

Community Engagement

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Community engagement refers to the process by which community benefit organizations and individuals build ongoing, permanent relationships for the purpose of applying a collective vision for the benefit of a community. While community organizing involves the process of building a grassroots movement involving communities, community engagement primarily deals with the practice of moving said communities towards change, usually from a stalled or otherwise similarly suspended position.

Origins

Community engagement can trace its roots to the concept of community benefit, a term that grew out of an English common law concept, articulated in a 1891 legal decision that defined four types of charitable organizations: trusts for the advancement of education; trusts for the advancement of religion; and trusts for other purposes beneficial to the community.

As community benefit became an important method of institutionalizing ideals, methods evolved to effectively reach the communities those entities were meant to aid. This led to the birth of community organizing, which as far as the United States is concerned, gained momentum over time beginning in the late 1800s.

Methodologies of community engagement are a result of problems in the current community benefit administrative structure, where governing boards of community projects become unable to continue convincing either themselves or the community to further the projects they became involved in. This may be due to "incorrect aiming of accountability for problems in the governing board, overzealous micromanagement of resources, a collectively dysfunctional board, poor board / staff relations or unsatisfactory organizational planning." Because of these overlaying problems, community members themselves are also directly influenced and therefore similarly hindered in regards to change within their specific regions of development.

Current methods and implementation

Practical community engagement is used as an active method of implementing change. While most current standards implore more static means through standard marketing techniques, community engagement involves actively implementing a specific process towards activism such as the 8-step guideline listed below developed by Hildy Gottlieb of Help4NonProfits. While the process may have similarities to a controversial form of friendraising, the emphasis in community engagement is that of honest relationship building for the sake of community, not for the sole purpose of money-making. The steps are:

Determine the goals of the plan

Plan out who to engage

Develop engagement strategies for those individuals you already know

Develop engagement strategies of those individuals you do not already know

Prioritize those activities

Create an implementation plan

Monitor your progress

Maintain those relationships

Other programs exist to assist communities in the process of building community coalitions for engagement. One such program is Communities That Care which helps communities assess their needs and implement tested and effective programs to address their identified issues.