

## Executive Summary and Action Guide<sup>1</sup>

Local governments can be in the forefront of advancing citizen engagement. To do so, they must understand what engagement is, and identify the ways to expand and connect their engagement activities, and share ownership of those activities with citizens.

Citizen engagement is the right thing to do because it promotes democracy and community building. It is also a smart thing to do to expand support from citizens and get buy in for achieving goals that government cannot achieve on its own.

### What is citizen engagement?

Engagement is a kind of connection and commitment not traditionally found in many of the interactions between citizens and government. There are lots of ways that local governments exchange information with citizens. These activities include providing information, being transparent, inviting input, and surveying citizens. They help get citizens involved but should not be equated with engagement. Likewise, providing services and good “customer-relations” do not make citizens partners in solving community problems. Exchange activities that are extensive, vigorous, and include all groups are essential, but they should be viewed as one-way interactions, not citizen

engagement.

*Engagement* moves involvement to a higher level. It is qualitatively different interaction that provides the opportunity for citizens and officials to listen to and learn from each other and to work together over time to address issues or problems that they feel are important. Some discussions of citizen engagement are based on the assumption that anything governments do to relate to citizens is engagement, but governments will be more effective if they carefully determine whether true engagement is occurring. Local government can encourage and support engagement, it can be a facilitator of action by others, and it can be receptive to initiatives that come from citizens, community organizations, and “social entrepreneurs”—individuals and groups that take it upon themselves to solve a community problem. In any of their interactions with citizens, local governments may consider encouraging engagement rather than simply seeking a one-way interaction.

Both exchange and engagement can occur in the two broad areas of community governance: how the community decides what goals they should pursue and what policies they could make *and* how the community delivers services to residents and works together to address ways to make the community better. Local governments should broaden their perspective to see how engagement occurs in delivering services and meeting needs as well in making decisions. Examples of engagement in decision-making include community forums to set goals or citizen advisory committees. Examples of engagement in delivering service and meeting needs are citizen campaigns to meet sustainability goals or a neighborhood revitalization effort. The distinctions between exchange and engagement in decision-making and service delivery are presented in Table 1.

<sup>1</sup> The authors of the executive summary and White Paper overview are James Svava and Janet Denhardt who drew on twelve essays prepared by experts in citizen engagement. Support was provided by the School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University, and research assistance was provided by management interns at ASU and staff of the Alliance for Innovation.

**Table 1: Public Involvement Spectrum in Local Governance (summary)\***

|  | Exchanges with Citizens   |  | Citizen Engagement  |  |  |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|
| <b>Interaction in policy making.</b><br><i>Goal: Inclusive Decision-Making and Problem-Solving</i>     | <b>Inform</b><br>Provide the public with balanced and objective information and be transparent. | <b>Consult</b><br>Receive and respond to comments and obtain public input and feedback.              | <b>Incorporate</b><br>Include residents throughout the process of making decisions.                           | <b>Collaborate</b><br>Identify issues and alternatives and make choices with citizens.           | <b>Empower</b><br>Let citizens take the lead in making decisions and developing solutions. |
| <b>Interaction in service delivery.</b><br><i>Goal: Effectively Deliver Services and Address Needs</i> | <b>Provide</b><br>Provide services and enforce laws and regulations.                            | <b>Respond</b><br>Respond to citizen requests and complaints and measure satisfaction with services. | <b>Co-produce</b><br>Encourage citizens to volunteer, help produce services, and assess results from surveys. | <b>Collaborate</b><br>Partner to determine priorities and achieve objectives, e.g., crime watch. | <b>Empower</b><br>Let citizens take responsibility for meeting a community need.           |

\*First row adapted from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

### Methods of Citizen Engagement

The methods that can be used to promote citizen engagement are numerous and choosing among them can be puzzling. There are several guidelines. First, local government needs to be clear about its goals for citizen engagement. If local government is seeking a dialogue and shared commitment, it should not rely on an exchange method like a public hearing or one-time survey. An engagement method will be needed. Second, it is important to choose a method that fits the circumstances rather than using a method as an end in and of itself.

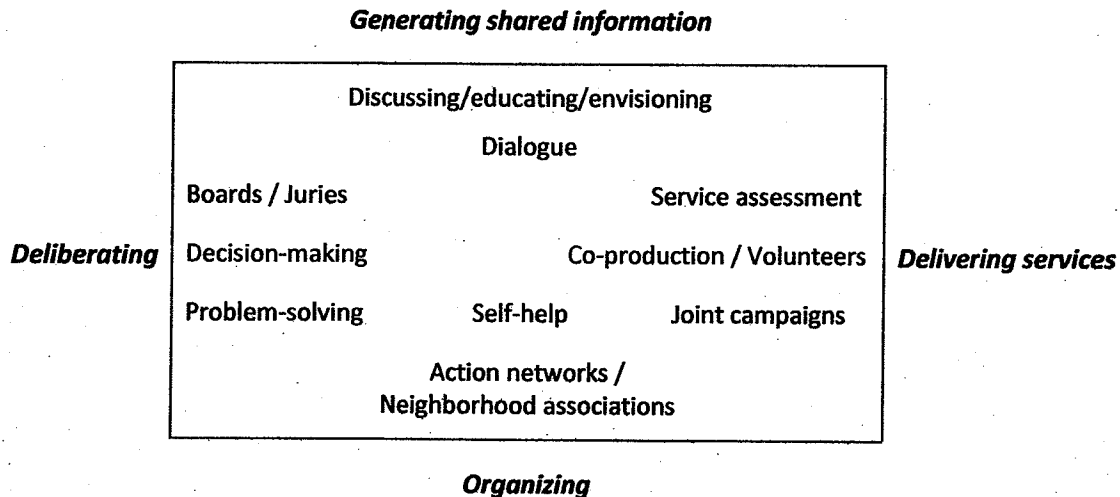
There are four broad types of situations and methods that foster interactions in different ways. They can be used in various combinations and sequences.

- One situation is the need to generate additional information, knowledge, and shared understanding. Many local governments have citizen academies that serve multiple purposes: to educate, develop skills, form bonds, and generate discussion on the future of the community. Forums in person and even on-line can facilitate sharing of perspectives and preferences, and dialogue sessions can promote improved understanding and empathy. These discussions may generate policy options or action plans.
- Two, there are various approaches to deliberating to define problems and identify alternative ways to guide or make decisions about goals, policies or programs. For example, a community visioning project, town hall session, or "world café" can encourage citizens to share perspectives and build consensus.
- Three, the challenge may be to address a community need or achieve a community aspiration. Cities have law and code enforcement, refuse collection, and recreational programs but they may lack a shared commitment to turn around a neighborhood struggling with crime and blight. A partnership between officials and residents to set priorities and develop a shared commitment on how to contribute to neighborhood improvement addresses this need.
- Four, an ongoing commitment to community capacity-building can take the form of supporting neighborhood organizations that develop their own approaches to enlisting engagement.

Citizen engagement methods can be placed on grid that generally indicates which of the situations is emphasized, as indicated in Figure 1. The placement also suggests how the methods can reinforce others or combine different situations. For example, study circles—a dialogue method—to examine performance shortcomings in schools can contribute to shared understanding about the home circumstances that impact performance, identification of the need for a new after school program that will need to be developed through deliberation,

and expansion of volunteers who commit to help tutor children as a partnership approach to delivering educational services. The point is to combine approaches as appropriate to meet the situation.

**Figure 1. Dimensions and types of citizen engagement efforts**



To increase the likelihood of success, it is important to match the method(s) used to the intended purpose, to make clear what the role and potential impact of citizens will be, and to listen to citizens and honestly explain how their views have been taken into account.

In addition to looking outward, local governments should also look inward to expand their capacity for engagement. A government is less likely to have participation from citizens if staff members operate in an organization that focuses on control. The local government can encourage participation and shared responsibility among staff members in their internal operations in order to foster a positive climate for citizen engagement. Staff members must be able to work across departments and get information to and answers from staff throughout the organization (and from nonprofits and community groups) to respond to citizens in a holistic way. Some staff members need to develop special skills in designing engagement activities and facilitating meetings, and all need to be willing to interact openly with citizens and an ability to listen and ask questions. Furthermore, the local government can adopt the attitude of “yes if” rather than “no because” in its response to proposals from individuals and groups in the community.

**A New Vision—The Connected Community**

Increasing engagement requires expanding the connections that tie the community together. The connected community has these characteristics:

- There is a wide array of exchange activities, including creative uses of new technology and social media, that link government and citizens and support engagement.
- The local government focuses on what citizens perceive to be important and reaches them “where they are.” It builds on existing social and civic connections before trying to broaden them or create new ones.
- Citizens are connected to each other, to community organizations, and to local government through engagement activities for generating information, deliberating decisions, delivering services, and organizing neighborhoods.
- Participants in various citizen engagement activities are connected to each other to expand civic capacity, activities are linked and support each other, and new ventures build on previous ones.
- Organizations in the community that initiate new ideas are connected to form partnerships with the local government.

## Taking Stock and Getting Started

Expanding citizen engagement begins with a commitment to involving residents as citizens. It cannot be a project of government alone. Local governments should honestly assess what they are trying to accomplish through citizen engagement and consider whether they are willing and able to listen to and act on what they hear. The following steps can be taken sequentially to build a citizen engagement strategy.

1. Take stock of what you are already doing distinguishing between exchange and engagement. Most governments have extensive citizen exchange activities, and often these can be expanded and incorporate new methods such as social media. Many governments are doing a lot of engagement already. In the assessment, consider whether the government is tapping into the potential for engagement in the way it invites participation, makes decisions, its volunteer activities, its work with citizens in delivering services, and its approach to neighborhood organizations. Examine how receptive the government is to initiatives from groups in the community and to what extent the climate in the organization supports engagement.
2. Identify key issues that need more citizen involvement or critical areas where more engagement is needed including new ways that staff can interact with citizens in delivering services. Drawing on existing resources and approaches, what are the best ways to foster dialogue and deliberation? How can citizens be brought together to partner with local government in action? How can the engagement activities be better connected to reinforce and build on each other? Answering questions such as these contributes to action steps for expanding engagement.
3. With support from the city council, citizens and officials can undertake a community dialogue on citizen engagement to identify how citizens wish to be involved in shaping community life and how the local government can contribute to meeting citizen aspirations. Citizens will tell you how and on what issues they want to engage in dialogue.
4. A local government and its citizens can work together to achieve the ideal of becoming a connected community. In partnership with citizens and local organizations, some local governments are developing comprehensive and integrated approaches. The goal is an ongoing commitment to meaningful engagement using methods including these:
  - Enabling citizens to be more active participants through citizen academies
  - Using forums and dialogue to understand conditions and generate ideas and aspirations
  - Deliberating in small settings and community-wide to make decisions and set goals
  - Using artistic approaches to expand creativity and engage the whole person
  - Identifying priorities for surveys of services and assessing implications of the results
  - Partnering with citizens in delivering services, achieving goals, and addressing needs
  - Encouraging other organizations to be conveners of community dialogues
  - Supporting the initiatives of citizen groups and social entrepreneurs
  - Facilitating neighborhood problem solving
  - Connecting the activities and participants in engagement activities to build an expanding network of citizens involved in community building.

In conclusion, citizen engagement enables communities to build a sense of community, strengthen attachments, and tackle persistent problems that can only be solved by people working together to help themselves and each other in a connected community. Local government is an essential and often lead partner with citizens in fostering authentic, meaningful and effective citizen engagement. It is important for local governments to encourage residents and employees alike to think of themselves as citizens who are engaged in the activities of governance and who work together to help make their community better.

*The complete white paper is available at [WWW.TRANSFORMGOV.ORG](http://WWW.TRANSFORMGOV.ORG) home page.*