

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

# A Cautionary Tale and a Success Story

Community engagement is a firm expectation in today's social sector. Agencies, organizations, and initiatives tend to construct the process according to the norms of their fields. State housing agencies issue calls for public comment and hold hearings. Developers ask for neighborhood input on projects. Hospitals send out surveys for community health needs assessments and organize resident councils to which they report on their activities with minimal space for interaction. When outside developers and funders enter communities, their outreach efforts often focus on the most highly visible local players and organizations, who may not actually represent the residents whose lives and neighborhoods their community development efforts may be designed to serve but too often disrupt.

Unfortunately, these kinds of formulaic efforts can have significant consequences: projects that do not align with community aspirations, development and investments that create harm for the people they are intended to benefit, displacement, and trauma. In turn, these consequences build distrust which becomes another roadblock to successful community engagement.

In contrast, effective community engagement strategies rest on two pillars:

- 1 An understanding and acknowledgement of past harms.**
- 2 A purpose-driven approach that specifically identifies what kind of input a project or initiative needs, who should give that input, and how best to enable them to give it.**



# Community Engagement in Action: A Cautionary Tale



When a local CDFI in Southwest City convened housing nonprofits, businesses, and agencies for an affordable housing initiative in Uptown Heights, they knew community engagement would be crucial for their work. A traditionally Black and brown neighborhood facing increasingly strong displacement pressures, Uptown Heights had been neglected for decades. Over the years, the various government bodies and developers who had considered what might be done for the community tended to ignore its residents and their concerns—and when they did ask for input, it was generally too late in the process for residents to make a meaningful difference. As a result, Uptown Heights residents were understandably jaded. The initiative partners knew from the beginning that they needed to repair trust.

Toward this end, the initiative created a resident council to ensure that community voices were part of their process. The resident council had 10 members, most of them low-income residents of Uptown Heights who were affiliated with the initiative's partner organizations. In the energy and excitement of creating the resident council, nobody realized that different people had different ideas about its purpose. Some thought it would be a platform for providing feedback on potential new housing projects. Others saw it as a way to organize the community to advocate for policy change. The resident council members themselves were particularly interested in addressing challenges related to housing conditions and rental terms.

Meanwhile, the partners were deciding that the initiative would focus on homeownership, specifically through subdividing lots, exploring tenancy-in-common and cooperative ownership models for multifamily buildings, and trying to change city and state laws so that accessory dwelling units (ADUs) could be converted into condos. Collectively, the aim of these strategies was to create more potential homes for residents to buy, which meant another significant part of the initiative's work would be to identify potential homeowners.

Unfortunately, these strategies did not align with the structure and membership of the resident council, which had been organized around renters who were not interested in homeownership. After two meetings, the council was suspended. As the partners considered how to engage residents, particularly as homebuyers, they discovered that Uptown Heights residents who were interested in buying homes wanted the traditional single-lot/single-family homes that lined most of the neighborhood's streets, rather than the creative multifamily housing solutions the initiative was working on. The work of the initiative slowed significantly as the partners considered how to navigate the strategic conflicts they had brought to the surface.

By separating the development of their community engagement mechanism and housing strategies, the partners had impeded the impact of both. Their resident council had no clear purpose, and its members had ideas of their own that did not align with the initiative's plans. Meanwhile, there was no ready buyer pipeline for the initiative's homeownership strategies. Last, but not least, this specific disconnect added to the long history of failed community engagement in Uptown Heights, reinforcing distrust rather than repairing it.

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# Community Engagement in Action: A Success Story



When Urban Hospital, a Midwest City anchor institution, decided to address social determinants of health in Hospital Village, a neighborhood adjacent to the hospital, they knew they needed to build credibility in the community. Hospital Village residents had long felt that they had not benefitted sufficiently from the nationally ranked hospital's presence in their midst. So Urban Hospital decided to partner on housing with Community Help, a neighborhood CDC based out of a local church. Community Help had leveraged the church's strong local presence into successful community development programs that had garnered widespread respect in Hospital Village and across Midwest City. Over the next several years, Urban Hospital and Community Help worked together to bring over \$50 million in housing investments into Hospital Village, resulting in hundreds of new and renovated homes.

In the wake of this success, Urban Hospital turned its attention to Lakeside, another Midwest City neighborhood that was threatened by a hot housing market. Although Urban Hospital had a clinic in Lakeside, neither the hospital nor Community Help had the kind of history or presence there that they had when they started their work in Hospital Village. Years of unfulfilled promises by other Midwest City institutions had left Lakeside residents wary of outsiders. Midwest City had recently conducted a series of public meetings with residents to identify their hopes and goals for the neighborhood. Politicians and agencies were eager for Urban Hospital to repeat their Hospital Town success in Lakeside, so the stakes were high.

Knowing that they were entering the neighborhood as outsiders, Urban Hospital decided that they needed

someone on their team who already had earned trust and built relationships in Lakeside. They created the position of senior engagement manager and hired a local resident who was a trained city planner and had worked for the city as well as other local anchor institutions and nonprofits. The senior engagement manager became a regular presence at community meetings and local events, held office hours at a local library, and established a Neighborhood Advisory Committee to gain input from residents.

At the city's public meetings, residents had expressed a strong desire for help with improving their homes. Urban Hospital's community engagement efforts confirmed that this was indeed a top priority. Although Urban Hospital and Community Help had little experience in this area, they created a Home Repair Initiative that provided grants for exterior home repairs for low-income residents who promised to remain in the neighborhood for at least three years. The Home Repair Initiative enabled them to start working on housing in Lakeside in a way that was visible to residents, demonstrating that Urban Hospital was serious about its commitment to the neighborhood. In the next two years, with the neighborhood's support, they attracted over \$10 million in investments and began developing new affordable units for rental and homeownership that would help residents stay in the community.

Urban Hospital's success in two different neighborhoods shows how important it is to find the right community engagement mechanism. Hospital Village and Lakeside had similar challenges, but they were different communities with different demographics and histories and Urban Hospital entered them in different ways. Community Help provided legitimacy and relationships in Hospital Village, but in Lakeside, the hospital needed to build those relationships itself. By showing up at neighborhood spaces and events and inviting residents to join their work, Urban Hospital was able to build those relationships and uncover Lakeside's housing priorities. Not only did Lakeside need its own community engagement strategy, but that community engagement strategy resulted in its own effective housing and community investment strategy.



A well-designed, carefully executed community engagement process should result in community investment strategies and deals that residents embrace and support, both conceptually and practically. But strategies and deals are only the beginning. The true success of community engagement comes in the implementation and results of those strategies and deals. When deals are executed with care and fidelity, when residents are consistently engaged throughout the process (included at turning points and the appearance of unexpected possibilities or obstacles), when resident goals are accomplished and shared priorities achieved, and when trust is not only built but sustained, that is the true outcome of successful community engagement.



## About the Center for Community Investment

The Center for Community Investment (CCI), a sponsored project at Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, works to ensure that all communities, especially those that have suffered from structural racism and policies that have left them economically and socially isolated, can unlock the capital they need to thrive. Our work is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, JPMorgan Chase & Co, and The California Endowment.

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