



Columbia, MO

▲ Community Example from Chapter 3 of "Lessons for Leaders:"
Lessons in Community Engagement for Equity

Community Background

During the past several years, a great deal of creative tension existed in the Midwestern college town of Columbia. It played out in many ways, including disagreement about policy, differing perspectives and priorities of new partners, and lingering feelings between partners from previous hard-fought campaigns. Nowhere was creative tension more keenly felt than on issues of race, class and community engagement.

Community Action

Led by a mostly white active-transportation advocacy group called the PedNet Coalition, the Unite 4 Healthy Neighborhoods (U4HN) partnership established health equity as a central value. They worked hard to build trusting relationships, engage residents for sustainable change, and understand the needs and capacities of the low-income communities of color they intended to serve.

Tensions became evident during the first few months of the project when the project director (who is white) and the engagement coordinator (who is black) were speaking on a community radio show about their goals and the availability of mini-grants for community organizations to help conduct assessment activities. Confronted by both the host and the mostly black listeners, they were accused of being "academic elites" who were more interested in collecting white-collar salaries to study poverty and then leaving the neighborhood than in solving the real daily problems of residents. This difficult experience defined their future approach and intensified the initiative's focus on authentic engagement and cultural competency.

They requested an extension of their assessment timeline from six to 14 months. The experience also led to more relationship building; changed times and locations of meetings; the provision of food, transportation and childcare; and paying people for their time on defined projects. It also spurred critically important youth and resident involvement in the group's kickoff policy summit. Nevertheless, the tension remained.

During conversations about revitalizing the Douglass Park Neighborhood Association in an area of concentrated black poverty, two black community partners from outside the neighborhood learned of the absolute need to gain advance approval from neighborhood elders. They listened to the pain of decades of institutional racism and oppression through a lynching, the destruction of the thriving black business district in the 1950s and the fracturing of neighborhood life from construction of an urban freeway. Even as the elders gave their blessing to re-establish the neighborhood association under the leadership of a young black composer, rap artist and community builder named Tyree Byndom, the issues of race, class, credibility, trust and power were very evident.

As one might expect with a health equity initiative, many other versions of creative tension were present across different goals and levels of the initiative. And it was the leadership's ability to work patiently, flexibly and constructively with these kinds of tension that allowed U4HN to become a highly productive initiative that achieved many health equity gains in Columbia.