Chapter 3
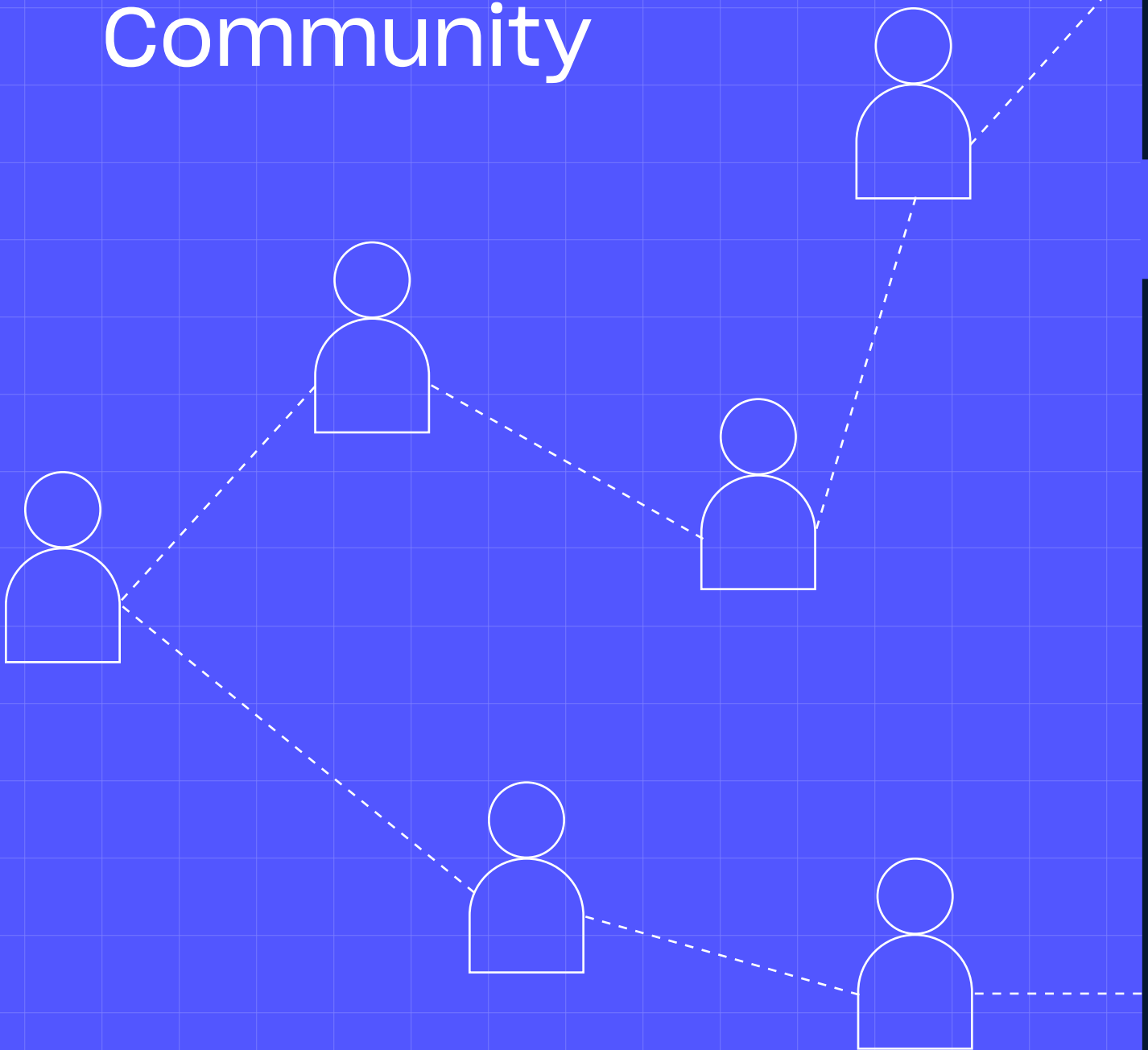
The Power of Incorporating Community

Why This Matters

A cornerstone of a successful evaluation process is the community's participation in that evaluation. The reason is simple: To be effective, an evaluation must incorporate the challenges that affect the people the program is designed to serve. Community engagement ensures that an evaluation is grounded in lived realities and that its findings are both relevant and actionable.

Affected community members can provide insights and questions not readily apparent to evaluators, offering nuanced perspectives on real-life impacts, inequities and opportunities for improvement. Involving community members in the evaluation process can also increase the credibility and acceptance of the evaluation findings.

A community-oriented approach to evaluation also empowers residents, giving them a voice in shaping the program under study and encouraging greater support moving forward. This can lead to more effective and impactful programs.

Including community members and critical stakeholders requires evaluators and policymakers to invest time and energy to develop cultural competency and embrace transparency. Those investments are worth it, for a few reasons. Engaging community members in evaluations can enhance understanding of results.[11] More broadly, transparency about government activities can help strengthen Americans' trust in government, which is now at historic lows.[12]

What Authentic Community Engagement Looks Like

It's not enough just to ask people what they think or feel in surveys, focus groups or stakeholder interviews, although these are important qualitative methods for obtaining community input.[13] Authentic community engagement means involving individuals representative of a community in decision-making processes early, often, and in meaningful ways. It means showing respect for people's input by using it to guide decisions and actions and, when thinking differs, exploring why.

Equity is a key part of authentic community engagement. All relevant groups in impacted communities — especially those marginalized by structural racism, as well as other historically underserved groups — should be engaged. Achieving this in practice requires targeted outreach efforts, including working to elevate voices that are often overlooked or silenced.

Here are a few community engagement examples drawn from Results for America's 2023 State Standard of Excellence resource.

In **Minnesota,** the Department of Management and Budget wanted to build more community input into its performance evaluation work. So it worked with nonprofit leaders to develop the concept of "community-based best practices," which are activities, programs or services developed by or in close partnership with community and cultural groups that underwent a community-led assessment process.

Pennsylvania's PA Heart & Soul program supports equitable community development planning by bringing residents together to identify what matters most to them and reflect on what they love about their towns. The program, supported by the state's Department of Community and Economic Development and the PA Humanities Council, ensures that all voices can be heard.

In **Utah,** the Citizen Feedback Program places a high priority on engaging with members of historically underserved communities. Executive branch agencies actively seek community input. The Governor's Office's Senior Advisor on Equity and Opportunity ensures that the Governor's Office connects with groups that have historically not been included in state activities.

It is important that evaluators honor diverse experiences and perspectives, while acknowledging and addressing inherent power imbalances between themselves and community participants. Authentic community engagement spans four important areas that help to center equity in evaluation practices. These areas — not to be confused with the seven evaluation policy principles promoted in Chapter 4 — are detailed below with best practice tips.[14]

Transparency: Be open about the community input process, including why you're seeking community input.

- Be clear about how the input will be used, whether there are additional opportunities to engage in the evaluation project, who will interpret the findings and how and when results will be shared.

- Make sure community participants know how to get more information.

Representation: Use data and community organizations to identify and seek input from the people most affected by the issues that the program under evaluation aims to address.

- Community organizations can often be sources of data to help you identify and connect with these residents.

- Consider including community representatives in any advisory board created to guide the development of the evaluation, including community engagement strategies.

- Consider creating a key performance indicator (KPI) that measures how well the input you receive reflects the community you are attempting to serve.

Inclusivity: Offer accessible, varied ways for communities to offer input and feedback. This helps ensure you hear from a wide range of voices, especially those most affected by issues relevant to the evaluation and the intended beneficiaries of a program.

- Pre-test questions and collection methods with relevant groups.

- Consider both online and accessible in-person forums.

- Partner with community-based organizations to increase participation.

- Remember that many residents do not trust the government given historic, discriminatory track records.

- Spur participation and signal the value of feedback with monetary and non-monetary compensation.

- Work to eliminate barriers related to language, technology, physical ability, work schedules and childcare responsibilities.

Trust: Remember that every community member has unique insights and valuable contributions to make.

- Be mindful of your unconscious biases when reflecting on feedback received, particularly when you receive negative feedback.

- Show respect for ideas and experience by reporting back on how people's contributions did or did not play a role in decisions.

Remember: Authentic engagement isn't a one-off event and isn't just about gathering input. It's a long-term commitment to building relationships, trust and mutual understanding with the community. When done well, it can further large-scale change — reducing inequities, improving outcomes and materially improving residents' lives.

Centering equity impacts both community engagement processes and outcomes. In terms of process, it involves using accessible language, providing language translation and in-person/phone/online options, and being thoughtful about who is

conducting feedback sessions and outreach. Whenever possible, authentic engagement involves shared decision-making. This means that community members are partners in the process, rather than just passive participants.

In terms of results and outcomes, it involves disaggregating data to understand subgroup analysis, paying attention to outliers in the data and oversampling those who have been most harmed by the status quo, to list just a few examples. It requires ongoing, dedicated staff time and expertise, which should be built into a programs' budget and timeline.

CONSIDER
What does community engagement look like in your jurisdiction right now? Do you have ideas for how that process might be improved to more authentically engage residents? How might it be adapted for use in evaluations?

The Importance of Community Partners

Community-based organizations (CBOs). Faith-based institutions. Mutual aid organizations. Unions. Clubs. These and other potential partners are invaluable resources in the community engagement and evaluation process, due to their deep-rooted connections and understanding of the community members they serve.

Governments can benefit from engaging a broad spectrum of community partners, from larger, well-funded service delivery organizations to smaller, informal groups. Such partners offer unique perspectives and connections, helping evaluation teams capture and involve many elements of the community.

Here are five specific ways community partners can improve evaluations.

- **Identify** key stakeholders whose insights are crucial for the evaluation, and facilitate connections between these community members and evaluators.

- **Increase** the quality and relevance of data gathered, including by co-conducting community input activities such as surveys, focus groups and stakeholder interviews.

- **Provide** essential perspectives in interpreting evaluation findings. Partners' insights into local cultural, social or historical factors can enhance understanding of a program's implementation and outcomes.

- **Communicate** evaluation results back to the community in a culturally sensitive and accessible way.

- **Implement** recommended changes post-evaluation. Partners' understanding of what is feasible and acceptable within the community can help ensure evaluation insights translate into meaningful action.

Given the valuable contributions that community partners can make to an evaluation, it's important to consider appropriate compensation for their time and expertise.

When to Seek Community Input

Community input should be sought at multiple stages throughout an evaluation. This ensures the evaluation is relevant, inclusive and grounded in the experiences and needs of the community members the program is meant to serve.

Here's a phase-by-phase breakdown of when you may want to seek community input, with best practice suggestions:

Planning Phase Before the evaluation starts, seek input to help define which questions the evaluation should answer, what approaches should be used and what outcomes are most important to measure. Community members can inform and speak to the needs and challenges that require a solution, thereby shaping the research questions. At this stage, community input can also help in developing culturally sensitive and appropriate evaluation instruments, like surveys or interview guides.

- **Suggestions:**

  → Establish a steering committee or advisory board that includes representative community members who can provide input, feedback and validation throughout an evaluation.

  → Communicate early and proactively the importance of transparency, which may entail publishing unpopular findings.

  → Reach a clear and shared understanding of who is responsible for final decisions about specific aspects of the evaluation. This will help to prevent surprises and misunderstandings.

  → Solicit feedback to test your assumptions about the ways the intervention is thought to affect the outputs and outcomes.

Data Collection Phase During this phase community members should be key sources of data. Their experiences, perceptions, and insights are valuable for understanding the implementation and impact of the program being evaluated.

- **Suggestions:**

  → Proactively consider how you will handle and communicate data privacy concerns.

  → Seek input from community members on appropriate indicators to measure the inputs, outputs and, where relevant, outcomes of a program.

Data Analysis Phase Community members can help interpret findings, especially when it comes to understanding the local context and the nuances of the data.

- **Suggestions:**

  → Convene community members for an analysis review to help inform the interpretation of results.

→ Be mindful of clearly communicating that interim results can change as analysis progresses and more data is obtained.

Reporting and Dissemination Phase When evaluation results are being shared, community members can provide feedback on the interpretation of the findings and recommendations. They can also play a key role in disseminating findings within the community and with policymakers.

- **Suggestions:**

    → Invite community members to participate in forums to share research findings.

Post-Evaluation Phase Community input can take various forms. Community members could be engaged in discussions about how to implement recommendations or how to monitor and assess the effectiveness of any changes. They can also be advocates for changes and budget allocations based on evaluation findings.

- **Suggestions:**

    → Plan for ongoing engagements with the steering committee or advisory board to provide input around implementation.

CONSIDER
How has community input shown up in your organization's past evaluations, if at all? How might you bring community perspectives into your evaluation work?

Community Engagement and Institutional Review Boards

As you are determining when and how to seek community input for your evaluation, it's important to consider whether your proposed methodology would be considered human subjects research and require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This is especially important if the community being studied includes vulnerable groups, such as children or people with disabilities. Some government agencies sponsor their own IRBs, while others depend on external IRBs. If your government has contracted with an evaluation firm or partnered with a university to conduct an evaluation, those organizations may have their own IRB requirements.

Incorporating These Practices Into Policy

Community input is far more likely to be incorporated into an evaluation if it is required by policy. To learn about how to create an evaluation policy, see Chapter 4.

Overcoming Community Engagement Challenges

It's normal to encounter hurdles in the realm of community engagement. Here are some common challenges encountered across four important areas: representation, inclusivity, trust and transparency.

	Challenge	Potential Solutions
Representation	You want to hold focus groups, but don't know where to start in terms of reaching individuals representative of the communities the program under evaluation aims to serve.	• If your jurisdiction has a dedicated public engagement person or team, or a chief equity officer, ask them for assistance. • Work with a community partner to develop a target outreach list for the focus groups. Ask for help sending out invitations. • Develop metrics for the characteristics of your ideal focus group (e.g., age, race, income, neighborhood, education level, etc.) to support targeted outreach
Inclusivity	Attendance is projected to be low at a scheduled in-person meeting in a government building at which initial evaluation findings will be shared — and the majority of RSVPs are not community members served by the program.	• Move the meeting to a location such as a community center within the neighborhood or area a program serves. • Enlist trusted messengers to help share the invitation with your target population • Ensure your outreach has been shared in all appropriate languages. Make clear translators will be available if needed. • Consider whether a community or other organization may be better suited to host (or co-host) the meeting. • Consider adding virtual options for additional opportunities for feedback. • Consider offering non-monetary and monetary incentives, as well as on-site childcare and transportation to/from the event.

Trust	Some community members you seek to engage do not trust the government. But obtaining their buy-in and feedback is critical to understanding what is and isn't working for the program.	• Acknowledge that the distrust they feel for the government is valid. • Be as specific as possible when describing the racialized harms and inequities that have been perpetuated. • Learn about the root causes of distrust and articulate an understanding of this history and the harm created. • Share why their input and participation is important and how it will inform government decisions. Let people know how findings will be communicated. Follow through and respond to feedback, even if it differs from the outcome the commenter had wanted. Responsiveness builds more trust than silence.
Transparency	Community members have said they don't see the point of participating in stakeholder interviews, since their feedback is never actually incorporated.	• Review and adjust the invitations to include information on the program and evaluation, including how these interviews will inform decision-making. • Provide a timeline for when the evaluation will be complete and when (and how) results will be shared. Make sure to follow through! • Include details on how the findings will be used. • Share a summary of feedback received, even before evaluation findings are available. • Where possible, be clear about which feedback was not incorporated and why.
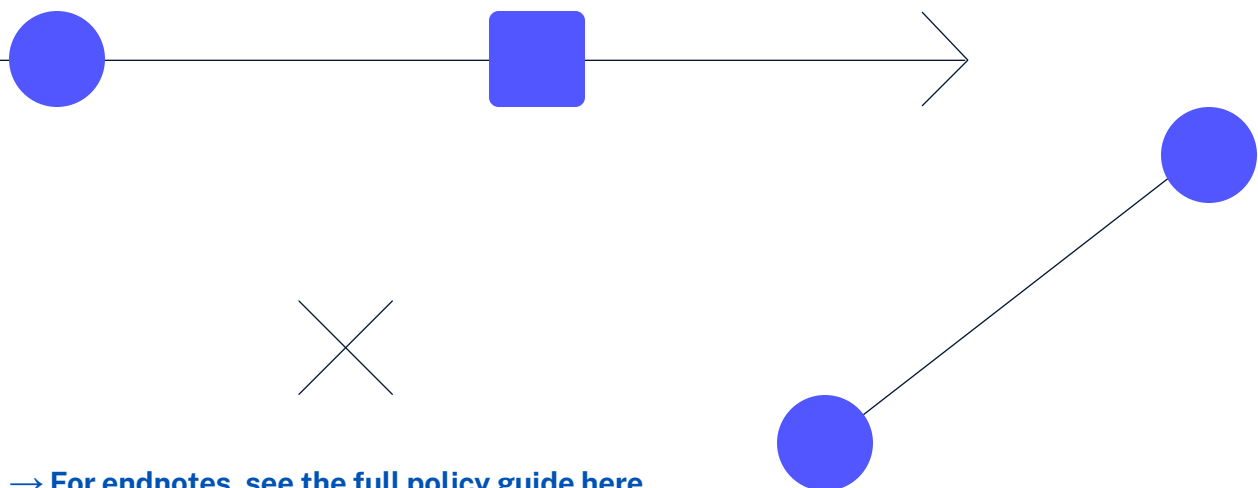
→ **For endnotes, see the full policy guide here.**

Exercise 3: Incorporating Community Input Into Evaluations

Designing an evaluation that centers equity requires thoughtful attention to power dynamics, community needs and interests, and potential benefits and harms. The following questions address all stages of the evaluation process — design, execution analysis,

1. **REPRESENTATION** **Identify the community members most affected by the issues the program being evaluated seeks to address.**

   - Is there data available on this population, and if so, who has it?
   - How will you know if the input you gather is representative of your target population?

2. **INCLUSIVITY** **Offer multiple methods to gain feedback and to reach different communities.**

   - What plans might you put in place to eliminate barriers related to language, technology, physical ability, work schedules and childcare responsibilities?
   - How might you partner with community organizations to increase turnout?
   - What resources can you allocate to ensure you have the staff capacity or can compensate community members for their time?

3. **RESPECT** **Recognize that every community member has unique insights and valuable contributions to make.**

   • What norms might you put in place around your evaluation process to ensure everyone in the process feels respected and valued?

   • What might be culturally sensitive and appropriate measurement instruments for this community?

4. **TRANSPARENCY** **Share why you're seeking community input, how it will be used and what the outcomes are.**

   • How will you let participants know how their input will be used?

   • What is the plan — and timing — for sharing the results?

   • Will there be other opportunities for participants to engage in the process, and if so, how?