

Response to the Request for Information on

Methods and Leading Practices for Advancing Public Participation and Community Engagement With the Federal Government

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Introduction

The federal government is committed to improving how its agencies work for and with communities. However, too often, research and decisions that will impact individual lives and communities are missing key voices. In addition, current attempts to engage with the general public when asking for feedback do not meet people where they are and where they are most likely to access information. The approach to involving the public and communities in government decision making has often ignored or marginalized the affected community, denying its members access to the decision-making process and conveying a message of “[your voice, needs and interests do not matter.](#)” Without community voices, decisions and policies can reinforce deficit narratives, biases, or long-standing structural inequities that ultimately harm communities. By creating a government-wide framework for public participation and community engagement (PPCE),¹ the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), in collaboration with other federal agencies, hopes to close the gap.

Collaborative, participatory methods with communities and feedback mechanisms that are accessible and encourage active public participation can actively disrupt the status quo, as they enable the public to provide input on important policy decisions. Engaging communities—and most importantly, incorporating their voices into policy and program decisions—can reduce harm and improve the outcomes that matter most to populations that have traditionally been left out of this area. This shift toward sharing decision making with communities requires OMB guidance that reflects the needs of each agency and its staff as it builds processes, structures, and capacity to engage with communities and creates spaces that rebuild public trust. By reimagining what engaging the public in government decision making can look like, the federal government can create a framework for PPCE that leads to more effective and sustainable programs, policies, and practices and, ultimately, better outcomes.

Mathematica is a nonpartisan research and data analytics organization with a mission to improve public well-being. We work alongside diverse communities and refine our practices continuously to improve our approach to shared decision making. Our work with agencies across the entire federal government, state and local agencies, foundations, and other clients has given our staff an understanding of the challenges of engaging community members in research and the strategies required to establish strong connections with communities and the public. For example, in our work with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), we developed an [equity assessment guide](#) and several tools to more equitably engage with people [with lived experience](#). In addition, we created a [guide to co-interpreting data with community collaborators](#) and another [guide to enhance culturally responsive and equitable evaluation \(CREE\)](#) support processes that improve community engagement.

Notably, this response was prepared by diverse Mathematica staff, specifically a team that includes people who identify as Hispanic, African American, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+. These staff members have a long history of centering equity in their careers through authentic and meaningful community-engaged and participatory approaches. Our team has extensive experience building and maintaining rich relationships with communities to support their self-determination and visions.

Item-by-item response

To help develop the framework, we offer a response to **Topic 2: Content in a federal framework for PPCE:** What types of content (for example, methods, tools, definitions, research on the value of participation and engagement, promising practices) could OMB include in a federal framework for PPCE that would be effective and informative for federal agencies to initiate or improve their participation and engagement activities, including those carried out with underserved communities? We provide detailed descriptions of approaches in response to the following subquestions within this topic area.

Question: How might OMB facilitate agencies adopting and effectively applying such practices, given the wide range of possible PPCE activities and focus areas?

Effective application of PPCE approaches requires recognizing that one size does **not** fit all for communities and agencies, but there are best practices that agencies might employ to improve PPCE. Facilitating adoption of PPCE activities requires internal capacity building and a shift to asking whether our conversations are including everyone who benefits or is impacted by our decision making. Some federal agencies are integrating PPCE approaches in their work. For example, Mathematica has worked with HHS to manage its Equity Technical Assistance Center, which is in its third year of helping the agency center the voices of people with lived experience in programs, policy, and research. Throughout this work, we have learned that community engagement and public participation requires time, trust, relationship building, and financial commitment. It is an iterative and ongoing effort, with a long-term goal of advancing equitable outcomes in communities. In the next section, we recommend capacity-building activities and changes in policy that can better support adapting PPCE activities to the various agencies and communities they serve.

Recommendation: Support and invest in advisory boards as a first step toward understanding the goals and communities most impacted by the agency’s mission. Advisory boards and working groups that include a range of community perspectives can support agency capacity building, learning goals, and rulemaking. They are a good first step toward more integration and meaningful engagement from community members and can inform the best mechanisms for public participation. Mathematica has created [advisory boards to include community members, practitioners \(for example, teachers\), and people with lived experience in decision making](#).

Recommendation: Reconsider and revise current OMB incentive policies and how they align with preferred community practices. Incentives play a crucial role in encouraging active involvement and ensuring diverse voices are represented in decision-making processes. It is essential to consider the current incentive policy and its implications for participatory approaches to community engagement. For example, current OMB guidance outlines specific parameters that encourage federal agencies to ensure any incentives are reasonable, justifiable, and provided in a specific manner. However, paying community partners fairly for their time and contributions in ways that make sense to them is paramount to fostering meaningful participation. OMB must also develop and provide clear guidance to agencies that explicitly addresses the allowability for cultural exemptions to OMB policies. OMB must be clear in its support of federal agencies’ discretion to incorporate culturally relevant practices, such as providing food during community meetings or events, as long as these practices align with broader legal and ethical standards. Agencies should be encouraged to exercise judgment and consult with community partners, including community

members and cultural experts, to ensure their policies and practices respect and accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds and preferences.

Recommendation: To engage effectively with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, adopt a culturally sensitive and community-focused approach. Incorporating cultural exemptions, such as allowability for food, demonstrates respect for Indigenous traditions and practices, and recognizes that community decision making necessitates a tailored approach that respects the unique cultural and historical contexts of each Tribal Nation. Prioritizing Tribal sovereignty and cultural humility training for agency staff involved in interactions with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities is essential. It is crucial to move beyond mere consultation policies and instead establish collaborative decision-making structures that actively involve Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities in developing, implementing, and evaluating federal programs, policies, and projects. Understanding that Indigenous people are place-based, allocating resources for trust- and relationship-building activities, including facilitating travel to communities with permission from Tribal Nations, fosters mutual understanding and cooperation.

The government must ensure information related to federal programs, policies, and projects is readily accessible and comprehensible to Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities. Doing so means employing innovative dissemination methods beyond traditional webinars, such as partnering with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities to host community forums or developing partnerships with organizations that already have established community networks and have gained communities' trust. PPCE activities should also emphasize the development of genuine partnerships that honor Tribal sovereignty and acknowledge Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities' inherent right to self-governance and decision making for the betterment of their people. Efforts should demonstrate the government's commitment to multidirectional learning, where agencies not only share information with communities but also engage in coordinated efforts to enhance interagency cooperation and coordination.

Question: What are effective ways for the federal government to provide updates to the public about the feedback it receives during, and decisions made after, PPCE activities?

Recommendation: Hold listening sessions with the public to understand their preferences. Communities are experts on their lives. One way to understand how best to update the public on feedback received regarding PPCE is to hold listening sessions to understand their preferences. For example, the federal government can hold listening sessions before decisions are made to explore effective ways to provide updates that reach the public. Listening sessions are most effective when members of the community co-facilitate them. Although it might not be feasible to recruit participants who represent every possible iteration of background and experience, the goal should be to capture a range of perspectives (for example, from Tribal communities, African Americans, and other groups). Mathematica has used [listening sessions](#) in various capacities to involve communities in decision making.

Recommendation: Tailor the content and format of dissemination products to the audience's needs and preferences. Often, decisions are not disseminated to the public and impacted communities in easily accessible ways. PPCE guidance should prioritize nontraditional forms of dissemination such as interactive graphics, infographics, social media, and live streaming of events and webinars on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. When members of the

community serve as co-designers, co-authors, and presenters, such efforts can further increase buy-in and reach.

Recommendation: Create a group of core collaborators to inform the public. People from the communities impacted by government decision making can be valuable core collaborators. For example, if the government is making decisions that will directly impact underserved communities, it should consider convening a panel that includes valued members of those communities to deliver results of PPCE activities. For Tribal Nations, this could include Elders; for African Americans, this could include clergy.

Question: What goals and objectives should OMB consider when developing a federal framework for PPCE?

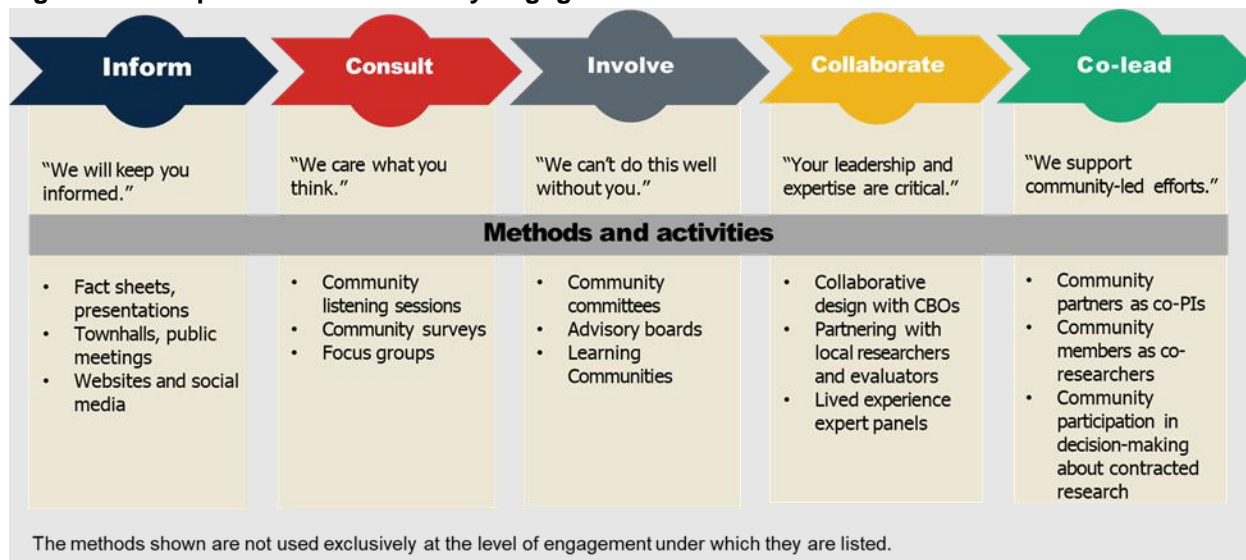
Recommendation: Recognize community members as experts. When developing a federal framework for PPCE, it is important to collaborate with communities to ensure components align with their needs and preferences. Collaboration must go beyond asking community members for input; it must include community expertise in decision making. Group mapping exercises with diverse representatives of the community of interest can help identify needs, priorities, assets, and challenges.

Recommendation: Prioritize hard-to-reach communities by creating partnerships with community organizations. Hard-to-reach communities (for example, sexual minorities, refugees, non-English speakers, and people without legal immigration status) face numerous barriers, such as language, location, and negative past experiences, that might hinder their involvement in public decision making. A priority for a federal PPCE framework should include partnerships with community organizations that best understand the needs of community members, can support engagement and participation in decision making, and know what forums are best suited to gather public feedback.

Question: What guidance might OMB provide to agencies for developing their own goals and objectives for participation and engagement? What metrics could OMB suggest helping agencies assess the success or impact of their PPCE activities?

PPCE means more than conducting surveys and interviews to gather input. Guidelines should reflect that PPCE requires moving toward approaches that involve communities in decision making. Also, PPCE approaches require a wider range of methods and approaches sensitive to context and local needs, including qualitative and other non-quantitative methods. To ensure community engagement extends beyond simply listening to communities, and that public participation is truly accessible and timely, federal agencies should focus on their current capacity, the types of communities they serve, and the problems they seek to address as they incorporate practices. While efforts to keep communities informed and to consult with community partners are encouraging, agencies should continue to evolve their practices and collaborate and co-lead with community members. (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The spectrum of community-engagement methods



Note: CBO stands for community-based organization; PI stands for principal investigator.

In the next section, we recommend guidance OMB can provide agencies for developing their own goals and objectives for PPCE.

Recommendation: Agencies should identify where they currently sit on the community-engagement spectrum and determine what steps they should take to advance down the spectrum. Identifying current levels of community engagement is a first step in setting goals PPCE activities, followed by determining next steps to move forward on the community-engagement spectrum. For example, if agencies already use community advisory boards, agencies should consider how to deepen advisory board contributions. Incremental change should be a central component of guidelines, and guidelines should be flexible enough to allow agencies to move toward specific goals. Mathematica is working with federal agencies to develop an equity maturity matrix for federal agencies that can support this journey.

Recommendation: Understand and use preferred practices for building relationships in communities. An essential part of increasing public participation and engaging communities in decision making is building relationships at the local level. Guidance should include preferred practices in how to work with grassroots organizations to build trust and to communicate more directly with those most affected by the research. To enhance public participation and facilitate community engagement in decision-making processes, it's crucial to prioritize the use of existing partner networks. This involves recognizing and using established community networks and partnerships to foster meaningful relationships. Tapping into these networks enables federal agencies to use existing relationships, enhance community-engagement efforts, and ensure that decision-making processes are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to communities' needs and perspectives.

Recommendation: Prioritize the development and use of inclusive metrics to enhance community participation and ensure equitable decision-making processes. Metrics play a crucial role in supporting decision making and increasing community participation in federal efforts.

It is essential to establish comprehensive metrics for assessing the success and impact of Tribal engagement initiatives, ensuring these metrics encompass various dimensions of participation, representation, and relationship-building. The metrics should measure the diversity and representation of participants in PPCE activities to ensure they include a broad range of voices and perspectives. For instance, metrics should go beyond demographics to ensure representation of diverse lived experiences, including traditionally underrepresented groups, such as rural communities.

Tracking the extent to which agencies incorporate feedback and input into their decision-making processes and outcomes is crucial for ensuring meaningful engagement and accountability. Metrics should measure the influence of PPCE activities on agencies' policies, programs, and projects to better align with the needs and priorities of impacted communities. They should monitor shifts from passive inform-and-consult models to more collaborative or decision-making models. Similarly, tracking changes in touch points where participation occurs within specific processes provides insights into the evolution of engagement strategies.

Finally, the process should emphasize inclusivity. Agencies should involve communities in goal setting to ensure they're considering those perspectives and priorities from the outset. All findings from these metrics should be disseminated to promote transparency and enable affected entities to track progress and hold agencies accountable for their commitments to authentic engagement and collaboration.

Recommendation: Uphold Tribal sovereignty and self-determination in goals and objectives for Tribal engagement. It is crucial to advocate for goals and objectives that not only prioritize meaningful participation and decision-making opportunities for Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities but also underscore the importance of respecting Tribal sovereignty and self-determination at every stage of the engagement process. This entails emphasizing clear goals related to transparency, accountability, and information sharing to build trust and foster constructive relationships with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities while ensuring these goals align with and uphold Tribal sovereignty and self-determination. By prioritizing meaningful participation and decision making in conjunction with the fundamental principles of Tribal sovereignty and self-determination, federal agencies can demonstrate a commitment to honoring the autonomy, rights, and unique governance structures of Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, thereby fostering genuine collaboration, mutual respect, and positive outcomes in policy development and implementation.

¹ The term “public participation” in government means any process that involves members of the public in government decision making. It seeks and facilitates the involvement of those affected by or interested in a government decision, including people; State, local, Tribal, and territorial governments; nonprofit organizations; educational institutions; businesses; and other entities.

The term “community engagement” is a more specific concept within public participation that involves and agency's actions to build trust-based, long-term two-way relationships with all communities, including underserved communities that have been historically left out of government decision making.