



Civic Engagement for Health
among Older Adults

Blueprint for Communities

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PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY



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Introduction

Background

This blueprint was developed following a research project hosted in Saint Andrews, New Brunswick. The project was funded through the Province of New Brunswick and the Public Health Agency of Canada's Healthy Seniors Pilot Project Program (HSPP). Initiated by the local non-profit nursing home, Passamaquoddy Lodge, they collaborated with sector expert, Silvermark, and research partner, St. Thomas University. Together, the project team sought to answer, *"How does a community bring to realization an Aging in Place Strategy?"*

Project Outcomes

The project demonstrated that civic engagement of older adults increased:

1. Civic engagement attitudes and behaviours.
2. Sense of mobilization and participants wanting to know what's next and how to help.
3. Awareness of organizational resources available in Saint Andrews and belief that such resources might be able to help participants (when and as needed).
4. Sense of social belonging through the community connections that were fostered.
5. Sense of future security.
6. Sense of a shared future.

Objective

This blueprint was developed to advance civic engagement among older adults by offering specific recommendations to inform the planning, promotion and development of strategies that are identified by citizens for citizens.

Use

Use encouraged by all communities to support more meaningful engagement of older adults (and other populations) following effective and equitable practices.

What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement is an essential aspect of community involvement that empowers individuals to actively participate in shaping their communities, contributing to social change, and making a meaningful impact.

"Civic Engagement" Defined

Civic engagement refers to the active participation of individuals in the social, political, and economic affairs of their communities. It involves individuals willingly investing their time, skills, and resources to address community needs, promote the common good, and advocate for positive change.

Why is it important?

By understanding the significance and benefits of civic engagement, older adults can gain valuable insights into how they can play an active role in their communities and foster positive change.

It provides opportunity to leverage their life experiences, skills, and wisdom to make a difference in their communities.

Engagement fosters a sense of belonging, collaboration, and collective responsibility encouraging individuals to come together, identify common goals, and work collaboratively to improve the quality of life for everyone involved.

What are the benefits for older adults?

Engaging in civic and community activities offers numerous benefits for older adults:

Social Connection

Civic and community engagement create opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals, build friendships, and develop a support network, which is particularly important for older adults who may be at risk of social isolation.

Personal Fulfillment

Contributing to community well-being and witnessing positive change can bring a deep sense of satisfaction, purpose, and fulfillment to older adults, boosting their overall well-being

Lifelong Learning

Engaging in civic activities exposes older adults to new ideas, perspectives, and knowledge. They can broaden their understanding of societal issues, learn new skills, and stay intellectually active.

Enhanced Quality of Life

Active involvement in community and civic activities can lead to improved health outcomes, increased resilience, and a higher quality of life for older adult

Why are you engaging?

Purpose

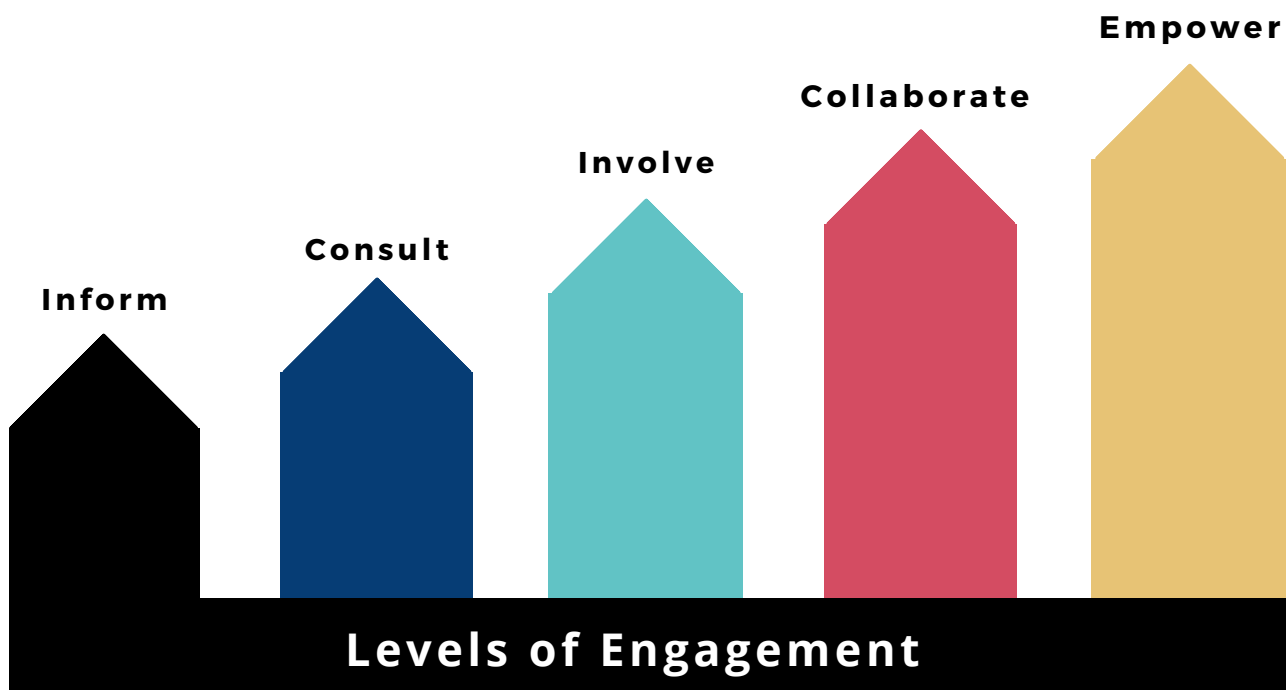
The purpose of engagement should be established before bringing citizens together. When determining engagement goals, ask:

1. What are the main reasons for wanting to engage the community?
2. Which community members should we engage?
3. What do we hope to learn?
4. What are the beneficial outcomes for the community?

Levels of Engagement

Supporting engagement offers a multitude of opportunities to inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower older adults. Understanding these levels of engagement will directly inform your approach.

"Engagement" is a commonly used term, however by outlining your purpose you will identify the level of engagement you are seeking. This is critical in designing the process you will follow and communicating to participants about what they can expect and what is expected of them.



Source: Tamarack Index of Community Engagement Techniques

The goal of the **Inform** stage is to provide stakeholders with appropriate information to help them understand the problem or key challenges in their community. It can also provide opportunity to share what activities and outcomes have been tried or achieved to date.

Engagement through information sharing ensures that older adults have access to accurate and relevant knowledge about local issues, initiatives, and opportunities. By staying up to date, older adults can make well-informed decisions, effectively advocate for their needs, and engage in meaningful discussions within their communities. Information empowers older adults to become active participants in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Information can be shared in a multitude of ways, such as:

- Postal mail outs
- Posters
- Community Calendars
- Websites
- Social media
- Emails
- FAQs
- Local media
- Community presentations (which can also be live streamed)

Consultation can take place through a variety of methods, including but not limited to:

- Polls
- Votes
- Surveys
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Online forums
- Social media outreach
- Workshops
- Open houses
- Comment boxes

When planning to **consult**, the aim is to obtain feedback from community members and key stakeholders.

Consultation involves seeking the input and opinions of older adults when making decisions or developing policies that impact their community. This engagement approach acknowledges the valuable perspectives of older adults and demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and diversity. By consulting older adults, community leaders and organizations gain insights into the unique challenges, aspirations, and needs of older adults, ensuring that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed.

When seeking to **involve** citizens you are setting the expectation that you will work directly with them on a regular basis.

Active involvement of older adults in community activities fosters a sense of belonging, purpose, and social connection. It allows them to contribute their time, skills, and resources towards community development and well-being. Older adults can engage in volunteering, organizing events, participating in local projects, or joining community organizations. Involvement empowers older adults to directly contribute to positive change, create a meaningful impact, and strengthen the social fabric of their communities.

Involving citizens can look like:

- Visioning
- Mapping
- Testing out different scenarios
- Citizen panels
- Volunteering

Some examples of how collaboration can take place are:

- Co-creation of documents and thought processes
- Online communities (e.g. website, email, social media groups)
- Working group sessions

To **collaborate** with citizens means taking a hands-on approach and working in partnership during each aspect of the process - from the initial planning to promotion to development and implementation of solutions.

Collaboration emphasizes the power of working together towards shared goals. By collaborating with older adults, community members, organizations, and policymakers can tap into the collective knowledge, experiences, and skills of a diverse group. Collaborative engagement enables the pooling of resources, ideas, and expertise to address complex community challenges and create innovative solutions. By actively participating in collaborative initiatives, older adults become co-creators of change, fostering stronger, more resilient communities.

To **empower** citizens means you are committing to provide them with the tools, resources, knowledge, and opportunities necessary to actively participate in society, make informed decisions, and have a meaningful impact on their own lives and the communities in which they live. It involves fostering a sense of ownership, agency, and confidence among individuals, allowing them to take charge of their own destinies and contribute to positive change.

Empowering older adults is about recognizing their capacity for leadership, decision-making, and initiating change. It involves providing opportunities for older adults to develop skills, build confidence, and take on meaningful roles within their communities. Empowerment encourages older adults to advocate for their rights, represent their interests, and actively participate in shaping the policies and programs that affect them. Through empowerment, older adults become agents of change, contributing to a more inclusive and age-friendly society. This should be the objective to civic engagement.

Approaches to empowering citizens could include:

Action Plans

provide a clear documented direction as to what should happen next (template in Appendix)

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

utilizes the assets already present within the community, and empowers citizens to draw on the talents, assets, and resources they already possess.

Decision-making platforms

such as online software that enables public engagement on a broad scale.

Citizen committees

which can provide specialized, practical expertise on behalf of citizens.

How to map your plan?

Process

The process of engagement can be broken down into three key steps: planning, promoting, and engaging. Each step plays a crucial role in ensuring effective and meaningful citizen participation.

Planning

The planning phase involves laying the groundwork for successful civic engagement. It includes the following elements:

- Define objectives and desired outcomes
- Identify key stakeholders
- Set parameters and establish a timeline
- Design appropriate engagement methods
- Ensure inclusivity and accessibility

Promoting

The promoting phase focuses on raising awareness and generating interest in the engagement process. Key elements of this phase include:

- Develop a communication plan
- Craft compelling messages
- Conduct targeted outreach efforts
- Collaborate with community partners
- Utilize multiple channels for promotion

Engaging

The engaging phase is the core of the citizen engagement process, where meaningful interactions and participation occur. Key elements of this phase include:

- Facilitate and moderate interactions and collect feedback
- Analyze and summarize data
- Provide participants with feedback on outcomes
- Evaluate the process for continuous improvement

Recommendations

Recommendations

Based on the research project conducted in Saint Andrews, New Brunswick the following recommendations have been developed to inform effective civic engagement across the three crucial steps of planning, promoting, and engaging. Drawing on evidence-based insights and best practices, these recommendations aim to empower organizations and communities to facilitate meaningful participation and enhance the impact of engagement efforts.

By following these recommendations, stakeholders can create an inclusive and participatory environment that fosters collaboration, elicits valuable input, and generates collective solutions to address community challenges while also benefiting older adult participants at an individual level.

1 Planning

- **Identify current interests & activities:** When starting an engagement project, it is important to take the time to learn about participants' connections to their community, their current level of involvement, and where they spend their time. This provides an understanding of current relationships, initiatives, and interests that may inform the engagement approach. Community initiatives often overlap. Understanding what is happening in community currently will help inform how to kick-off your process including distinguishing shared and unique objectives.
- **Ensure sufficient planning time:** To ensure successful community engagement it is crucial to allocate enough time upfront for planning. This involves clearly defining the purpose of engagement (the WHY), setting goals, determining the desired level(s) of engagement, selecting engagement methods, identifying the target participants and the reasons for their involvement, assessing necessary resources, and establishing evaluation and impact assessment strategies. The Tamarack Institute's *Community Engagement Planning Canvas Tool* can provide valuable assistance and is included in the Resources & Tools section at the end of this guide.

- **Recognize that history & relationships can impact participation:** When conducting an engagement process, it is essential to consider the history and relationships between participants and the organization or group leading the engagement. Building trust is crucial and includes three key elements: competence, connection, and authenticity. This *Trust Trifecta* is based on work out of The Center of Implementation which is provided in the Resources & Tools section at the end of this guide. It provides insight on the importance of transparency in building trust with participants.
- **Hold information sessions:** To ensure effective engagement, it is recommended to hold an initial information session with a question-and-answer period. This session should take place before or at the beginning of the project, providing participants with essential background information. It is important to identify the co-leads of the project and encourage open dialogue to address any questions or concerns. By doing so, host organizations can increase awareness and understanding of the project's purpose and background. Gathering informal feedback and assessing community readiness, including a feedback survey can be beneficial.
- **Include peer researchers or community ambassadors:** To enhance community engagement projects, it is beneficial to involve older adult Peer Researchers or Community Ambassadors in the process. These individuals can help collect valuable insights on participants' experiences and thoughts about the project. Whether you include a formal research evaluation or simply gather feedback through informal conversations, having older adults from the community reach out to participants and collect data tends to yield higher response rates and more valuable information than an external person could obtain.
- **Ensure roles are clear:** For successful engagement projects, it is vital to have clarity in roles and responsibilities. Project teams should proactively identify facilitators or moderators for small group discussions. These facilitators should be provided with all the required documents, instructions, and, if needed, training well in advance of the events. Setting expectations and discussing flexibility at the outset is helpful. If an information session precedes the engagement, an invitation can be extended to potential facilitators or Community Ambassadors during that session.

2 Promoting

- **Offer multiple ways to engage:** To enhance engagement, it is advisable for project teams to provide participants with multiple means of engagement. Applying principles of Universal Design ensures that different opportunities for participant involvement are available. This benefits both individuals who prefer diverse ways of contributing and those who wish to contribute more extensively.
- **Prioritize accessibility:** When organizing engagement initiatives involving older adults, it is important to acknowledge that a higher proportion of participants may have hearing impairments compared to the general population. Planning with accessibility in mind, including considerations for vision loss, limited mobility, and other accessibility issues, is crucial to create a welcoming and inclusive event. There are various resources available to guide project teams, such as the *Nova Scotia Accessibility Directorate's Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings and Events* included in the Resources & Tools section at the end of this guide. Transportation is also an accessibility issue that should be considered and planned for. It is recommended to include a clear message during recruitment, encouraging individuals to contact a project coordinator if they require transportation assistance. Consider the involvement of an accessibility expert in your planning phase.
- **Engage in widespread recruitment:** Engagement should utilize a variety of advertising and promotional channels to reach a wide range of community members. Engaging a committee of community members from the project's outset can generate ideas for effective outreach strategies. Peer Researchers or Community Ambassadors can improve recruitment efforts. To improve access to information, particularly for individuals with visual, hearing, or mobility issues, it is beneficial to provide physical copies of important documents to each participant. However, this must be balanced with the project's budgetary constraints. It is recommended to provide summaries of each community engagement event to attendees and interested parties promptly. Appointing a designated communications person and prioritizing communication with citizens fosters relationships between the host organization and the community, contributing to the overall success of the project. Project teams should consider the practical realities of developing and maintaining websites and social media pages, weighing the benefits they offer to participants and the project as a whole.

3 Engaging

- **Establish democratic and inclusive participation:** To foster democratic participant relationships in engagement projects, it is essential for the primary facilitator to clearly communicate the purpose and establish ground rules for small group discussions or other activities. This ensures a respectful and inclusive environment for all participants. Additionally, projects could incorporate an information session at kick-off that outlines the expectations for diverse and inclusive participation to educate participants about Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging (DEI&B) practices. It could also include a dementia-friendly awareness activity, raising awareness and understanding of dementia-related challenges within the community and welcoming participation by persons living with dementia.
- **Encourage participants to dream and think big:** Engagement projects can yield a multitude of valuable suggestions and ideas when they incorporate envisioning or dreaming activities early on. Following the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, this dreaming phase should come after an initial discovery phase and build upon the strengths and successes of the community. Participants should understand that the primary purpose of the dream phase is to be generative, encouraging them to think expansively and consider what possibilities lie ahead. Often, participants can remain stuck in what they believe is possible and benefit from being encouraged to consider options that "feel" out of reach.
- **Use Asset Mapping to raise awareness of resources:** Asset mapping is a valuable practice aligned with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles. It can take various forms, such as lists, visual representations, or mapping on platforms like Google Maps or physical maps. Project teams should determine the most useful approach for their specific project. To set clear expectations and prevent frustrations, it is important to explain to participants the type of community asset map that will be created and its intended focus.

- **Be open and transparent:** Throughout the engagement process, it is crucial for host organizations or project teams to remain aware of the relational context and maintain transparency with community members. Providing all the necessary facts, information, and context is essential for participants to fully understand the process and outcomes of the community engagement project. When project teams clearly communicate the purpose of engagement and outline expectations for outcomes, it can help alleviate potential frustrations that participants may experience towards the end of the project. Additionally, it is recommended to prepare participants for the next steps in the process. This can be accomplished by implementing an off-boarding plan before the community engagement project concludes. This plan ensures that participants are aware of what will follow and helps to create a smooth transition as the project reaches its conclusion.
- **Capture participant transformations:** Host organizations should anticipate and acknowledge that participants may experience transformations as a result of their involvement, and they should take steps to capture these changes. It is advisable to utilize a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Creating Action Plans can be a very empowering activity for older adults. They generate ideas, decide the priorities, and lay the groundwork for how to accomplish their goals.
- **Share policy and social outputs:** In any engagement process, it is crucial to inform the community about the social and policy outputs that result from their participation. Participants want to feel acknowledged, valued, and aware of the impact they have made. Civic engagement activities with older adults should be grounded in a genuine desire to solve problems and create meaningful solutions for the community, not because of benefits to older adults themselves. These can and will occur, if engagement is productive and meaningful.

Resources & Tools

Engagement

- [Index of Community Engagement Techniques](#)
- [Community Engagment Planning Canvas](#)
- [Cultivating the Trust Trifecta](#)

Accessibility

- [Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings and Events](#)

Age-Friendly

- [Age-Friendly Cities Framework](#)

Research

- [What is Peer Research?](#)

Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgement

The project team respectfully acknowledges the traditional lands of Peskotomuhkati and Wolastoqewiyik Nations where this work was conducted. St. Andrews rests within the heart of the Peskotomuhkati traditional territory which encompasses Passamaquoddy Bay and the Skutik (St. Croix River) watershed. St. Thomas University, in Fredericton, lies in Wolastoqewiyik territory, along Wolastoq (the “beautiful and bountiful river,” commonly known as the St. John river). Everyone who lives in New Brunswick is a Treaty person as this territory is covered by the Treaties of Peace and Friendship which Passamaquoddy, Wolastoqewiyik, and Mi’kmaq first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The purpose of the Treaties was to establish an ongoing relationship based on peace, friendship, and mutual understanding between sovereign nations. There was no surrender of lands and resources.

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