



Shifting Power: Community Engagement Strategies for Joining the Right Tables

A lack of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA), at all levels, makes it increasingly difficult to advance health equity and address social determinants of health as they relate to COVID-19 health disparities among populations at higher risk and that are underserved. This session dove into assessing and deconstructing existing power dynamics for better coalition building, planning, and policymaking. Presenters examined the intersections of funding and accessibility to raise awareness of common pitfalls while highlighting best practices for moving health equity forward.

What is shifting power?

- Shifting power refers to government agencies working with communities in a way that prioritizes community members' needs and suggestions.
- Ideally, community partners should serve as equal partners with government agencies.

Why is shifting power important?

- Structural oppression, particularly systemic racism, has deep roots in systems in the United States, particularly health systems, and this oppression can impact health, including by impacting the social determinants of health.
- Structural oppressions are perpetuated by government actions. In many historically minoritized communities, this has led to a distrust of government agencies and other institutions.
- Shifting power allows governments to increase community trust by centering community voice and equity in their work. It also allows governments to learn from community members, who have the most knowledge of their health needs.

How can organizations shift power effectively?

Certain principles, including those listed below, can help organizations effectively share power and work towards dismantling systematic oppression:

- **Developing a shared analysis of the problem and its byproducts:**
 - Those doing this work need to name and understand the historical systems of privilege and oppression that have led to health disparities.
 - They also need to understand and name the inequities that still exist today as a result of these systems.
- **Creating a container for systems change processes:**
 - There must be space to develop the relationships with community members that are necessary for any power sharing.
 - Any relationship building should happen authentically, without tokenizing community members.
- **“Integrating the head and the heart:”**
 - Give everyone the space and time to process any emotions that this work can surface.

- **Adopting a power-sharing approach:**
 - This means establishing processes that ensure community members, who have not historically had decision-making power, are not only represented but can also lead in the work and in systems changes.
- **Changing who is at the table to directly address inequities:**
 - Governments should establish long-term relationships with community organizations that represent and consist of people who have been disproportionately impacted by inequities.



Resources to learn from:

The below resources may be helpful starting points for health departments, but it is important to note that every community is different, so these resources may need to be adapted.

[Power-building Partnerships for Health: Lessons from Santa Barbara About Building Power to Protect Farmworker Health and Advance Health Equity](#)

A brief that discusses a partnership between the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department and two community-based organizations. Through this partnership, the health department has developed an analysis of power and has worked to build community trust through transparency.

[Cook County Partners with Community to Tackle Structural Racism and Build Community Power](#)

A case study that outlines the partnership between the Cook County Department of Public Health and community organizers on worker and immigrant rights. Through this partnership, the department created a multisector collaborative that centers anti-racism and health equity in strategic planning.

[Engaging With Communities — Lessons \(Re\)Learned From COVID-19](#)

A peer-reviewed study that describes a variety of strategies undertaken by health departments, hospitals, universities, and others to partner with members of underserved communities. One major strategy described was community-based participatory research.

[Leading Locally: A Community Power-Building Approach to Structural Change](#)

A roadmap for communities that discusses a variety of approaches to building community power. This roadmap also includes sixteen distinct efforts for community power-building from across the country.

[Building Power to Advance Health Equity: Findings from a Survey of Health Departments about their Collaborations with Community Power Building Organizations](#)

A report detailing findings from a survey of state and local health departments that have worked with community power-building organizations. The survey asked about how to better make decisions to build power and improve health equity. This also includes suggestions for effective ways to partner with community power-building organizations.

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