

Reaching People with Disabilities through Healthy Communities

Phase one – Commitment

Partnership Development for Community Engagement

[Karma Harris]– David – I'd love to hear from you. With regard to your specific role as the State Expert Advisor for the project, and to get your thoughts about how this is really important to the success of the community.

So that said, I guess the question I'll start with is, "Can you talk more about your experience as the State Expert Advisor for Ohio and your involvement with Adams and Marion Counties?"

[David Ellsworth] Absolutely. So, this was a really fun role for me to take on. My background is in serving people with disabilities and making sure that public health efforts and programs are inclusive of people with disabilities. And it was just a really unique and fun opportunity to partner with local communities to help make sure whatever their existing efforts were are inclusive.

So, we didn't ask them to do a whole lot that was new. We just kind of asked, "Hey, whatever you're planning on doing, whatever you think would benefit your communities, let's work together to make sure that that includes people with disabilities and that it has the potential to benefit everyone." So, I think it was a really unique opportunity to learn how to make some local public health programming, policy, systems, and environmental changes more accessible, but also how to engage the disability community in those local areas in this really important work.

[Karma Harris] Very interesting. Can you also speak to some of the benefits of having the State Expert Advisor in place for a project like this, for a project that specifically focuses on policy, systems, and environmental changes within various community sectors at the local level? Like, how this could be advantageous to other folks who are looking to maybe replicate parts of this project?

[David Ellsworth] Yeah, so I think that this State Expert Advisor model was a really smart move for a couple of reasons:

The local community coaches are very much experts in their own right. They know what's going to work for health in their community. They're very acutely aware of their community needs, but they might have a little bit less of an understanding on how to make things inclusive, or how to engage people with disabilities. And that was the important role of the State Expert Advisers, to bring that disability inclusion lens.

So, having this State Expert Advisor role really served as an opportunity to enhance the partnerships at the local level, ensuring that communication was working both ways, and really to kind of bring some expertise at the state level that translated to the local level, but also connects with the national level – the CDC and NACDD – as well. So, we were able to provide some guidance on how to include people with disabilities in the strategies that were selected and existing community-based activities.

Another reason that this partnership was beneficial, or that the State Expert Advisor role was beneficial, was they kind of served as a dedicated contact person for the local counties to call on if they were a little bit unsure of their activities, or if the selected programs might benefit people with disabilities was really useful to kind of

be able to talk that through and to bounce ideas off of each other. And through this process, again, and kind of, you know, I realized that the coaches – the people that I was working with at the local level – again are very much experts on what works for health and in their local communities. So, it was certainly a two-way street with regard to communication and deciding on what our priorities should look like.

And finally, it really served as an opportunity for us to discuss and build best practices that work at the local level. But for us to share those strategies and lessons learned at the state and national level. So I think that it was a really beneficial opportunity for myself. But it really influenced state level efforts and national efforts, as well.

[Karma Harris] In thinking about working with your two communities, I just want to throw this extra question out there, David: When you think about from start to finish that we started this process back in 2015, has that partnership process been easy? In terms of connecting with them and forming relationships with them and throughout. Because I think when we talk about commitment, we're talking more than just about coming into the project and being selected, but really how those relationships work throughout the course of the project. And if I could throw in that question, I'd really be interested to hear how seamless or how challenging the partnership might have been with your two communities, and just wondering if you have any thoughts on that.

[David Ellsworth] Yeah, I think that the partnership came pretty naturally. I really enjoy engaging local health departments and local health officials and trying to make sure that community efforts are inclusive of people with disabilities. I think that it did take a little bit of time to, you know, achieve some buy-in, and, you know, kind of brand myself as a resource. And I think it was really successful. And that was me not taking ownership of the project, and really, again, letting the community coaches be experts in what works for health in their communities.

And for me to simply provide some advice on how to engage people with disabilities and how to make those opportunities more inclusive. So, I think that, that strategy was really beneficial and was the right choice. I don't have to dictate what goes on in the communities. That's not my call. My job is really to make sure that the existing opportunities are inclusive and consider the needs of people with disabilities and everyone in the community.