

November 29, 2024

Attn: Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President
 Eisenhower Executive Office Building, 1650 Pennsylvania Ave. NW,
 Washington, DC 20504

RE: DRAFT MEMO: Broadening Public Participation and Community Engagement with the Federal Government

As the bipartisan, national membership association representing state and local health and human services agencies, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) welcomes the opportunity to share insights on how Federal agencies can better support public participation and community engagement. APHSA’s members are experts in administering, overseeing, and aligning programs that build resilience and bolster wellbeing through access to food, health care, housing, employment, child care, community supports, and other key building blocks.

APHSA’s members are also leading experts in engaging communities and people with lived experience in decision-making. With and through our members, we draw on insights from community engagement collaborations to elevate the priorities of and promising practices discovered through state and local practitioners and policymakers. APHSA’s response most directly draws from the following APHSA initiatives that exhibit successes and lessons learned on fostering community engagement.

APHSA-led Initiatives informing national community engagement strategies

APHSA Initiative	Description
Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports (CSNS)	CSNS is a cohort grant program administered by APHSA and funded by Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry Campaign that aims to align the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) with other federal, state, and local nutrition supports. Four funded sites – Caroline County, Maryland, San Francisco County, California, North Carolina, and Illinois are building partnerships with community organizations to improve the experience of families accessing SNAP and other nutrition supports.
Lived Experience National Scan (LENS)	The Lived Experience National Scan (LENS) collected information from human services agencies, identifying successful and emerging practices that engage people with lived experience (PWLE). The scan identified how agencies partnered with PWLE to shape organizational decision-making and strategy development. The scan also asked those who participated in agency initiatives to share their first-hand account of partnering with agencies and how they would recommend engaging PWLE to make human services systems more human-centered.

Aligned Customer-Centered Ecosystem of Services & Supports ([ACCESS](#))

The ACCESS project is an initiative led by APHSA and the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) that aims to surface and align modernization efforts that organizations across the wide health, human services, and labor ecosystem are undertaking in service of promoting truly customer-centered improvements to program design and delivery. Current and recent customers of health, human services, and labor programs, APHSA, NASWA, and other identified collaborators are co-designing a roadmap for system alignment informed by cross-sectional insights garnered throughout the project period and centered on the customer’s desired future state of alignment.

System Alignment for Young Families ([SAYF](#))

The System Alignment for Young Families (SAYF) Project is a project led by APHSA and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Beginning with a Technical Working Group of parents, state and local human services leaders and national advocates, SAYF worked to map essential inroads to system alignment for young families accomplished in partnership with parents and families. Building off this work the SAYF Learning Community brought together six state and local teams made up of cross-programmatic leadership and parent leaders with lived experience. The teams are working together to form a Strategic Alignment Plan (SAP) that breaks down programmatic agency silos with the goal of better serving young families.

Key Considerations for Engagement Based on APHSA Lessons Learned

Address Inaccessibility. Agencies should work to ensure the public is knowledgeable about government operations and opportunities for engagement. In addition to building awareness, agencies should ensure people can access engagement opportunities by providing supports with technology, transportation, childcare, language access, and other solutions to barriers that may prevent people from engaging.

Create Feedback Loops. OMB can include more information and examples for agencies on creating and managing feedback loops. This is a crucial step in ensuring people feel heard and respected and maintaining transparency in government, including transparency on why agencies choose not to implement certain perspectives. If agencies will adopt feedback, agencies should provide an approximate timeline of when they will implement the feedback. Relatedly, agencies could report back to those who respond to this RFI on the approaches they take and what they learn throughout the process.

Share Experiential Learnings and Best Practices. OMB can inform agencies about how to put into place the proper consent and ROI mechanisms to share engagement back to the public for others to use to inform their work. Agencies could consider creating a public data repository with feedback for other agencies and levels of government and partners to use. One example of this kind of customer research repository is Public Policy Lab’s [“The People Say.”](#)



Guidance Feedback

APHSA appreciates the thoughtful approach taken in the draft guidance and offers the following key recommendations to strengthen its impact.

Emphasize the intentionality required for planning successful community engagement.

The definitions, particularly framing community engagement as “trust-based, long-term, and two-way relationships,” provide a solid foundation. Expanding common definitions, such as “partners,” will promote alignment across agencies. While the guidance emphasizes inclusion for underserved groups, OMB could further stress the importance of intentional and authentic engagement and its role in making government more efficient, as well as both proactive and responsive. Providing practical, concrete examples of how agencies can inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower the public would strengthen the framework and help participants prepare for engagement.

Establish accountability measures for all collaborators involved in community engagement.

In APHSA’s experience engaging communities and individuals with lived experience across the country, we have learned that establishing accountability measures, such as setting clear expectations and creating and sustaining feedback loops. To benefit fully from the impact of community engagement, agencies must communicate how public input is used and why certain recommendations are not implemented to maintain transparency. The memo could also offer stronger guidance on reducing barriers to engagement through capacity-building support, staffing, and resources like childcare, translation, and compensation. These actions would ensure meaningful and accessible participation by individuals who face heightened challenges to contributing their time and expertise to government innovation.

Encourage cross-agency collaboration and collaborative data use.

OMB encouraging the involvement of all components and members of an agency’s workforce is a great step in keeping staff within the agency informed, establishing an organization-wide culture of community engagement, and co-creating opportunities. Additionally, we find that cross-agency collaboration and communication is a necessary step in improving the experiences of agencies and communities, sharing best practices, building on previous projects, and avoiding repetitive activities. This should also serve as an avenue for strengthening alignment across agencies, programs, and services.

Conclusion

APHSA is encouraged by this draft guidance and its accompanying toolkit. We welcome further collaboration to support inclusive, accessible, and impactful public engagement practices. We remain committed to partnering with the federal government to build systems that reflect the lived experiences and needs of the communities we serve.

For questions or to discuss further, contact Jess Maneely, Assistant Director of Process Innovation at jmaneely@aphsa.org.