

Engaging Participants as Partners in Colorado: Insights from the Field



Alexandrea Wilson, MSW

Hunger Free Report
February, 2022

Table of Contents

01

Introduction

02

Centering
Participant
Voices

03

Engagement
Strategies

04

Models of
Engagement

05

Models of
Engagement:
Overview

06

Models of
Engagement:
The Delores
Project

07

Models of
Engagement:
Emergency
Family Assistance
Association

08

Models of
Engagement:
Growing Home

09-14

Centering Participant Voices:
Next Steps

15

Conclusion

16

Acknowledgement

Introduction

Engaging Participants as Partners: Insights from the Field

“If we want a beloved community, we must stand for justice, have recognition for difference without attaching difference to privilege.”

- bell hooks

As the pandemic approaches its 2nd year systemic inequalities continue to be highlighted. One such example of this is the wealth gap that has led to poor access to basic needs such as food and housing. This social inequity has been exacerbated by the pandemic and its impact is disproportionate. Communities of color and low income communities have felt the burden of a system that prioritizes profit over people. It is important to state that the pandemic has not happened in a silo and neither do systemic inequalities.

Centering the voices of people with lived experience - especially those from marginalized communities is an important step toward creating equity. People with lived experience hold unique perspectives and insight that could inform organizations and systems in their equity journey. Equity is an ongoing process rather than a destination therefore strategies that support continued engagement with people with lived experience is critical.

This report will highlight the processes and outcomes of an evaluation conducted within Warren Village in response to the need for a racial equity lens. Warren Village is a nonprofit organization in Denver, Colorado that supports single parent families transition into stable housing and employment. The population Warren Village serves predominantly identifies as low income, BIPOC and immigrant. The evaluation answered how Warren Village can best center participant voices in decision making. The evaluation also centered participant experiences with diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Lastly, this report will outline lessons learned from organizations in Colorado that have established participatory mechanisms. This report can be utilized as a potential guide for organizations looking to establish participant centered methods of engagement.

Centering Participant Voices

Over a 5 month period we conducted a series of qualitative interviews with Warren Village alumni, residents and staff. The objectives of these interviews were to (a) evaluate current mechanisms for engaging resident and alumni for feedback and participation (b) inform a strategy for increasing meaningful resident and alumni involvement.



The data collection process began with qualitative interviews of staff to understand at a high level the areas of improvement and strengths of Warren Village programming geared toward alumni and resident participation. Through these interviews with staff we were able to understand the external and internal influences that impact alumni and resident experiences at Warren Village.

There were some challenges with gathering data from alumni and residents. It is important to note that participants may not always have the capacity to meet for focus groups or have 5 minutes to take a survey. Therefore participatory methods were critical to engaging participants in the evaluation process. We were able to conduct 2 focus groups with alumni and residents. Leaders amongst participants were essential to this process as they were able to meet for 1:1 interviews.

Centering Participant Voices: Engagement Strategies

Engaging participants is an opportunity to be creative and practice radical inclusivity.



Below are a few methods that were utilized to engage participants in the evaluation process at Warren Village. These methods are not a one size fit all approach. When determining which methods to use in engaging a specific population consider their particular needs.



Incentivization

Gift cards of various amounts were offered to alumni and residents that opted to participate in focus groups and other forms of data collection.



Elevate Leaders

Alumni and residents of Warren Village help to facilitate participant centered programs such as the Peer Resource Navigators which is a peer mentorship program. Participant leaders of this program were asked to participate in 1:1 interviews to inform this project.



Eliminate Barriers

There were events and other avenues where participants meet regularly that were utilized to gather alumni and resident input. For example, a participatory data collection method was used to evaluate participant programs during a holiday gift pick up and distribution. Alumni and residents were also incentivized to participate by receiving a raffle entry for every question they answered.



Identify Tangible and Intangible Resources

The evaluation would not have been made possible if the necessary resources were not made available. These resources included people - such as the Emerson Fellow helping to lead the evaluation, the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee at Warren Village. People serve as essential resources. Tapping into different types of capital can be critical (social, political, financial etc.).

Centering Participant Voices: Models of Engagement

The evaluation conducted within Warren Village prompted a series of interviews with local organizations engaged in similar work. The intention behind these interviews was to inform the creation of a mechanism within Warren Village that would help to facilitate the process of alumni and residents being more involved in programmatic change and decision making. We were able to identify several similar local organizations in Denver with established mechanisms for equitable and sustainable participation of service recipients.



The organizations included in this portion of the project are:

The Delores Project

The Delores Project primarily serves women and trans identifying individuals and advocates to end homelessness.

Emergency Family Assistance Association (EFAA)

Emergency Family Assistance Association (EFAA) - EFAA's main focus is providing stabilizing services, innovative programs, and transformative advocacy to strengthen families and create a thriving community. They provide access to food, direct financial assistance, short-term and transitional housing, case management and child enrichment programs to help families thrive.

Growing Home

In partnership with the community, Growing Home advances equity in food, housing, parenting education, and lifelong stability to create lasting change for the future. Each day Growing Home works side by side with its community to strengthen families, nurture children, and connect community so that community members who are experiencing immediate and long-term barriers to stability and success have the opportunity to thrive.

Centering Participant Voices: Models of Engagement

Models of Engagement Overview

The chart below outlines the models of engagement adopted by The Delores Project, Growing Home and the Emergency Family Assistance Association (EFAA).

Organization	Participatory Model(s)	Overview
The Delores Project	<p>Guest Advisory Committee</p> <p>Resident Advisory Committee</p>	<p>The guest advisory committee is geared toward shelter guest</p> <p>The resident advisory committee or community circle centers residents.</p>
Emergency Family Assistance Association (EFAA)	Participant Advisory Committee (PAC)	PAC was originally an advisory council to the board and then after a year or so PAC was formalized into a committee of the board. They started with one seat at the board and now there are two PAC representatives at the board.
Growing Home	<p>Program Advisory Committee (PAC)</p> <p>Participant Centered Approach (PCA)</p>	<p>PAC is a space for community members to share their thoughts on programs at Growing Home.</p> <p>The PCA is a framework built into Growing Home to facilitate a bottom up approach.</p>

Centering Participant Voices: Models of Engagement

The Delores Project

The chart below outlines the models of engagement adopted by The Delores Project including the Guest Advisory Committee (GAC) and the Resident Advisory Committee (RAC).

How was the need for this model identified?	What were the challenges to forming the initiative?	How do you involve people with lived experience?
<p>The GAC began informally. During dinner time there would be a guest meeting where staff were able to get feedback from guests by asking questions. Guests would be asked about protocol rules and their needs. Board members joined during the initial process to help facilitate.</p>	<p>Overall attendance happened to be a main challenge for the GAC in regards to engaging participants. Lessons from the GAC helped to inform the RAC.</p>	<p>Participants were incentivized to be involved. For example extra chore points were given to committee participants.</p> <p>The meetings were moved to once a month so that participation would increase.</p>
<p>Staff realized the need to foster a sense of responsibility and ownership of the community, for residents so that residents can feel like they are part of the community.</p>	<p>The RAC had less challenges because of the lessons learned from the shelter GAC. However, staff had to put in the effort to facilitate and create the space. They did this by talking with residents and understanding their needs..</p>	<p>Currently the Delores Project is still figuring out what it means to make these processes equitable for participants. The Delores Project has an intern creating surveys and doing research to better understand what this looks like.</p>
<p>The RAC was intended to help residents feel invested , that they are looking out for each other, not necessarily policing each other, but helping each other out. The RAC would act as a space that residents can identify what they need to feel connected with each other.</p>		<p>As a reflection the Delores Project has also been doing more to bring on staff that represent the populations they serve so that they can better engage their residents.</p>

Centering Participant Voices: Models of Engagement

Emergency Family Assistance Association (EFAA)

The chart below outlines the models of engagement adopted by the Emergency Family Assistance Association (EFAA) including the Participant Advisory Committee (PAC).

How was the need for this model identified?	What were the challenges to forming the initiative?	How do you involve people with lived experience?
The need was identified by the board to provide a formal space for participants to have a voice on how EFAA was run. Under the premise that participants are experts on their own experience, EFAA wanted to elevate those lived experiences in the organization's decision making process. The initial PAC cohort officially started in 2018.	EFAA spent a month on active recruitment, hosting informational meetings to recruit potential candidates. At the beginning the explanation about the PAC was very general, but the initial PAC members worked together to define their mission and vision, and identify their priority work areas.	EFAA offers a \$45 monthly stipend to PAC members. This helps to remove some barriers to participation. PAC members are able to use the money for whatever they need.
Along with creating the PAC the EFAA started the implementation of their DEI strategic plan. Since then EFAA has contracted with a consultancy firm called Point B(e) that is supporting the implementation of the DEI strategic plan.	Although there would be 8-10 participants consistently, 4 of which were part of the initial cohort. Their commitment is for one year and many of them keep coming back. Others have served on the committee for 2 years or more.	EFAA offers a \$45 monthly stipend to PAC members. This helps to remove some barriers to participation. PAC members are able to use the money for whatever they need (transportation, childcare, etc.).
EFAA put out a concerted effort to recruit participants. Recruitment would take place through their programs (putting out flyers, talking to participants waiting in the lobby, etc.). Case Managers were also utilized to help identify potential candidates for the PAC.	PAC members also conducted over a hundred one-on-one interviews with EFAA participants to identify main areas of concern and areas of strength and potential improvement at EFAA. This information was shared with the Board and it also informed the PAC's workplan.	EFAA also applied for a grant to create more digital access through the American Rescue Plan Act. This will provide Chromebooks, internet connection and digital literacy training.

Centering Participant Voices: Models of Engagement

Growing Home

The chart below outlines the models of engagement adopted by Growing Home including the Participant Advisory Committee (PAC) and their participant centered approach (PCA) framework.

How was the need for this model identified?	What were the challenges to forming the initiative?	How do you involve people with lived experience?
Nearly a decade ago, Growing Home recognized that it needed to transform from being a direct service provider to better tapping into the leadership and expertise of its community. The overall Growing Home stakeholders – especially its volunteer base and Board of Directors – did not reflect the populations with which the organization works, and there were few opportunities for participant leadership within the organization. Growing Home has made great efforts to address this.	<p>Internal conflict</p> <p>Growing Home realized that sometimes participants will not share the same values and ideas and this can create tension. It is a reminder that participants are not a monolith and come with their own experiences.</p>	<p>Incentivize Participation</p> <p>Growing Home desires to be able to compensate people for their time, but legally they are only permitted to offer incentives for participation or to offset the cost of participation.</p>
There are two primary objectives of the PAC 1) Upward communication - participants raise issues, positives and blind spots. Participants have a captive audience among staff and leadership and 2) Downward communication - coming from staff - seeing needs for change or expressing any areas of improvement and before they make changes they consult community members to solicit their ideas and thoughts.	<p>Additional Time and Training</p> <p>Growing Home understood that it is important to be transparent. As the organization started bringing community members more into conversations, the organization recognized that additional time and attention was needed to provide sufficient background information, context, and overall training so community members has sufficient context.</p>	<p>Feedback Loops</p> <p>Growing Home learned that when asking for feedback it is necessary to follow through and show how that feedback is being implemented to avoid fatigue of participants.</p>
The Participant centered approach lives within every branch of Growing Home. It is more of a philosophical framework. There are a set of tools that are used so that this approach can reach every level of the organization. These tools include an annual survey that acts like an internal audit. The survey focuses on the impact of programs and participant needs that may not be met.		

Centering Participant Voices: Next Steps

The models provided by The Delores Project, EFAA and Growing Home share insights that can be considered while determining next steps. The organizations models exemplify how a strengths based approach is essential to forming a mechanism that is participant led and fosters sustainable, equitable participation. Organizations must also consider their readiness to take on this initiative. The evaluation conducted at Warren Village revealed that the organization had the resources to begin implementing next steps toward becoming more participatory. One such resource at Warren Village is the racial and cultural diversity (lived experience) amongst alumni and residents. Again, reiterating that alumni and resident insights should be drawn upon to create a more inclusive and participatory environment at Warren Village.



The recommendations made as part of the evaluation were based upon the qualitative data obtained through interviews with alumni and residents. These recommendations were first identified as "future oriented themes" or suggestions, or wishes for the future regarding DEI at Warren Village.

Among the recommendations was the suggestion that Warren Village implement some kind of participant led channel to engage alumni and residents. Therefore the final portion of the project included an implementation guide to creating an Alumni and Resident Advisory Committee.

The Alumni and Resident Advisory Committee would serve as a participatory model and establish a pathway for participants at Warren Village to be meaningfully involved in decision making. The following pages will outline the recommended steps and serve as a potential blueprint for organizations interested in establishing their own participatory model.

Centering Participant Voices: Next Steps

Where do you go from here? Creating a sustainable and equitable method of engagement takes intentional planning.

The following pages outline the steps recommended to Warren Village in establishing a participatory model of engagement. It is important to note that an understanding of participant needs, attitudes and organization readiness should inform next steps.



Phase 1: Committee Preparation

This phase will involve setting the foundation for the committee. A dedicated staff will be required in order to kickoff phase 1. Therefore it is critical to identify staff who can help to facilitate the formation of the committee. Leaders amongst alumni and residents should be a part of this process as well. Participants involved in any leadership roles would be great resources to building the foundation for the committee.

Phase 1 should involve the following steps with the support of staff and leaders amongst alumni and residents.

- Incentivization. Prior to approaching potential candidates consider how will participants be compensated for the time? What are the benefits to being a part of the committee?
- Establish an informal or formal process of finalizing the committee. This will be decided by resident and alumni leaders and dedicated committee staff. The process could be an formal election where alumni and residents vote or informal where whomever shows interest is a part of the committee.

Centering Participant Voices: Next Steps

01

Committee Preparation..

Participant recruitment. Leaders amongst participants and staff will work together to identify participants who are interested in being apart of the committee. Other methods can include flyers or recruitment through existing participant programs

02

Formation of Committee Processes

Once the committee is established committee processes such as membership requirements, member roles, bylaws (if necessary), functions, meeting times etc. should be established. These policies should reflect the capacity of participants.

Phase 2 should involve the following steps with the support of staff and leaders amongst participants.

- **Establish a statement of purpose and committee policies that help to give the committee structure and guidance.** These policies should be created by participants with the support of staff.
- **Create an accessible, public facing document that outlines the statement of purpose and committee policies.** Transparency will be significant to the success of the committee. This document will not only be a guiding point for the committee but also inform participants and overall organization of the committee's purpose and processes.

Centering Participant Voices: Next Steps



03

Integration of the Committee into the Decision Making Processes

Recruitment and committee structure has been formed. Phase 3 details steps toward ensuring that the committee is fully engaged throughout programmatic change and design.

- Introduce the committee. Who makes up the committee? How can participants reach out with concerns? This introduction should answer those questions for the community. The introduction could take the shape of a brief announcement or be included in an organization wide newsletter. Perhaps the committee could stage a virtual or in person meet and greet with other participants.
- An initial meeting with staff leadership and the Board of Directors is an essential next step in phase 3. This meeting should focus on rapport building and establishing a foundation for a mutually beneficial relationship between participant and staff leadership.



04

Sustaining Continued Participation

The final phase is ongoing. Participants capacity may shift causing changes to occur frequently in the committee structure. Phase 4 includes a continued evaluation of participant needs for continued involvement.

Centering Participant Voices: Next Steps

04

Sustaining Continued Participation

Phase 4 draws upon the lessons provided by comparable community organizations and their models for participant engagement.

- What does equitable involvement look like for the participants? Regularly check in with the committee on their capacity and needs. This will help to sustain their continued involvement. For example, if a stipend as a form of compensation is implemented should this be increased based on the amount of work the committee is doing?
- Continue to support participants in their journey toward becoming more involved. Especially in the beginning participants should feel that they have the full support of staff in being more vocal in decision making. For example coaching committee members before presenting to staff or attending board meetings is a form of support.
- Cultivate leadership within the committee. The committee members may act as leaders and liaisons between staff and participants. Through continued support of staff committee members will be able to grow into leaders who are effective advocates for the community.

Centering Participant Voices: Next Steps

04

Sustaining Continued Participation

Phase 4 draws upon the lessons provided by comparable community organizations and their models for participant engagement.

- Close feedback loops. Committee members and general participants should be able to see their input put into practice. When the committee is engaged in the decision making process on a particular policy and voice specific concerns then those concerns need to be reflected in those final decisions.
- Make a concerted effort to recruit staff who have similar experiences/backgrounds of the committee members to work closely with the committee. For example, the Qualitative analysis conducted at Warren Village reflected themes of alumni and residents feeling alienated due to staff not reflecting their personal identities. Therefore it is important to ensure that staff who are working with the committee share similar lived experiences or identities.

Conclusion

"Strong communities are born out of individuals being their best selves." -Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

The contents of this report are guiding points to creating a participant centered environment. The following points highlight a few key take-aways.



Strengths Based Approach

Each organization has strengths to draw upon in creating the infrastructure to facilitate full participant engagement.

Obstacles are Learning Opportunities

While the goal of inclusivity may take some time and there will be obstacles to fulfilling this goal, obstacles should be seen as opportunities for learning.



Participant Centered Approach

A participant centered approach is the lifeline to building a strong infrastructure. This approach centers the needs of participants.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the Delores Project, Emergency Family Assistance Association, Growing Home and Warren Village for their contributions to this report.

I would also like to acknowledge Elise Matatall, Tony Jackson and Emma Williamson for their support throughout this project.

Alexandrea Wilson, MSW
Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow
Congressional Hunger Center

