



&

CommonKnowledge

# BEST PRACTICES IN ACTION

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STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING LATINOS,  
SENIORS AND LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS  
OF SONOMA COUNTY

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PREPARED FOR:  
THE SONOMA COUNTY DEPARTMENT  
OF HEALTH SERVICES

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Copies of this report and supplemental materials can be downloaded at:

[www.sonoma-county.org/health/community](http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/community)

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Sonoma County has experienced some dramatic demographic shifts over the past ten years, with Latinos, seniors and residents with low income representing a larger portion of the County's population. Sonoma County's first Strategic Plan, completed in 2007, specifies that the Department of Health Services (DHS) conduct an assessment of best practices for community engagement, specifically focused on three emerging populations in Sonoma County (the County): Latinos, Seniors and residents with low income. The County projects continued growth among these populations, and successful engagement is fundamental to its strategic perspective on Sonoma County's overall health.<sup>1</sup>

As part of its efforts to enhance individual and community health for all residents, the DHS has committed to improving the County's ability to engage with these growing populations. The Blue Sky Consulting Group and Common Knowledge were asked to research and evaluate "best practices" for community engagement and outreach that have been successfully employed in communities throughout the state. While the Department of Health Services oversaw this assessment, many aspects of the report will be applicable to all county government departments as well as community partners.

This report presents a portfolio of strategies and best practices that lay the foundations for and promote the implementation of effective community engagement. These strategies are drawn from surveys and interviews with a purposeful blend of local government and community leaders across the state. The report also presents ways in which Sonoma County can implement improvements based on these findings.<sup>2</sup>

## Overall Findings

Local governments across the state, including Sonoma County, are using a wide variety of community engagement practices to enhance their operations. The benefits they are gaining include increased program participation, more efficient use of public resources, improved relations with sectors of the community, increased community contributions to shared outcomes, and better information for program planning, among many others. In an era of increased budget challenges, effective community engagement has moved from "nice to do" to an essential way of more effectively

<sup>1</sup> We note that these populations are the focus of this report not because they are primary consumers of County services, but rather because of their increasing size and importance in Sonoma County. In many cases members of these communities do rely on County services, and improved community outreach and engagement can help to make this service delivery more effective. In other cases, members of these populations start businesses, hire workers, build buildings, lead community groups, and otherwise contribute to and participate in community life in Sonoma County. As such, communicating with these groups can help the County to more effectively respond to and engage with the populations it represents.

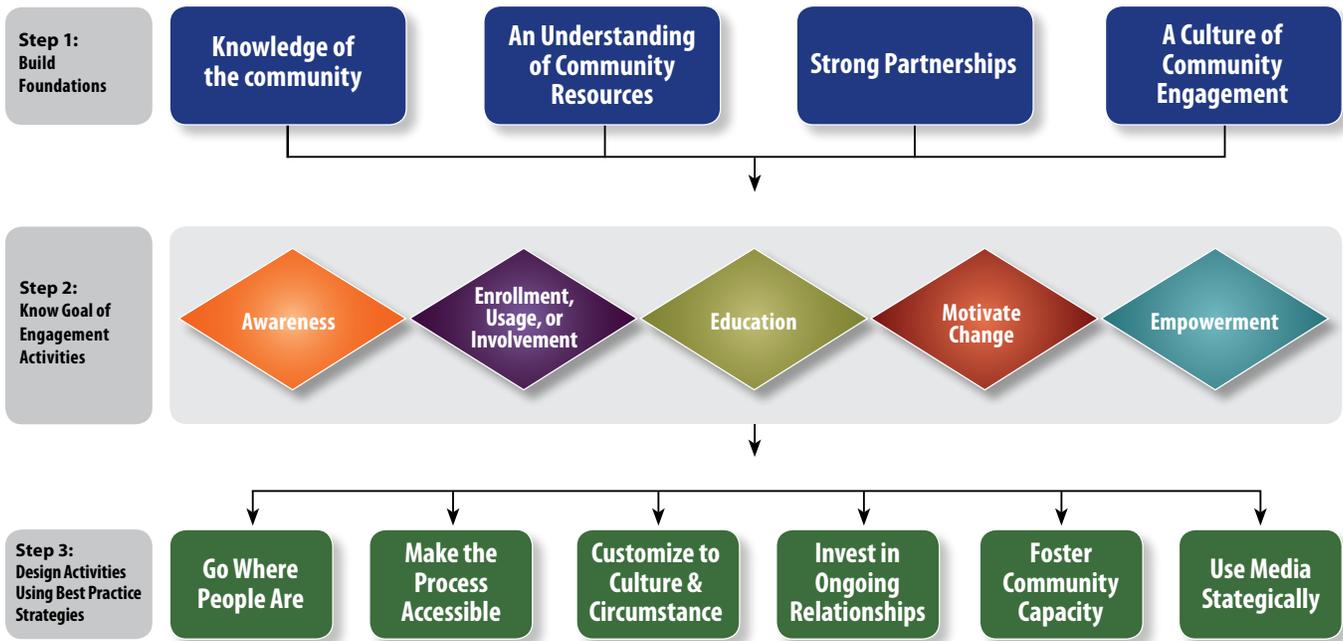
<sup>2</sup> Three supplementary documents provide additional detail for interested readers. The first of these documents is a toolkit that contains a detailed list of specific community engagement activities that have been effectively used in communities throughout the state (frequently as part of a broader community engagement effort). The second presents additional county-specific findings about the three target populations identified in this report. Finally, there is a list of additional research and resources on community engagement. These additional documents can be found online at [www.sonoma-county.org/health/community](http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/community).

aligning resources with community needs and opportunities.

Our research shows that in order to experience these benefits, one thing is key: engagement efforts must be built on a solid foundation of institutional capacity for and commitment to effective engagement with the local community. Understanding, respecting and working with the communities of interest make far more difference in whether engagement is successful than simply choosing a particular engagement activity. Building on a strong foundation, successful engagement efforts develop strategies for specific populations or communities of interest based on clearly stated goals and well-designed and implemented community engagement activities.

In Figure 1, we outline the framework for these three key elements of effective community engagement.

**Figure 1: A Structure for Effective Community Engagement**



**Step 1:** Effective community engagement begins with building four crucial foundations:

- 1. Knowledge of the community.** Develop a deep understanding of the concerns, values, culture(s), habits, and demographic characteristics of the community.
- 2. An understanding of community resources.** Know the community-based and government organizations and leaders that serve, interact with, and have the trust of this community.
- 3. Strong partnerships.** Be known and accepted as a partner in collaboration. This requires a commitment to building and maintaining relationships.
- 4. A culture of community engagement.** Prioritize engagement within the organization (at all levels) and support continuous improvement in cultural competency.

**Step 2:** Next, clarifying the goal(s) for community engagement enhances the design of effective engagement activities. Specific goals for community engagement can be as varied as the organizations seeking to connect with residents, and will depend on the outlook and purpose of

a department's programs. A general spectrum of community engagement goals may include the following: a) increase awareness of issues, services and opportunities; b) increase the use of programs; c) educate residents on issues and/or involve them in decision-making; d) motivate a change in behavior; and e) empower communities to identify and address their own issues and opportunities. Some local government managers see these goals in a continuum, while others find it more useful to think of them discretely. Regardless, establishing clear goals will enhance the effectiveness of community engagement efforts.

**Step 3:** Finally, county departments can utilize some or all of six specific engagement strategies (bottom row of Figure 1) as they design engagement activities for specific populations. These strategies have been found to be effective in helping local governments to be more accessible, relevant, and impactful for changing populations.

## Recommendations for Sonoma County

Based on research, analysis, and in-depth interviews with managers from across the County, six general recommendations emerged, with multiple options for specific action within these recommendations. These are:

- A. Elevate community engagement as a countywide priority,** creating a supportive “learning community” that encourages continuous improvement.
- B. Foster intra-county collaboration,** to share insights, skills and resources.
- C. Create and enhance mechanisms for community feedback,** to improve information and relationships.
- D. Develop a more user-friendly County presence in the community,** to enhance access as well as trust.
- E. Make it easier for County departments to develop cultural competency,** short-term as well as long term.
- F. Build and sustain strategic partnerships with community organizations,** to expand the impact of the County's goals.

These recommendations, together with specific action items, are further explained at the end of this report in Section VII.

## Conclusion

Effective community engagement relies on more than just designing the best website or utilizing the newest automated text messaging system. Instead, it builds on strong foundations that an organization establishes and succeeds when it is applied strategically in a way that is designed to help achieve specific goals. In this way, community engagement becomes integral to, rather than a simple extension of, an organization's core mission, with results that can improve community relationships, service delivery, and, ultimately, quality of life in a community.

While Sonoma County is currently implementing many promising practices in community engagement through its departments and programs, there are opportunities for the County to more comprehensively institutionalize community engagement, thereby constructing the strong foundation needed for successful community engagement and eventual systems change to increase the effectiveness of services and support the well-being of the broader community.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sonoma County has experienced significant shifts in the composition of its population in recent years. For example, Hispanics or Latinos represented 24 percent of Sonoma County residents in 2010, up from 17 percent in 2000.<sup>3</sup> In addition, over 28 percent of county residents are now 55 years or older and the county's median age of 39 is five years older than the state median of 34.<sup>4</sup> Finally, more residents are struggling economically; ten percent of Sonoma County residents were living at or below the Federal Poverty Level (of \$10,956 per year) in 2008 and 42 percent were living at or below 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level— a common threshold for safety net programs in California.<sup>5,6</sup> Other indicators of economic stress for residents include a tripling in the number of households enrolled in the food stamp program and a dramatic increase in the number of students receiving free or reduced meals at school (now 42 percent compared to 27 percent ten years earlier).<sup>7</sup>

These demographic trends coincide with an emerging approach in Sonoma County toward “Collective Impact,” where government departments engage in a comprehensive collaboration with public and private organizations. These two shifts increase the importance of conducting effective community engagement in order to connect an increasingly diverse set of residents with County and community-based services and resources. As such, the Blue Sky Consulting Group and the Common Knowledge Group were asked to research and evaluate “best practices” for community engagement with Latinos, seniors and low-income residents.<sup>8</sup> This report represents our synthesis of this information and presents a portfolio of proven strategies and best practices from which County staff and partners can draw.

Although we conducted a survey of Sonoma County departments, interviewed over a dozen department managers, and benefitted from the insights of an advisory group of representatives from many Sonoma County departments to recognize the community engagement activities in place currently, our primary assignment was to learn about best practices utilized outside of the County. Many of the strategies and activities discussed in this report are already being successfully employed in the County. We have noted at least some of these examples, and know that there are likely others as well.

In the following sections of this report, we delve more deeply into the elements of effective community engagement:

- Section II presents our methodology.
- Section III explains the framework for effective community engagement we have identified.

<sup>3</sup> Sonoma County Economic Development Board, *Sonoma County Economic and Demographic Profile*, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Sonoma County Economic Development Board, *2010-11 County of Sonoma: Local Economic Report*, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Sonoma County Economic Development Board, *Sonoma County Economic and Demographic Profile*, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Sonoma County Upstream Initiative, *Indicators of Success*, Jan 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Here we note that increased enrollment may be both a sign of effective outreach on the County's part as well as increased need. Sonoma County Economic Development Board, *Sonoma County Economic and Demographic Profile*, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> We did not use a specific definition of low-income or senior in interviews, allowing respondents to tell us what delineations they relied upon in their own work. For this report, we generally consider low-income to be at or below 300% of the federal poverty level and seniors to be 55 and older.

- Section IV addresses the institutional foundations of engagement; describes the value of knowing the community, building strategic partnerships, and creating a culture committed to community engagement
- Section V identifies methods for building this institutional capacity
- Section VI explores six engagement strategies that build upon the foundations for effective engagement, and
- Section VII discusses how the County can implement improvements based on these findings.

Throughout these sections, we share examples of effective engagement strategies and activities as potential models. It is important to emphasize that Sections IV through VI present an overall model of effective community engagement with examples largely from other local government agencies. This is not meant to imply that departments or programs within the County are not already engaged in effective community engagement. The hope is that this model and the county-specific findings we present in Section VII will help the County build on and refine its existing community engagement strategies, activities, and knowledge.

We have also prepared three supplemental reports to provide additional detail for interested readers:

- A toolkit with specific community engagement activities that the County can use to match a particular purpose, budget, or goal, along with criteria to assist in choosing which activity is appropriate for a given circumstance.
- A supplemental report with highlights of findings about Sonoma County’s target populations, including information on the particular obstacles they encounter as well as strengths they can contribute.
- A list of links to additional research and resources on community engagement relevant to the County’s operations.<sup>9</sup>

These materials can be found online at [www.sonoma-county.org/health/community](http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/community).

## Overview of Sonoma County’s Latino, Senior and Low-Income Populations

Latinos are forecasted to represent 50 percent of Sonoma County’s population by 2050.<sup>10</sup> Within this large group are a wide variety of important social, demographic and cultural differences. These differences include (but are not limited to) the generation of immigrant; country and region of origin; languages spoken; level of literacy; rural, urban or suburban background; ages of children; family patterns; and preferred communication sources. The County’s Upstream Initiative reports that, on average, Latinos in Sonoma County are less likely to have health insurance and have higher levels of obesity than non-Latinos.<sup>11</sup>

Seniors, defined here as those aged 55 and older, actually represent two distinct generations. Younger seniors are healthier, more active, and less likely to be homebound than older seniors. In addition, income can play a large role in the mental and physical health issues facing seniors.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase “community” is used in this report as a convenient way to consolidate findings that were relevant across the three populations of focus. But it in no way is intended to give the impression that county residents are a monolithic “community” with the same characteristics. Similarly, for convenience we refer to a wide range of county operations as the “County.” In both cases, the reader is invited to think about the specifics of the community sector and county department that is of interest to them.

<sup>10</sup> Sonoma County Economic Development Board, *2011 Hispanic Demographic Trends Report*, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Sonoma County Upstream Initiative, *Indicators of Success*, Jan 2011.

Finally, while 41 percent of Sonoma seniors 65 and over are living alone, support structures can differ markedly across the population.<sup>12</sup> For example, the community leaders we interviewed indicated that Latino seniors tend to have more family infrastructure for support than Anglos.

While the economic recession has increased the number of low-income residents in Sonoma County, the characteristics of this population remain highly varied. People in this category include those working at full time jobs unable to meet the local cost of living, seasonal laborers, and the unemployed, as well as those that are homeless. In fact, children under 18 are the group most likely to be living in poverty.<sup>13</sup> This is why the category of “residents with low income” may be more helpfully used for defining engagement strategies when accompanied by other characteristics such as employment or housing status.

It is important to note that these summary observations are not comprehensive, but are provided here as a broad context for the engagement strategies and practices shared in this report. An overview of Sonoma County staff and community-based observations about each of these populations are provided in a supplement available at [www.sonoma-county.org/health/community](http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/community).

## II. OUR APPROACH

This report’s findings are based on a survey of engagement practices across California and rely on the expertise of government and community-based practitioners in determining what has been effective. First, we invited local government representatives from across the state to complete a survey about the practices they found effective in reaching the targeted populations. The survey was distributed to county government health executives, welfare directors, planning directors, public information officers, and public works directors.<sup>14</sup> Based on the survey responses, we conducted a series of follow-up interviews that collected additional information on engagement strategies.

In addition, we contacted both government and community-based health and social services practitioners in Sonoma County. Community-based input was also gathered at an October 7, 2011 convening of community-based organizations in Sonoma County that was conducted by the Sonoma County Department of Health Services.<sup>15</sup> We also conducted a survey of and follow up interviews with Sonoma County department staff related to current engagement efforts. The research concluded with 10 in-depth interviews in winter 2011 with directors and managers of a set of diverse Sonoma County departments. All of the interviewees and survey respondents are listed in the appendices to this report.

These surveys and interviews were analyzed in order to create the portfolio of strategies and best practices that is presented in this report. They have been reported as effective based on experience and evaluation methods that are largely process, rather than research, oriented. However, we have provided a supplement to this report that directs readers to additional

<sup>12</sup> Sonoma County Human Services Department, *What We Know About Sonoma County Seniors*, May 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Sonoma County Upstream Initiative, *Indicators of Success*, Jan 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Recipients were also invited to pass the survey along to anyone they deemed to be an expert on community engagement.

<sup>15</sup> The Sonoma County Human Services Department, Community Action Partnership, United Way of the Wine Country, and Sonoma County Office of Education co-sponsored this forum.

literature and resources that utilize different methods to measure effective community engagement. It is important to note that this report’s findings are in step with other research in the field.

Finally, these strategies and best practices have been presented to, reviewed by, and enlivened by two advisory groups. One group consists of three community advisors who head well-respected community-based organizations working with the targeted populations, while the other gathered leaders from various Sonoma County departments, including Health, Human Services, Parks and Recreation, Community Development Commission, Permit and Resource Management, and Probation.

### III. FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The key finding from our research is that community engagement efforts are most successful when they are built on a foundation of community knowledge and partnership within an organizational culture that fosters and values effective engagement. These foundations include having deep knowledge about the community and its resources, strong partnerships, and a culture of community engagement.

In addition, any group or organization seeking to effectively engage with sectors of the community should be mindful of its community engagement goals; these goals will influence how engagement activities are designed. Table 1 provides a simplified overview of community engagement goals.

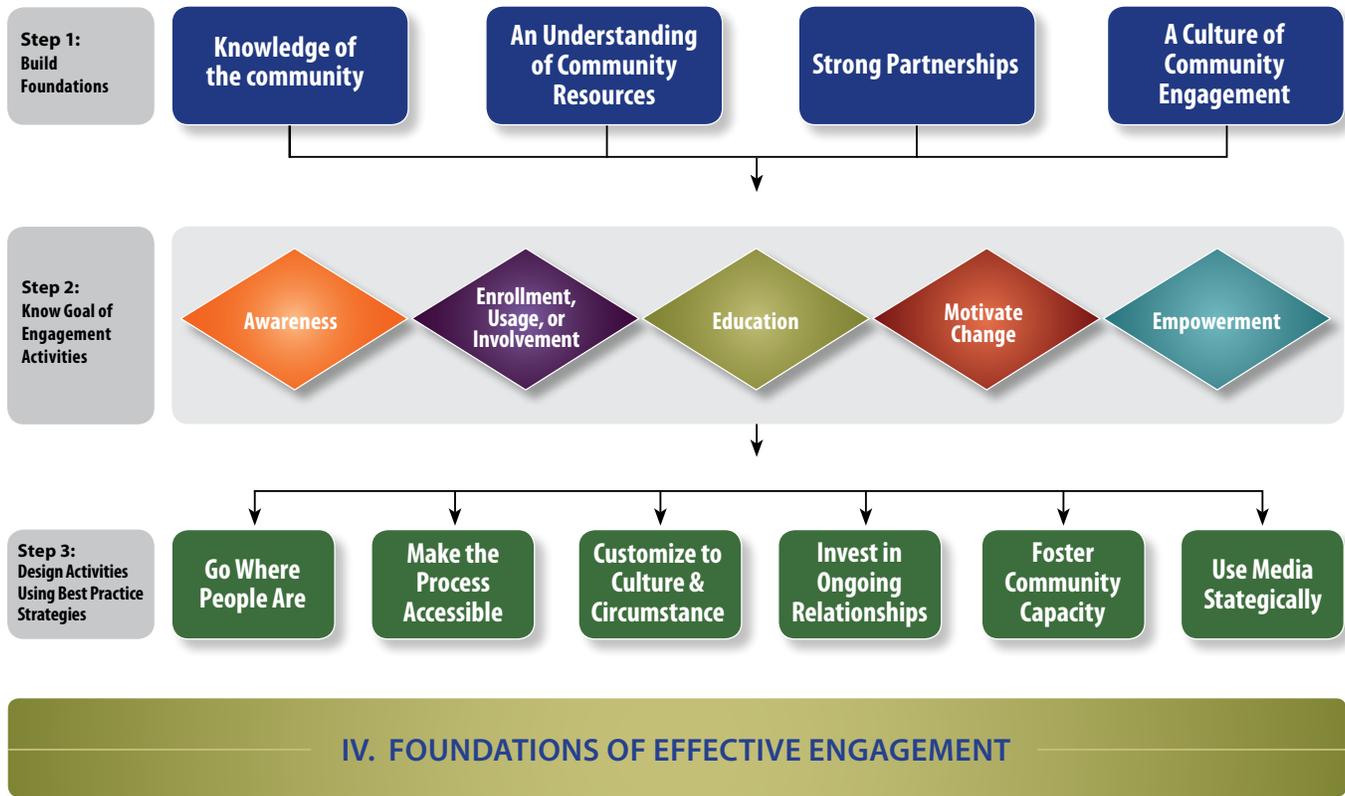
**Table 1: Spectrum of Community Engagement Goals**

	Awareness	Enrollment/ Usage	Education/ Involvement	Motivate Change	Empowerment
<b>Possible Goals for Engagement</b>	Draw attention to services, education or other opportunities	Enroll residents in programs or increase use of County services	Teach residents about important issues and/or involve them in decision-making	Inspire changes to behavior	Enhance the community’s ability to identify and mobilize around self-selected issues

With the foundations in place and goals acknowledged, the County can then proceed to develop community engagement strategies and activities for use in specific campaigns.

In Figure 2, we summarize these three steps to effective community engagement. In the following sections, we delve more deeply into the elements presented here.

**Figure 2: A Structure for Effective Community Engagement**



The ways in which a local government can implement community engagement strategies are numerous, but doing them effectively depends on the organization having the institutional commitment to and capacity for tailoring the strategies to the needs and capabilities of the local communities of interest. There are four crucial foundations for engagement: (1) Knowledge of the community, (2) An understanding of community resources, (3) Strong partnerships, and (4) A culture of community engagement.

### Knowledge of the Community

“Knowledge of the Community” means learning as much as possible about the targeted community residents, including the following key characteristics:

- *Where* do they live, work and congregate?
- *How* do they communicate?
  - What language(s) are spoken?
  - What are the levels of educational attainment?
  - Through what family or community structures effective communication take place?
- *Who* do they trust?
  - What types of individuals in their neighborhood community?
  - Which community groups or associations?
  - Which government organizations or representatives?
- *What* do they value?

**“Outreach is very unique, and you need to know your community...What might work for my community might not work for other communities.”**

*- Community Outreach Work*

In addition, while Sonoma County has expressed a distinct interest in three specific growing populations, other community groupings can be equally important. For example, it may be beneficial to understand target populations as place-based groupings – e.g., Sonoma Valley or Roseland – rather than age or race-based communities. Whatever the community grouping, it is important to understand the mix of backgrounds and community identifications that exist within a target community. While much information is available via secondary sources, this level of understanding almost always requires direct contact with representatives of that population.

## An Understanding of Community Resources

A part of knowing the communities of interest is to know the community organizations and leaders that serve and interact with the members of those communities. Effective engagement involves mapping which organizations are already engaged with, have established a degree of trust with, and are establishing coalitions within those communities.<sup>16</sup> It is also important to know where leadership, community groups, and initiatives are lacking and what gaps remain.

The following types of groups in the community should be considered in the stakeholder analysis:

- Not-for-profit community organizations
- Health care providers
- Local, state, and federal government agencies (emphasis on local)
- Schools and other educational institutions
- Advocates and aid organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- Housing providers
- Local businesses and business networks

Knowing the community groups, the services that they provide, and the existing partnerships between these groups can help county governments in numerous ways. Utilizing trusted channels for communication with residents in the community helps county agencies direct residents to valuable community services and also helps ensure services are being used efficiently and effectively. In addition, as one of the respondents from the state-wide survey of county governments noted, there is no need to “reinvent the wheel; if it’s already out there, use it.”<sup>17</sup> Identifying allies also increases community-building opportunities and situations where community members can contribute to shared goals. Part of the stakeholder analysis should include a review of whether there is adequate breadth in the community partners. Sometimes there is an over-reliance on the same few leaders who may have difficulty representing the changing community landscape.

**“There should be a health fair for county staff, as well as residents, so they learn about organizations providing health information and services to specific groups. That would help them develop relationships for collaboration and referrals.”**

**- Local agency manager**

<sup>16</sup> Communities can be defined along a number of different lines. See National Institute of Health, *Principles of Community Engagement Second Edition*, 2011 for additional details.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Imperial County Public Health Department representative.

## Strong Partnerships

Another essential foundation for community engagement is to be known and accepted as a partner in collaboration. This requires a commitment to building and maintaining relationships, even

**“We are very siloed and don’t often create the space to have a meaningful dialogue about how to move forward in this post recession environment and serve all the people.”**

**- CBO Executive Director**

when a county department itself may not be spearheading a particular engagement effort. Being an authentic partner – one that commits to listening and encourages feedback – enhances the capability of county government to effectively reach and serve residents.

Creating mutually beneficial relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs) can aid any local agency, regardless of its community engagement goals. At the most basic level, community groups can refer residents with whom they interact back to county government agencies or

departments for available services. With training and resources, community partners can help in the enrollment or education process for county services or community empowerment goals. More broadly, these partnerships can help county agencies and community define the most effective roles for each player in a collaboration, reducing duplication and amplifying collective impact.

Partnership-building efforts can also be useful within county government; engaging with other departments outside of programmatic and functional silos allows the entire county system to maximize its knowledge, resources, and capabilities.

## A Culture of Community Engagement

Although a county department may dedicate specific staff members to do community engagement, highly effective community engagement efforts are more likely to result when these activities become ingrained in the organization’s culture.

If just the departments and staff-members that have a mission to go out into or interact with the community are committed to engagement, the efforts of these select few will be markedly less fruitful than if the entire operation comes to view community engagement as its mission. Residents and communities come in contact with Sonoma County at more than just outreach events or through specific engagement activities. When residents request information over the phone, when they make an appointment for services, or when they enroll in programs, the way in which they experience this interaction will reflect their perception of that organization’s commitment to community engagement.

**“Counties are viewed more as enforcers and a mystery than as a resource or service. Counties promote themselves as a data resource or a facilitator but then don’t do it well. And any tiny thing that goes badly gives you a much higher mountain to climb.”**

**- Sonoma County Worker**

Equally important, a culture of community engagement helps county departments work across boundaries to improve community outcomes. This is important because the needs of its

residents are interconnected and span department boundaries. By increasing community vitality through its entire spectrum of initiatives and activities, a local agency eventually needs to focus less of its resources on helping residents who come into the system in crisis (e.g., through violent crime, homelessness, medical emergency, or poverty).

A county government can move beyond simply launching a culture of community engagement to intentionally sustaining such a culture, if it chooses to incorporate engagement into each department's planning, goal setting and performance measurements. Since engagement practices usually improve with repeated application and refinement, adopting an attitude of a "learning community" can encourage creative exploration of innovative approaches.

## V. STRATEGIES TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN THE FOUNDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Through our interviews with county government staff and community leaders across the state, we probed for the processes and mechanisms that had been used to create the institutional capacity to effectively engage with and reach out to local communities of interest. Our research identified five strategies to build this capacity. All five strategies can help county departments know the community, understand community resources, build partnerships, and commit to a culture of engagement (the foundations of effective community engagement). Each strategy is worthy of pursuit. However, the way in which Sonoma County decides to implement the strategies will be based on the County's goals. Below, we provide examples of how other local governments implemented each strategy, to give a sense of how this can differ across organizations with diverse goals and communities.

### Institutionalize Community Feedback

Creating avenues for communities of interest to speak honestly to county government can help increase understanding of how best to engage with residents. Feedback can consist of appraisals of county government services, input on outreach materials and strategies, and/or cooperative identification of community resources, goals, and actions. The mechanisms to institute this strategy can differ depending on the capacity of the relevant county department(s) and the communities, and the goals of each.

To obtain a snapshot of the entire community's opinions, surveys and focus groups are useful. Surveys can be done in person, by phone, by mail, or on-line; and can be a one-time information gathering effort or a part of an ongoing plan to collect information about community attitudes, needs, and preferences. To reach Sonoma County's specific communities of interest (i.e., seniors, Latinos, and residents with low income) a strategy of going into the community and knocking on doors or going to community gathering spots such as churches may be more effective, both from a cost and quality standpoint. In some cases, members of the community being surveyed are trained to survey their peers. Focus groups can provide more nuanced feedback than surveys, especially on complex issues, but may require more time to undertake and analyze. And, determining the extent to which results are reflective of broader community attitudes requires skill and experience.

**"[There is a need for more] open, respectful, and transparent dialogue with people...there could be more trust in the county if people knew more how the decisions were made about how to cut services. It isn't clear to people how much county officials and staff think and care about delivering services to underserved populations."**

**- Local agency director**

Another way to obtain feedback is community forums, which provide a way for community members to come together and voice concerns or suggestions. Small forums can provide a more intimate setting for soliciting feedback; larger forums can solicit a wider range of views, although in some settings these can limit the number of voices actually heard since some community members may find it intimidating to speak in front of large audiences. One preferred method is to design well-attended community forums with small group break-outs (with translation support as needed).

In order to obtain ongoing (versus point-in-time) feedback from a wide-range of residents, one approach is to hire staff to interact with the community. For example, Shasta County's Public Health Department created a Community Outreach division that hired people from the community to be advocates and organizers. Marin County has a community liaison position

filled by a bicultural/bilingual professional who goes out into the community and solicits feedback.

Another approach is to establish mechanisms that provide two-way communication via periodic meetings with designated community members or groups. For example, San Bernardino County's Public Health Department brings consumers directly onto outreach planning teams, while Marin County utilizes the Health and Wellness Center's Community Advisory Board. This is similar to the task groups used by the Sonoma County Community Development Commission.

**"It's a bit presumptuous for us to say 'This is what you need' without getting their input first."**

**- Sonoma County  
Department Director**

Table 2, below, presents a range of feedback mechanisms identified in our research that produced valuable insights into community attitudes. When selecting an approach, an important factor to consider is the readiness and interest level of the community members being invited to participate. Some mechanisms allow



### **Best Practice Spotlight: Institutionalize Community Feedback**

Napa County assisted in the formation of a coalition of CBOs in order to help move from competition to collaboration, and in the process created a permanent feedback mechanism. Initially, the county was the financial supporter of the coalition; now it is an independent non-profit called the Napa Valley Coalition of Non-Profits. The county is just one of many members paying a membership fee. The deputy directors of several county departments attend discipline-based sub-committee meetings with other CBO members within the coalition. These meetings offer recurring opportunities for feedback. In addition, the coalition has acted as the lead voice in presenting feedback and concerns directly to the county on behalf of its members.

community members to easily “give voice” to perspectives without much prior preparation. For example, the Sonoma County sheriff has hosted informal listening sessions without a structured agenda. Other formats require community members who have a desire to learn official procedures (e.g., in structured planning processes or mandated councils). Whatever the format, the community members will be better able to provide feedback if the setting and language used are selected with the specific characteristics of the community of interest in mind.

**Table 2: Strengths and Considerations of Feedback Mechanisms**

Feedback Mechanism	Strengths	Considerations
Using intercept surveys from church goers after services	Targeted to a specific population	Limited in content
Having a listening session with Latino leaders to hear their concerns and priorities	Allows participants to determine content and creates a bond	Assumes that concerns and priorities are funneled up to leaders
Convening 100 focus groups done countywide to elicit the “real scoop” from the community	Goes directly to the population for feedback	Results are a snapshot in time
Bringing consumers in on the planning team	Strengthens skills of consumer	Limits feedback to planning content
Using an advisory board of community members	Strengthens skills of community members	County can limit the context of the feedback
Consulting with relevant CBOS before undertaking new projects	Permanent mechanism that creates partnership	Assumes that concerns and priorities are represented by CBOs
Placing a bilingual, bicultural staff member in the community liaison position	Brings back feedback on a range of issues and creates a countywide presence in the community	Relies on government funding and strength of relationships rests on one person
Creating a Community Development section with community-filled advocate and organizer positions	Brings back feedback on a range of issues and creates a countywide presence in the community; builds skills of community members	Funding sources may limit the ability to keep these positions non-programmatic
Creating a non-profit of non-profits	Permanent mechanism that creates partnership	Assumes that concerns and priorities are represented by CBOs

An essential facet of institutionalizing community feedback is to have a process in place for the organization to process the input, make a decision and report back to the participants. Whether the input can be implemented or not, honest and transparent communications will help to sustain trust in the process.

**Formalize Intra-County Collaboration**

Although departments and programs within departments can and do fashion their own customized community engagement strategies, establishing mechanisms to collaborate can be

beneficial in getting to know communities of interest, building partnerships to reach them effectively, and creating a culture where community engagement is viewed as the purview of the entire organization.

Our research identified a few basic approaches to break down departmental silos and encourage cooperation on community engagement issues. One way is for county departments to work together on specific issues, such as childhood obesity or mental health. Another is for departments to work together based on target populations. For example, Orange County departments involved in children and family issues meet monthly in the Orange County Children's Partnerships; Mendocino Health and Human Services meet across departments on Latino issues. Another way is to work together at the activity level. For example, Shasta County Health and Human Services works across programs in their Program Access meetings which bring together departments to work on tackling enrollment-related issues; Marin County coordinates prevention activities.

A promising approach is to create a structure – a Community Engagement Coalition (or even a department) – that focuses on engagement across populations and issues. This kind of formalized structure can facilitate continuous communication, centralize outreach expertise, and support the design of mutually reinforcing activities. This allows for systemizing the work that has been done by various departments in getting to know community resources; for example, by developing a database of community partners and county initiatives. Such a database can help county staff (and community members) quickly and easily learn about what groups or resources can be utilized within their local communities. It also allows for coordinated evaluation of community engagement activities. Assessment is often done at the program or initiative level, especially if grant funding is tied to the work, but offers additional benefits if done at a higher level. This way, assessment operates at the activity-level through pre- and post-tests; at the initiative level through

**“The challenge is to be more coordinated and more holistic. And to do that, we need to be strategic, our programs need to look more integrated, and we need to have clear goals for county and community.**

**And all of these must be outcome driven. We have to know where we want to go and how to operationalize it before we do the outreach. There is outreach fatigue for outreach workers competing with other departments for community attention and there is community fatigue as well.”**

**- Sonoma County Worker**



#### **Best Practice Spotlight: Formalize Intra-County Collaboration**

Marin County Health and Human Services created a virtual office in order to bring departments together on prevention services and opportunities, including assisting communities and organizations to take action on health issues. This “Prevention Hub” is in charge of all prevention-related initiatives, no matter the issue or department. Utilizing staff members from various departments, this hub is a result of the county's effort to co-ordinate services and work collaboratively across departments. In essence, it brings all the issue-based engagement into one central location so that efforts can be leveraged to their fullest potential.

process evaluation; and at the outcome-level through community-level benchmarks – including the indicators already being selected by Sonoma County DHS and its partners.

### Create a County Presence in the Community

Developing knowledge of and partnerships with the community requires development of a connection designed to build trust over time. Working to increase Sonoma County’s presence in the community is another key to building the institutional capacity to do effective community engagement. At the most basic level, increasing staff time outside of central offices helps a county government avoid being seen as distant and out of touch, and enhances direct community contact. At a more strategic engagement level, focusing activities in certain neighborhoods is in line with the field of public health’s increasing exploration of “place-based” initiatives that recognize the importance of using the location rather than any one organization as the focal point.

The degree to which county governments formalize this presence differs. For example, some make it easier for residents to come to their doorstep by opening up government offices in isolated areas; others co-locate staff at CBOs or other services providers in the communities. Calaveras Human Services has six full-service outstations in its county, which serve as hubs of their engagement activities. Shasta County, meanwhile, has three regional offices and a downtown office near the bus terminus. These offices have been transformed from providing only public health services to offering all health and human services as well as referrals to community resources. Other county governments co-locate services with other community providers. For example, Riverside County Public Health co-locates all its services at its ten health centers. Some do both; Napa County Health and Human Services has one branch office, but also co-locates at Family Resource Centers, the main hospital, Federally Qualified Health Clinics (FQHCs), and the veterans service office.

There are several examples of Health and Human Services staff placed at clinics throughout Sonoma County. A partnership with the Sonoma County Indian Health Project is an example of providing a wide array range of services at a location trusted by its community. Resource constraints in Sonoma County led to the closure of a one-stop shop “store front” in Roseland – but departments like the sheriff are opportunistically finding venues for co-location.

In addition to locating services in the communities, being present at community-initiated events, forums, and coalitions is important in connecting with residents. Accepting invitations and engaging on the community’s terms lets residents and leaders know that the County is not just interested in its own agenda, but wants to act as a resource for community priorities. For example, Sonoma County staff report routinely participating in major community events such as the Cinco de Mayo festival and serving on panels on topics such seniors, homelessness and community health.

### Build and Sustain Strategic Community Partnerships

Having the institutional capacity to build and sustain strategic partnerships is one of the fundamental cornerstones of effective community engagement. The mechanisms with which to build these relationships can differ depending on goals and preferred methods of engagement. We identified three basic partnership platforms: providing knowledge, providing skills, and providing funding, which county governments combined in different ways. For example, the implementation of the Mental Health Services Act used all three of these modes of partnership.

At the most basic partnership level, some county governments provide information to other community groups about the services offers in order to increase referrals and enrollment. However, local governments can also provide knowledge at a more complex level, for example, bringing their own community, program, planning information and expertise to coalition meetings hosted by others. Similarly, sharing skills and staff resources such as data analysis and uniform indicators is another way to build partnerships. For example, the County can play multiple skill-based roles, including offering technical assistance, meeting facilitation, training, evaluation, and convening. Finally, county governments can utilize funding in order to build partnerships. This can involve subcontracting or county-funded grants, as well assistance with securing and dispersing non-county grant money. And many County departments offer technical assistance to community organizations that enhance their ability to respond to county RFPs and other funding opportunities.

*"I used to work in the East Bay and I was impressed by the way these organizations would come together, share resources, support one another... they have conversations about who will pursue grant funding in order to avoid competing with each other... If there were resources to coordinate something countywide and share information and best practices, people would be receptive."*

*- Community Leader*

As a government department contemplates which partnership approach to use, depending on priorities and the relative capacity of external community resources and internal staff, one of the most promising opportunities is to utilize its skill as a convener. Especially in a context of resource constraint, the County's ability to convene multiple partners is highly valuable, creating the space for sustained exploration of how best to collaborate. For example, Health Action is an instance of a highly organized effort to catalyze new resources from the private sector, public sector and community at large for shared health goals. The Upstream Initiative is inviting intellectual capital from its community partners, investing in long-term relationships for evidence-based culture change.



### Best Practice Spotlight: Build and Sustain Strategic Community Partnerships

Napa Health and Human Services was invited into a collaborative effort to turn the local hospitals' biennial community needs assessment into a more useful tool for the county. Now, that collaborative has turned into the Health Matters initiative ([napahealthmatters.org](http://napahealthmatters.org)), a one-stop resource for information on community health goals and progress, promising practices, and services available in the community. Similarly, Riverside Public Health partnered with the Health Assessment Resource Center, providing in-kind data analysis and report review, in order to produce the Community Health Monitor, which presented the results of a systematic survey of households in Eastern Riverside County to determine the health and social well being of its adult, senior, and child residents.

## Commit to Culturally Competent Practices

Our research revealed that many county governments have multiple mechanisms for institutionalizing cultural competency. Hiring bilingual/bicultural outreach workers is a basic

starting point to bring cultural competency into engagement work. A complementary approach is to create a structure for reviewing and revising outreach materials for cultural competency. For example, the San Bernardino Behavioral Health Department relies on a Cultural Competency Office, reported as one-of-a-kind in California, to do translations of materials as well as review informational hand-outs for correct phrasing, appropriate adaptation of language and review of cultural assumptions being made. Many county governments also utilize advisory groups and/or other community-based groups to review materials and activities, although in some cases they have had difficulty coordinating these outside or ad hoc efforts for consistent oversight.

In order to infuse cultural competency more widely through county government departments, a broad swath of staff can be trained in cultural competency. For example, Riverside County is providing cultural competency training for its entire staff based on a training program designed by Alameda County. Inside Sonoma County, the Probation Department has training on Motivational Interviewing which places the community member's individual perspective at the center of the approach. While many agencies turn initially to an outside consultant, it can be helpful to first conduct an internal self-assessment of cultural competencies. There may be skills among internal staff that can be utilized in conjunction with outside resources. A "train the trainers" model can also help spread skills and develop greater commitment to sustaining competency.

Another aspect of developing cultural competency is to incorporate it into organizational planning and evaluation (by conducting periodic assessments of progress). Because the issues in cultural competency are dynamic, an adaptive approach that recognizes shifts in the community will help ensure relevance for staff activities on an ongoing basis.

## VI. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES

Once the County has the institutional capacity and strategic partnerships in place to do community engagement well, it can focus on specific engagement strategies and activities. The following strategies were identified from our research, both in- and outside of Sonoma County. While effective engagement often involves tailoring an approach to a specific population, these overarching strategies were cited as applicable to all three of the populations that are the focus of this report, i.e., seniors, Latinos and residents with low income. Additionally, these strategies can be utilized across a range of engagement goals.

### Go Where People Are

Engagement activities are more effective if they are done where the community members themselves reside. For example, instead of holding town halls at government offices, different Sonoma County departments routinely use community-based venues such as community centers, churches or schools. Not only do community members feel more comfortable in these settings, it also helps address transportation challenges.

The most basic way to engage people where they live is to be physically "there." Mobile and/or co-located staff members can meet residents on their turf, serving as entry points to services and education. Locations selected for meeting residents include other service points, such as food distribution sites, community centers, churches, day labor centers, and government program sites. This approach can be especially effective for residents with low income who have multiple stresses in their lives by recognizing that it is more effective to engage residents when they are

obtaining a needed service. For example, Sonoma County's Behavioral Health Division takes multi-disciplinary teams into homeless shelters.

Other locations include well-populated social and living areas such as grocery stores, senior housing, and apartment complexes. Sonoma County's CalFresh program has had success with outreach and educational demonstration at area Farmer's Markets. Note that in choosing sites it is important to understand community perceptions about what locations feel comfortable for engagement. For example, one community health education program director found that planning an event in the park was not as effective as hoped because it was not considered family-friendly and safe.

Going door-to-door was considered highly effective by both community-based practitioners and county government staff that we interviewed. A key to success is using representatives with an established identity in the neighborhood or with knowledge of that particular neighborhood and community (i.e., versus being done "cold" by an outside organization).

Another way to reach people in locations that they already frequent is to work with people or organizations with whom community members have an existing relationship. Educating other professionals and providers such as doctors, teachers, hospice workers, and job center workers about county government resources, events, or opportunities, can help these individuals direct residents to government resources where they identify potential beneficiaries or contributors. In Sonoma County, WIC has an orientation program for medical residents that are doing their community health rotation that results in increased referrals. In addition, the Sonoma County Department of Aging connects with postal workers and clergy for training in the signs of elder abuse.

**"People feel seen and heard when the services are located in their own communities."**

**- Community Organizer**



#### Best Practice Spotlight: [Go Where People Are](#)

As part of its Healthy Tomorrows program, Orange County Children and Family Services provided parenting programs at several elementary schools. Course content was based on a community survey conducted by 70 former graduates of the program. This "army" would canvas the community and ask community members what they needed and wanted in the class. As a result, the classes were deemed highly effective, inducing hundreds of parents to participate in and graduate from the program.

### Make the Process Accessible

When residents attend a class or attempt to enroll in programs, effective engagement makes the experiences as easy and welcoming as possible by putting into practice what it knows about the population's language needs, transportation obstacles, norms for gathering, and related factors.

One important engagement strategy is to invest in creating user-friendly single points of entry. For example, many county governments invest in system navigators, case managers, or ambassadors that can help residents navigate the system and access the range of resources that may be needed. Some have adopted a "No Wrong Door" philosophy of assistance that steers people to the needed service no matter their starting point. Applications for services can be developed to ensure that

residents apply for all enrollment-based programs for which they are eligible (such as the One-e-App). Accompanying this strategy are Internet and phone systems that are designed with public access as a primary focus. Sonoma County's 2-1-1 phone system and website are an example of a consolidated bi-lingual entry point.

Modifying business hours to allow more people to access government offices and adopting drop-in policies can help make the county governments more accessible to many residents. Nevada County has adopted a videoconferencing system to help people determine service eligibility remotely, saving hours of travel for rural residents. Inside Sonoma County, the Human Services Division has launched phone interviews for eligibility in order to help overcome transportation barriers. Even investing in a simple "customer-first" service approach to residents could alleviate many of the obstacles residents encounter. For example, one Sonoma County practitioner shared an anecdote about a community member who had to take off of work to make the full-day trip to Santa Rosa to enroll in a service only to find that the staff did not have time to help her with the application and simply told her that it was rejected. She tried to correct it and made a second full-day trip, only to find out that she had failed again. While anecdotes such as this may be isolated incidents, they can nevertheless have a powerful effect by creating the impression that the County is not accessible or community-focused.

In addition, several county governments shared how they make their community-based activities less formal and, therefore, more accessible to residents. Providing child care by trusted providers, and culturally appropriate food can bring people through the door and get them to engage in a meaningful way. Some local agencies have also offered entertainment for the whole family, prizes and "give-away's." In addition, providing a needed service such as immunizations, health screenings, or employment resources will make this kind of engagement more relevant to residents – and more effective than showing up just to "tell" about a single service.

### Customize to Culture and Circumstance

While individuals are often the focus of specific government programs, these individuals make choices about where to go and what to do based on cultural values and practices, the circumstances of their whole household and/or in consultation with other family members. And rarely are individuals the only person within a household that can benefit from government services or engagement efforts. Taking the entire context within which an individual lives into account when developing engagement activities helps enhance the connection between residents and county governments or other service providers.

In order to communicate with parents, for example, many organizations work through schools and let the children serve as messengers. Similarly for some seniors, direct contact can be complemented with communications to adult children. In addition, our interviewees indicated that messages that ask an adult to consider the impact of their behavior on their children were effective for both parents of youngsters and grown adults. For example, engaging adults first via topics that relate to their child's health, education, or general welfare can often lead to the adult's receptivity to messages and invitations to improve their own health practices. In addition, some seniors may be motivated to try services by thinking about becoming less of a burden on their children.



## Best Practice Spotlight: Customize to Culture and Circumstance

The Network for a Healthy California supports a program that uses real moms as promoters of healthy eating for the whole family. In Imperial County, their volunteer is a Latina, Spanish-speaking mom that made changes to her family's traditional foods and activities because of a chronic medical condition. These "Champion Moms" relay their own experiences and success in creating a healthier future for them and their children including recipes, produce tips, and workout ideas.

Once a community member is engaging with the County, it is still helpful for educational programs or capacity-building efforts to consider family circumstances and culture. For example, classes on cooking healthy food should include recipes that both children and parents would like. Some programs intentionally use intergenerational designs to create ongoing relationships that pair youthful energy with elders' wisdom. On more complicated issues, it is necessary to understand how behaviors are affected by expectations of and challenges facing other family members: who and what values have the greatest influence in the family and who will be the most enthusiastic champion of a particular behavior change.

## Invest in Ongoing Relationships

When conducting community engagement for longer-term goals of changing health behaviors and building community capacity, many of our interviewees indicated that the most successful efforts invested in creating sustained relationships to achieve results.

One popular approach is to focus on utilizing one-on-one relationships that community members have created already. For example, the County can utilize staff members such as community liaisons or public health nurses that are often seen in the community through co-location or repeated involvement. Another way to utilize relationships to engage residents is by training or subcontracting partners in the community such as former program consumers, volunteers, other professionals, or CBO-based staff. This has the added benefit of helping to provide partners with financial or skill-building resources. It should be noted, however, that always or primarily relying on non-County resources can make the County less of a known and trusted presence in the communities. While this may not matter to residents on a day-to-day basis; it may matter to the County to the extent that its efforts do not translate into community-based support. Therefore, a combination of approaches may provide the most effective strategy in the long-run.

**"[Our clients] don't know and don't care if these services are from the county or not."**

**- Manager at health provider**

An important subset of this type of work is utilizing peers, such as community health workers or ambassadors. A benefit of using peers is that county government invests in the skill-building of the ambassadors as well as those with whom they connect, often at a low cost. Community Health Workers are health aides that have been selected and trained to work in the communities from which they come. These workers provide culturally appropriate health education, information, and engagement in community-based settings; provide direct services; and help residents access the



## Best Practice Spotlight: Invest in Ongoing Relationships

A parent education program called AVANCE was reported to be successfully educating isolated low-income Latino parents in Sonoma County because of its ability to work collaboratively with parents over a long period of time. The AVANCE model consists of weekly three hour classes that include early childhood education for the children of the adult participants, home visits, transportation to and from program services, advocacy and support, meals during class time, and special events and holiday celebrations. In addition, graduates of the program are encouraged to continue participating in a second phase focused on adult education and college.

services they need. A good example from the Latino community is the Promotoras de Salud Lay Health Worker Training Program; it trains women in the community to teach prevention classes to their peers.

Finally, creating engagement strategies that utilize peer support through group activities, regularly scheduled peer contact, and safe meeting spaces can help the County with goals that involve behavior change. Peer-based support groups can reduce isolation, increase motivation, and sustain individual and community progress. Examples of this peer support were cited for smoking cessation, graduates of diabetes prevention classes, family nutrition classes, transitioning families out of shelters, and more. One caution is that government departments who contract for this kind of support need to have realistic expectations for how many hours are needed to create effective relationships with community members. As one community-based practitioner shared, “You can’t get anything worthwhile done with five hours per week.”

## Foster Community Capacity

Few county governments engage methodically in community capacity-building initiatives. Organizations that do, however, rely on an asset-based philosophy that sets “high expectations” for community members and sees them as having gifts and talents to contribute even while they are experiencing other types of challenges in their lives. In return, these empowering organizations help diverse residents develop their leadership skills and create both community improvement and the capacity for stronger partnerships in the future.

A key component of capacity building is fostering both individual and community leadership to help define and address community issues by providing training as well as opportunities to put the training immediately into action. For example, the San Francisco Department of Public Health funds CBOs to provide community action training to residents to tackle numerous health issues, such as obesity or substance abuse. San Diego County has created a Resident Leadership Academy that teaches residents in four regions how to assess their neighborhoods, determine and prioritize needs, and implement a Community Improvement Project to support physical activity and healthy eating. Similarly, Marin County Health and Human Services made grants to three

**“It was a very minor expense, but having city staff spend a day running pipes [to help the community get its community garden going] created a partnership so that the residents are now willing to stand up and support their city leaders.”**

**- CBO Manager**



## Best Practice Spotlight: Foster Community Capacity

Marin County Health and Human Services, in its mission to gain trust and build community capacity, has become a skill-based partner for Binational Health Week, instead of its organizer. In the first year of the event, the county went to the communities and arranged events. In the second year, they gave the communities the option to hold the event as they saw fit. The county would provide technical assistance, such as tents, supplies, vaccines, or nurses and \$1000. It instilled within the community the idea that the county wasn't only interested in calling the shots, that it was interested in being a partner.

community-based coalitions to effect broad change in their communities, specifically on the issue of alcohol and tobacco abuse. As part of the grant, Marin County helps recipients with best practices and assessment.

Leadership opportunities can also be more comprehensive; for example, Alameda County's City-County Neighborhood Initiative (CCNI) helped two neighborhoods create Resident Action Councils to serve as the hub for community action. Monthly meetings provide the Councils an opportunity to meet resource providers from city, county, and other community groups, to get training, to plan community-wide events, and to problem solve on crime and other neighborhood issues. In Sonoma County, the Healthy Eating Active Living Community Health Initiative has empowered local parents to pursue the priorities they choose, such as changes in their children's school lunches. Nuestra Voz is training Latino residents in leadership skills and encouraging them to get involved in city and county government meetings.

## Use Media and Marketing Strategically

Community and ethnic newspapers, local radio stations, and television stations that are regularly used by communities of interest were cited as the most effective ways to reach the targeted communities through mass media outlets. Especially useful is ongoing programming or columns that utilize community voices and leaders to provide useful and accessible information, such as a popular daily radio show in Sonoma Valley. In addition, many ethnic media outlets are also willing partners in collaborative events, fairs and forums, and may help promote the event and provide popular hosts.

Most local governments also use common "new media" tools such as websites. Many health departments, including Sonoma's, have set up health specific websites that parallel the official government pages. Some of these separate sites, such as Nevada County's Dial211.com are oriented to helping community members find services more easily while others, such as Alameda County's healthylivingforlife.org, are promoting healthy lifestyles. Both Los Angeles and Santa Clara Counties have designed websites that try to place these functions within their sites. In many cases, the CBO's we interviewed reported that the greatest website usage was from other organizations and partners rather than clients, but some indicated they had good traffic from better-educated and younger community members.

**"[It is] important to educate newspapers and other media sources about the program and services offered....They are a crucial partner in connecting with a larger audience."**

**- County outreach worker**

Some of the county governments and organizations we researched were also using, or at least exploring, social media tools such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Practitioners shared that figuring out how to use new media in other ways is still not obvious because many in their audience are not yet using these newer forms of media. In Sonoma County, social media and mobile apps are being piloted for teens. They in turn may share relevant information with their families. The Parks department has started conversations on Facebook. The Department of Aging reports good use of their web resources by younger seniors. These tools have the potential to provide a more community friendly face to a broader cross section of the public than an official County website. They can also invite people to view the community goals, services and dashboards housed at the County's website(s).

Mobile applications are an area of increasing focus due to the proliferation of smart phones, especially among low-income and Latino populations. For these audiences, the mobile app may be the sole point of digital contact rather than expecting someone to later use a computer to visit a website. In addition to formatting information to be accessible "on the go," there is an opportunity to invite two-way communication and feedback about services. Several organizations discussed texting as a promising way to reach Latinos and, increasingly, seniors.



#### Best Practice Spotlight: Use Media and Marketing Strategically

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has declared May as CalFresh Awareness Month. The associated media campaign was effective in reaching the Latino community due to the involvement of well-known and influential individuals. A civil rights activist and a professional athlete created public service announcements and the county collaborated with the Spanish-language media to conduct outreach.

## VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNTY

To gain a better understanding of Sonoma County's ability to implement the foundations and strategies for effective engagement, we conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews with County managers from a sample of departments. With a wide range of community engagement goals and experience, these departments provided insights into how the County could build on its own strengths and overcome current obstacles in order to create a countywide foundation for effective engagement.

The departments' purposes in engaging these groups represented a wide range of goals, such as increasing awareness about the availability of services, education about regulations, consultation in public planning, and enlisting partners in identifying and working toward mutually developed outcomes. All were keenly aware of the changing demographics and reported making changes in both staffing and operations to the extent possible in an environment of limited resources. Departments serving seniors and residents with low income are experiencing increased caseloads and wait times. All departments serve Latinos and are sensitive to the need for cultural competency in attempting to meet the needs of these residents. The subject of enhancing effective community engagement was deeply relevant to all interviewed.

## Progress in Developing Foundations to Engage Changing Populations

County representatives were asked how they perceived their department's progress in building the four foundations outlined for community engagement. Many departments feel well positioned; this has been a priority for some time. Others feel like they are on their way. The following are very brief highlights from the interviews:

- **Knowledge of the Community** – There appears to be a good understanding of demographics via secondary data. Many departments rely on community-based groups for cultural context; some have mechanisms for direct community contact on an ongoing basis. Others cited mixed progress in developing knowledge of cultural issues.
- **An Understanding of Community Resources** – There was widespread acknowledgement of the need to ally with community-based partners. In many cases though, the selection of partners and locations was more ad hoc than strategic (e.g., relying on familiar names and organizations instead of conducting a more detailed stakeholder analysis).
- **Strong Partnerships** – Department representatives report that partnerships have been easier to develop where existing networks in the community were in place; if not, it can take unusual commitment to identify appropriate partners and create solid alliances. The Mental Health Services Act process was an example of the benefits of an extended process that developed creative and successful collaborations between new partner groups.
- **Culture of Community Engagement** – The level of commitment appeared very much tied to the leadership of a given department. If they saw that community engagement was a way to make their work more effective or more efficient (and most of those we interviewed did), then engagement was increasingly integrated into department operations. In some cases, the motivation was more defensive, e.g., to “protect against complaints.” Those departments were more tentative in their efforts.

## Challenges for County Departments

Just as it is important to develop an understanding of the “culture and context” for reaching a community of interest, it is important to understand the psyche of County staff and context of the County departments themselves. While there are many glowing examples of success stories, it is also important to note that some departments are somewhat discouraged about their community engagement efforts. Some indicated that they lack both resources and expertise; some know that they are not doing enough, but past efforts have fallen short so they have limited motivation to try again. Some feel “judged” by the community organizations they partner with. The perceived downside of “failing again” or potentially offending someone appeared to be a deterrent to more creative experimentation.

The following challenges were cited across most or all of the departments interviewed:

- Not enough staff capacity; they understood the benefits of putting staff out in community but felt severely constrained about the ability to do that without falling short on the “core workload.”
- Some departments reported difficulty in being able to diversify their workforce to be more representative of the populations being served. Almost all had increased the hiring of bilingual/bicultural staff within the limited (usually insufficient) hiring they are able to do, but some suggested that official credential requirements are not flexible enough to support diversity goals.

- There is a perceived environment of general distrust of the County among some sectors of the community. For example, there are misperceptions and confusion about whether County services create legal or safety issues for immigrants. If County staff wear a uniform or drive a county car, that can increase fear.
- The physical size of Sonoma County and its geography make it hard to be accessible to all communities. County departments felt that they do not have adequate reach outside Santa Rosa.
- There was a tension between wanting to increase working with community-based organizations as conduits for communication and/or service (especially as they were seen as offering more cost-effective staffing) and not wanting to “hand over accountability.”
- Many reported sensitivities or stigma associated with some kinds of County government services such as mental health, economic assistance or support for previously independent seniors. Age and culture issues can complicate this.
- Most reported lack of staff with media expertise beyond placing announcements in newspapers and occasional radio interviews. They want to go further but do not have staff to investigate other options. Similarly, most felt they do not have adequate resources or preparation to implement the County’s new social media policy.

Interviews with a wide range of community-based leaders in Sonoma County provided another perspective on the obstacles and challenges facing the County’s departments in their engagement efforts. Some are deeply involved with County contracts and/or long-term collaborative planning processes. Others are in more limited affiliation. They affirmed the key challenges of limited staff resources, e.g. to help complete applications, and distrust of County operations also known by staff. They shared these other observations:

- Many acknowledge the good intentions of most county government managers and the progress being made in more inclusive and accessible communications. But some also report inconsistent practice of engagement within and across departments. In some cases, for example, translation for Spanish-speaking audiences “seems like an afterthought.” Community-based organizations that work with multiple departments, hope to get every operation to a similar “baseline.”
- Sonoma County government has many “front doors” for community members and multiple websites. For community partners in contract with the County, this undergirds their “case management” role and is not a problem. For others, it increases confusion about how to help connect community members with County-based issues and/or services.
- Many cited the need for consistent contact points as well as more consistent follow-through. “One-off” events or calls for community input without follow-up were seen as showing a lack of commitment to building ongoing relationships. Organizations involved in multiple collaboratives convened by different County departments asked for greater coordination by a dedicated staff person to minimize duplication of effort.
- Transportation challenges and the fact that Sonoma County lacks an effective transit infrastructure was a common theme. It was hoped that current “workarounds” such as volunteer drivers were not seen as a cue to stop trying to find better long-term transportation solutions and more local access points.

## Findings and Recommendations

The following recommendations integrate the findings from in-County interviews with the framework developed from our research. Given that some departments are already using community engagement strategies highlighted in this report, these recommendations focus on activities that can be undertaken at the County-level in order to help departments build needed capacity. The key opportunity is for Sonoma County government's leadership to adopt a system-wide approach to effective community engagement.

### **A Elevate community engagement as a countywide priority**

**Findings:** Our research revealed a number of obstacles to engagement success, including a lack resources, expertise, and motivation after past efforts that might have fallen short and a lack of trusted partners in the community. Despite these obstacles, many departments have a deep interest in improving and expanding engagement.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Create an environment where all County departments, regardless of previous experience, are encouraged to continue developing of their engagement competence and to make engagement an integral part of departmental planning and operations. This will require iterative learning and a real commitment to creative experimentation. Integrating engagement efforts at all levels and creating a “learning community” which seeks to enhance the effectiveness of engagement efforts can help to improve the performance of programs throughout the County.
- Establish and fund a staff position, in addition to the County's Community and Government Affairs Manager, to act as a countywide resource on community engagement efforts and to help with the implementation of these recommendations.
- Use the engagement framework in this report as a foundation to create a consistent format for planning as well as evaluation because feedback indicated it was relevant across a wide range of departments and engagement goals.

### **B Foster intra-county collaboration**

**Findings:** Despite bright spots of collaboration, managers report that County government is still siloed in much of its operations. All interviewees plus the team of County-based advisors to this project indicated significant interest in a cross-county engagement committee and resources.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Create an ongoing forum for County departments to meet and discuss community engagement issues. This effort can use the existing committee formed for this project as a starting point. While the committee itself would need to define its scope and activities, the following are examples of collaborations that could result from such interactions:
  - A forum to share promising practices and serve as a resource for each other's questions about what does and does not work.
  - Joint media training/media contact lists.
  - Training for rollout of new social media policy.
  - Technology-based solutions for community engagement, such as mobile applications.
  - A dynamic shared database of community organizations and events by audience, geography, and issue area.

- Host and maintain an intra-County website where information about community engagement can be shared/posted.
- Coordinate a Countywide survey of community engagement activities, opportunities, and challenges.
- Hold an intra-County community engagement conference where departments and programs can share their successes and discuss their progress on the implementation of these recommendations.

### **C Create and enhance community feedback mechanisms**

**Findings:** While departments had a good understanding of demographics via secondary data, the ability of departments to learn directly from the community varied greatly. Some departments have robust processes for direct interaction with community members that have provided deeper insights into motivations and barriers, while others reported little or no standardized community input mechanisms. Some feedback mechanisms were too formal and bureaucratic which limited participation to a narrow range of community members.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Develop regular mechanisms for soliciting and analyzing community feedback. Surveys coordinated across multiple departments are one important element of this data collection, and allow for more frequent surveying of target populations at lower cost.
- Encourage departments to develop informal as well as formal mechanisms for direct contact with community members.

### **D Develop a more user-friendly county presence in the community**

**Findings:** In its effort to be accessible to the community, the County has created numerous “front doors,” both physically and virtually. However, these efforts can be built upon and refined. In some communities, a general distrust of the County impedes community member access. In others, transportation challenges limit access for residents outside of Santa Rosa. In general, navigating to the correct “front door” can be daunting.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Explore creative ways to collaborate on building a more unified and trusted Sonoma County government presence in the community while creating efficiencies in County operations. For example:
  - Develop a cadre of community ambassadors that a) explain County services, regulations, and planning issues across departments; and b) serve as an ongoing informal feedback loop.
  - Look for locations and partners to create multi-department “store fronts” in high opportunity neighborhoods in the community such as Roseland, Sonoma Valley and West County in order to enhance proximity and accessibility.
  - Work with local media to create weekly radio shows, weekly columns, and other “standing” media slots to accept speakers and/or content from rotating departments so that the County is seen as a friendly resource for useful information.

## **E** Make it easier for departments to develop cultural competency

**Findings:** Departments reported addressing cultural competency primarily via recruiting staff from communities of interest rather than training current staff in cultural competency. But some departments indicated that the pace of hiring, in the context of budgetary limitation, was not adequate to achieve the desired internal competency. Other departments do not feel they can justify investing in staff competency when engagement is an episodic event. While hiring of culturally competent staff is one of the best ways to enhance community engagement efforts, sharing staff resources and offering training to existing staff can achieve the same goals.

### **Recommendations:**

- Provide a resource accessible across all County departments for translation support and outreach guidance, especially for those departments unable to maintain that skill set on a constant basis. All departments could benefit from consistent translation protocols for key phrases and concepts across programs.
- Provide staff training or orientations about issues in engaging target populations. This training could be shared across departments, and would be complemented by periodic department-specific manager/staff discussions.

## **F** Build and sustain strategic community partnerships

**Findings:** There was widespread acknowledgement of the need to ally with community-based partners and several departments do this routinely. There appeared to be some distinction between the situations where departments contract with community organizations to help deliver services and when CBOs are approached to be volunteer allies. At times, the selection of CBO partners was reported to be more casual than strategic and there was uneven awareness about the types and capacities of CBO partners. If a new issue came up without a known existing network, significant extra effort (or, in some cases, no effort) took place to create the community-based partnership.

### **Recommendations:**

- Help individual departments and programs build effective community partnerships by sharing resources to create partnerships where they do not exist and to strengthen them where they do. In addition to the dynamic database of CBOs mentioned in the report, Sonoma County government can:
  - Host an expanded reconvening of community-based organizations that builds upon the two convenings already held by DHS with help from Human Services.
  - Share learnings between departments from the County's partnership-based projects, including large ones such as Health Action, Upstream and MHSA – plus smaller ones such as the Sierra Youth Center.
  - Undertake a "place-based" community mapping process in selected geographies. Such efforts engage residents directly in the mapping of community resources in order to generate a shared understanding of what already exists and where gaps and opportunities for stimulating new community networks and connections remain.

## Final Thoughts

Sonoma County government can strengthen its foundations for effective community engagement with seniors, Latinos, and residents with low-income in numerous ways. In this report, we provide general strategies for building this capacity as well as several specific recommendations that the County can undertake today. Going forward, as the County learns more about its abilities and obstacles, the ways in which the County can utilize these findings will change and expand. As long as Sonoma County government is deepening its understanding of its diverse communities and their resources, engaging as sincere partners, and fostering a culture of community engagement, the dividends of community engagement will grow.