and use various approaches to engage stakeholders to achieve desired outcomes, and relate best practices to maximize engagement through effective communication.

Setting the Stage for Effective Engagement

In the quest to achieve synergistic goals of improving the patient care experience, improving population health and reducing health care costs, the health care landscape is constantly evolving. There are increasing opportunities for health care and public health systems to partner in a population health initiative and become accountable for health outcomes, while emphasizing social determinants of health, community environments, preventive care and nontraditional health care settings and resources.

Effective engagement helps a population health improvement initiative ensure that it can fully and strategically mobilize community resources to affect individual behavior, as well as policies, systems and environmental changes that impact health improvement. Successful engagement requires thoughtful participation, clear and mutually agreeable expectations, and the ongoing involvement of key stakeholders. Done well, engagement helps establish and enhance buy-in and ultimate ownership, build capacity (including for key data), effect change and sustain impact.

As outlined in the full guide, this executive summary provides a brief look at 10 best practices for effective engagement.

1. Engage the Right Stakeholders and Partners

To fully realize population health improvement, it’s essential to get the right people around the table to inform the initiative from start to finish. Once key stakeholders have been identified, defining the specific problem to address becomes easier. The group’s work can then turn to setting specific goals and objectives by leveraging existing community data and resources, identifying desired outcomes, and using its collective expertise to prioritize, inform, implement and measure the results of intervention(s) or next steps. Ensure that key stakeholders include representatives from the entire range of a clearly defined target audience and reflect its diversity.

2. Enable Open, Two-Way Communication

Effective engagement requires input and feedback from all key stakeholders, including the target audience. There are a variety of ways to gather input, and it’s likely to be an iterative process, especially for initiatives that have a planned timeframe of a year or longer. Depending on the project’s scope and target audience, various approaches can be used to provide opportunities to garner feedback, create the best interventions and gather project support. Ask key stakeholders for input and create an open, trusting environment that encourages and uses that input. Ask open-ended questions frequently and develop a follow-up plan to share learnings and next steps.
3. Align Around a Common Vision

From the beginning, help key stakeholders to buy in to the mission, scope and expected outcomes of the work. Identify a common mission and vision, focusing on a specific community health need to help narrow the project’s scope, set expectations, engage key stakeholders and ensure ongoing progress. Use data from multiple sources to help identify needs, gain buy-in around the problem, and identify how to monitor progress. Consider key stakeholders to be partners. Partnerships are interdependencies — none can accomplish goals without the others.

4. Clearly Define Roles, Responsibilities, Authority

All stakeholders must understand their roles and responsibilities, agree upon expectations for their involvement, and understand the value of being part of community change. How each stakeholder views the value of health, and to what level they wish to engage in the project, may vary among the key stakeholder groups, as well as their roles. The ideal strategy for how and how often to engage and communicate with different stakeholders will also vary, depending on the outcomes expected.

The complete learning guide also discusses these communication best practices for maximizing engagement:

- Tailor communications strategies to increase engagement
- Regularly communicate data to facilitate change
- Build a strong, pervasive brand strategy
- Use storytelling as a winning formula for engagement

5. Use a Community Asset Mapping Process

Community Asset Mapping is a way of identifying existing resources available in the community. It focuses on positive assets within the community (as opposed to focusing on “problems” in the community), and helps to identify connections or relationships between individuals, between individuals and organizations, and between organizations. Asset mapping helps to discover both expected and unexpected key stakeholders to engage, and initiates a process that a community can ultimately use to mobilize the identified resources and help solve its own health problems.

6. Identify Partners to Access and Generate Data

Developing partnerships with various stakeholders with access to data is essential for success. Using collective data can help prioritize community health issues. Explore ways to leverage points of alignment by working together, sharing resources and data, and aligning strategy to maximize the impact of collective actions through effective coordination of potential resources. By beginning this work as soon as is feasible, initiatives can fully maximize the benefits of these partnerships and the data.

7. Develop a Collective Long-term Financial Strategy

It’s imperative to develop a financial strategy with key stakeholders so that there is ownership, commitment and role clarification to the strategy for long-term engagement. Identify opportunities for in-kind donations as well as direct monetary support of the population health initiative. This can take many forms, such as pro bono services or administrative staff support; donation of space, volunteer time, prizes or supplies; or promotional support.

8. Establish Credibility, Engender Trust

When implementing an initiative, it’s critical that the voices of health care or public health professionals do not drown out stakeholder voices, especially from the target audience. However, determining where there are gaps in knowledge or expertise among stakeholders is also important, so that experts can be invited to address those gaps. Outside experts can ensure that the project follows the best approach, and can also help to engender stakeholders’ trust as a result of perceived neutrality on local issues.

9. Diligently Build Community Capacity

Community capacity building is a continuous process for growing pride and leadership to ensure that key stakeholders (including the target audience) are trained to take ownership for the work and sustain it. Growing the knowledge base, confidence and skills of all stakeholders empowers each individual to represent the initiative; it’s some of the most important work the project’s team can do.

10. View Health as a Shared Value

Integrating health as a shared priority in all individual, family, organizational, government, city and school agendas is necessary in order to weave health into the fabric of the community and to maximize the opportunity to reach its full health potential. To do this requires key stakeholders to understand the impact of the individual’s health on others, as well as an understanding where health issues fall to be prioritized among other competing priorities. Using data in a persuasive way helps people understand that health is not only about caring for those with chronic illness or disease, but also about preventing disease, reducing costs and improving policy, systems and environments.

The learning guide was produced as a part of the Community Health Peer Learning (CHP) Program. In 2015, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) awarded AcademyHealth $2.2 million to cooperatively lead 15 communities in the CHP Program. Through this two-year program, AcademyHealth is working to establish a national peer learning collaborative addressing community-level population health management challenges through expanded collection, sharing and use of electronic data. Learn more at www.academyhealth.org/CHPhealthIT.