

Guide Overview: Community Engagement: An Essential Component of an Effective and Equitable Substance Use Prevention System



This overview provides a summary of the Evidence-Based Resource Guide titled, *Community Engagement: An Essential Component of an Effective and Equitable Substance Use Prevention System* (SAMHSA Publication No. PEP22-06-01-005). The complete guide is available on the SAMHSA Store: https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/SAMHSA_Digital_Download/PEP22-06-01-005.pdf

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are among the most common disabling conditions in the United States.¹ They have the potential to impair a person’s ability to work, engage in relationships, maintain mental health, connect with community, and carry out activities of daily life. Substance use affects all Americans and all communities—the young and old, all racial and ethnic groups, people of all abilities, and people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, or sex characteristics.²⁻⁶ Substance use affects both under-resourced and affluent neighborhoods. It impacts all community sectors: business, education, health care, law enforcement, social services, and more.⁷

Prevention systems aim to:

- Protect community members across lifespans from substance misuse and SUDs
- Minimize the negative consequences of substance misuse on individuals and society
- Advance equity and population health

Achievement of these goals depends on scaling up evidence-based practices (EBPs); community engagement is a critical factor that influences the equitable scale-up of EBPs and contributes to improvements in population health.⁸ As stated in the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy’s 2022 National Drug Control Strategy, “implementing evidence-based policies, environmental strategies, and programs requires an understanding of a community’s challenges and knowing which strategies will effectively address a community’s specific challenge.”⁹

Developed for practitioners, administrators, community leaders, and health professions educators, the guide highlights research on community engagement in substance use prevention and provides practical guidance for implementing and evaluating community engagement strategies and activities. It does not focus on specific evidence-based practices, programs, or policies, but instead provides an overview of how community engagement can play a pivotal role in the uptake of EBPs broadly across the substance use prevention system.

Community Engagement Core Principles



Transparency and trust



Careful planning and preparation



Inclusion and demographic diversity



Collaboration and shared purpose



Openness and learning



Impact and action



Sustained engagement and participatory culture

The guide presents what we know about community engagement from research studies selected through a systematic review of the literature and collaboration with subject matter experts. It then discusses practical considerations drawn from on-the-ground experience regarding how to effectively participate in community engagement, emphasizing the importance of establishing trust, prioritizing equity, and ensuring community capacity to carry-out and sustain efforts.

The guide highlights three organizations that are using community engagement in their substance use prevention interventions. These examples affirm the benefits of community engagement in addressing substance use while illustrating that community engagement involves a set of activities that can look different across communities. The guide concludes with considerations and resources for conducting evaluations that state, tribal, and community leaders can use to improve community engagement practice and address accountability concerns.



Endnotes

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SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance use and mental illness on America's communities.
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