



Episode 20: Community Engagement: A Guide to Meaningful Relationship Building

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Intro:

Welcome to the NCJA podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning, and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program or Byrne JAG, contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.

Amanda Blasko:

Hi everyone, and welcome to the NCJA podcast. My name is Amanda Blasko and I am a program manager here at NCJA. For our first episode of the year, I have the pleasure of speaking with my colleague, Amir Chapel, program manager of policy and practice here at NCJA. On today's episode, we'll be discussing community engagement, what that really means, and how to engage the community in a meaningful way.

Thank you for being on the podcast, Amir. I'd love if you could introduce yourself and provide us with a little more information about your background.

Amir Chapel:

Good morning, Amanda. Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. Again, my name is Amir Chapel. I'm a program manager here at NCJA, and I'm looking forward to having this great discussion today. I come to you with the background rooted in community. As a formerly incarcerated person who grew up in marginalized community, I understand firsthand the importance of community engagement. And later in life as a professional, I worked on the system side of things. So I also understand some of the practical challenges that go into determining what it looks like, how a system partner or a government can engage with the community, and I'm really excited about this discussion. So thank you, Amanda.

Amanda Blasko:

Thank you. Very glad to have you. Just to set us up for success in this conversation here today, I'd like to start pretty broad just with a basic question about what is community engagement and why is it important, both in general and specifically as it relates to strategic planning processes.

Amir Chapel:

That's a tough question there. Giving it a shot, I first want to start by bringing us to a shared understanding of what community means because when we use the word community engagement, it can mean different things to different folks or different entities depending on what their understanding of that is. And if I just start off with a Oxford Dictionary definition, it's a group of people living in the



same place or having a particular characteristic in common, like the law enforcement community or the scientific community or the sports community. And if you look at peer review literature, like the literature that's in public health, social and behavioral health, they define it as a group of people that interact and support each other, but they're tied together with their shared experiences or other characteristics like a sense of belonging or their physical proximity, like neighborhoods, groups, things like that nature.

And when I'm thinking about SAAs, or state administering agencies and their grantees, I think of community to include traditional, and very importantly, non-traditional stakeholders who've been left on the margins when thinking about what a strategic plan could look like and the priorities that are in them. When you think about a stakeholder survey and the community of respondents to that survey, we see in some cases, they're predominantly law enforcement as far as the respondents, which then makes sense that the priorities align with law enforcement. So when thinking about diversifying funding within or outside of law enforcement in the SAA, gathering different perspectives for their strategic plan from other parts of the community could help identify unmet needs. You need to identify those unmet needs. And if you're not engaging with entities or folks or community groups, coalitions and advocacy groups to identify those, the strategic plan will completely miss those.

And I think it's really important to involve citizens in the political process because it's a fundamental part of democracy. And community members bring valuable expertise and perspective to policymaking. The people most impacted by the criminal legal system, they hold critical knowledge. They include people with lived experience, victims, family members, and community organizations. And I always have to think about inclusion and equity. I feel like those are key to community engagement. Inclusion fosters a culture that welcomes diverse voices, especially those of groups that have been historically marginalized. Equity ensures that the criminal legal system processes are fair and accessible to everyone.

The one thing I really want to mention is that it's really important in strategic planning, especially in strategic planning, as it relates to setting funding priorities and how to distribute Byrne JAG funding because it promotes equitable funding decisions. It helps governments improve the efficiency, legitimacy, and transparency of their decision making.

I think by embracing and encouraging participation, it enables grant funding decision makers to make more informed decisions by engaging with and carefully mapping out the needs, opinions, and visions of local communities on issues that matter to them. And I think, and I'm hopeful that this would lead to priorities that are driven by all of the stakeholders instead of the ones who've always had a seat at the table. And you know how I feel about having a seat at the table, Amanda.

Amanda Blasko:

I sure do. Yeah. And I really like also what you said about involving citizens because they are integral to democracy because I think a lot of times, we think about community engagement, and you think, "Okay, so we've got to involve community-based organizations," which is true, but we also can't forget about



people on the citizen level because those individuals are just as vital and have also been left out of these conversations.

What does community engagement look like or what can it look like? And how can we do that process in a meaningful way beyond just the seat at the table, to your point?

Amir Chapel:

You know what? Again, it all depends on who you ask. And dependent upon who you ask or what that is, it changes how community engagement looks and whether it appears or is meaningful to the recipient. When I think about government and its structure outside of the public safety apparatus, most government agencies don't operate on a 24/7 cycle. Police, fire, EMS, they're a 24/7 type outfit. But when you think about community outside of government, it's all over the place. Some people work graveyards, they work evenings, early mornings. Some folks work 9:00 to 5:00, which is parallel to government, and it makes it extremely hard to engage them at a time that works for everyone. You throw in family duties like attending the kids or taking them to school, extracurricular activities and things like that, it then seems impossible to have meaningful engagement with the community and determining what their needs are.

I think this is why it's extremely important to engage different coalitions, clergy, advocacy groups, community-based organizations working within these communities because they can serve as a proxy when you're trying to determine what the priorities and needs in a specific area are. It's really challenging, and I know we're going to get into some of this, but you have to go the extra mile, especially when there's a power dynamic. Government has the power to make the decisions and trying to figure out how to meet the community where they are and trying to work around all these things is challenging, but with the intentionality that it deserves, it can be done.

Amanda Blasko:

Yes, it certainly can. Yeah. It just has to be an intentional process. And I do feel like, and we're going to get into this a little bit more later in our conversation, but it's also to think about, especially if you are someone working in government work, just thinking beyond over-relying on the standard traditional forms of office communication like email, phone call, and going beyond that and thinking how that might exclude certain individuals or how certain individuals might not have that as their first preference of communication and all those types of things.

So I guess leading in as a segue, what are some challenges when it comes to engaging the community and what are some solutions to overcoming those challenges?

Amir Chapel:

You brought up some really good points, Amanda. As far as the traditional mode of outreach, we send some emails. We may or may not pick up a phone and leave a voicemail, but generally, we send out communications electronically with the hope, the dire hope that someone responds to us. And you



could be waiting for a week, a month and maybe never get a response. And I always ask myself, well, why aren't people responding? Did they not get my email? Did it go to spam? Did it get lost in the numerous unread emails that they have that they're dealing with? And so I'm trying to think about some of those practical challenges and how we could get over them.

When I think of government, I think there are some key challenges. I think one, I would say there's this, what I call the heartlessness of bureaucracy. Even though it's run by people, it's its own beast. It does its own thing and it just moves and moves and moves regardless of who are the people are working within it, at least so it seems. Then there's the power dynamics, right? Government holds more power than communities and trying to give more voice to community partners and finding ways to equalize that power is a big challenge. And also, I feel like government in understanding and managing their own expectations, both from the community and from the government is critical as well in moving the work forward.

Another challenge that I see is government has a hard time being flexible and willingness to think outside of the box because everything is guided by rules, regulations, practices, and things of that nature. But with all those challenges, I feel like there could be some kinds of solutions. One of them would be is trying to understand what the best mode of communication for the recipients to be able to have them to actively be able to reengage you as you're doing some outreach. Maybe not just the email, maybe holding open and public forums to ensure, like in the SAAs point of view, to ensure that the stakeholder surveys go out to a wide variety of respondents. And if the responses don't reflect the wide variety you expect by its dissemination, well, we need to determine why that is.

We can also potentially help the community understand what an SAA is and why they're even doing outreach and why the community's input is vital to what the SAA is doing. The SAA needs to help the community understand, again, this is not just a checkbox, but we're trying to make a meaningful attempt to engage, possibly making it easy as possible for communities to engage in the process. That's going to look different for different states, different SAAs and different communities. But the only way you can figure out what that is if you're doing that intentional intensive, active outreach.

Another thing I think about when thinking about data, maybe we could do some data mapping, equity mapping. When you do equity mapping, you can look at where community engagement is working and where it's potentially falling short because you can overlap the equity mapping data with community data or with participant data, and you can see where we're falling short so we could potentially improve. For example, if you look at the distribution of English second language speakers in a geographic area, when you look at this, you can provide practitioners with a clear perspective on which approaches should be used when trying to solicit input from them. Or we could see how that demographic has been engaged over time.

You could provide onsite childcare even during in-person meetings when families have children. You can partner with non-governmental community leaders in areas where the distrust is high or where there's cultural barriers or other language barriers that contribute to even engaging with them. We want to meet them where they're at. Really, all of the solutions I'm trying to propose here are meeting communities where they're at.



Amanda Blasko:

Meet communities and individuals where they're at. I think that's a really important takeaway. And as you know, Amir, I used to work for an SAA's office, and so this has just got me thinking about how we used to engage and how we might have been able to engage better. One thing I've just noticed across the board in government work and really just in general is a lot of times, engagement goes like this. It's like, "Hi, I need your help with something," or, "We have this problem," and then the person's like, "Yes, I can help you with that problem or help you with this project." And then once the project's completed or the problem is solved, it just ends there. The relationship ends, or maybe the relationship just lies dormant until another problem or issue arises. So I'm just thinking about how we can circumvent that process and prevent that from happening specifically in the terms of community engagement as we're talking about it here.

If I were to give my own self some advice, for myself working in the SAA's office, I would say to devote some specific time to relationship building, maybe just put it on your calendar on a continuous basis and also track how you're engaging these folks, who you're engaging, what's working and what's not.

I think a big barrier that we experienced was lack of time and staffing issues. The reality is that in a lot of these SAAs offices, these staff members are managing multiple grants at once, and they're juggling a lot all at the same time, which means that they're understaffed and overworked essentially. And that can lead to a process of churning things out to meet deadlines rather than really doing things the way you really want them to be done, if that makes sense.

And I think this is a place where we can think about internally, how can you set staff up for success and create a tight-knit staff environment in which even if you're working on different grants, your internal staff is supporting each other and maybe even if the state decides to do a statewide criminal justice strategic plan, that can also help in terms of engagement because then you have multiple grant-led staff members all devoted towards how can we best engage these community members? And that can help distribute that time and effort, I guess, for lack of better words.

Amir Chapel:

Amanda, you made some really good point about an SAA expert working from within and what that looks like when, as I mentioned before, the heartlessness of bureaucracy, despite the people working within. You brought up the challenge of capacity, practical issues, and you also brought up some potential solutions, possibly marking out some time specifically on your calendar to do that intentional intensive outreach. And I was just wondering what you thought about what that looks like when the political barriers that get in the way, the other interests that get in the way of, regardless of the level of engagement that you want, what does that look like when you run into those political and practical barriers or lack of support to be able to do that work?

Amanda Blasko:



Yeah, I think that's a great question. I think when it comes to thinking about funding boards or administrative priorities, I think really the ticket to change and to changing the status quo is the community. It's getting the community involved and mobilized, and that's really how you change these deeply entrenched status quo type systems. I think a lot of SAAs operate behind closed doors, and so to some extent, the public and the community doesn't even really know what they do or what those grant funds are being used for. And so I think reaching out to these community members and community-based organizations, specifically individuals that you haven't engaged with in the past is vital because that's how you show the board and the administration that people are invested and that the needs are elsewhere from maybe what priorities were previously outlined. And you use that in conjunction with the data, I think, to slowly create a shift.

Also, it helps to just be as prepared as possible when it comes to board meetings because if you're trying to get the board to approve your strategic plan, you might consider making a presentation. And maybe that presentation has all that intensive work that you did. Who you engaged, how you engaged them, the process from beginning to end of engagement among other things, how that drove your priorities for the plan. Because really, you're aiming to convince the board, we identified these priorities for this funding based on these discussions, based on this engagement and through this data. And I think if you just push out your strategic plan and say, "Here it is, here's what we did, and then briefly talk about a survey for example, I think sometimes that's just less convincing. You need a little bit more.

From our side, from NCJA's side. We know how much work goes into creating a strategic plan, but I think the board doesn't always know that or the administration doesn't always know that. So the more you can show, "This is all the time that we spent and all the effort that we spent, and here's what we created." I think slowly but surely, that will create some small shifts.

Amir Chapel:

Absolutely. So what I just heard you talk about was some intergovernmental community engagement. So for example, engaging with the board so they can understand the brevity and what goes into a strategic plan. In the SAA, on the other end, creating a strategic plan, engaging individuals, communities and CBOs, community-based organizations, who've been left out of the process historically, what does that engagement look like so that they can understand?

And earlier, we talked about being invited to the table. From my personal experience, I've been invited to a couple of tables. The first table I remember is a table that had three forks, a couple of knives, and two different spoons on the table setting. And I was thinking to myself, "Man, as a dishwasher," as I have been in the past, in a point in my life, I felt bad for the dishwasher because I was wondering why there were so many forks on the table. And being a keen observer, I can quickly see what everybody's doing. But without that insight or without someone explaining it to me, I thought it was a wasteful act.

And then the term of community engagement, when you're inviting a group or communities or individuals to the table, we need to prepare them to be able to partake in what is being served. We can't just expect them to come to the table, understand what Robert's Rules of Orders are, understand how

committees work, understand how strategic plans develop. Those are assumptions we shouldn't make. When we do make those assumptions, we're setting them up for failure.

And so when we invite non-traditional stakeholders to participate in the government-led process, I think we must ask how is government setting up the community to engage in the most constructive way possible? Being equitable and inclusive means inviting me and making sure I have everything I need to participate in a way that is constructive to the effort. And in this case, it would be strategic planning or grant funding decision making. I feel like a willingness to listen is not the only ingredient needed for inclusivity, but if we understand your audience and the environment that the audience operates within, those are critical to lowering barriers to public participation.

Amanda Blasko:

Yeah. I definitely agree. I guess along those same lines, you touched on it, but I want to stay here because this is really important. How can we best engage individuals, communities, organizations who have been left out of the process completely from a historical perspective, or invited in a way that wasn't productive? And I'm thinking here, if you were an SAA staff coming in and you realize none of this engagement's been done or it's been done, but not in a productive way, where do you start? What are some tangible steps that people can take?

Amir Chapel:

Absolutely. Historically, when you don't have trust in something, someone, the government or anything like that, it's hard to even begin to do any work in a collaborative way. So the first thing I would say was we need to engage on this process of trust building and relationship building. There were some researchers at the University of Minnesota that looked at building trust within communities across our country and across the world. And they saw trust in several different ways. I feel like when grant funding and other decision makers ask themselves whether they are trustworthy to the communities that they're engaging with, we can think about how we can make changes that matter to both the system side or the SAA in this case and the community side.

I summarize it like this. There's a couple of different types of trust we want to think about. There's contractual trust. Simply does the SAA keep their promises? Are the expectations clear? Do the community members believe that they could depend on one another? Contractual trust is strong when people follow through on commitments. When governments follow through on commitments. We got to be sure. We don't want to overpromise or under promise.

And then there's the communication trust. I feel like community members need to know they'll be told what they need to know when they need to know it. Clear and frequent communication between the SAAs, the grantees, the sub-awards, the traditional stakeholders, the non-traditional stakeholders. All of this, I believe, helps them understand one another and the expectations that we spoke earlier about.

I also believe that there's a competency type of trust. SAAs need to understand and address the inherent bias built into bureaucracy that communities have the knowledge and skills to understand what



their own needs are, what solutions could work, and the ability to engage the government to help setting those priorities. Convening a community conversation or focus group to gather information about the experiences, needs and challenges faced by underrepresented groups should be viewed as an opportunity to further develop those relations. That's one thing I think we can do to really knock down those walls and begin building bridges. Let's knock down walls and build bridges.

Amanda Blasko:

I like that. Great way to end your answer. But I think the competency trust is really big. I think sometimes, and this goes to what you said earlier about inviting someone to the table even just to listen, but then that's as far as it goes. You have to trust. You trust that people know what they're talking about because they do, and that's how you make engagement truly matter.

In terms of thinking about interacting with individuals who have been historically left out of the conversation or engaged within an unproductive way, something that I also think about is how people might respond to seeing the name of your organization. So for example, reactions to SAAs with agency names that have law enforcement in the title or state police in the title will be different than how individuals respond to agencies with Department of Public Safety in the title, for example.

And building off of that, you could also have an agency name that someone might read and not directly attribute it to grant work or to criminal justice even. And so there's a barrier there in terms of educating people on what we do as an SAA, which is what you said in your first answer. But also just thinking about how to get the word out and how your organization will be perceived, I think is an important part in engaging people within the community.

Amir Chapel:

Absolutely. Absolutely. That is definitely breaking down barriers and building bridges. That's basically attempting, in my mind, to address the inherent assumptions that we operate based on names, titles, positions, and things of that nature. So I definitely agree with you, Amanda. That's a great point.

One thing I would say is never give up. If I could type that out somewhere, it would be all bold and caps. Never give up. Because when I think about it, if it were not for all the ancestors and others that came before us that continued to push forward despite some of the most seemingly insurmountable barriers and obstacles, we would not be where we are today. A lot of people have said before me, we've come a long way, but we also have a long way to go and we can always do better.

So the way I like to think about it is hammer them with the data. Be very persistent and consistent with data-driven decision making, because I feel like over time, it's hard to contend against data-driven decision making when you're trying to determine or make a decision that's objective. I believe with persistence and effective use of data presented in a way that makes sense, in a bipartisan way. And I say bipartisan because states are all over the spectrum in how the politics influence policy. And I feel like if we're using data objectively, in a bipartisan way, I feel like over time, we can chip away at resistance to certain ideas.



Even if other priorities in innovative programs are a focal point of what a board wants to do or what the governor's office wants to fund, I feel like the persistent and constant use of data as to why a certain program or program area should or shouldn't be funded or should or shouldn't be a priority will eventually break through.

I think part of the challenge in making standard change is that the same message has been given by the same people to the same power structure. And in some instances, when you include non-traditional stakeholders or those who haven't had voices in the past, views that have never been heard may impact the status quo. And in many others, it may have no effect. But again, I feel like we never give up.

Amanda Blasko:

And sometimes, you have to remain passionate to make up for other people's lack of passion.

Pivoting slightly, but still related, how does lived experience and language specifically matter? Does lived experience change the rules of engagement in terms of interacting with those folks?

Amir Chapel:

Absolutely. I feel like lived experience and language, in my mind, are the cornerstones of community engagement. I like to think if we don't have shared experiences, it may be likely that we won't have the same language. And I don't just mean English instead of Spanish or other types of verbal languages, but the language we share in the work we do. The colloquial language used in government is different than the colloquial language used in community, in advocacy or in coalition building. Understanding those similarities and differences would bring to light things like possibly holding meetings in a neutral government location rather than a police substation, for example. Just understanding what our experiences are, the historical distrust, the way we have the level of understanding and how these decisions are being made drives a lot of what that community engagement looks like.

When you have language like used in committee meetings or procedures like Robert's Rules of Order or following the Opens Meetings Act provisions, that's different than when the community comes together to have a discussion. For community, these guardrails seem limiting and minimizing. Coming to a public meeting and having two to three minutes to share a lifetime of historical trauma and why the status quo of different interventions by law enforcement, like drug task forces haven't reduced opioid overdose death rates or rates of admissions to jails and prison for drug offenses isn't feasible. You can't do that in two to three minutes. Governments speak isn't easy to pick up.

So SAAs, when they think about engaging and being intentional about inviting community members who haven't traditionally been part of the process, they need to understand that they need to help them have a basic level of understanding so that they again, can contribute constructively. If Robert's Rules are used for committee or subcommittee work, well then participants must understand how those rules work. It would make sense for those who have the authority, the power, the resources to hold workshops, for example, to bring participants up to speed. Again, that's getting to my point of how are we setting up those that we're engaging in a way that allows them to engage in a meaningful way?



Amanda Blasko:

So I guess just as a follow-up question, let's say that an SAA is having a meeting. It's an open meeting, and they really want members of the community to attend this meeting. People with lived experience, they want those individuals to attend. Prior to the meeting, what should be the initial steps just to create a basic understanding of what the course of the meeting will be, those weird rules that people might not know? What should that process look like or what can it look like?

Amir Chapel:

Yeah. Well, the SAA is going to probably have the agenda in mind of what they want to talk about and who they want to talk to it about with. Now, the part comes in where you said, "Well, when are we going to have this meeting? What platform are we going to have this meeting on? Who are we going to invite to this meeting?" And those types of things. So when you want to determine who you want to invite to the meeting, well, based upon the agenda and the priority set in the meeting, you're thinking like, "Hey, I want to bring in all these different community groups," but we're going to hold the meeting at 1:00 PM in the afternoon. Well, it is likely that as many participants as would love to participate in this discussion, whether or not they understand the process or not, won't be able to come to the meeting because they're in the middle of their work days.

So thinking about, "Okay. How can we determine when is the time where we can have the most participation by everyone that we want to participate?" That would be a first step. And in determining that, "Okay, are we going to email these community-based organizations? Are we going to call them up? Are we actually going to drive over there? Can we drive over there?" If you're in a rural area and the next closest community-based provider or group is in an urban city that's three hours away, it's not feasible to be able to drive over there just to ask them to participate. So then what do we do?

That leads to the point I was talking about earlier when I'm like, "Okay, we got to think outside the box." Can we go outside of the proverbial box that government operates in a little bit, even just a little bit. Without violating any rules or regs, can we somehow figure out what extra steps we can take to get that kind of meaningful engagement? Can we have a separate type of meeting just for that rural group that we want to engage or that one niche part of the community that we can't align with?

And then let's say we figured out a time, okay. Now that they're here, how can they participate? How do they get to provide and contribute to the meat of the situation? How does their thoughts and their input, how do we make sure that what they're doing and the time they're spending is meaningful? And so these are the types of things we need to think about.

I feel like partnering with community outreach groups, partnering, like I was saying, with clergy groups, with other coalitions that already have that community network, we can work with those specific groups to do the outreach and to do the engagement because they understand the lay of the land. They speak the language that the community does. So we can use them as intermediaries to push the message out or put out feelers so we can understand how we should think about engaging. We don't literally have to



go to each organization, but we can use proxies that represent groups of organizations and things like that.

Amanda Blasko:

Yeah, I think using proxies or intermediaries is a really great point. They can help you get individuals and community organizations that you might not even have originally had on your list as people to reach out to, so I think they can also help fill some gaps and increase trust as an intermediary and as a proxy.

This has been a very insightful and enlightening conversation. Thank you so much for speaking with me today and for being a part of this podcast. We really appreciate it.

Amir Chapel:

Thank you, Amanda. It has been a pleasure being here with you. Have a great day.