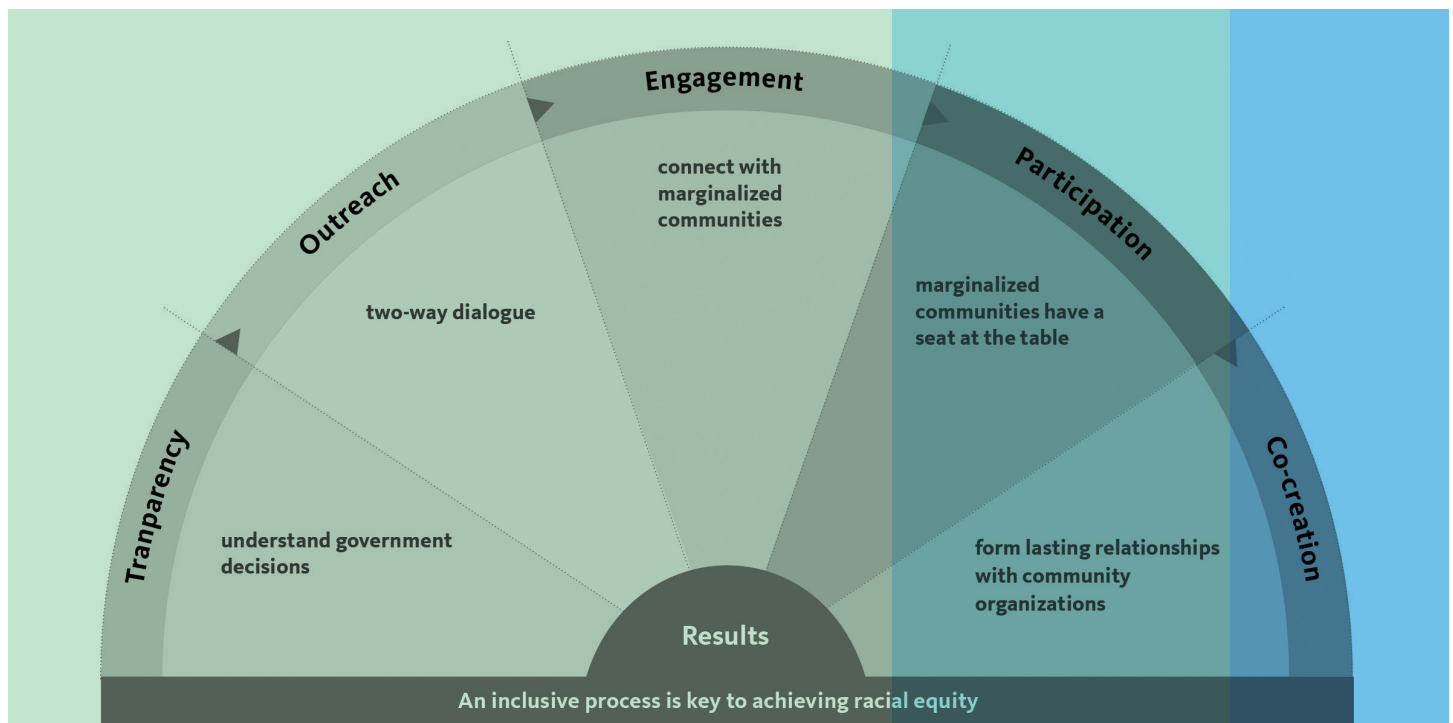


Inclusive Processes to Advance Racial Equity in Housing Recovery: A Guide for Cities during the Covid-19 Pandemic

July 2020



PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works®**.
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The Covid-19 pandemic has created a set of dire public health and economic challenges for communities across the country. No one is immune and no one will be spared some degree of impact. This crisis strikes our most vulnerable communities and communities of color even harder, magnifying existing racial disparities in health, housing, and economic security. People of color are experiencing [higher Covid-19 infection and mortality rates](#) at the same time as they are disproportionately impacted by job loss, wage reductions, and business closures, which in turn negatively impact their access to safe and affordable housing. Without dramatically more public intervention, the crisis will certainly worsen the already stark economic inequality along racial lines in the United States. For example, people of color, particularly Black, Native American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander people, are already far more likely to experience homelessness. People of color are also more

likely to pay too much for rent, and face greater housing instability than Whites. Rather than allowing Covid-19 to exacerbate these challenges, communities can use recovery strategies as an opportunity to house more people and close racial disparities in housing.

Federal, state, and local governments have committed trillions of dollars of new spending to support vulnerable workers, businesses, tenants, and homeowners during the pandemic, and public agencies are likely to invest significantly more over the coming year. How and where public agencies allocate their recovery dollars and how related public policies are targeted can profoundly impact racial equity for decades to come. Down one path is a focus on equity—just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential—that entails targeting resources to communities most impacted and using the recovery to help heal long-lasting racial inequities. Down the other path is what is far too often business as usual—doling out resources to businesses and communities with the most political access or where money can be spent most quickly. Unfortunately, the second path is well worn, and it leads to deepening inequities. Inclusive processes will enable communities to take the first path and focus on racial equity, helping those most in need and addressing long-standing disparities.

This inclusive process guide is designed to help local government leadership and staff design public processes that use this crisis as an opportunity to further racial equity and build community capacity. Our companion guide, [*Strategies to Advance Racial Equity in Housing Response and Recovery: A Guide for Cities during the Covid-19 Pandemic*](#), outlines policy and program design actions that communities can take to support an equitable recovery and advance racial equity in housing during and after the coronavirus pandemic.

This process guide:

- Outlines the reasons for pursuing an inclusive process (even in times of crisis);
- Describes a developmental path that moves from simple, but ineffective, public engagement to authentic and meaningful community partnership;
- Provides real-world examples of steps that communities are taking to ensure that traditionally excluded communities have a real seat at the table when it comes to planning Covid-19 recovery efforts; and
- Illustrates specific strategies and tools (both online and off) that local government agencies are using to effectively facilitate public input in the absence of face-to-face public meetings.

Inclusive Processes—The Key to Equitable Outcomes

Furthering racial equity in our Covid-19 responses will not happen automatically. Good intentions and broad statements of principle are not enough. Because the crisis is acute and unfolding rapidly, it is easy for public agencies to affirm a commitment to equity even as they make detailed decisions that undermine that intention. As just one example, the federal CARES Act provided funding intended to protect families likely to be impacted, but the Act explicitly excluded families headed by undocumented immigrants, which also cut off aid to their US citizen children.

In June 2020, PolicyLink convened more than 50 leaders from local housing departments and housing advocacy organizations across the nation to learn how they were using and prioritizing federal relief resources and whether those resources would result in racial equity outcomes for vulnerable populations. We learned that because of multiple factors—including Covid-19, sheltering-in-place orders for local government and advocacy organizations' workers, unemployment, and economic impacts on local jurisdictions' budgets—few understood the range of resources coming to their jurisdictions, their potential uses or integration, who was being prioritized or served, or who was informing the process. We also learned that many vulnerable populations had received no resources from relief funds. This guide is intended to rectify these deficits and to help cities undertake inclusive processes to proactively engage and partner with the most-impacted communities to help shape the use of resources and reach the people who need them most.

The proven strategy for ensuring that public actions consistently further equity entails broad-based and inclusive public engagement that gives people from impacted communities of color a seat at the table where decisions are made. This table may be an existing table, may build on existing tables, or may be a new table. Given the extent of the current, multiple, and overlapping crises and the potential for vastly increased homelessness and extended high unemployment, an inclusive decision-making process that can guide policy, resources, and reach the most vulnerable populations seems critical. When impacted stakeholders are directly involved in decision making, more innovative choices get made, with greater accountability for resources to reach those who need them the most.

Community engagement is far more than a set of activities and methods confined to a particular project, policy, or process. Rather, [as PolicyLink has written about previously](#), it is a type of communication, decision making, governance, and implementation infrastructure with the potential to give community members the power to own the change they want to see, leading to more equitable outcomes. While public agencies have plenty of tools for basic public participation and protocols for using them, many of these tools are ineffective because they neither address the legacy challenges in low-income communities and communities of color nor tap into the widely underutilized expertise and organizing capacity in these communities.

The approach to community engagement can mean the difference between a transformative initiative and one that deepens racial inequities. Inclusive community engagement makes highly technical or routine projects and processes more accessible and, as a result, more likely to produce real, tangible, and lasting benefits for communities. When marginalized community members are given meaningful opportunities to engage in budget and policymaking processes and shape the outcomes, a wide set of benefits follow, such as those listed below.

- **Legitimacy and increased support for plans and projects.** With the substantive engagement of affected communities, developed plans will have greater legitimacy and support, will reflect community priorities, and will produce more equitable outcomes. Legitimacy builds trust, political will, and ownership for effective implementation.
- **Improved community/government relations.** Community engagement can build trust between diverse stakeholders and help improve the quality of difficult discussions about racial disparities, economic conditions, and community development needs. By creating a multifaceted process built upon relationship building, trust, and respect and by affirming the critical information brought to the table by members of low-income communities of color, more effective ways of dealing with differences will emerge.
- **Increased reach into vulnerable populations.** Diverse community representatives can better reach impacted residents, better design effective benefits, and better ensure those resources reach residents.
- **Deeper understanding of the issues.** Housing strategies are stronger with the input of the people who are facing and addressing housing challenges and who have a clearer view of both the barriers and opportunities on the ground. Having better information leads to more effective decisions.

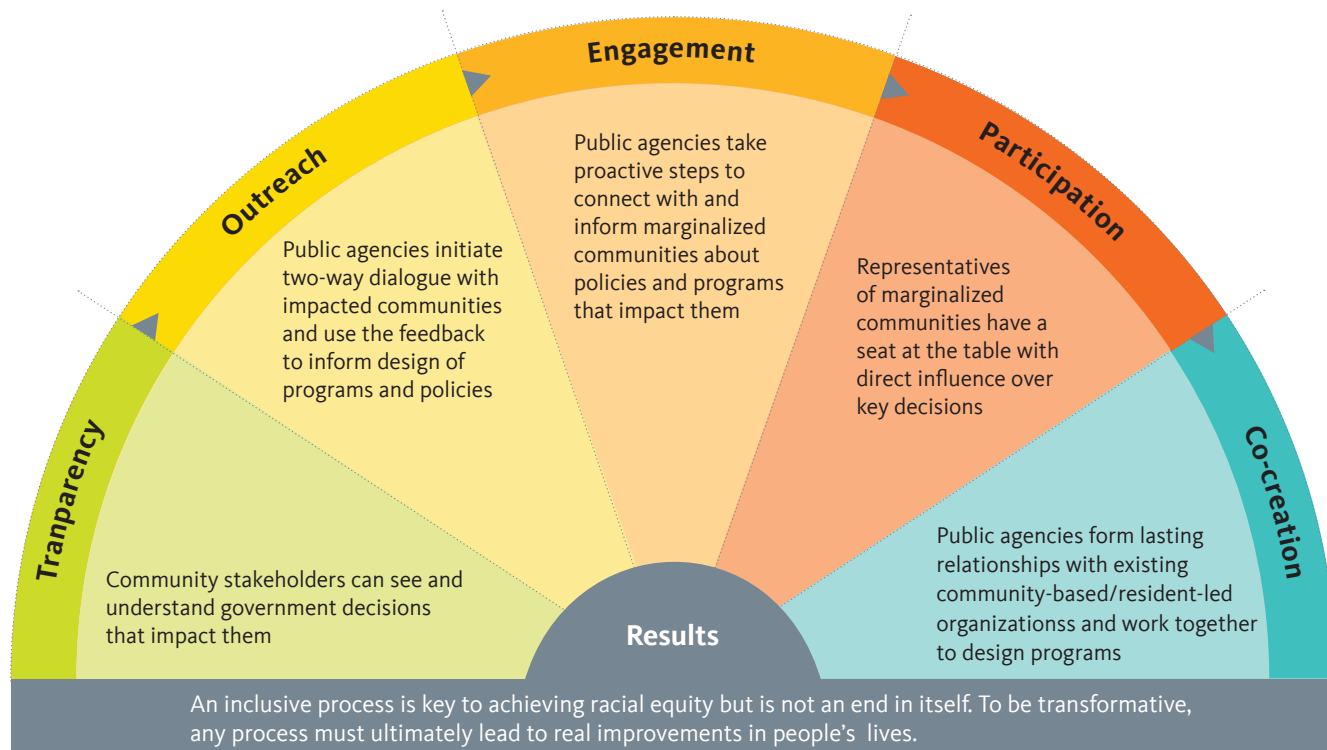
- **Increase in community capacity.** A meaningful engagement strategy will increase the capacity of community members for problem solving. Engagement builds stronger networks across racial, ethnic, generational, gender, and socioeconomic divides, which is an essential component to achieving equitable outcomes and leveraging additional resources outside of public processes.
- **Reduced long-term costs.** Plans and development projects risk ending up in costly litigation when lack of or poor community engagement has not effectively crafted a consensus. While conflicts may arise during planning (especially when there is a history of failed projects or unrealized promises), the community engagement process can create an environment of positive communication where creative and inclusive solutions can be found to resolve conflicts before decisions are made.
- **Effective implementation infrastructure.** Community leadership is in the best position to design culturally competent methods for reaching the most vulnerable people and ensuring that solutions alleviate the risks they are facing. These organizations can often fulfill effective service delivery, extending the reach of local government.

A Developmental Approach to Community Engagement

The quickest way to effectively engage the community in crisis decision making is to have already invested in building robust platforms for participation before the crisis. Cities that invested in community engagement and explicit racial equity work before the Covid-19 pandemic have found it easier to repurpose existing community tables to solicit quick feedback on Covid-19 response and recovery plans. Earned and cultivated trust facilitates stronger and faster decision making during an emergency. When dialogue is ongoing before a crisis, the government and community possess deeper knowledge and trust to deal with challenges that arise during a crisis. However, it is never too late to invest in greater inclusion.

In our listening sessions, PolicyLink heard about at least five distinct types of inclusive processes. A number of participants articulated a “developmental” view of public engagement in which the more challenging and meaningful types of engagement are predicated on the successful implementation of the easier steps. Figure 1 illustrates this sequence from simple transparency through meaningful community engagement and up to sustained partnerships with community stakeholders. Over time, as communities invest more time and attention to equity, they seem to naturally progress along this continuum.

Figure 1: Continuum of inclusive processes



In this light, it is important to mention that the many examples or processes highlighted below are provided as inspirational examples of what is possible, not as “models” to be blindly copied. Communities across America are still learning how to center racial equity; no one has it figured out. We have highlighted the positive aspects of these examples in full awareness that each story also has limitations and challenges that we have not attempted to detail here.

Ensuring Inclusion of People Whose First Language Is Not English

During the best of times, public agencies struggle with public engagement in communities that do not primarily speak English. During a crisis, extra effort is necessary to reach out to and listen to the voices of these stakeholders who often possess critical knowledge about community needs and resources. Many cities have developed [internal guidelines](#) outlining which resources require translation and which locally common languages to prioritize. Often public agencies rely on ongoing contracts with community-based organizations with capacity to reach specific language groups—both to inform community members and to solicit feedback.

Principles of an Inclusive Covid-19 Housing Response and Recovery

Commit to transparency to enable accountability

Transparency provides the most basic element necessary for an inclusive process. Stakeholders who are impacted by public policies and programs must be able to track and understand decisions that impact them. Transparency requires thoughtful efforts not only to just make information available but also to ensure it is understandable, including consideration of which information needs to be translated into languages other than English. When decisions are made in secret or only disclosed in impenetrably dense technical documents, the results too often benefit those in power at the expense of marginalized communities. The urgency of local Covid-19 response and recovery efforts makes it challenging to maintain appropriate transparency, but ensuring that recovery efforts further racial equity requires transparency at the very minimum.

For example, as cities and counties make plans for spending federal coronavirus response funds, such as those authorized by the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act, it is not always clear what decisions are being made, who is making them, or why. While the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires cities to provide public notice of spending plans once they are decided (see sidebar on the next page), because the funds are being pushed through many existing federal programs, it is far from clear who is making the final decisions or on what they are basing these choices. Other Covid-19 response funds, particularly those passed through the US Treasury or Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), come with even fewer requirements for public participation.

Identify and prioritize communities most likely to be impacted

Covid-19 is impacting every person in one way or another. However, both the health and economic impacts of this crisis fall disproportionately on the very communities of people who were already disadvantaged by structural racism and discrimination in our society. These impacts take distinctly different forms for different groups including Black, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Indigenous, queer, transgender and immigrant communities and people with disabilities. Responding to the crisis in a way that furthers equity means paying close attention to emerging public health and economic data to identify the groups who are most impacted and directing response and recovery resources explicitly to those communities. That does not mean our systems do not have to serve everyone, just that we need to take special care to ensure that resources reach those who need them most.

Jurisdictions should draw on recent studies that have identified the most vulnerable populations as a baseline for addressing those who will be most impacted by Covid-19 and unemployment. Any data should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, gender, and geography. These data could include consolidated plans (for use of HUD funds), analyses of impediments, assessments of fair housing, public health studies, racial disparity studies, displacement analyses, unemployment data, and other details. Identifying the neighborhoods with the greatest concentration of housing cost-burdened households before Covid-19 struck will provide a strong indication of where evictions will be most likely and where populations will need recovery resources to be directed.

San Francisco's open data portal, [DataSF](#), provides daily updates on coronavirus cases and deaths with the results broken down by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and whether the individual was experiencing homelessness. They also provide a real-time map showing infections per 10,000 residents for each neighborhood in the city as a way to focus their outreach and intervention resources.

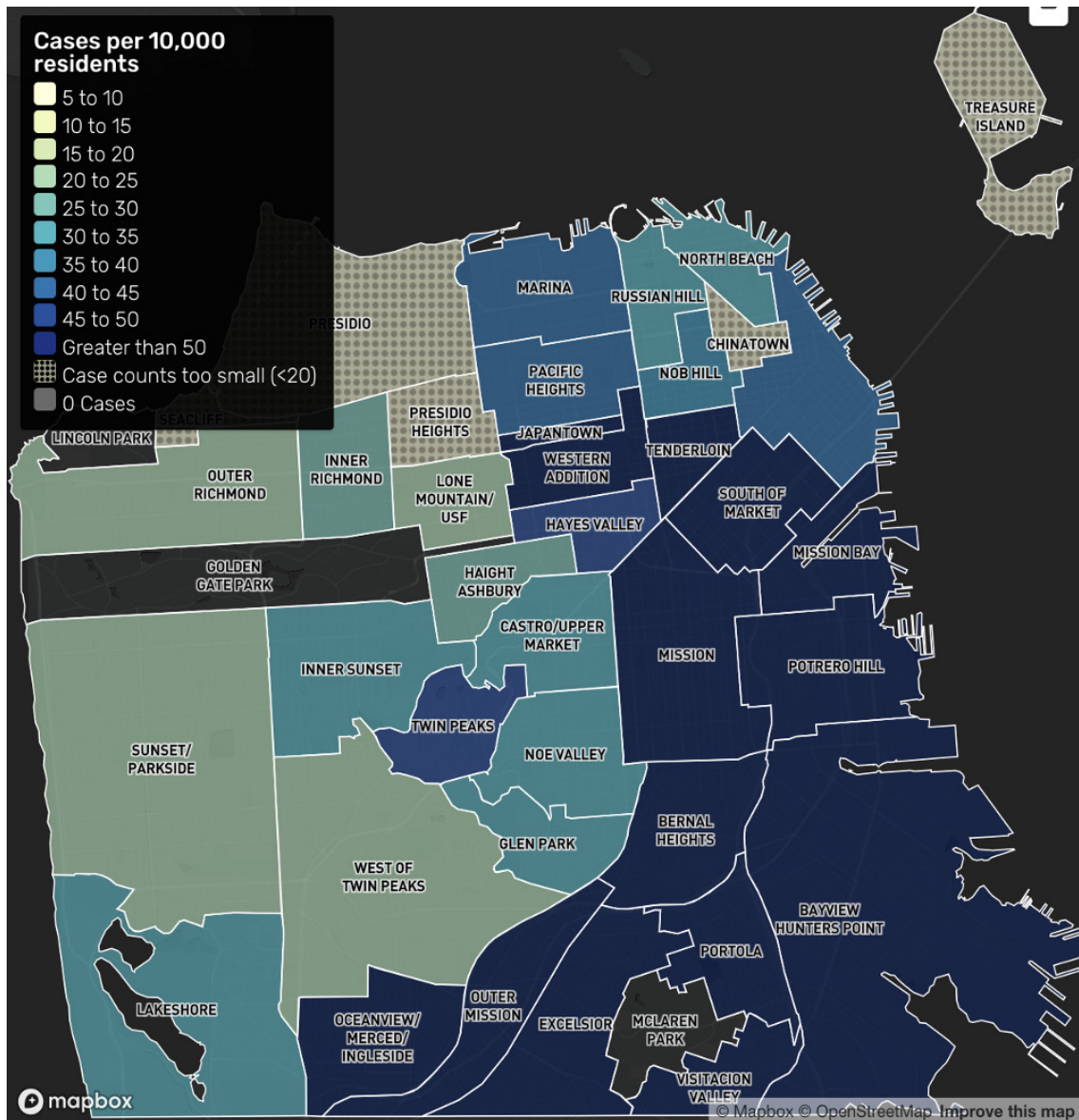
HUD Community Input Requirements

In March 2020, the US Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), which, among other things, authorized the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide supplemental Community Development Block Grant (CDBG-CV), Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG-CV), and Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS (HOPWA-CV) funding to communities that currently receive direct HUD block grants. HUD requires these cities and counties to create multiyear consolidated plans and annual action plans outlining how HUD funds will be spent. Jurisdictions receiving CARES Act supplemental funds must update their action plans to describe how they will spend the new resources and solicit public input before finalizing these changes. Because engaging the community in updating this plan is critical to achieving racial equity results, it is important that cities make the effort to ensure meaningful participation.

Having the opportunity to access data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and income is necessary to make informed decisions about both how to respond and how to target community outreach and engagement efforts. Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative produced a [guide](#) to available data tools for decision makers within city government to make racially equitable decisions related to Covid-19 responses. The guide brings together data about which local communities are most vulnerable to Covid-19 with data about other existing racial disparities, including housing security and displacement risk differences.

The [National Equity Atlas](#) provides disaggregated data by race, gender, nativity, ancestry, and income on 30 indicators including homeownership, housing burden, and working poverty. This data enables cities to evaluate which communities face greater risks and can inform high-level insights into more vulnerable populations. Disaggregating the population by race and ancestry can lead to critical insights that can guide effective policy responses. For example, in Spokane County, Washington, Pacific Islanders make up only about half of 1 percent of the population, but [nearly a third](#) of the county's Covid-19 cases have come from within the county's Pacific Islander population of people from the Marshall Islands. Data that placed this vulnerable population into a catch-all "Asian/Pacific Islander" category would have obscured this information and made it harder to target recovery resources where they could make the most difference.

San Francisco Covid-19 cases were up to 50 times higher in some neighborhoods



Source: [Data SF](#), as of July 16, 2020

Engage the community before decisions have been made

Participation before decisions have been made can be empowering to communities and can improve the quality of recovery strategies. If an agency has already decided on a direction, after-the-fact engagement is insulting to community members and consumes valuable stakeholder time and attention for little potential benefit. These “decide and defend” practices compromise public trust in government and thus create long-term barriers to developing the effective community partnerships and support that are so critical to solving local problems, and raising much-needed revenue.

Give community representatives a seat at the (real) table

An inclusive table should be built now to review the resources available and anticipated. Roles, authorities, governance structures, and agreements should be established. Additionally, organizers should build cross-departmental and cross-community processes to address the current and future housing and economic development challenges the jurisdiction will confront.

Activists and leaders of community-based organizations report growing fatigue with being invited to participate in working groups and similar public processes that they later discover are not empowered to make meaningful decisions or recommendations. Rather than simply soliciting feedback from impacted communities, authentic engagement involves the transfer of power, such as directly including community representatives in formal structures of decision making. PolicyLink worked to track the progress of community consortia formed for HUD’s Sustainable Communities Initiative and found that inclusion of leaders from low-income communities and communities of color in the governance of these consortia at all levels resulted in tremendous progress in breaking through silos and spurring collaboration on equity and realizing community-driven investments in neighborhoods and housing.

A number of cities have created temporary recovery working groups or task forces to guide overall Covid-19 response plans, but few have used these vehicles to formulate housing-specific policy strategies, prioritize the use of housing or homelessness resources, or facilitate racial equity discussions.

While effective community engagement takes time, this does not mean that public agencies cannot have inclusive processes when decisions need to be made quickly. When community engagement and public input are structured as an additional step to be taken after decisions have been nearly made, rather than as a core element of decision making, there is a risk of having to backtrack and rethink priorities once more complete information about community needs is incorporated. Instead, agencies can engage leaders from communities of color and impacted communities and make room for them at the table when decisions are first being considered.

[National Innovation Service](#) points out that we can move more quickly when the right people are already in the room:

What’s critical for us to remember is that equity-based decisions can still be made quickly if the right people are already in the room. Now is the time to look around our decision-making tables. Is everyone at the table White? Is everyone cis-gendered? Are there any Native people at the table? Then now is the time to make changes quickly to diversify groups of decision makers. If we bring people into our decision making then there is the opportunity for them to be considered.

Budget for participation and capacity building

Budgeting for the participation of organizations and residents from traditionally marginalized communities is critical to facilitating meaningful discussions of equity. Providing seed grants to support their participation can effectively ensure engagement of their communities’ needs. Meaningful engagement of marginalized communities needs consistent and ongoing reciprocal capacity and cultural competency-building between agency staff and community organizations. General funds or Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds are common places from which to draw these engagement resources.

Spotlight: Ramsey County, Minnesota

Leaders in Ramsey County, Minnesota, which is home to St. Paul, were particularly quick to realize the tremendous racial equity implications of the coronavirus crisis and the need to actively and transparently engage impacted communities to help guide the county's response and recovery efforts.

Transparency

In April 2020, the county formed a [Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team](#) (RECERT) to “help inform the county's [coronavirus] response and provide critical links between county operations and the residents we serve.” The RECERT team reports directly to the county manager and is made up of county staff including:

- Racial and health equity administrators
- Public health representatives
- Policy and planning team representative
- Health and wellness service team evaluator
- Human resources representative
- Service team liaisons

To provide public accountability, the team provides the county with a weekly status report highlighting unmet community priorities related to racial equity and Covid-19. The county manager provides a written response to each weekly report and both the report and manager's response are posted publicly on the county website.

Outreach

Ramsey County took several additional steps in outreach. The county invested federal CARES Act funds into small grants to support “trusted messengers” and media outlets that were able to reach linguistically isolated communities throughout the county. Through a [public application process](#) lasting only 6 days, they selected grantees including television, radio, print, and social media outlets and community-based organizations in a position to “aid the county in getting culturally specific, relevant, linguistically appropriate, accurate, and timely messages and communication related to Covid-19 to racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse communities in Ramsey County.”

Learn when to follow a community's lead

Public resources can often go further when they are used to amplify actions being taken independently by community organizations. Public agencies can expand their reach considerably by working with, and following leadership of, community organizations, which have important capacities and resources to bring to the table. Public agencies can meet with established community-based organizations to better understand their existing and planned programs and search for opportunities to collaborate on bringing these programs to scale.

Track results—engagement is necessary for equity, but it is not in itself equity

Equity is often equated with engagement of traditionally marginalized communities on the front end—but real success in achieving equity is only evidenced by policy and investment outcomes, and quality-of-life improvements, not just by who participated in the process.

Engagement

Ramsey County formed a Racial Equity Community Advisory Committee at the start of the Covid-19 crisis. The committee, which is now known as the [Equity Action Circle](#), includes 15 community stakeholders representing Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant communities in the county. Committee members were selected through an open application process from among a group of 140 applicants. Selection criteria included having a “connection and trusted relationships with local historically marginalized racial, ethnic and cultural communities” and “lived experience as a member of a racial, ethnic, cultural community.” Members of the circle were asked to make an eight-month commitment to meeting every two weeks and are being financially compensated for their time.

Participation

Having engaged a wide range of communities, the county has used this table to co-develop strategies to further racial equity and address unmet needs. Among other issues, the Equity Action Circle has reviewed and provided recommendations regarding county priorities for CARES Act funding.

Strong relationships, multisector partnerships, and greater participation from underserved communities in planning processes are essential but not, by themselves, sufficient. For engagement to be transformative, it must be aligned—in both content and process—to actionable processes and policies that can improve equity outcomes for people. One large barrier to more interest in engagement is the perception (and often reality) that involvement will have minimal impact. Connecting engagement processes to policy change and ultimately tangible improvements in a community's quality of life is what makes the transformative nature of community engagement possible.

Spotlight: Portland, Oregon

The City of Portland, Oregon, has been working to acknowledge the city's role in segregation and disinvestment of local communities of color and to actively further racial equity in city policies. As the magnitude of the coronavirus crisis became clear, the city took a number of immediate steps to ensure that racial equity was central to their response and recovery efforts.

Transparency

Portland's Office of Equity and Human Rights produced an "[Equity Tool Kit for Covid-19 Community Relief and Recovery Efforts](#)" that outlined the city's principles and values related to furthering equity in the recovery. The document also summarized the city's existing legal obligations under local laws, the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, FEMA, and other federal program requirements that remain in force during the crisis. The toolkit includes several suggested additional accountability measures, including the following:

- Quarterly reports, including an equity scorecard from bureaus to the Office of Equity and Human Rights Council
- Annual report to the council from the Office of Equity and Human Rights communicating collective progress on citywide Covid-19 goals
- Report to the council between June and December on CARES Act priorities
- Use of a revised budget equity tool

If our Covid-19 response is an opportunity to advance or to undermine racial equity, how will we know if we are moving in the right direction? While evaluating the longer term impact of today's policies and programs will be challenging and inevitably imperfect, measuring results is critical if public agencies hope to improve.

Outreach

Recognizing that the urgency of the crisis might lead some agencies to skip key public outreach steps, Portland provided [detailed guidance](#) to city departments about which public documents need to be translated during the Covid-19 crisis. In addition to prioritizing documents with safety and health implications, the policy calls for departments to translate policy documents with financial implications relevant to impacted communities.

Participation

To provide a table for meaningful participation of impacted communities in the city's planning for recovery, Portland created an Anti-displacement Task Force. While the effort was underway before the start of the pandemic, the city accelerated its formation in recognition of the significant displacement threat that the Covid-19 crisis presented. The task force has been charged with recommending a set of actions to prevent displacement to be incorporated into the city's broader Covid-19 response.

To support broader participation in this task force, the Portland City Council allocated \$68,000 in grants to smaller community-based organizations that had not previously been engaged closely with the city. These small grants make it possible for organizations with strong connections to particular marginalized communities to make time for participation in public processes.

Partnership

Recognizing the critical need to engage Black communities under threat of displacement, Portland funded a full-time community organizer focused on anti-displacement activities. But rather than hosting the new position within city government, Portland listened to community stakeholders and located the organizer within an established Black-led organization that has been leading anti-displacement and anti-gentrification efforts in historically Black communities. By partnering in this way, the city is able to build on decades of work by the community itself, which should lead to better outcomes for everyone.

Beyond Public Meetings—Social Distancing and Community Engagement

Digital engagement strategies

Because of the uneven access to high-speed/broadband internet and differing levels of comfort with digital technology, communities cannot rely exclusively on digital tools for broad public engagement. However, the coronavirus crisis has forced communities to explore digital engagement strategies more than ever before, and some have found that these tools can be used effectively to facilitate a level of engagement that is often better than what was accomplished with public meetings. Trusted community-based organizations should be engaged to design and deploy these strategies within their memberships and neighborhoods.

Videoconferencing/virtual town halls

Many cities and states that have previously not allowed virtual public meetings have been successfully experimenting with meetings through platforms like Zoom. Many are reporting that the overall level of public participation in these meetings is significantly greater because it is so much easier for the public to participate from home than to come down to city hall for a hearing. This is particularly pronounced in rural communities where videoconferencing allows people to participate without driving long distances to a meeting. While videoconferencing is accessible to many people, not everyone can participate through a computer or smart phone. It is important to allow people also to dial in with a phone only. Some agencies have limited public comment to email submission only, but when verbal comments can be provided by phone also, a wider segment of the population can participate. Because everyone's schedules have been turned upside down, having robust communication strategies so that stakeholders know when meetings will happen and what will be discussed is critical. It is also important to consider the need for live interpretation into languages other than English and the need for adaptive technology to support access for people with disabilities.

Ramsey County, Minnesota, formed a Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team to focus on Covid-19. The team has organized a series of 10 virtual town halls including one on May 19, 2020, focused on housing stability. The open meetings were hosted on the Zoom platform and recordings are available on the county [website](#). The sessions combine presentations from county staff on key programs and

policies related to Covid-19 responses with significant time for public questions and answers and the collection of feedback about priorities and needs from participants.

Interactive discussion boards

A number of communities have set up digital discussion boards to enable members of the public to discuss public services or policies. For example, Mountain View, California's [Ask Mountain View](#) tool, allows the public to ask questions or raise concerns about Covid-19.

In some cases, digital discussion boards are combined with videoconferencing to enable real-time text-based discussion alongside audio/video of a public meeting. For example, the City of San Rafael, California, streams public meetings on YouTube and allows members of the public to [submit public comment](#) through the YouTube comment system. Commenters can choose between posting only for other YouTube users or they can flag their comments as official submissions for the city to read aloud in the videoconference.

Social media

A growing number of public agencies and elected leaders also are relying on social media platforms to provide a forum for public engagement about Covid-19 response. For example, New York City's mayor is [using Twitter](#), Chicago's health commissioner is [using Facebook](#), and Fort Collins, Colorado's leaders are [relying on Reddit](#).

Offline engagement strategies

Socially distanced participation in public meetings

While many stakeholders are able to participate in public meetings through internet-connected computers or smart phones, a sizable population in most cities cannot. Many cities have been supporting participation of this group by offering telephone-only access to meetings. Some (but not all) of the online meeting platforms allow for callers to be recognized to ask questions or submit public comment.

Riverside, California, responded to this problem in an innovative way. To facilitate broader participation in a hearing about housing projects, they organized a drive-through public comment station. In addition to soliciting online and e-mail comments, the city mounted a video camera and microphone at a City Hall location where members of the public could record video comments without leaving their cars.

Direct outreach

Recognizing the limitations of digital outreach, local governments have been attempting to directly reach members of impacted communities who are least likely to be participating through digital tools. Some cities are posting fliers on neighborhood bulletin boards at food banks and other social service sites. Some have distributed door hangers with short surveys in targeted neighborhoods. This strategy seems especially effective in reaching seniors who may be less comfortable with social media and, because of heightened Covid-19 risks, limited in their ability to interact face-to-face.

San Antonio, Texas, Community Health and Prevention teams have been using the city's [Equity Atlas](#) to identify neighborhoods where residents are likely to have challenges accessing online information. City health teams have been [going door to door](#) to distribute Covid-19 information in these areas. San Antonio's Office of Equity has been planning follow-up with door-to-door canvassing to collect community feedback on recovery strategies.

Mobile outreach

Activists in Nashville, Tennessee, raised awareness of Covid-19 issues through a "slow roll" car caravan in which cars covered in signs drove slowly through targeted neighborhoods.

For a period of time, Boston, Massachusetts, operated an innovative system called City Hall To Go in which a truck visited underserved neighborhoods offering in-person access to city services, such as parking ticket payment or voter registration.

Outreach through community-based organizations

Many public agencies rely informally on support from networks of community-based organizations to reach marginalized communities.

Ramsey County, Minnesota, is using federal CARES Act funding to provide small grants to community-based nonprofits that it has designated as "trusted messengers." The county is relying on these partnerships to provide up-to-date Covid-19 response information to communities that the county has not always succeeded in reaching.

Phone banking

Chattanooga, Tennessee, is using volunteers to staff [phone banks](#) in order to reach out to vulnerable seniors about Covid-19.

In 2016, in an effort to include more voices from communities that do not typically participate in public meetings, Seattle, Washington, organized a series of [telephone town halls](#) on housing affordability. The mayor's office direct dialed more than 70,000 residents in target areas of the city.

Mailings/postcards

The city of Fresno sent mailers to all rental properties listed in the city's rental registry about a tenant protection ordinance it passed during the pandemic.

Additional reading on inclusive processes

- PolicyLink and Kirwan Institute, [Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities](#)
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, [Authentic Community Engagement to Advance Equity](#)
- King County, Washington, [Community Engagement Guide](#)
- Institute for Local Government, [Building Healthy & Vibrant Communities: Achieving Results through Community Engagement](#)
- PolicyLink, [Moving from Engaging to Organizing with Arts and Culture Strategies](#)
- Nelson Nygaard, [Principles for Equitable Public Outreach and Engagement During COVID-19 and Beyond](#)
- PolicyLink, [The Housing Prescription: A Curriculum for Improving Community Health via Housing Planning & Policy](#)
- PolicyLink, [Advancing Environmental Justice through Sustainability Planning](#)

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