

Sustaining Your Nonprofit Into the Future: A Curriculum for Home and Community Based Service Providers

Part I Community Engagement: Creating Sustaining Relationships

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement is the process of building relationships with community members who will work in partnership with you to support your mission and make the community a better place to live. These long-term relationships can recharge and sustain your organization, but you must be proactive in the engagement process. This means conducting a comprehensive community assessment, making multiple connections with clients, potential clients and other agencies, and communicating with the larger community to raise your visibility.

Community engagement is important because it brings you face to face with the needs of your community. Engagement builds relationships with individuals and organizations that can help you meet client and community needs.

Myth says that these relationships are cultivated by public relations, marketing or designated outreach professionals. This is far from the truth. Community engagement is the ongoing process of creating, developing and promoting your organization's presence in all potential areas of service. This activity is a shared responsibility of every staff person, every board member and every volunteer.

In any community, cooperative relationships emerge when businesses, education, faith organizations, government, health and human service organizations and other active civic groups join together in a common goal. Collaboration around goals will result in the desired outcomes. This is an ongoing process without strict timelines or end points. The sustainability of your agency requires ongoing interaction and engagement with all sectors of your community.

Case Study

For one Minnesota senior service agency, community engagement has become their organization's cultural norm.

"We learned that good community engagement goes way beyond 'business as usual.' We've found that the more active we are, the more visible and recognized we are in many sectors. As we volunteer and respond to requests for speaking and community panel participation, our agency recognition grows.

Our goal used to be for businesses to recognize us for our senior services. While this was important during our initial growth, we are now much more than that. Our agency and services are viewed as a major contributor in education, community awareness and family support throughout the community. We've learned that we are more than our services. Through our staff and board involvement, we serve multiple communities in different ways. I am embarrassed to admit we used to think, 'What will we directly get

back from community involvement?’ The good news is that we are now seen as a strong contributor, as we work to keep our reputation and standing high.”

Community Engagement is an all-inclusive activity – everyone is involved.

Fortunately, if you are an existing agency as opposed to a start-up, your players are already in place. This includes your employees, board, advisory groups and volunteers. Everyone associated with your agency is an ambassador. They represent your professionalism and credibility within the community.

Before you set out to engage the community, you need to be clear about what you want to accomplish – including the work in which you want to engage the community’s help. Meet together to explain why it is important for citizens, groups and organizations to become engaged in your mission. Identify your specific strategic position in the community (See course in Strategic Positioning) and discuss the importance you place on building meaningful partnerships with other agencies.

This course introduces you to the three key components of community engagement. They are:

- Assessment
- Building Relationships
- Communication

You will also be introduced to methods that will help you gather and assess data about your community so you can best determine what residents **need** and **value** most. This includes examples of how to reach out to other agencies to develop strategic partnerships.

Community engagement requires making connections and building relationships. These relationships can be with current and potential clients, with partnering agencies who complement your work, and with a wide range of community leaders. Collaboration, not competition, is your goal. When the entire community works together with a shared vision of making the community better for all, everyone wins.

Objectives

After completing this coursework, you will be able to:

- Define community engagement and its importance to your organization.
- Describe community assessment and its importance to understanding your community.
- Identify community research options for conducting an assessment.
- Identify how to build relationships that result in community partnerships for service sustainability.
- Describe the difference between marketing and engagement so that you increase your community visibility through thoughtful communication strategies.

Chapter 2: Assessment

Why complete a community assessment?

Over time, the needs of a community evolve. In order to ensure that you are providing valuable, relevant services, you need to assess and re-assess community needs. Conducting community research is the best way to do this.

Conducting community research (also known as a *community audit* or a *community assessment*) will help you assess your present and future environment. In the process of doing the research, you will develop new relationships. These relationships may later develop into significant partnerships as you continue to grow your agency.

Research helps you understand the public's direct needs and makes it possible for you to create a product or service that is valued because it satisfies those needs. No organization can achieve long-term sustainability unless its services are seen as valuable and useful.

Collecting new data on a regular basis is important because it identifies shifts in consumer needs and perceptions. Collecting data also tests assumptions that your board or leadership may unknowingly have made. Your research will either verify or disprove those assumptions. Uncovering false assumptions may help you avoid serious errors.

Case Study: A Community Research Strategy

Seniors Minnesota, a Minnesota service agency for older adults, had provided services to seniors in their community for more than 30 years. Their volunteers and paid staff provided transportation, chore services and respite. While the number of seniors in the community was increasing, the demand for services was not. Because of this, the agency recognized that they needed to better understand the changing needs of seniors and families in their community.

Seniors Minnesota formed a strategy team of board members, staff, community and faith leaders, and current and former clients and family members. They also invited a master's level social work student from a nearby University to assist them in a three-month research internship. The intern's role was to develop a community needs assessment for senior and caregiver-centered services.

Over one month, the strategy team met weekly to clarify what core information they wanted regarding community care needs. The team formed key questions and prioritized them. They discussed what kinds of services were missing, what new services might look like and a variety of service delivery options.

The student intern worked closely with her academic advisors to determine the most effective way to conduct the research. A combination of demographic research,

individual interviews with both current and potential clients and a 10-person focus group were included.

At the end of three months, a snapshot of community needs was completed. The student presented her findings to the strategy team and the agency's Board of Directors. The most significant finding was that older adults in the community wanted transportation that could take them anywhere in town (such as to the grocery store, the pharmacy, a senior center exercise class or a nursing home to visit a family member or friend.) The agency currently offered transportation only to medical appointments.

Through community research, the agency discovered a potential market for additional transportation services. The agency must now decide whether or not they will expand their services to meet this need. **In the Strategic Positioning and Financial Stability courses, we review the** questions that an agency in this situation must ask before making a decision to expand or not.

What do you want to learn from a Community Assessment?

When conducting an assessment it is important to identify what you want to learn. The following list suggests a few areas to explore. You can add additional items based upon the program or service you offer. Remember that this is a broad survey assessing community needs, **not** an evaluation of your specific program or service.

- What percent of your population is 65 or older?
- What percent of older adults have family members living near them?
- What is the economic status of the seniors in your community? What is the percentage of men and women, living alone or in partnership?
- What lifestyle factors affect the health and well-being of older adults?
- What services are most valued by older adults? By their families?
- Do current consumers know the breadth of the services and care that you offer? How do current older adult consumers view your services?

The following are ways you can assess your community.

Internet and Websites

The first and easiest way to gather data is to look at what has already been collected. Internet sources carry abundant community studies, reports, surveys and census data. Sources may be extremely broad in scope or very specific. Your city, county and state websites also contain a wealth of data on rural, urban and suburban communities.

The following sites will help you collect current information:

- [U.S. Census Bureau](#)
- [Quick Facts](#)

- [Minnesota State Demographic Center](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Human Services \(DHS\)](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Health \(MDH\)](#)
- [Kaiser Family Foundation State Health Facts](#)
- [U.S. Office of Minority Health](#)
- [Local United Ways](#)
- [Survey of Older Minnesotans](#)

*See **Appendix A** for web addresses.

Surveys

Surveying your current and former clients and families is another good way to gather information. These individuals are most familiar with your services and see you regularly. Based on an understanding of their own needs, they will have ideas and perspective about what would make life easier for seniors and family caregivers.

You can also partner with a community group, such as a clinic, house of worship, or senior center to find other community members you can survey regarding their needs.

Key Informant Interviews

You may wish to conduct interviews with specific community members that have insight into the needs of a particular group of people. These “key informants” may be community leaders or people who have spent time working with the people you want to learn about. Develop a list of questions that will guide each interview. Summarize the main points and new things you learned through this process.

Focus Groups

Conducting focus groups is an excellent way to learn about how people view your organization or to test people’s reactions to a change or new idea. In a focus group, participants are not only answering your questions, but also hearing the responses that others in the group are giving. Therefore, they are likely to give thoughtful, in-depth answers. Develop a list of open-ended questions that will get people thinking about your topic. The group facilitator should be skilled at managing group dynamics, getting people to share their opinions, and keeping the group on topic.

Community Newspapers

Local community papers, including papers that target specific cultural groups, are a good way to learn about the issues that are important in a community. Human interest stories and editorials may point out a current community need where your agency could be of assistance.

Despite the emergence of new information technologies such as the Internet, community newspapers continue to play an important role throughout Minnesota. Moreover, the value of community newspapers continues to grow as they seek new ways to serve their

readers and strengthen their communities. These newspapers generally maintain a strong commitment to serve the information needs of a particular community – be it geographic, political, cultural or religious.

Chapter 3: Building Relationships

Picture a pebble being thrown into the middle of a still pool of water. What happens? As the pebble hits the water, ripples extend from the center point to the edge of the pool. The center point where that pebble dropped is the core of your mission. The ripples are the connecting points forming your community partnerships – honest relationships that are based on mutual support of your core mission. Partnerships combine the knowledge, wisdom and experience of complementary community agencies to solve shared health, social and economic challenges.

A familiar African proverb tells us that it takes a village to raise a child. It also takes a village to meet other needs in the community. You may be an expert at what you do, but your organization cannot do the job alone. You will improve your ability to carry out your mission by working hand in hand with other organizations who share your passion for solving community problems. These well-chosen partnerships will also increase the visibility of your organization.

Some partnerships will be very formal, with written agreements and contracts, while others will be more informal. But no matter how formal or informal, the most effective partnerships bring beneficial outcomes to all the parties involved. This occurs when you have discussed and agreed upon a common shared goal, the methods you will employ to achieve the goal and how you will measure your success.

Identifying Potential Partners

The partners you choose will depend on the type of partnership you're looking for. In general, you want partners that give you additional visibility and have a strong community following and presence, even if they provide a service similar to your own. You also want partners that can offer financial or in-kind support (to reduce service expenses), while maintaining high service quality. In turn, you must be positioned to offer these same benefits to other organizations. These are the elements of **sustainable win/win community collaborations**.

Examples of strategic partnerships include the following:

- A faith community is able to meet their mission of helping people in need by donating office space, telephone, and internet lines to a small nonprofit that serves older adults.
- A business in a rural community donates freezer space to an organization that delivers meals to older adults. The business receives positive publicity in return.
- Organizations that provide similar services in neighboring counties meet regularly to problem solve, share ideas and best practices and work to improve the quality of each organization's services.

Who are your potential partners?

They may include other human service organizations, faith organizations, block nurses, minority organizations, wholesale food companies, your local school district and community education providers, property management, community banks and other financial services, athletic facilities, entertainment venues or other organizations. The possibilities for partnerships are as limitless as your creativity and vision.

Consider the following ideas as you draw up your list of potential partners.

Look at your volunteer base. What volunteers live or work in the community? Reach out and get introduced to their community contacts.

Look at your board of directors. What board members live in the community? Request that they host an intimate informational event at their home, business or favorite restaurant for a handful of their associates.

Look at your current supporters and clients. These people are already passionate about the mission. Create a speaker's bureau asking them to speak and raise awareness.

Look at the school district. Do any volunteers or board member's children attend those schools? Ask for assistance with getting a meeting at the school or with the PTO group.

Look at large community corporations. Local corporations recognize the importance of community giving. Can they host an employee giving fundraiser, match employee funds or sponsor an event?

Look at local businesses. What stores, restaurants or vendors could you collaborate with to create a special event?

Look at community clubs, faith organizations and groups. Would they be willing to host a special event?

Don't hesitate to see partnerships with your "competition." The individuals working and volunteering at these organizations are passionate about your issues. You may find you can accomplish more together than alone. You may be nervous striking up the first conversation. But you may learn that conversations with people who care about *what you care about* are the most energizing conversations you can have.

Cultivating Win/Win Relationships

Be inclusive. Look for new community players that are not the "usual suspects." Large or frequently tapped organizations become weary of solicitations and ongoing requests. Invite new players that do not have the public exposure - and who are looking for new ways to reach others with high quality services. There are always new and talented organizations waiting in the wings.

Develop strong relationships with public agencies. You want county health and human services agencies to be familiar with your organization and to trust you to provide quality services. These agencies play an important role by administering public programs. County staff can keep you apprised of what they are seeing in the community. They can also make referrals to your organization.

Serve on other health and human service boards of directors. It says a lot when organizations know you are committed to making your community a better place to live. Encourage your staff and volunteers to serve on boards. Working with other organizations will give you a new perspective and greater insight.

Communicate regularly with business and community leaders. Organizations outside of health and human services are less likely to hear about your organization in their day to day work. Therefore, you must make a special effort to reach out to them, create new relationships, and explore potential partnerships. One idea might be to schedule a breakfast or lunch at least once a week with someone new from an organization that interests you.

Remember that new relationships are built slowly over time. As in any relationship, individuals and agencies want to know you are a trusted community participant. Your integrity, honesty, creativity and inclusion will be noticed and tested to see if you are indeed genuine. Collaboration, not competition, is the goal. Strive to make every new relationship shine.

Case Study: Collaborating in Support of Minority Elders

Caregiver Support Association is a collaboration of five organizations that provide caregiver coaching and counseling to family caregivers. They were approached by two agencies that serve minority elders who were interested in learning more about caregiver coaching and support services, specifically for their population of minority elders. As a result of this contact, these organizations decided to partner with one another in order to better serve minority elders in their communities.

The agencies that serve minority elders received mentoring and support from the members of the Caregiver Support Association, which resulted in better services for their clients. As a result of the partnership, all agencies were able to recruit additional respite care volunteers, allowing them to serve more people. This story illustrates that, although each agency felt it was meeting the needs of its constituency, in reality they needed one another in order to provide the best service.

Chapter 4: Communication

Communication for Maximum Impact

Are you a nonprofit leader who is convinced that no one in your community knows about you – even though you have a nice brochure and good local PR? You are not alone!

Marketing is a tool that originated in the business world and is basically a one-way effort. Marketing in the for-profit world is *telling* – with a goal of *selling*. Community engagement for nonprofits is different from marketing in one key way – it is a **two-way** process of interaction. You are communicating with the community about your service and then asking them to become involved in your work so you can help one another.

The standard marketing tools of the business world must be adapted in order to work for the nonprofit world. **Communication** is the key marketing tool for nonprofits.

How do you go about telling the community about yourself? Start with the following methods. They are relatively easy and cost effective.

Write about your organization. This can mean writing articles for newsletters, local newspapers, or online blogs. Write a human interest story educating the public about how you helped older adults in your community, highlighting your mission and future goals. This will connect you with readers that are sympathetic to your goals and may want to become involved in your work.

Speak about your organization. Local groups are often looking for effective speakers – people who know their subject and can capture the audience’s attention. If you are truly passionate about your agency, you are the right person to get this message out. Volunteer to speak at local civic clubs, religious organizations, auxiliaries or other forums. Speak from the heart about what you do and what you need, then ask for their support. Let them know in advance that you are not there to ask for money, but rather to ask for visibility and partnership.

Converse “one on one” with others about your organization. Start with one person in the community who is a friend and is dedicated to your mission. Tell them about what you do and identify how their interests might be similar. Ask that person to provide an introduction to one or two other community members who might also support your cause. Follow up by calling them, showing them your program and seeking their advice. One relationship builds on another, **one person at a time**.

Develop media relationships. Reporters are looking for news. If you have something timely, unique and new, pitch your story to a reporter, preferably someone with whom you already have a relationship. If a reporter is not interested in your story, find out what she or he is looking for. Think about how to make the maximum impact with each story. Nonprofits use television, radio, print, electronic and web-based avenues to publicize

their services to specific markets. Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and talk radio programs are common venues for nonprofit service marketing. Identify your specific market and frame your message for a distinct audience.

Communicate your message repeatedly. Remember this formula: **Frequency Over Time = Reach**. This means that in order for an average person to absorb a promotional message, the message must be repeated many times.

Develop long-term personal relationships. There is an adage, “People buy from people.” Attend conferences and outside meetings to meet others. Provide reader-friendly handouts to remind individuals who you are and how you can help them. Cultivate your personal relationships by maintaining consistent contact.

Be visible. Developing new relationships is difficult if no one knows you. Being visible could mean that your agency is physically located in a highly visible place in the community. It could also mean that your organization is represented at meetings and community events.

Community engagement activities are different from marketing activities in many ways. Engagement is not about selling; it is an act of relationship building. Communication should be interactive - not about "telling and selling" but about real, honest sharing of your goals and dreams for the community - creating energizing connections. The outcome of this kind of connected communication may include attracting new staff and board members, increasing referrals, attracting new fee-for-service clients, increasing your volunteer capacity or getting into new geographic markets.

The wonderful thing about community engagement is that it does not require a large budget. Writing, speaking, connecting with people one-on-one – these are all effective communication methods that are relatively inexpensive. And the payoff is huge, because you are building sustainable, long-term relationships!

Chapter 5: Summary

Community engagement is your first critical step toward reaching service sustainability. The goal of engagement is to create supportive, long-term community relationships that are mutually beneficial for the health, strength and well-being of the community.

Before strong engagement plans begin, it is important to **conduct timely community research** to uncover who lives in your community. Community research (also known as a community assessment) uncovers population and demographic changes. Methods of conducting a community assessment include reviewing published data and reports, conducting focus groups, key informant interview, and surveys, and reviewing community newspapers. Each method has advantages and disadvantages, so it is important to weigh the pros and cons of each before beginning.

Once you have determined who lives in your community, you can begin **developing partnerships** that will strengthen your organization. The most successful partnerships are ones in which there are shared goals and all organizations benefit. Let your vision and creativity guide you when seeking out potential partnerships. Make community engagement a regular part of your agency's practice by attending meetings, participating in taskforces or councils, serving on other boards of directors, participating in community events and meeting one on one with other leaders and change agents. Partnership ideas will flow from there. Remember that this is not simply the job of the Executive Director. Staff members, board members and volunteers must all be involved. **Community engagement is everyone's job.**

Effective communication is a key part of community engagement. The goal is to reach the public through targeted messages and then engage them in the mission of your organization. This is different from marketing in the for-profit world, in which the goal is "sales" or "income." Look beyond traditional methods of advertising your service and explore communication methods that build relationships with people in your community.

Community Engagement is about connecting in a real way – with for-profit businesses, health and human service organizations, schools, community organizations, faith communities and persons of all ages and economics. Once you interact with as many different people as possible, and with as many different portions of the community as possible, it becomes apparent that you all want the same thing: for your community to be a wonderful place to live. As diverse community groups become engaged and recognize the value of the work you provide, you will find possibilities for partnerships that you had not previously imagined.

Consider a future in which the mission of your organization has been woven into the very fabric of your community – and you are seen as an integral part of the lives of older adults in your community. With this goal in mind, you are headed toward true service sustainability.

Appendix A

Websites referenced in Community Engagement Course

[U.S. Census Bureau](http://www.census.gov/): <http://www.census.gov/>

[Quick Facts](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/): <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>

[Minnesota State Demographic Center](http://www.demography.state.mn.us/): <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/>

[Minnesota Department of Human Services \(DHS\)](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/): <http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/>

[Minnesota Department of Health \(MDH\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/): <http://www.health.state.mn.us/>

[Kaiser Family Foundation State Health Facts](http://www.statehealthfacts.kff.org/): <http://www.statehealthfacts.kff.org/>

[U.S. Office of Minority Health](http://www.omhrc.gov/): <http://www.omhrc.gov/>

[Local United Ways](http://www.liveunited.org/): <http://www.liveunited.org/>

[Survey of Older Minnesotans](http://www.mnaging.org/advisor/survey.htm): <http://www.mnaging.org/advisor/survey.htm>