# **Section 7. Involving People Most Affected by the Problem**

Social or community problems are problems that by their very definition concern a large number of people. Unfortunately, those who are socially and economically powerful, such as government officials, interest groups, or community leaders often define these problems - and their solutions. While everyone is indirectly affected by social problems, those who are directly experiencing the problem are often left out of the processes of identifying what the problem really is.

WHY INVOLVE PEOPLE AFFECTED BY PROBLEMS?

Let's say that you have a rock in your shoe. No one other than you can know exactly how that rock feels. Others may have read about rocks, seen rocks, or even had a similar experience with a pebble caught in a sandal. However, you are the expert on this particular situation because you are experiencing it.

The same concept applies to social and community problems. People who directly experience a problem have a much different outlook on their needs than does a politician who has only read about the problem in the newspaper or a helping professional who once wrote a college paper on the problem.

There are two important ways to involve people affected by a problem in helping to solve the problem. First, you can listen to them so that you have a better understanding of the causes of the problem, the barriers they have to managing or preventing the problem, and their ideas for solving the problem. Second, they can become involved through participation in the initiative or program that is being developed by helping empower them to tackle the problems they confront. It's always better for people to participate, but if those affected by the problem don't wish to, listening to them is a good way to start building rapport with them.

HOW CAN PEOPLE AFFECTED BY THE PROBLEM GET INVOLVED?

People can get involved in many ways--here are just a few:

* Get involved in planning processes like creating goals or defining the problem
* Donate money or help out with a fundraising effort
* Volunteer to staff the office, answer phones, put together mass mailings, or make phone calls
* Doing research, writing grant proposals, or handling correspondence
* Attend public events like rallies, community hearings, or fundraising events
* Serve on committees that focus on specific problems or activities
* Take leadership roles in a community partnership

When examining a problem, perspectives from all types of people and sectors of the community are necessary. For instance, a mother of a pregnant teenager has different needs and ideas than does her daughter, even though the issue of teenage pregnancy affects both of them. Unfortunately, people who directly experience the problem are often ignored, or if they are included it is in minor ways.

WHO SHOULD YOU ASK TO PARTICIPATE?

Those affected by the problem or issue may vary greatly in social class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, or culture. It's important to be inclusive. Some of the most important participants could be people affected by the problem.

For example, if you work with a youth suicide prevention initiative, it would be important to involve as many young people as possible. You should also include people who have been directly affected by youth suicide, such as friends or family members of youths who have committed suicide or young people who have survived suicide attempts.

Take special care to reach out to populations who are generally overlooked, discriminated against, and excluded. This includes reaching out to minority populations and people who are economically disadvantaged.

It may not be easy to get some of those who are affected by the problem to participate, especially if the problem is stigmatized or illegal. Sometimes the problem itself is a barrier to effective participation.

There are a few things you can do to bring people who are affected by a problem into the problem-solving effort. These will help whether you wait to recruit them to participate in listening sessions and committee work, or to help empower them to get more involved in organizing and advocacy. Here are a few ideas to help you:

* Every community is different, so familiarize yourself with your community by asking where do people work? Socialize? Volunteer? Receive services? Shop? Access information? Attend school or church?
* Sometimes people are already involved in civic groups such as agency boards, advisory committees, neighborhood councils, local community organizations, social movements, and neighborhood improvement associations.
* You can find out what exists in your community by contacting the mayor's office, the city manager, the chamber of commerce, involved city officials, information and referral agencies, leaders in non-profit agencies such as the United Way, YMCA, YWCA, and the Salvation Army.
* Public hearings and meetings can also be effective ways to reach people who aren't involved in any groups. Advertise creatively to reach the targeted populations and remember to hold the meetings at convenient times and locations. Plan carefully so that the meetings are not too large to be effective--as a rule, groups of more than 20 persons may lose effectiveness.
* Listening sessions are a bit different from public hearings and meetings in that they are expressly designed to allow citizens to be heard about the issues and problems that are important to them. Conducting a public forum or listening session is a good way to let the public know that you do indeed care about their views and ideas, and can be useful in encouraging them to get further involved.

WHAT ARE SOME POTENTIAL OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION?

It is easy to blame low levels of participation on apathy and lack of motivation, especially if you're getting frustrated in your efforts to encourage participation. You may find yourself getting so discouraged that you start to think that parents don't care about their family's health, or that teenagers don't want to stop the violence in school and on the streets. In reality, however, there are often things that prevent their involvement, such as lack of transportation or child care.

Some of the people you're hoping to involve may need to learn some basics about doing this kind of work. They may need to learn to attend to what goes on, to take notes so they'll remember what was discussed, to understand and resolve conflicts (rather than either trying to ignore them, or taking them personally), to make themselves heard without sidetracking the meeting, etc. Some of us have learned these skills through training or work and take them for granted, but a lot of folks may not have had that sort of training and they can easily become frustrated and disappear from your organization. Some ways of helping them move past this are to hook them up with mentors in the group; to have some sort of training dealing with those issues (ideally for everyone, not just them); or to try to find a role for them that they understand is important, and that they can fulfill well while learning the other skills they need, etc.

Before trying to involve people ask yourself what obstacles could possibly inhibit participation of those affected by the problem.

* *Preconceptions and attitudes* within your organization: Do you have a positive attitude or do you find yourself thinking things like, "I won't ever be able to get working parents involved in this initiative because they're always too busy to get involved in anything?" A pessimistic attitude will almost always show, no matter how much you try to mask it. If people see that you aren't excited or optimistic about their involvement, then they probably won't invest very much of themselves. Give people the benefit of the doubt and expect the best.
* *Inadequate community communication*: People may simply be unaware of opportunities to be involved in the community. Try contacting groups working on similar issues to your own to find out how they get people involved. Find ways to get the word out to the community that you're looking for people to join in your effort.
* *Limited experience*: People may avoid becoming involved simply because they haven't ever had experience with collective action, and therefore are unfamiliar with what will be expected of them, how they can make a difference, or whether they will be welcome. For many people, participating in an unfamiliar way, such as attending a neighborhood meeting, may cause anxiety. Be very clear with people about what they can expect to have happen at meetings, what they can expect their role to be in the organization, and what will be expected of them if they get involved. Make sure people know you are approachable should they have any questions, and make sure that you are always friendly and clear when answering those questions.
* *History of being ignored*: Sometimes people affected by the problem have been ignored or they have tried to participate in the past but they were allowed to do only token work. Few leaders and organizers may have actually listened to them seriously or actively involved them in the planning, organizing, deciding, and evaluating processes. If people have come to expect that they will be ignored, they will be less likely to even attempt to get involved.
* *Resistant leaders*: Perhaps the people who are affected by a problem see their leaders as resistant to their getting involved. Are the leaders willing to rethink their agendas according to citizen input? Are the leaders able to listen and follow through with what they've heard? For citizens to remain involved, it is important for them to feel that what they say is worthwhile.
* *Sense of powerlessness*: The complexity of politics intimidates citizens, preventing them from getting involved. The many levels of government make it difficult for anyone to know where to begin, whom to approach, and how to be influential. Awareness and education regarding these processes will help individuals gain the self-confidence to begin. People may be scared to speak up because they might not understand everything that's going on and they're afraid they'll look foolish.
* *Lack of time*: Organizing convenient times for people to meet is key since they often have tight schedules. Take into consideration when the population you are reaching is available so that they will be able to participate. For example, if you want a lot of people who work the night shift to get involved, you will need to have times available that don't coincide with their work hours. Additionally, meetings and events should not last longer than is necessary so that people don't feel like their time is wasted.
* *Lack of transportation*: If possible, provide transportation to those who don't have the money or access to vehicles. Meeting places also need to be as close and familiar as possible to the participants, such as in schools or libraries. If there is public transportation near your meeting location, be sure to tell people where it can be found.
* *Lack of child care*: Not being able to find reliable child care or having to pay for a babysitter can be big barriers for parents who would otherwise get involved. Consider ways in which child care can be made available. For instance, you can provide childcare at the meeting site, or have parents who are involved set up a pool to take turns providing care.
* *Overcommitted leaders or citizens*: If those involved try to do more than is realistic, then others who don't have the time or ability to work as much on the issue may leave. Pace yourself and make realistic demands of yourself and others.
* *Too many involved*: Smaller groups tend to get more done quickly. Utilize more groups with fewer people so that each individual may be heard and feel important instead of overlooked.
* *Poor organization of existing action groups*: If there are existing groups that are taking action on the issue at hand, organize their efforts and resources so that time and energy are not duplicated. If the groups themselves are poorly organized and utilized, assist them in reorganizing or joining other groups.
* *History of unproductive meetings*: Past experiences with unproductive meetings make people cynical about the effectiveness of meetings in general. Find ways to let them know why you believe the meeting will be helpful and why each person is an important part.

**Remember:** Examine barriers with an open mind and creatively think of ways to overcome them.

HOW DO YOU MOTIVATE CITIZENS TO BECOME AND REMAIN INVOLVED?

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

There are several ways in which to motivate others to become and remain involved. Motivation begins within the individual, so it only makes sense to focus on the uniqueness of each person. Help people to realize that what they have to offer is important and appreciated, and that by becoming involved they can benefit in ways that are significant to them.

You need to be familiar with what life is like for the groups you want to attract to work on your initiative. How do their physical, social, cultural, economic, and political environments affect their participation and your response? By trying to imagine what it would be like to be other people, you may understand them better and have an easier time working together as a team.

RECOGNIZE STRENGTHS

Every individual has unique talents, skills, cultural heritage, experiences, beliefs, and values. Because of those qualities, each person tends to learn different things from the experience of getting involved in community issues. While it is important for each person to contribute, it is equally important to recognize, appreciate, and utilize his or her strengths. This will enable participants to see the ways in which their participation is helpful and important.

In addition to recognizing the strengths of individuals, you should also recognize the strengths of a particular community. For example, if you are working to get members of the Asian-American community in your town involved, you should consider what strengths the Asian-American community possesses. How do they already organize to get things done? They may already have effective systems in place that you can use. Political organizing may be unfamiliar to them, but you might be able to relate it to something they know and feel comfortable with--like, for example, organizing a big cultural event or church fundraiser.

RECOGNIZE NEEDS

Individuals have different reasons for becoming involved. Those reasons often coincide with or respond to basic needs that they want to fulfill. Some of those needs include:

* The need to improve or maintain self-esteem
* The need to feel that one's contribution is genuinely useful and helpful
* The need to have a sense of having influence with an issue
* The need to have some level of control of self and environment
* The need for friendship
* The need to be recognized for one's efforts

SUPPORT OTHER INTERESTS OF THESE GROUPS

If you expect people to give you support, you should reciprocate. In other words, don't expect them to support your initiative unless you're willing to support them as well. For example, if you are hoping to get the African American community more involved in your initiative, be prepared to lend your voice to their causes. Speak out publicly against racism in your community, have your organization be visible at African American community events, and prove yourself and your organization to be an ally. Attending an occasional rally or fundraiser may not seem relevant to your organization's purpose--but if it's relevant to the interests and concerns of the people you want to reach, then it's relevant to you.

RECOGNIZE THAT GROUPS ARE MADE UP OF INDIVIDUALS

Citizens who take an active role in community issues develop skills and knowledge that they need to participate effectively. More important however, they have self-confidence. Believing that they can make a difference leads to a willingness to participate. As you appeal to citizens for their participation, remember that each individual is a powerful resource and convey that belief to them. Even when addressing groups, recognize that groups consist of individuals who are all different despite their common bonds.

ASK PEOPLE INDIVIDUALLY FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION

A 1990 Gallup Poll showed that the main reason that has kept most people who are interested in volunteering from doing so is that nobody ever asked them! By inviting people individually, you let them know that they aren't just faceless numbers in part of a mass appeal. When people interact on a personal level, especially between friends or neighbors, involvement appears less intimidating and distant.

You can ask people to get involved directly yourself, or you can get employers to invite their employees and co-workers, teachers to ask their students and families, friends to ask their friends, neighbors to ask their neighbors and so forth. Personal phone calls or letters are more effective than general advertisements.

MATCH INDIVIDUAL TALENTS, SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND EXPERIENCE WITH THE GROUP'S NEEDS

Not only will the group be stronger as a result, but people will remain involved because they see themselves as being useful. For example, ask someone with an outgoing personality to speak publicly and a quiet person who enjoys writing to keep written records of what takes place.

MAKE PARTICIPANTS FEEL WELCOME BY LISTENING TO THEM AND TAKING THEM SERIOUSLY

When new people arrive for their first meeting or activity, be sure to welcome them, thank them for coming, and solicit their opinions and suggestions. Work at bringing them into the discussion. Try to get them involved in small projects that will spark their interest. And most important, listen to what they have to say.

Active listening will prevent alienating certain people. It also helps you to empathize with and understand different perspectives and opinions. Active listening skills include clarifying things that don't make sense, summarizing what is presented, and allowing the participants to finish without interruptions.

**Seven Tips for Active Listening**

1. Give your undivided attention. Look at the person, and suspend other things you are doing. Put down the newspaper, turn off the cell phone, look at the person who's speaking, and listen intently.
2. Listen not only to the words, but the feeling content. A large part of human communication is nonverbal. It includes the tone of voice, gestures, body language, and inflections. They often reveal unspoken messages--such as anger, irritation, sadness, or fear--that can be far more important than the words used. Be sensitive to them.
3. Be sincerely interested in what the other person is talking about. Remember that you can always learn something from anyone, and that you are doing service by really listening.
4. Restate what the person said. This is a way of letting the person know that you understood not only the words but also the intent of the speaker. This is very important especially when there is conflict or when the other party is hostile. Your instinct may be to answer the allegation immediately, but this only creates further tension and distance.
5. Ask clarifying questions once in a while. This will let the other person know that you are actively listening and that you are really interested in what he is saying.
6. Be aware of your own feelings and strong opinions. When we are not aware of our own feelings and strong opinions, we tend to express our immediate reactions when we're listening. Such reactions may cut off effective communication. For example, someone may be stating a religious view you disagree with. Your initial impulse may be to express your disagreement, which may only start an argument. Be aware then that when you disagree, this may not be the time to say so.
7. If you feel you really must state your views, say them only after you have listened. Let the speaker finish first, and if you feel it is helpful, then relate your own experience.

SHOW APPRECIATION FOR EACH PERSON'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Recognition is essential for people to feel wanted, helpful, and important. You can show appreciation through certificates of appreciation, recognition parties or banquets, special attention to participants in newsletters, newspapers, or other media resources, thank you letters or postcards, and personal phone calls or conversations thanking and recognizing those involved.

KNOW YOURSELF

It is equally as important to understand yourself because you are continually influencing and shaping the process of helping those most affected by a problem to become involved. Ask yourself:

* What motivates me?
* Why am I participating?
* What do I want to achieve?
* How will I react to different people and situations?
* How committed am I?
* How much am I willing to do?

REMAIN ORGANIZED

When people walk into a disorganized or unclear situation they generally walk away. Hence, to keep people motivated you need to help them be organized as well as be organized yourself. Good leaders help participants feel more secure and confident. If the leader understands what is going on and what needs to occur, then the leader can effectively delegate responsibilities and include all participants effectively.

DEFINE AND CLARIFY THE PLANS, GOALS, AND PURPOSES OF THE GROUP EARLY ON

People need to have a sense of direction with something to look forward to in order to get and stay involved. Working towards common goals gives people a special bond, enabling them to work together as a team and making them care more deeply about the work they're doing. Come up with clear plans and realistic goals.

It's also important to come up with a practical, achievable timeline. If people see nothing happening--or if they feel too rushed--they will lose interest in being involved, so know how to pace yourself. Creating a timeline allows you to see what is complete and what still needs work, in addition to giving everyone a clear idea of a realistic pace. Periodically remind group members of their goals and their timeline in order to keep them focused and inspired.

ESTABLISH GOOD COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE GROUP AND AMONG DIFFERENT GROUPS

Different groups in the community are more likely to share resources and help each other accomplish established goals if they communicate effectively with each other. Keeping people within the group as well as other groups informed will help them work to meet common needs and avoid duplicating work.

USE MEETING TIME WISELY

People value their time. Any time people get involved in an issue, they are committing personal time, but sometimes they also sacrifice work time or time spent with family and friends to become involved. When people show up for a meeting, they rightfully expect to have their time used wisely. If a meeting drags on or accomplishes little, they may not attend other meetings or events because they feel as if it is a waste of their valuable time. Know how to run effective and efficient meetings, and keep them as short as possible.

**Example:**

Yuka's organizational meetings for volunteers at the local battered women's hotline were thorough, but they tended to run long. Yuka believed it was important to cover every agenda item on the monthly meetings, and all volunteers were required to attend. More and more volunteers were dropping out, and Yuka didn't know why.

One day at the grocery store, Yuka ran into a volunteer who had quit. They chatted politely for a while, and then Yuka decided to just ask what had made the former volunteer leave. "Well," said the former volunteer, "I just couldn't go to the meetings anymore; I never knew when the meeting would be over and I just couldn't afford to have a babysitter for more than a couple of hours. And since you can't be a volunteer if you don't go to the meetings, I had to give it up."

Yuka realized that many of the volunteers were young mothers, and many were single and/or living on fixed incomes. She changed the meetings, honing her facilitation skills and setting a strict time limit--meetings ended after one hour no matter what--and volunteers were now allowed to miss one meeting every six months. She also got together a few volunteers to provide child care during the meetings. Yuka soon saw a big increase in the number of mothers who were able to become volunteers.

ABOVE ALL, KEEP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Attitudes are contagious, so if you have a poor attitude, the people you're trying to get involved will pick up on that. If you show a positive attitude about your work, others will be more likely to feel hopeful and more able to accept and learn from challenges.

IN SUMMARY

Attracting people who are directly affected by the problem to be involved is handled, in many ways, like attracting anyone else to your cause, although it may be a bit more difficult and take more effort on your part. Still, having people who are directly experiencing whatever it is your organization deals with is worthwhile. These are the people who know the problem most intimately, who deal with it day to day, and who will be able to make a more in-depth, meaningful, and personal contribution to your organization's discussions and planning. Do whatever you can to get these people involved and you'll be glad you did.