

Community Engagement: How the Process Leads to Progress

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The Invest Health initiative, led by Reinvestment Fund with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has worked with 50 small and mid-size cities across the United States since 2016 in developing strategies to align investment capital with other resources and policies to address the social determinants of health in community development. A critically important element of health and equity-focused community development, and a program principle of Invest Health, is authentic community engagement. This case study highlights the strategies, challenges, and lessons learned from community engagement efforts in five Invest Health cities: Hartford, CT; Lansing, MI; Missoula, MT; Roseville, CA; and Spokane, WA.

Executive Summary

Community participation in decision-making alongside government representatives, nonprofit organizations, and developers is a critical piece in true community investment – going well beyond historical practices of treating participation as a cursory “box to check.” Building trust and reciprocal relationships between residents, and other community development stakeholders is a positive step in moving towards racial equity in communities. With authentic engagement – where the community members who are most impacted by development decisions are actually part of the decision-making process – projects avoid inflicting unintended community harm by building public will and support. Thus, Invest Health city teams have worked to improve their processes of reaching out to community members, investing in sustained relationships, truly listening and honoring their expertise of their communities, and developing pathways to resident leadership.

Strategies used to deepen engagement include community meetings, residential leadership development, informal conversations and relationship-building, surveys and focus groups, investing in residents as experts, and thoughtful messaging. Meetings allow residents an opportunity to provide real-time feedback, and while teams pivoted to Zoom when COVID-19 struck, they also kept in mind the digital divide and tried to maintain other forms of outreach. Informal conversations – which can happen simply through “staying visible” in the neighborhood – can provide even richer opportunities for engagement. Teams also utilize surveys and focus groups, weaving data into a comprehensive engagement strategy in order to be as informed as possible about the needs of a community. Experience shows that messaging is most effective when it focuses on shared community benefit, for example, addressing common objections to development like affordable housing by demonstrating the shared value in all community members having affordable and humane housing.

City teams also identified opportunities to improve engagement with the community. One is bridging the gap to communicate with historically over-looked audiences– for example, finding ways to reach immigrants with

culturally relevant communications and strategies that are inclusive of these residents. It is also important to give space for emotion and make community members feel heard and understood. Negative emotions are often linked to negative experiences with policymaking and power dynamics in the past in which residents' input was not valued. Invest Health teams cited the importance of patience, trust-building, and working with community-based and residential leaders who are already known to and trusted by the community. Keeping community members organized and engaged is another challenge, as residents cannot always participate in regular meetings. Thoughtful scheduling and compensating participants for their time and expertise are strategies Invest Health city teams have used to address this.

From their experiences turning challenges into opportunities and deploying new innovative strategies of engagement, Invest Health city teams have come away with important lessons: 1) Build relationships. 2) Be visible in the community. 3) Consider diversity (and demographic differences between policymakers and community members and how that can affect engagement). 4) Find and lift up wins. 5) Be intentional, but flexible. 6) Address barriers (such as language difference and time restrictions).

City teams have also identified several promising outcomes of their efforts: 1) Increased involvement (in decision-making). 2) Stronger trust (in government, nonprofit and other development stakeholders). 3) Improved systems and networks. 4) Informed decision-making. While challenges persist, Invest Health city teams are thinking big and finding creative ways to meet them. The support from the initiative in providing structure and strengthening collaborative relationships across sectors has been critical in facilitating this work.

Overview

Invest Health is an initiative of Reinvestment Fund in partnership with and supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) that began as a forum for 50 cities to define community needs and investment challenges, devise solutions, and align investment capital as well as other resources and policies to address the social determinants of health.

The initiative provided a starting point for cross-sector leaders in small to mid-size cities across the country to strategize and align with community development finance experts; local, regional and national philanthropic networks; and public funding streams to build healthier, more equitable communities. Over the course of the initiative, Reinvestment Fund has supported Invest Health city teams as they developed strategies for improving the community investment system and advancing equity-promoting community development projects in neighborhoods facing the greatest barriers to health and opportunity.

City teams focused on one or more of the key social determinants of health (e.g., housing, public safety, transportation, and local food systems and security) and worked to address these issues through built environment projects, such as affordable housing; development of community centers, crisis intervention centers, or medical centers; established healthy food retail; and improved parks, sidewalks, public lighting, and other features to facilitate safe recreation and walkability. Throughout this work, city teams learned about using data to drive decisions, community trust-building and authentic engagement, the importance of cross-sector collaboration, and the need to prioritize health and equity in all facets of their work.

Community Engagement

Authentic community engagement is a critical element of health and equity-focused community development; cities cannot create profound community change without including the community itself through representation, data sharing, collaborative decision-making and resource investment. Though community voices have too often been overlooked by leaders and decisionmakers in cities or treated as a ‘box to check’—a challenge that perpetuates racial inequities and diminishes trust—community leaders are emerging and leveraging their power through a collective set of voices to advocate for policies and practices that can lead to improvements in their communities’ health and well-being. By listening to and learning from residents and committing to an ongoing, long-term community engagement process, developers, government representatives, and nonprofit organizations can better understand the challenges, needs, and assets of communities, as well as more effectively and respectfully deploy services and resources aligned with community priorities.

Highlighted Cities

The Invest Health cities, all small to mid-size, benefit from both motivated nonprofit and government sectors, as well as strong anchor institutions. However, each faces significant income disparities and socioeconomic differences which have led to inequitable health outcomes among its residents. In these case studies, we explore community engagement efforts in the following cities and projects.

Hartford

Expanded grocery options to increase food access for underserved communities. A new wholesale grocery store will address the health impacts of food insecurity in an area identified as a food desert.

Lansing

Investment into a commercial corridor to revitalize the southwestern section of the city. Improvements are led by the South Western Action Group (SWAG), a group of small businesses and residents, to bring new business and positive economic impact to the neighborhood.

Missoula

Broad-based community organizing structure to address a lack of affordable housing, inequitable access to healthcare resources, and income inequality. The newly established Common Good Missoula will train 500 community members as leaders and, ultimately, engage 5,000 Missoulaans in the decisions that affect their health and well-being.

Roseville

Improvements to safety and walkability in key neighborhoods, with a particular focus on a community park with an affordable housing development adjacent to it. Three target neighborhoods have gained a vehicle to voice concerns to elected and appointed officials through a new neighborhood association structure.

Spokane

A series of three built environment projects designed to provide affordable housing options within a half-mile of Spokane’s new high transit line. The projects provide transitional housing for women, families, and young adults.

How the Process Leads to Progress

When embarking on any project designed to strengthen the community, seeking the community voice—a set of diverse community perspectives—is essential. “Not only does it make projects run more smoothly when the community is on board, but there are also valid educational opportunities when residents are at the table,” said Julie Honekamp, CEO of Spokane Neighborhood Action Partners (SNAP), and a member of the Invest Health team in Spokane. “We want to hear concerns and myths firsthand so that we can address them and incorporate community feedback. Everyone wants to live in a community where they feel welcome, and part of our job is to set the stage for all residents to join together.”

In Missoula, Hallie Cardé describes community engagement as crucial to dismantling racist systems. Engagement should go beyond hearing the community’s voice, eventually moving toward community members taking the lead. “There has to be a deep investment in the areas that affect people’s lives: issues like housing, transportation, and food access. And the people to lead those efforts should be the people who are experiencing those things. Things won’t change until people with the experience are involved from the beginning in imagining, developing, and implementing policy change,” said Cardé, who serves as Coordinator for Health Equity at the Missoula City-County Health Department.

The Invest Health teams have found that neighborhood residents want well-planned community engagement efforts to be part of the solution, rather than an afterthought for decision makers. Too often, halfhearted attempts at community engagement fail to provide meaningful opportunity for input, and the results can do more harm than good. For example, poorly advertised meetings or efforts that only target the same people can be detrimental; instead of setting a tone of shared responsibility, that type of engagement process can have the opposite effect, destroying trust between a community and its city leadership.

“If you’re not going to do community development work in response to, and in partnership with, the community who is going to participate in it, you’re doing it wrong. You’re wasting your time. Some of the neighborhoods where we work have had things done to them for years. Not with them,” said Gina Federico, who serves as Director for the North Hartford Triple Aim Collaborative of the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut. According to Federico, the absence of the community voice has resulted in disinvestment and insufficient investment in health-related issues in Hartford, resulting in a missed opportunity to build trust and see better outcomes.

Engaging the Community Authentically

The Invest Health city teams recognize the importance of authentic, comprehensive engagement that requires a more balanced power dynamic and includes residents at the planning and decision-making table. Authentic community engagement means abiding by the phrase “nothing for us, without us” regarding the community’s role in making decisions that affect them. Invest Health city teams strive to ensure resident voice is incorporated throughout all the elements related to investing in their community. Ultimately, the pivot from outreach to engagement contributes to a sustained and deeper relationship with community members so that their leadership and opinions are prioritized and valued.

Meetings

Over the course of the 24-month initiative, Invest Health contributed to the development of a national learning community, leveraged both within and across participating cities through convenings and meetings. This type of collaboration helped city teams achieve a clearer understanding of the relationship between built environment and health; deepen their commitment to addressing issues of equity and engaging with communities; advance development of built environment projects; and strengthen cross-sector teamwork with expanded collaboration efforts.

In addition to meetings among core multi-sector team members, city teams also held community meetings to communicate with residents and gather feedback. “Our community engagement didn’t truly begin until we met with the community,” said Martha Page, executive director of Hartford Food System. “We had data from surveys and statistics about outcomes but inviting the community to show up [and engage with us] changes everything.” Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Invest Health city teams moved toward Zoom meetings to continue engagement in a safer environment. “Keeping a mass of people involved is key,” said Yolanda Williams. “Not only keeping leadership involved but speaking out to the community so that they’re informed and feel part of it. COVID is making it harder to keep people involved.”

Efforts to continue community engagement using technology have been successful, but it is important to recognize the digital divide. “Zoom makes it easier to engage in the sense that people are spending more time at home and near a computer. People can have it on in the background while making dinner, on mute, off video. For things like that, it’s great,” said Hallie Cardé. “But it’s a privileged form of access. We’re constantly struggling to reach people who might not have consistent access to internet or a computer. It’s more important than ever to address the resource inequities around health and to involve those who are most acutely affected, but we’re not always able to do that through Zoom. We’ve been trying to think creatively around how people can be involved.” One of those solutions included providing two in-person locations meeting guidelines set forth by the Center for Disease Control (CDC)—one at a restaurant, and one at a community center—that allowed groups of participants to live stream a meeting.

Informal conversations

Not all community engagement has to be formally structured. In fact, some cities have found that informal conversations can be more effective. The Roseville team completed more than forty key informant interviews early in their work, but the process of identifying the right contacts was organic, and the interviews were relaxed. “We built the list simply by asking around in the community, and instead of interviews, we had conversations,” said Debra Oto-Kent, Founder and Executive Director of the Health Education Council in Roseville. “Our focus groups were held in people’s backyards and around kitchen tables. We offered food and had discussions with families.”

Yolanda Williams has also found success in a traditional grassroots approach in Lansing. She relies on mail to reach seniors, who typically aren’t on the internet, and maintains a strategy to simply stay visible in the community to answer questions and build trust. “I go to neighborhood clean-ups and local events, and I strike up a conversation. I let community members know I’m available,” said Williams, a member of Lansing’s South Side Community Coalition. “We need to know what’s going on when we can’t see it. If there’s a problem and you don’t know about it, you can’t do anything. As a community, we have the opportunity to come together and fix issues before they get worse.”

Surveys and Focus Groups

Invest Health teams also perform information gathering through surveys and focus groups. In Hartford, data from several organizations helped to inform decision-making. “We knew that we were focusing on food security but weren’t set on a direction. We had one survey done about perceptions of food access, and a series of focus groups by the Hispanic Health Council about food options in Hartford,” said Martha Page. “It helped that the organizations leading these particular efforts were well-known and trusted in the communities we were targeting.” The same was true in Roseville, which depended on team members and community groups to get input from the people they serve. “We engaged all of our partners in information gathering. Schools and parent outreach staff helped by talking to families about their needs. We also spoke with community groups, service providers, and health care providers to get a full picture of the community’s needs,” said Debra Oto-Kent.

Messaging

In Spokane, thoughtful messaging has helped to improve community understanding surrounding the shared benefits of affordable housing. “There are a lot of misconceptions about transitional housing, but the reality is that we all benefit when our most vulnerable neighbors are housed. Affordable housing helps provide stability and prevents homelessness. It means fewer dollars into jails and social services. And, by design, Invest Health is helping to connect housing to transportation, which boosts the economy, health, and access to services,” said Honekamp. Not only is the messaging focused on shared community benefit, but it also stresses the importance of helping families access better opportunities. “When you have stable housing, it’s easier to find employment, to get an education, to prevent and to treat chronic health conditions. Housing is particularly important for children, who may experience poor health outcomes and higher development risks in unstable housing situations, increasing their chances of life-long health problems,” said Julie Honekamp. “These are messages that resonate with everyone.”

The Challenges in Community Engagement

Bridging the gap

When welcoming the community into the conversation, it is important that there is a conscious effort to include all members. Diversity and inclusion are key. But what happens when some residents are harder to reach—or worse, feel like their voices don’t matter? Part of community engagement is healing a community that is fragmented between “us” and “them.” Community outreach efforts that fail often target usual suspects, driving an even bigger chasm between the residents who are asked to participate and those who feel ignored by the process.

In Roseville, there is fear among undocumented families of possibly drawing attention to themselves. City government, until recently, was also unaware how many residents do not speak English as their primary language, making communication complicated. “We are really excited that the neighborhood association structure has taken shape and form. It’s always been a priority for both the City and Invest Health. And we always knew that there were some residents that were not engaged in the association meetings,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “We began by having Spanish-speaking staff members call residents to invite them to association meetings. The first time, we reached out to six people, and five came. It changed the whole dynamics of that meeting.” Through a translator, the residents were able to participate in the conversation and lend a very different perspective of Weber Park and the neighborhood. One woman explained that the Latino community saw the park as a meeting place, where they raised their children, created their own programming, and built a sense

of community. “Bringing those neighbors into the process and giving them a role helped us understand their priorities and their hopes for the park,” said Oto-Kent. “While our English-speaking residents were comparing Weber Park to other neighborhoods with bigger parks, the Spanish-speaking community saw the park differently and contributed to the vision.”

Giving space for emotion

Conversations with community members about decisions that impact them can sometimes cause emotions to run high. Further, having these conversations too late in the process often creates a feeling that residents have been left out of the decisions that will ultimately affect their lives. “When we first started, we didn’t get enough input from community. That was one of our biggest mistakes,” said Yolanda Williams in Lansing. “What we needed to do was communicate with everyone and make it clear that no one is trying to take anything away from them.” This communication is sometimes best received from a fellow community member, versus an elected official or a representative who is less in tune with neighborhood residents. “It’s harder to do if you’re not from the community. I live here. I’ve worked in the community center for sixteen years. People know who I am, and they trust that I know them. It makes the conversation easier,” said Williams. Still, it is best to be prepared to untangle some difficult emotions among neighbors, and it all begins with listening. Julie Honekamp in Spokane suggests “letting people get the vitriol out first,” before moving on to solutions.

“You have to be prepared to be beat up,” said Honekamp. “It’s part of the deal. It’s how you move forward from it that matters.” For example, in Lansing, once the residents felt heard and understood, they became active participants in the process, rather than opponents. “When I let them get it all out, heard their fears, heard about their negative experiences, I could respond in a way that brought them back into the process. They were able to put that behind them and join the conversation. Now they feel valued and they’re contributing ideas to help make their neighborhood better. And the City is listening,” said Williams.

Overcoming negative experiences

Inviting community members into the fold is crucial. Yet, resistance to that invitation can often arise from a negative experience with policymaking and power dynamics. “So often, and particularly in underserved communities, a lot of people don’t feel like they’re heard. They’re asked to engage, but then nothing happens and there is no follow-up,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “It can turn people off to the process.”

With time and persistence, community engagement can increase participation. Inviting residents into the process pays off eventually, as trust is established and the invitation is understood and demonstrated as sincere. “People want to be asked. They want to be part of activities and, if they seem resistant, there’s usually a good reason for that,” said Oto-Kent. “In community engagement, you always have to ask yourself who isn’t at the table. And then you need to focus your efforts on those people in a way that is relevant to them.” Keeping community members organized and engaged. While partnerships are crucial to the community engagement process, holding regular meetings can prove challenging. Project leaders intentionally stay nimble and reinforce engagement by incentivizing participation. “Any time you’re doing this work, you’re going to get people who are super responsive and then the rest of their life happens. That’s standard in the work. When we were able to hold task force meetings in person before COVID, we made sure to schedule things when people were available,” said Hartford team member Gina Federico. “We also fed them and, even now, task force members receive a stipend.”

Thoughtful scheduling and compensating participants for their time acknowledges that their participation is valued and makes it easier for all residents to stay engaged, particularly for those balancing financial, family, and work demands. However, it is important to remember that people—no matter how motivated they are to achieve change—will have different priorities at times. And participation is not always linear. “People have drifted in and out as life intervenes, but you have to be expecting that. When they are distracted, you understand, and when they come back, you welcome them back into the process,” said Federico.

Expertise vs. Experience

When it comes to community engagement, the concept of expertise is often misunderstood and, consequently, disproportionately leaves out community voices. Many times, it is assumed that elected and appointed officials know best—but expertise is no match for lived experience. Decision-makers and local leaders should act according to the will of residents for many reasons, but above all, because they are not always in tune with what constituents actually want or need. This may seem obvious but is often not how planning and policy decisions are made. “Sometimes our narrative as developers is not always accurate. ...For the Riverwalk project, we didn’t anticipate that the neighbors would want access to a bus, but we found out quickly that [they did]. As a result, we created bus turnout lanes so that transit could run there,” said Julie Honekamp. “Having healthy dialogue before and during a project keeps everyone informed—both the community and the developers. That way, it’s an informed process and there aren’t a lot of surprises.”

In Roseville, early work was focused on food insecurity. The neighborhood was a documented food desert, so the team felt it was the natural place to concentrate its efforts. As it turned out, the community had different priorities. “When we went back to the community, we heard a much different story. They were more interested in the safety of their streets. Things like walkability, lighting, and improving neighborhood relations,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “Once we pivoted away from food security, we were able to focus on what would really make a difference for residents. They didn’t mind walking to the food store, but they just wanted it to be easier to walk safely.” Successful community engagement empowers community members and builds leadership among residents to create a more informed and engaged community. Otherwise, efforts can be met with resistance from residents who feel that something is being done to them, rather than with them. “If the community doesn’t feel like it’s for them, ultimately, it’s not going to work,” said Martha Page in Hartford. “When you don’t have that connection that speaks to the community’s needs, or if you don’t understand the trust level of your target population, that’s a blind spot. You can have the best intentions, but no intervention is going to be successful without the community on board. And the outcomes will reflect that.”

Hartford learned that lesson in 2017 when it built a baseball stadium on empty lots and land with blighted properties. The decision was made by the City in conjunction with the property owner, without consulting neighborhood residents. “The stadium is beautiful. So many people from the city go to the games, and it has opened up a lot of seasonal and part-time jobs for local residents. This is a project that, from the outside, was enormously successful. But you still hear from residents that this is something that was done without them. It’s a constant and potent reminder of what happens when you don’t ask,” said Page. “Collective conversation is power,” said Hallie Cardé of Missoula. “You don’t have to be a policy expert to have an impact on something that [affects] your daily life.”

Lessons Learned

Community engagement fails when leadership sees the process as a box to be checked. Invest Health city teams come to the table prepared to ask difficult questions, truly consider the answers, and continue the conversation. “Community engagement is not ‘tell us how you feel and we’ll pass it along,’ nor is it ‘we’ll engage with you for a bit and then drop you.’ If you’re a member of our community, we want to have a relationship with you. We want to know you,” said Hallie Cardé. “That’s the only way things get done.” Cities and agencies looking to meaningfully engage the community should keep the following lessons in mind.

Build relationships.

All of the Invest Health teams credited relationship-building as the most important key to success in community engagement. “There is value in a broad set of voices. It’s imperative that you work with all the parties involved. Pull everyone together. The more people around the table, the better,” said Oto-Kent. “Our team, early on, made the decision that we needed to do some aligning before we could get started. Invest Health prioritized operationalizing the neighborhood associations and resident engagement so that no one was left out of the conversation.”

Be visible.

Part of connecting with people is simply being among the community as much as possible. In Lansing, Yolanda Williams regularly attends community meetings, neighborhood watch meetings, and community events to seek support. “Whenever there’s an event, I’m there. Whether it’s a trunk or treat, a tree lighting, or a neighborhood clean-up, that’s where I have my most valuable conversations,” said Williams.

Consider diversity.

Community engagement is most successful in building trust when the community sees partners that look like them or come from the same neighborhoods they do. “In order to be authentic, the composition of the group should be representative of people experiencing inequities related to health and income,” said Hallie Cardé. “In Missoula, we have been traditionally white-led. With the growing awareness around racial inequities, it’s time to give more attention to diversity in community engagement.” The same was true in Lansing, who found resistance among its African American residents at the beginning of its work. “City officials were suddenly coming at people with ideas, and the first thought is, ‘they’re trying to change us.’ That’s when I got more involved,” said Yolanda Williams. “What I tried to do is just ask community members what they want. It took a little time, but now the neighbors understand that they’re being listened to. They feel more ownership.” For these reasons, the team in Hartford is acutely aware of the demographic differences between its Task Force and the population it is serving. “In North Hartford, there is a large population that identifies across the Black diaspora, including African American, Caribbean Islander, Haitian, Creole, and Jamaican. It’s on us to take a step back and ask ourselves, how can I communicate in a way that is meaningful to folks from lots of different backgrounds?” said Gina Federico.

Find wins.

Finding early wins can go a long way in establishing trust with the community. That can be achieved by careful preparation and logistics. The team in Roseville consistently heard concerns about safety, including poor lighting, overgrown trees, and walkability. A relationship with the city utility company helped establish an early win for neighborhoods that are often overlooked. “The company was working on upgraded LED lighting, so we

went to them and asked them to serve our Invest Health neighborhoods first,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “So instead of core neighborhoods being the last to get them, they were the first. Little things that demonstrate that residents are listened to and changes are made send a powerful message to the neighbors and help tremendously with incremental change.”

Be intentional, but flexible.

Simply put, inclusivity is dependent on having an intentional process to engage the whole community. But part of this step includes seeking, accepting, and acting on the priorities of the residents, the neighborhood, and the segment of the population you are serving. “From the beginning, we’ve made intentionally engaging residents our very first step. It’s not always easy to do well, but the bottom line is that one person doesn’t stand for the community. We need to really hear our whole community. That’s what makes investable opportunities successful,” said Gina Federico in Hartford. “And recently, our community has been decimated by COVID and fighting racism – and then here we come, talking about a grocery store. Priorities have changed, and that’s all part of the process. In different communities, the temperature changes, and part of community engagement is constantly taking the temperature and acting accordingly.”

When inviting community input into decision-making, it is necessary to be both open to ideas and realistic about what is possible. Striking that balance is essential in preventing frustration among community members who spend their time and use their voices only to feel ignored if their suggestion is not taken. “No matter how you’re engaging the community, you have to be clear on your intention and what will—and will not—happen with the information you’re collecting. You just can’t accommodate every request or idea. It’s not possible, particularly in underfunded cities,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “But on the other side of the spectrum, decision-makers should be clear on what it means to listen and pay attention to how they’re listening. It’s best to listen without an outcome in mind and without restrictions. Sometimes at meetings with the community, ideas are shot down because of budget or agenda. It doesn’t have to be that way.”

Address barriers.

In cities where language barriers are more prevalent, translators have helped overcome the challenge that prevented participation from some segments of the community. And virtual solutions were designed to maintain engagement in a pandemic. But even as teams have made significant efforts to include the entire community in planning and policy discussions, there will always be barriers to inviting everyone to the table. Chief among them—lack of time. Hallie Cardé believes fully in people’s ability to weigh in on issues that affect them, but acknowledges that some may be intimidated by the process or feel too underinformed to advocate for themselves. That led to the Missoula team creating research action teams to give citizens the data they need to make their case. “Our organizing helps find the people who have time to do the research. It helps break it down and enables the public to feel informed enough to take action on a policy,” Cardé said. Missoula’s Common Good Missoula body has also established the use of civic academies to educate people on how to take action. The Invest Health Team works together to support these civic academies and identify citizen leaders and community partners to attend. “Each institution and each member of [the] core team commits to turning out [a] number of people. The reason this works is two-fold,” said Cardé. “First, partners are not only held accountable for community outreach, but we’ve also lightened the load considerably for each. It allows each partner to invite people they already know, which is just easier. And as a result, we end up with more attendees who come ready to learn. People are much more likely to participate when they’re invited by someone they know or have a tangential relationship.”

In Hartford, the team learned that low participation numbers were not a matter of people not liking the grocery store, but more a reminder that the target population was simply not available for meetings. “The average age in our neighborhoods is about 28, and 50 percent of women are single moms with children under five,” said Gina Federico. “For a single mom with young children who is probably working, there’s a slim chance of her volunteering her time. It’s not a lack of interest, it’s a lack of time. We need to think about who we are serving, and how to build a process to engage folks that is meaningful to them.” That means, in Hartford’s case, ruling out certain social media platforms that are less successful in reaching a younger demographic, as well as thinking through the best time and place for meetings to work around the demands of residents’ personal and professional lives.

Invest Health as a Catalyst

The support of Invest Health has helped cities achieve more than they could have alone. In particular, the structure it lent to the community engagement process led to increased participation and stronger coalition-building. “In Lansing, Invest Health helped us put a team together and work toward common goals,” said Yolanda Williams. “We never had that before.” Not only did Roseville’s newly formed neighborhood association network thrive, but the idea that municipal government and anchor institutions can be more in tune with the community has expanded to City efforts beyond the Invest Health project. “Even for other work we do in the region, our Invest Health experience has reinforced the importance of having local government as a key player and empowering anchor institutions,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “When larger entities talk about community engagement but aren’t necessarily equipped to do it, they can learn from our process.”

The focus on social determinants of health also helped to organize cities’ approach toward better outcomes. Whereas many individual organizations are focused on a specific issue, the intersection of these issues tell a much more accurate story about what residents are facing. “Invest Health is about health, but it’s also about transportation, housing and housing policy, and things like safety. To better serve our cities, there has to be a deep investment in areas that affect people’s whole lives,” said Hallie Cardé. “On a professional level, it’s my first time walking the walk with regard to population health and all of the policies that can change when we uplift the community voice.”

Promising Practices

Some Invest Health city teams have found success with the following community engagement efforts.

Increased access and partnership. The work of the Invest Health city teams has helped increase residents’ access to and partnership with the people making decisions in their community.

“People in our target neighborhoods don’t always have connections to city leaders and decision-makers. They don’t sit around the table with the Mayor from a power-neutral position. Our community engagement efforts have been designed to do that,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “We have people emailing officials and actually getting a response. That has happened since Invest Health. It’s empowering.”

Stronger trust

“Building and maintaining trust and accountability is the cornerstone of engagement. But it’s easy to say and hard to do,” said Gina Federico. “One of the things that makes it easier is forming an authentic connection with people.” That authentic connection means knowing that not every move will be the right one. If community engagement efforts are to succeed overall, addressing failures and shortcomings along the way will reinforce

trust. “When we hear from residents that something doesn’t feel right or look right, we have to make changes. It’s about hearing them and being iterative. Communities are a living, breathing organism. The ability to connect and be flexible builds that trust.” For Yolanda Williams, building trust is not just part of the process—it is the ultimate goal of community engagement. “We’re trying to get the community to trust us again. We want them to trust that our vision is the same as theirs. When they see that we’re aligned, it’s the first step in repairing the trust that we’ve been missing,” she said.

Improved systems and networks

Invest Health provides a starting point for cross-sector leaders to strategize and align with all organizations who have a stake in building healthier, more equitable communities. That includes health and human service agencies, the corporate sector, faith-based organizations, and funders. “The model we use helps organize people in the places where they are naturally playing, working, living, and worshipping,” said Hallie Cardé. “The thought is that each of the institutions has hundreds of members, so by connecting them and inviting them to a space where they’re comfortable, we’ve reached thousands of people.” The result is improved local community investment, with strong partnerships as the foundational network. For the Roseville team, reactivating and expanding its neighborhood association structure has set the stage for mobilizing residents now and in the future. “Early on, the Mayor of Roseville was part of our team. Under her leadership, one of eight City Council goals was to build our neighborhood associations. When we started Invest Health, associations were not active in the core neighborhoods. But now, all three of our neighborhoods have formed associations that meet regularly and have become part of Invest Health. The neighborhood residents see firsthand that the city was serious about building that infrastructure and, as a result, making actionable items a reality,” said Debra Oto-Kent.

Informed decision-making

Invest Health projects are laser-focused on community input, and as city officials continue to learn more about the people they represent, there is more opportunity for better, more informed policies. Many Invest Health cities are seeing a more representative group of stakeholders at the table when decisions are made, and the results are clear. In Roseville, seeing the value of a broad set of voices, the City’s government has grown its capacity and understanding of community engagement. Decision-makers have turned directly to residents and Invest Health committees to inform policies. “The City has implemented surveys to get neighborhood input and now actively aligns resources in response. That’s hasn’t happened before,” said Debra Oto-Kent. “Something that the City had not considered—the sidewalks in our target neighborhoods weren’t sloped to accommodate pedestrians walking with strollers or utility carts. When the residents had the chance to speak up, the City secured the funding for sidewalk improvements.”

Community engagement efforts have continued beyond Invest Health projects, and many residents who felt powerless have been invited into the conversation long-term. “There’s been a lot of learning, growth and commitment on the part of the City and all of our partners as well. The communities we reached through Invest Health have remained at the table, and we are confident they’ll be there for years to come,” said Oto-Kent.

Looking Ahead

As the experiences of Hartford, Lansing, Missoula, Roseville, and Spokane city teams during Invest Health demonstrate, authentic community engagement is an ongoing process that requires empathy, adaptiveness, and a willingness to embrace new ways of doing things. Challenges to building trust and making political par-

ticipation meaningful for residents will not disappear overnight, and city team representatives acknowledge this. However, through their work with Invest Health, city teams have taken many of those difficult first steps towards authentic engagement, side by side with community members. These steps have included making traditional “outreach” modes of engagement like public meetings and surveys more meaningful through intentional efforts to reach those who have less access to these spaces; long-term strategies to build relationships and trust; sharing of data and power; investment in community members through financial and skill-building opportunities; and the facilitation of residents’ direct participation in decision-making that affects their lives and communities. Examples like Roseville’s inclusion of Spanish-speaking residents through bilingual programming or Yolanda Williams using her position as a community connector to build trust show that while challenges persist, Invest Health city teams are thinking big and finding creative ways to meet them. The support from the initiative in providing structure and strengthening collaborative relationships across sectors has been critical in facilitating this work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that we cannot wait to address health equity issues. As the work moves forward, it’s apparent that more intentional approaches to engagement with the community are aligning with a sense of urgency around advancing equity. These important efforts will continue to provide an opportunity to learn from smaller places, while also emphasizing where the community role is—at the center of it all.

Invest Health is an initiative of Reinvestment Fund in partnership and with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) that began as a forum for 50 cities to define community needs and investment challenges, devise solutions, and align investment capital, other resources and policies to address the social determinants of health. The initiative provided a starting point for cross-sector leaders in small to mid-size cities across the country to strategize and align with community development finance experts, local, regional and national philanthropic networks, and public funding streams to build healthier, more equitable communities. Over the course of the initiative, Reinvestment Fund supported Invest Health city teams as they developed strategies for improving resident well-being in neighborhoods facing the biggest barriers to health and opportunity.

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