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Community engagement for policy and systems change

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The Health for Oakland's People and Environment Collaborative prioritized building Oakland (California, USA) community residents' capacity to engage in systems and policy changes toward improving food access and neighborhood conditions for physical activity. This article describes the process for community engagement, summarizes results, and analyzes lessons learned from the perspective of existing literature on community building, youth engagement, and empowerment for social change. Several dimensions necessary to build community capacity were used by the Collaborative and created the foundation for empowered residents to work with organizational partners. Evaluation findings from 2009 to 2012 provide examples of strategies that developed leadership skills and brought community residents, including youth, into leadership and decision-making positions. The Collaborative's structure incorporated opportunities for community to lead new and existing food justice programs and advocacy activities. Several lessons from the Collaborative's efforts can inform community capacity practice, such as (1) developing resources and support to build capacity for community residents to meaningfully engage in policy and systems change; (2) considering elements of collaborative structure and its processes, shared power, and decision-making necessary in partnerships among diverse individuals and groups; and (3) incorporating resources and activities that sustain community residents' participation as change leaders.

Keywords: community engagement; youth leadership development; community leadership and empowerment

Introduction

The Health for Oakland's People and Environment (HOPE) Collaborative was formed in 2007 when several Oakland, California governmental agencies and community groups – including the original conveners of the collaborative, the Alameda County Public Health Department (ACPHD), Alameda County Community Food Bank, and Urban Ecology – received invitations from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to jointly apply for funding as part of the foundation's Food and Fitness initiative (Lachance, Carpenter, Emery, & Luluquisen, 2014). Food and Fitness community partnerships were funded to increase access to healthy, locally grown food, and opportunities for active living through policy and systems change at the community level.

The HOPE Collaborative envisions vibrant Oakland neighborhoods that provide equitable access to affordable, healthy locally grown food; safe and inviting places for physical activity and play; and sustainable, local economies – all to the benefit of the families and youth living in Oakland neighborhoods with the greatest health disparities. HOPE's mission is to create community-driven and sustainable environmental change

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that will significantly improve the health and wellness of Oakland's flatland residents most impacted by social inequities. Recognizing the existing system of making and implementing policies that affect food access and the physical environment, the HOPE Collaborative focused work in three areas (HOPE Collaborative, 2013):

- *Sustainable and Equitable Food Systems*: supporting policies, programs, and practices that increase equitable access to fresh, healthy, affordable food, and investing in local, sustainable, economic development.
- *Healthy and Safe Built Environments*: engaging community members in creating changes in their neighborhoods to increase active living and social cohesion.
- *Community Engagement and Leadership Development*: supporting community members and youth to develop skills and knowledge for engaging in policy-making to create change in the food system and built environment.

Several dimensions necessary to build community capacity (Goodman et al., 1998; Minkler, Wallerstein, & Wilson, 1997) were used by the HOPE Collaborative and created the foundation for empowered Oakland residents to work with organizational partners. Since the beginning, HOPE has engaged Oakland residents in a participatory process that has allowed them to assess their own community's strengths and needs, as well as design and implement processes for making their communities more accessible to healthier, locally grown food options and safer places to live and play.

Oakland's community context

In 2011, Oakland had a documented diverse population of 391,445, with no single race or ethnic group comprising a majority. The city's population was 28% African American, 34.5% White, 25.4% Hispanic or Latino, and 16.8% Asian. According to American Community Survey estimates (2011), 21.0% of Oakland residents lived at or below the federal poverty line and 12.3% were unemployed.

Oakland's cost of living, including housing costs, is higher than the rest of the country but moderate for the San Francisco Bay Area. The costs of health care, transportation, and food are higher than in the rest of the United States. As a result, Oakland has a greater burden of persons who lack health insurance and have inadequate access to health, compared to most cities in the county (City-Data.com, 2009b). Moreover, in 2010, Oakland's violent crime rate was the highest among California cities with a population of 100,000 and above (City-Data.com, 2009a).

As such, Oakland residents face barriers in accessing safe and enjoyable places for families and children to play. The City of Oakland has over 100 parks with amenities such as gardens and bathroom facilities. However, in low-income neighborhoods, residents experience poor grounds lighting, poor maintenance and cleanliness of bathrooms, repeated infestation of cockroaches and rats, limited or no signage posting community programs and hours of operation, lack of multilingual signage, lack of sporting equipment, and the disrepair of sporting areas in local parks. A shortfall in the 1989 and 1993 property tax reductions, Lighting and Landscape Assessment District, resulted in a \$7.3 million park maintenance deficit for the fiscal years 2005–2007 and contributed to Oakland parks' decaying conditions (City-Data.com, 2009b).

During 2005–2007, three studies conducted by the University of California, Berkeley, in partnership with the ACPHD, found that residents in Oakland's low-income neighborhoods were unable to access healthy foods due to the lack of proximity to

vendors that stock affordable healthy foods (Unger & Wooten, 2006). As in many other cities (Larson, Story, & Nelson, 2009), several factors have produced neighborhood conditions that adversely impact food access. For example, there have been decreasing numbers of large grocery stores in low-income Oakland neighborhoods because of city and regional planning inequities such as disparate neighborhood revitalization, gentrification, and poorly planned efforts to provide incentives for new commercial enterprises (Unger & Wooten, 2006).

In the area of focus of the HOPE Collaborative – the low-income flatlands – residents have been able to purchase most of their basic food necessities only from neighborhood convenience stores and liquor stores. As of 2005, there were 350 stores licensed to sell liquor in Oakland for a population of approximately 400,000 residents, or one store for every 1150 people. In the poorest neighborhoods, such as West Oakland, there is one liquor store for every 300 residents. Of greatest concern is that these corner and liquor stores, more often than not, sell few fresh and healthy foods and stock a limited variety of food items, most of which are lacking in nutritional value and quality (Unger & Wooten, 2006).

HOPE Collaborative's strategies to engage community residents

Following an assessment of the Oakland food system by the Oakland Food Policy Council (OFPC), a recommendation was made to engage community residents in assessing the existing food system and developing a sustainable food plan for the city (Unger & Wooten, 2006). At the outset, the HOPE Collaborative made community engagement a priority strategy. Community residents were integral to leadership and decision-making in the development and design of priorities, strategies, and programs, as well as the function of the HOPE Collaborative Steering Committee. Moreover, activities to secure involvement of Oakland's residents were incorporated in several policy and program areas. HOPE recognized the necessity of capacity-building trainings and initiatives, which have sustained resident engagement throughout the planning and implementation phases of the initiative. The following section describes specific structures, strategies, and project activities employed by the HOPE Collaborative aimed at community engagement during 2009–2012.

Create mechanisms for community involvement in the planning process

Two aligned long-term goals of the HOPE Collaborative are to ensure that the City of Oakland (1) adopts a health element to address the link between built environment and health; and (2) incorporates the framework of complete streets into the City's General Plan. Complete streets are designed so that all users (e.g. motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians) have safe use and adequate access (Smart Growth America, 2010).

One of the strategies implemented to reach these goals is the creation of mechanisms for community involvement in the City of Oakland's planning process, thereby establishing a mandated "neighborhood" planning process that allows community residents to effectively advocate for additional usable parks, playgrounds, gardens, and green spaces for physical activity and play.

The HOPE Collaborative built the capacity of residents to advocate for the health element and for complete streets, partnering with the City of Oakland staff and the ACPHD's Place Matters Initiative. Combined, these groups have been a major influence in moving this dual-action agenda forward. Activities have included conducting neighborhood

planning, hosting community engagement events, conducting interviews, and hiring two community members as team leaders. HOPE conducted neighborhood mapping sessions with Oakland's Elmhurst community residents and presented these plans to the area's Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) and Community Development Block Grant Board for consideration and adoption by the City's Planning Commission.

HOPE has been partnering with the City of Oakland and Alameda County Public Health Department to implement a healthy neighborhood plan, specifically for the lower Elmhurst area, to be used as a tool for advocacy in Oakland's General Plan. HOPE members chose Oakland's Elmhurst area for its neighborhood planning efforts because there were planning projects already happening in the area. As a result of the HOPE efforts, there has been an increase in civic engagement in this area. For example, three neighborhood residents have agreed to be community leaders and several neighborhood residents have participated in neighborhood mapping sessions. Results from this effort include greater community resident involvement and advocacy with their NCPC and Community Development Block Grant Board.

Create mechanisms for community involvement in ongoing decision-making

The HOPE Steering Committee was formed in 2007 during the planning phase and is responsible for the decision-making and leadership of the collaborative. This diverse group of 14 stakeholders is comprised of representatives from public agencies and community-based organizations, as well as four Oakland residents. Oakland community residents have served on the Steering Committee as its co-chair and treasurer; additional residents also co-chair action teams with an agency or organizational partner. This allows community residents and organizational partners to work together in a way that ensures input from both types of partners and fosters an equal decision-making process.

The Steering Committee holds regular meetings once a month for two hours to update, process, and strategize how to best move forward in achieving its set goals and objectives. Important Collaborative decision-making does not transpire without the prior approval and blessing of the Steering Committee. Decisions by the Steering Committee are made democratically and only members that hold elected and/or voting positions are allowed to vote. Although many Collaborative members that attend Steering Committee meetings are not elected or voting members, the Steering Committee is still an open space for them to be heard, and opportunities exist for all to become a part of the Steering Committee over time. Their opinions about Collaborative functioning are invited, included, and respected.

Oakland residents are important community stakeholders and their involvement has been a key component in the way the Steering Committee functions and makes decisions. Residents are able to provide a level of insight and perspective about the ways systems and policies function on the ground in their own neighborhoods and communities. Community residents continue to remain engaged because HOPE's work is shaped by the belief that community leadership and ownership are critical to the success of policy and systems change efforts, and they have experienced their ideas being put into action.

Conduct focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of barriers to participation in ongoing programs and practices

As part of the HOPE work, the Collaborative partners with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) to ensure that the vast majority of low-income students eat a healthy

breakfast at their schools that includes fresh fruits and vegetables. Strategies to address systems level changes to bring this about include assessing and eliminating barriers to students accessing school breakfasts and enhancing community engagement with the Oakland Fresh School Produce Markets. The Oakland Fresh markets were created to build a school-based local food system that increases access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food for Oakland residents and promotes healthy school environments for children and families living in those communities. Each of the Fresh School Produce Markets is placed in schools located in neighborhoods with overwhelming numbers of liquor and corner stores.

To collect information regarding the progress of this work, HOPE conducted four focus groups with middle school students from the following schools: Roots International, Coliseum College Prep Academy, Alliance Academy, and Elmhurst Middle School. These schools were identified because they had lower participation rates in the school breakfast program compared to other schools in the district, and they were also located in the HOPE-targeted neighborhoods. HOPE partnered with University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health students to conduct each of the focus groups. Results of this effort revealed that barriers to school breakfast program participation exist in four major categories: quality of the food, type of food served, time constraints around breakfast, and the eating environment. These barriers are being addressed by OUSD, and subsequently, a larger percentage of students are accessing the free breakfast program at various schools. Moreover, OUSD has taken over as the sole operator of the Oakland Fresh School Produce Markets, and the markets have officially been institutionalized within the district. Community engagement has resulted in several residents that have volunteered in the warehouse. With resident volunteers, OUSD gained the capacity to meet the growing demand of the OUSD produce markets. Over the past year, the number of produce markets in low-income neighborhoods in the flatlands has increased from 12 to 22.

Partner with food policy council and other critical organizations

One way to foster economic opportunities for Oakland residents is to ensure that local policies on urban agriculture facilitate access to locally grown healthy produce. In partnership with the OFPC, HOPE gathered and analyzed existing research on policies and laws related to Oakland's urban agriculture. In this partnership, OFPC acted as the food policy arm of HOPE, and HOPE functioned as the official community engagement partner of OFPC. The systems changes that HOPE and OFPC worked toward included: (1) building a local food economy through the promotion of support towards local ownership; (2) developing accessible pathways to entrepreneurship; (3) facilitating support of a regional food shed through institutional purchasing of local food; and (4) assessing the feasibility of an Oakland-based regional food hub.

With resident participation in the OFPC, a policy advocacy agenda incorporated a community perspective. HOPE and OFPC advocated for a full-city update of zoning codes because most of the then-current zoning codes and policies were grandfathered in and were out of date. For example, an Oakland food system's pioneer received a threat of up to \$3000 in fines for not having an expensive Conditional Use Permit for growing food on her personal property. As a first step towards larger policy change, a policy was passed that enabled people to grow food for consumption in *all* zones in Oakland in April 2011. This was a great achievement because community residents could then grow and consume healthy fruits and vegetables in a way that was accessible and affordable

to them without risk of fines. As a by-product, this effort facilitated a collaborative relationship with the City of Oakland's Planning Department.

Additionally, the partnership advocated for a change that eliminated the need for a Conditional Use Permit, which costs \$2800 to grow food, instead replacing it with a streamlined amendment to Oakland's "Home Occupation Permit" that makes allowances for certain home-based businesses. The permit process for individuals who want to grow and sell plant-based crops at a pop-up stand on-site is now a one-day process that costs \$40.

Community residents continue to serve on a policy advisory group and have provided the following key recommendations for the City of Oakland's Zoning Update:

- Define urban agriculture to include both plant- and animal-based food productions;
- Allow for on-site sales, locally grown produce, and value-added goods citywide;
- Ensure affordable and timely permitting for urban agriculture operations;
- Uphold the highest humane, ecological, and neighbor-friendly standards of operation; and
- Support residents to access available lands, both public and private, for food growing and selling.

Build champions for policy and systems change

The HOPE Collaborative developed and conducted a six-month Leadership Institute for community residents that built champions for policy and systems change in East and West Oakland. The two main goals of the program were to: (1) build the capacity of residents to take leadership in the HOPE Collaborative, in their communities, and in the broader policy-making arena; and (2) provide an opportunity for residents who demonstrate leadership potential and a commitment to HOPE's work to deepen their skills in policy advocacy, facilitation, communications, project management, working in collaboratives, community organizing, broadening their knowledge of food systems and the built environment, and economic and civic community ownership.

Eleven HOPE residents graduated from the Leadership Institute in March 2012, and many of the participants applied what they had learned to their work within the Collaborative, such as facilitating meetings, providing testimony at the City Council meetings, and community organizing with store owners to sell healthy foods.

As a capacity-building activity, the HOPE Leadership Institute provided an opportunity for residents to put what they were learning into practice in specific community engagement activities. For example, a resident came into the Leadership Institute and learned new skills such as how to refine her strategies when speaking to certain audiences. Her community project with the Food Transportation Resource Connection involved organizing a transportation service to ensure healthy food options are more accessible for residents in her residential complex. She also worked together with the Food Bank so that her neighbors received earth boxes to grow produce in their homes. All of these community engagement activities benefited from her improved capacity to speak with collaborative stakeholders.

Another resident had been doing work in the community for years, well before the HOPE Collaborative was first established. The Learning Institute allowed her to build on her current skills to update the *Flavors of the Garden* cookbook developed by People's Grocery, a community-based organization in West Oakland that focuses on

economic development and food justice through urban gardens, produce sales to local community members, and the distribution of “grub boxes” of seasonal produce to low-income families. Since the Leadership Institute, this participant has given interviews, written pieces for the OFPC website, testified at transportation meetings, and had her testimony video posted on the government website.

These examples indicate that community residents – and the work of the HOPE Collaborative – benefited from a concerted leadership training program. As a member of the HOPE Executive Committee and previous Built Environment Action Team Co-Chair, a resident who has been with the HOPE Collaborative since the planning phase emphasized, the lessons were successfully aimed at developing participants’ leadership and engagement for creating positive changes in the community. As a graduate of the Leadership Institute, he reports using the communication and relationship building skills and applying them to his participation in the community engagement piece of the HOPE Neighborhood Planning Initiative.

Provide a youth lens

The HOPE Collaborative Youth Action Board (YAB) is a collection of ethnically diverse youth from Oakland, California, that originated from a larger project called Youth Building Healthy Communities. YAB provides the HOPE Collaborative with a youth lens, ensuring youth always have a voice in the system and policy changes that affect their community.

YAB created a youth-driven social enterprise program for East Oakland to help community members live healthy, eat healthy, have jobs, and make healthy decisions by learning where to get nutritious food, services, and produce. Their objective was to ensure that all youth in East Oakland would be able to easily access fresh, affordable food whenever they want and lead healthier lives. For the last two years, YAB has been meeting weekly to focus on issues important to the collaborative, specifically regarding increasing opportunities and access to healthy ways of living and having healthy habits in the Oakland flatlands, by way of a coupon book and fresh food guide.

YAB developed and implemented a healthy food and coupon book in an effort to achieve five main goals: (1) raise awareness about food justice and health disparities in East Oakland among their peers; (2) provide a resource and inexpensive way for youth and community members to access healthier foods and community gardens; (3) create a reimbursement program for local stores and gardens; (4) encourage more youth engagement with local community-based organizations and events working on food justice issues; and (5) create a new youth social enterprise opportunity for 16–22-year olds through coupon book sales and engagement in and outreach regarding food issues of importance in East Oakland.

The youth group succeeded in their project, which included compiling information on healthy eating and the location of farmers markets, and the youth participants gained skills in program planning, marketing, advocacy, and policy development. The book was distributed throughout the HOPE Collaborative and its partners, and it raised awareness about healthy food options in the city.

HOPE’s efforts at youth engagement with YAB provided opportunities for youth to lead and take action on their food justice priorities. The YAB coupon book project lasted for one year and paved the way for additional youth engagement opportunities within the HOPE Collaborative. For sustaining youth engagement, HOPE’s commitment to fostering positive youth development in a community setting requires an ongoing and

goal-oriented process. Youth must engage in meaningful activities that build their skills and in projects that they believe will make a difference in their lives (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003).

Youth are often inappropriately placed in powerless positions. Since the establishment of the HOPE YAB, it has been particularly challenging to have youth members actively participate on the Steering Committee. In a focus group with members of YAB, they reported feeling that they were not listened to or respected for their opinions. They found it difficult being around many adults because their messages and work got “lost” among the adults. YAB gave them a forum in which they were listened to, and their priorities were addressed.

Working with youth requires a worldview, considerate approaches, and engaging methodologies that pay attention to their priorities and life circumstances while fostering their long-term dedication to community change. Young people have skills in community organizing, facilitating meetings, conducting outreach, and coordinating major campaigns, as described in the YAB coupon book project. As Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) propose, youth must be seen as resources who contribute their perspectives, skills, and life experiences in the design and implementation of programs.

Insights and lessons from HOPE Collaborative’s community engagement strategies

The HOPE Collaborative made a commitment to engage Oakland residents, most of whom are people of color and reside in the low-income neighborhoods of Oakland’s flatlands. These residents bear the greatest burden of the health and social inequities related to food access and poor neighborhood conditions (Beyers et al., 2009). In the process of engaging Oakland residents, several challenges emerged, including both structural and relational challenges. Structural challenges to community engagement have included mechanisms, such as committees, groups, events, and activities that the HOPE Collaborative provides as opportunities or pathways to work with Oakland residents. Relational challenges refer to dynamics in collaborative organizations that address resource and power sharing in decision-making. Reflection on these challenges has raised a number of lessons learned and recommendations for sustaining community resident engagement in complex partnerships aimed at policy and systems change.

Several lessons were learned from HOPE Collaboratives’ community engagement efforts, including the following: (1) include adequate financial resources in the budget to support capacity building, such as leadership trainings and compensation; (2) incorporate opportunities for shared power and decision-making among racially and economically diverse members; and (3) ensure sustainable engagement by providing opportunities for experiencing early success and deeper dedication to the work.

Include adequate financial resources in the budget to support capacity building such as leadership training and compensation

Findings from the Leadership Institute indicate that community residents and the HOPE Collaborative benefited from a concerted leadership training program. Resources for building community residents’ capacity should include comprehensive, intensive leadership trainings on community organizing, policy advocacy, and specific skills to change systems and policies related to food access and built environments. Funding for similar leadership trainings need to be robust with adequate resources in the operations budget. HOPE had originally planned for a larger curriculum but had to change it due to

funding circumstances. An adequate budget for trainings would ensure that all topics and skill areas are sufficiently covered for maximum impact. A goal of the trainings should be to ensure that community residents can advocate effectively for themselves.

There also needs to be a concerted effort to provide residents with financial compensation for participation, rather than insisting that they volunteer their time. As stated earlier, the residents who are most impacted by health inequities typically have little or no disposable income. They also often have the greatest interest in and commitment to ensuring policy and systems changes in their communities. With the HOPE Collaborative, funds were available for stipends to support participation, which fostered the ability of residents to participate in the Collaborative's various projects and activities. The recommended strategy, however, is that stipends need to be coupled with strategies that ensure residents' ongoing and sustained involvement.

Incorporate opportunities for shared power and decision-making among racially and economically diverse members

Community residents often experience being at the lower end of the power and privilege spectrum. Many times, decisions at the community level are made by those who occupy staff positions in agencies, community-based organizations, and policy-making institutions.

Since there are only four residents on the Steering Committee, their voices can get lost or overlooked because of the unequal presence of organizational members. Many of the organizations around the table have been there since HOPE was first established and, therefore, have always maintained the ability to vote during Steering Committee meetings. If there are multiple representatives from one organization, then their votes all count as one. The only time transitions occur on the Steering Committee is when there are co-chair elections and new people come into those positions. The persons and/or positions with decision-making power were decided when the Collaborative first came about, and since that time, there has been considerable turnover with the director's position. There have been no transparent processes for deciding who has voting power on the Steering Committee and there is no formal process for having co-chair elections. Elections have come so infrequently, it has been difficult to get new people involved with the Steering Committee. One resident in particular has had a seat on the Steering Committee since the Collaborative was first established in 2007. Residents continue to be truly committed, and while they often have difficulty influencing the direction of the Collaborative, their opinions about organizational functioning are invited and respected.

Evaluation findings from interviews with adult residents indicated a desire for more ways to be in leadership and decision-making positions in the Collaborative. They requested more opportunities to be seen as more than "community residents" and wanted places within HOPE to showcase their leadership skills. As an example, a YAB member participated in the Leadership Institute and learned how to speak to different audiences in a way that got her point across. With these skills, she reported growing more comfortable talking to "youth about different leadership roles, how to be a leader, the steps to go about it, and how to be a leader while still maintaining lives as a teenager."

Ensure sustainable engagement by providing opportunities for experiencing early success and deeper dedication to the work

Physical and social conditions in many low-income neighborhoods in Oakland are not on par with middle-class neighborhoods as a result of divestment, similar to other urban

areas of the U.S. (Anthony, 2010; Fullilove, 2004). Therefore, many community residents who have been involved in the HOPE Collaborative prioritize short-term concrete improvements in order to see immediate changes take place in their neighborhoods.

This type of priority setting was evident in the YAB food coupon project. For the youth, it was important to have concrete deliverables that could be produced within a reasonably short period of time. As a result of having short-term success, the youth's dedication and ability to push through difficulties and obstacles showed concrete accomplishments. As the youth coordinator said,

it is important to go onto what you want, staying on target with what you can accomplish. Even though the process might be difficult, stick to your guns and push through it. It's rewarding because now they can see change from their efforts.

This is crucial to developing sustainable strategies for community engagement.

In order to keep community residents engaged and at the table for the long term, there must be a system in place to address the shorter term priority issues of the residents. Funds need to be invested so that short-term projects can be realized in a collaborative neighborhood approach. For example, it was essential that Leadership Institute graduates have specific projects and tasks that met their needs and also contributed to the work of the Collaborative.

Another important element for sustainability is to support ongoing teamwork that creates meaningful products for the community. The YAB's coupon book project is an excellent example of youth working together as a team. YAB members shared that they learned how they could do anything if they work together and put in effort. They reported that just seeing some of their efforts come to life made them feel inspired to keep doing this work.

Conclusion

This article captures a three-year window in the HOPE Collaborative's efforts at community engagement. There is evidence that the HOPE Collaborative incorporated dimensions identified by Goodman et al. (1998) that build community capacity: *participation, leadership, skills, and resources*. Community residents participated in program planning and implementation. Others were also engaged through the Leadership Institute and as decision-making individuals in the Steering and Program Committees. Many grew leadership and advocacy skills through active involvement in policy campaigns. Although evidence of how HOPE's engagement strategies are sustained requires further evaluation, findings to date indicate that creating opportunities and capacity for authentic civic engagement is essential to the process of community change.

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