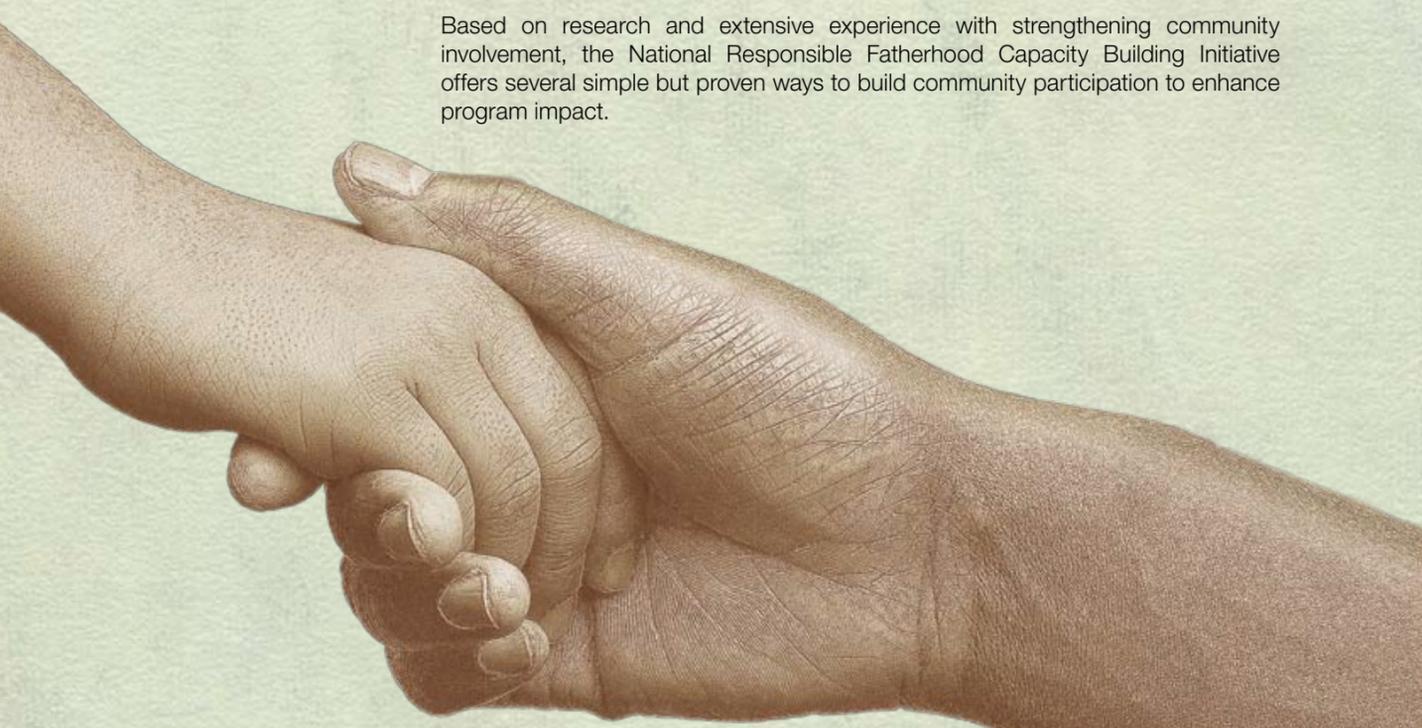


8

Steps Programs Can Take to Increase Community Involvement

Programs that promote responsible fatherhood can gain valuable insights and ideas when they involve members of the communities they serve. Community engagement can energize a program with innovative perspectives and approaches. Community representatives who are active with your program also can become influential allies as you expand your program's reach.

Based on research and extensive experience with strengthening community involvement, the National Responsible Fatherhood Capacity Building Initiative offers several simple but proven ways to build community participation to enhance program impact.



Building Capacity for Programs that Promote Responsible Fatherhood...

Leadership Development

Organizational Improvement

Program Enhancement

Community Engagement



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance

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National Responsible Fatherhood Capacity Building Initiative subawardees are encouraged to request technical assistance for organizational capacity building by contacting the National Fatherhood Initiative.

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8

Ways

to Engage

Your Community



NATIONAL RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD
CAPACITY BUILDING
I N I T I A T I V E

1 Involve Your Board

If your program has little or no experience with community engagement activities, schedule a discussion for the next board meeting. Putting community engagement on the meeting agenda will concentrate board attention on this vital strategy for program growth. Encourage board members to identify key community members and to share ideas for ways to capture their interest.

Suggest that the board form a committee that will create a detailed plan to boost community involvement with your program. The committee will help carry out and assess the activities outlined in the plan. Members of the full board also should be counted on to participate in community engagement efforts, which will help sustain their commitment.

2 Prepare a Plan

Just like the strategic plan that guides your program's operations, staffing, and services, a plan for community engagement will help focus your efforts. Community engagement must be a two-way street, with participation, interaction, and communication shared consistently. Therefore, a community engagement plan not only should outline how the program will reach out to the community, but also how others can work effectively with the program as you promote responsible fatherhood.

The written plan should present strategies for explaining the benefits of involvement to organizations and individuals. In other words, the plan should answer the "What's in it for me" question you can expect to hear as you launch community engagement activities. Be sure the answer aligns with the mission, goals, and objectives of those with whom you are trying to connect.

Once you complete the comprehensive community engagement plan, do not let it gather dust on someone's desk or bookshelf. Monitor implementation of the plan and measure outcomes each quarter. Then update your plan at least once a year, based on the quarterly assessments.

3 Identify Community Strengths

Before you kick off a community engagement campaign, first pinpoint the particular communities you want to involve. Be as specific as possible—proposing to involve "the community" is vague and could lead to scattershot efforts. You might determine your target communities are based on location (certain neighborhoods, for example), age (teen fathers, for example), or other factors and demographics.

Learn as much as you can about the values, problems, and concerns of the groups you plan to contact. Also find out how they view your program and the nature of any previous experiences they might have

had with it. Take advantage of the networking resources of your board members to uncover the unique skills and abilities organizations and individuals can bring to a partnership with your program. Compile a database of organizations and individuals and the strengths they might contribute to enhancing the quality of your services.

4 Create Committees

Carrying out an extensive community engagement plan can be overwhelming for even the most organized and dedicated board, if working alone. Recruit community members to serve on an advisory board or committee. The first-hand experience they gain is invaluable for transitioning them into being advocates for the program. Community members can provide fresh perspectives that give program staff a better understanding of the issues on the minds of those the program serves. And community members can be a terrific sounding board for new strategies or messages the program develops.

5 Open Your Doors

Personal relationships often are built and thrive on people asking others into their homes. Similarly, positive relationships can come about when your program invites community members into its home. Schedule an open house event where staff, board members, funders, and other stakeholders can interact with community members. Provide refreshments and make sure the space is professional, tidy, and able to accommodate diverse visitor needs (such as seating for seniors, easy access for persons with disabilities).

Spark dialogue with informative displays, attractive handouts, and activities for a variety of ages that showcase your work with fathers. Gather contact information of people who request additional information or are eager to become involved with your program (and assign staff to follow up). Have staff circulate during the event and note topics of particularly spirited discussions. Fatherhood-related issues that community members are passionate about might be added to the agenda of a public forum your program holds.

6 Sponsor a Forum

Like a town meeting, a forum or summit presents an opportunity to gather large numbers of people in one place to learn about and discuss a specific issue or topic. A lively forum can give your program deeper reach into faith, business, health care, or other sectors. Participants provide feedback to help you fine tune both your program's overall strategic plan as well as the community engagement plan.

Energetic discussion often reveals existing or potential challenges your program faces in implementing public awareness, education, and resource-building activities. Recruiting volunteers and locating additional resources also can move forward at a community forum.

Plan a forum thoroughly and well in advance, paying special attention to assembling a dynamic group of participants. A structured agenda will help focus participant discussion and prevent the forum from becoming merely a grievance session.

7 Conduct Interviews and Focus Groups

One-on-one in an interview or with peers in a focus group—both techniques give your program important access to key community members. The discussion topics, how many people should be included, time constraints, and availability of skilled facilitators will determine the technique you select.

Interviews more readily accommodate the schedules of busy community leaders and enable you to collect a lot of information in a limited time. During interviews, individuals often are more candid about controversial or sensitive issues. Additionally, training staff members to conduct a productive interview is easier than training them to facilitate focus groups.

Focus groups, however, are more effective for reaching several community members at once. The interactions of the group also prompt questions, comments, and ideas that might not emerge from a personal interview. Invite 6–12 participants and select an experienced facilitator who can help maximize feedback from all group members.

8 Spread the Word

Keeping stakeholders informed is essential for a community engagement campaign to be successful. Programs that promote responsible fatherhood can deliver information rapidly and cost-effectively to target communities by savvy use of media. Positive media coverage can position your program as a vital community resource working to improve the well-being of its children.

Whether low-tech (letters to the editor of the local newspaper) or high-tech (interactive Web site), media strategies can be tailored to your program's financial, staff, and other resources. Think beyond mailings, flyers, and newsletters to exhibits, billboards, community cable broadcasting, and other creative methods for increasing program recognition and enlisting volunteers.

Editors, columnists, and producers constantly look for great stories. Maintaining good relationships with them can lead to high-profile print space, air time, or radio spots at little or no cost to your program. Contact media representatives and establish your program as a reliable source of information about responsible fatherhood.