

Reaching People with Disabilities through Healthy Communities

Phase one – Commitment

Including People with Disabilities in Community Coalitions

[Karma Harris] I, really, one of the things I think about when I think about commitment and what the Commitment phase means to inclusive healthy community efforts is that this project, I believe, for the first time really brought together and sort of merged and married the efforts of the folks working on the disability and health side, and then the local community health folks, and bringing them together to do this work for the first time.

And when I think of that commitment — hearing your conversation today — this is really what sticks out in my mind, is that now we've got these folks together and really have changed the culture of how we involve people with disabilities and the disability community into our local healthy community effort.

David, as we round up our discussion on Phase One, commitment, is there any advice that you would give to other states who are interested in working at the local level on these inclusive Healthy Living strategies? And then, by that same token, what successes or lessons learned have you experienced that might be of value to other states who might be listening to this particular podcast session and learning more about the Commitment phase?

[David Ellsworth] Yeah, so I'll just kind of share a smattering of things that I found to be beneficial, or lessons learned pretty broadly. The first is that communities are really already engaging in efforts that would benefit people with disability as long as they're accessible. So, there's a lot of great work that happens at the community level.

And I think that that's an ideal opportunity to bring in kind of a State Expert Advisor, or someone who is familiar with disability, or, better yet, people with disabilities themselves to look at the activities that are going on in communities and provide some advice and suggestions on how those could be more accessible. They might need some minor adaptations, but those adaptations benefit everyone at the community level. So I think that that's extremely important and that kind of ties into the next thing.

So I think it is crucial to engage the disability community at the local level in that type of work. There's a saying in the disability community that is “nothing about us without us.” So don't do anything that you think would benefit us without our opinion and without our advice. And I think that's important to remember. If you if you bring people with disabilities into your coalition or into your public health work or any work, you're going to get a lot of advice on how to make those programs or activities more accessible for a very large proportion of the population.

I guess if local health departments are looking for state experts where people to serve in that State Expert Advisory role, they should look to the University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (or UCEDDs). There's at least one in every state. So that is a tremendous resource for people who might want that kind of state expert advice. And there's a lot of opportunities for disability inclusion at the local level.

You can look at inviting your local Centers for Independent Living, or CILs as they're sometimes called, or your local Department of Developmental Disabilities. Those are all great resources. And then I guess some advice for the State Expert Advisers or state roles is just be aware that there are a lot of opportunities to improve health at the local level, but respect that those local health experts really are the experts.

They know what's best for the community, but you can probably help them along and suggest some ways to build in ties with the disability community and make things more accessible, in general. So those are kind of my lessons learned from the project thus far.

[Karma Harris] Thank you for sharing those. You shared some great resources and tips for how we can connect with our local, state, and even national disability partners, and I couldn't agree more that our local folks have shown us and demonstrated that they really know their communities more. And with us at NACDD, CDC, and then you guys at the state level as the State Expert Advisors – us really sort of guiding them to this community-driven community-facilitated leadership process really does yield some really impactful changes in terms of making our communities healthier and more inclusive for everyone. I think that, in a nutshell, really sums up what the Commitment phase and the partners are, and how important this is in doing this important work.