

JANUARY 2025



Engaging Local Government to **Promote Health and Prosperity** **in West Virginia**



INTRODUCTION

Strong partnerships between community organizations, community leaders, and local governments are crucial for promoting health and prosperity.

Building these relationships is a key role for community leaders, who often work at the local level to advocate for changes that improve communities. This resource offers guidance and best practices on how to effectively engage with local governments in West Virginia.



UNDERSTAND THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT LANDSCAPE

To effectively engage with local government, it is crucial for community organizations to first understand the unique landscape of their local government structures, processes, and key stakeholders.

RESEARCH THE STRUCTURE:

Understand the roles and responsibilities within the local government. Become familiar with the different types of structures (e.g., Council-Manager, Mayor-Council) and identify key decision-makers.

ATTEND PUBLIC MEETINGS:

Observe decision-making processes, identify stakeholders, and understand the dynamics of local government.

IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES:

Leverage existing engagement opportunities like community budgeting meetings, town halls, and public comment periods.

REVIEW PUBLIC RECORDS:

Analyze budgets, plans, and reports to gain insights into government

priorities and challenges. These may be available on the local government's website or requested in-person at their office.

STAY INFORMED:

Keep up-to-date on current events and issues important to the local government.

ENGAGE NEW OFFICIALS:

New administrations offer new opportunities for collaboration.

IDENTIFY UNDERUTILIZED RESOURCES:

Explore how underutilized public resources (e.g., surplus property or easements) might be leveraged to benefit the community by repurposing them for projects such as community gardens or affordable housing.

IDENTIFY AREAS OF OVERLAP:

Identify areas where municipal department's priorities overlap. For example, there may be opportunities for collaboration around addressing food insecurity between the economic development and health departments.

REVIEW AND COMPARE BUDGET PLANNING:

Budget planning periods and planning documents can be reviewed and compared to seek alignment between local governments on shared priorities.

ASK KEY QUESTIONS

To effectively engage with local government, community organizations should proactively seek answers to key questions that will help them understand the decision-making processes, budget cycles, and communication preferences within the government.



IDENTIFY DECISION-MAKING STAFF:

Who are the key influencers within the local government offices?



ALIGN WITH PRIORITIES:

What are the current priorities and challenges facing the local government?



UNDERSTAND THE BUDGET CYCLE:

When are key decision points for resource allocation?



EXPLORE AVAILABLE SUPPORT:

What resources or support does the government offer to community organizations?



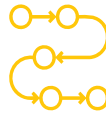
UNDERSTAND ELECTION CYCLES AND TERM LIMITS:

When are elections held, and how long do terms last? This will help identify opportune times to highlight successes.



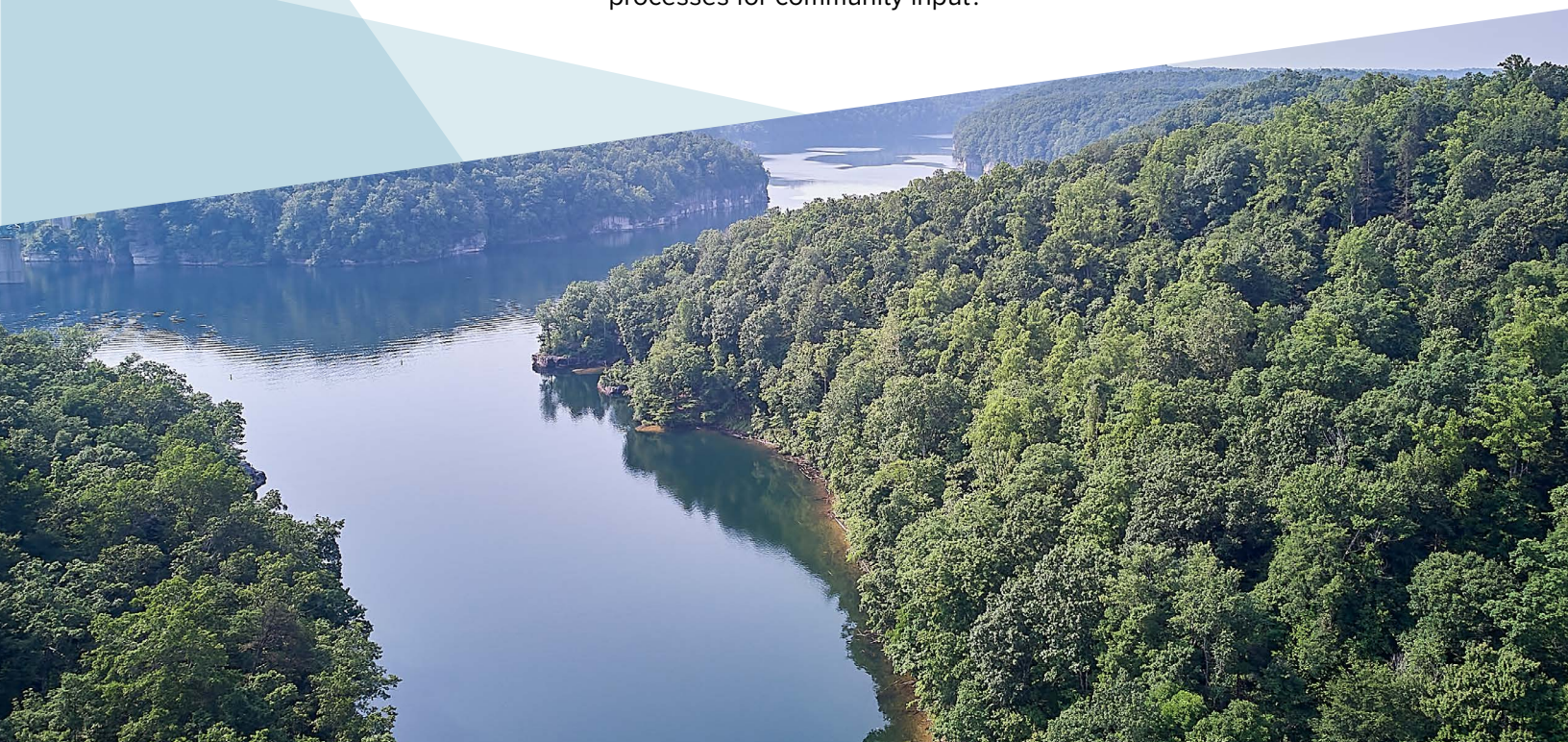
TAILOR COMMUNICATION:

What are the communication preferences of different officials and departments?



KNOW THE PROCESSES:

What are the formal and informal processes for community input?



BUILD RELATIONSHIPS STEEPED IN TRUST

Building and nurturing relationships based on trust, empathy, and open communication is vital for fostering successful and sustainable partnerships with local government.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS:

Cultivate relationships with government staff who can provide guidance.

BE CONSISTENT AND PERSISTENT:

Develop rapport through ongoing outreach.

BE PATIENT AND FLEXIBLE:

Building strong relationships takes time.

ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS:

Invite government partners to share their perspectives.

PRACTICE REFLECTIVE LISTENING:

Demonstrate that you understand their viewpoints.

SHOW EMPATHY:

Acknowledge the challenges and constraints faced by government partners.

SHARE INFORMATION PROACTIVELY:

Keep partners updated on successes, setbacks, and changes.

BE RESPONSIVE:

Respond to inquiries and concerns in a timely and transparent manner.

SEEK FEEDBACK:

Incorporate input from government partners whenever possible.

CELEBRATE SUCCESSES:

Acknowledge the contributions of both the community and government.

ADVOCATE FOR TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

If there is limited transparency, community organizations can advocate for government partners to practice transparency, openness, and integrity to build credibility and ensure accountability.

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY-GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Clear communication about the invaluable role that community leaders and members play as ambassadors and experts for their communities can foster a productive relationship with local governments. Community-government partnerships offer local governments numerous advantages:

FACILITATE INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

Community leaders can ensure that government engagement efforts are accessible to all community members, who are the experts in their community and know the needs and priorities of the community better than anyone. To form any type of lasting change, community members need to be at the center of decision making processes.

PROVIDE HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, TECHNICAL, AND GEOGRAPHICAL EXPERTISE.

Community members have deep knowledge of their communities that can be invaluable to government officials.

PERSUADE CITIZENS TO PARTICIPATE AND ATTEND ENGAGEMENT EVENTS.

Community organizers can help to mobilize community members and encourage them to get involved in the decision-making process.

PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT THROUGH CO-HOSTING OR FACILITATING.

Community organizers can help to plan and execute community events and meetings, freeing up government staff time and resources.

PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO ISSUES NOT CURRENTLY IDENTIFIED.

Community organizers can bring attention to emerging issues and concerns that may not yet be on elected official's radar.

Effectively navigating conversations with local government leaders involves finding common ground and emphasizing shared values to foster collaboration and understanding.

FOSTERING BELONGING:

Increasing a **community's sense of belonging** is an essential element for **fostering collaboration** between residents, organizations and governments to **drive meaningful change**.

FINDING SHARED VALUES:

The first step is to identify shared values between your community and the local government leaders. Common values like fairness, opportunity, and individual responsibility can serve as a bridge to connect with government leaders and build trust. By focusing on these shared values, you can create a more open and productive dialogue.

REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION:

Consider highlighting how fairness and prosperity aligns with shared values you have identified. For example, 'equal access to opportunities' creates a level playing field for everyone in your county or town leading to a more prosperous and vibrant community. This approach can help to make the issue of equity more relatable and relevant to local government leaders and opens up avenues to building good will and collective power.

ENSURING INCLUSION OF ALL:

It's important to acknowledge that rural communities are not monolithic and contain diverse populations and historically marginalized communities of color, families experiencing generational poverty, and high rates of individuals living with disabilities. Actively engaging with these communities ensures that efforts are inclusive and representative of the entire population. Intentional outreach to these members of the community can surface peoples' values, promoting the effectiveness and success of initiatives and programs.

OTHER EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

In addition to building relationships, employing a range of effective strategies can further enhance community organizations' ability to engage with local governments and achieve shared goals.

ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY-OWNED DATA COLLECTION, STORYTELLING, AND EVALUATION.

Support the use of data collection and evaluation strategies that are led, defined, and analyzed by the community itself. This will help to amplify community voice and expertise while mitigating patterns of investment that perpetuate health and economic disparities.

INTERACT IN NONTRADITIONAL SPACES:

Interact with officials at community events to create more informal and accessible opportunities for engagement and relationship-building.

COLLABORATE WITH BUSINESSES:

Involve local business communities to identify and address shared community concerns that also align with government priorities. This demonstrates a proactive and solutions-oriented approach.

IDENTIFY CLEAR MILESTONES:

For transformational projects, identify realistic phases or milestones that can be funded over several successive years.

BUILD CREDIBILITY:

Garner support from respected other local leaders who can vouch for the credibility and effectiveness of the community organization.

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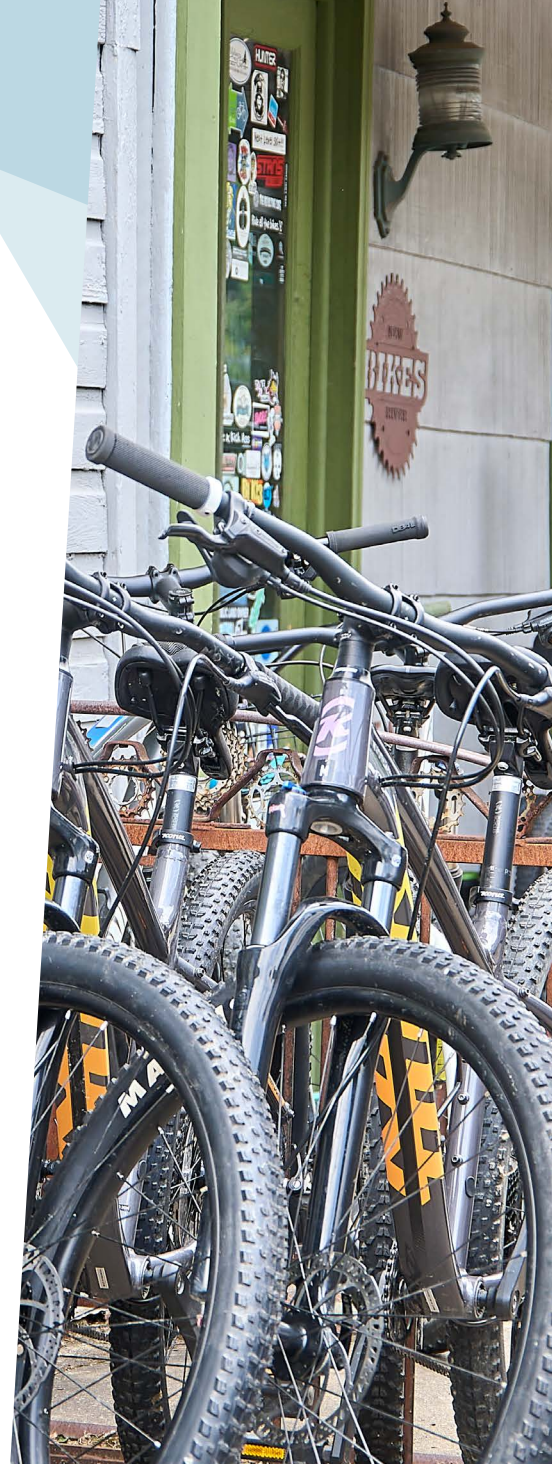
BUILD Payette, a rural Idaho community collaborative, partnered with the local government to address the pressing housing needs. The collaborative's proactive engagement with elected officials, including education on housing programs, fostered a shared understanding of the region's housing challenges. This collaborative approach was instrumental in securing crucial support from the city council for the development of

attainable and senior housing projects. Key strategies employed by the collaborative to build this partnership: early sharing of project plans, showcasing diverse stakeholders invested in the project's vision, and hosting community listening sessions to ensure alignment with local needs. This inclusive process built trust with the local government and laid a strong foundation for future collaboration.

MASSACHUSETTS

The Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QVDC), in partnership with Ware Town Manager, Stuart Beckley, launched the Quaboag Connector shuttle service to address transportation gaps in a rural Massachusetts region. This initiative, which targets one of the most rural, least populated, and remote areas in Massachusetts exemplifies a successful public-private partnership, with QVDC and the

Town of Ware sharing resources and responsibilities through a memorandum of understanding that detailed the roles and responsibilities of both parties. Subsequently, QVDC leveraged additional funding to enhance the service's visibility and accessibility through strategic outreach and artistic collaboration aiming to build excitement about the new transit service in the community.



CONCLUSION

Clear communication, trust-building, and shared goals are essential for successful partnerships between community organizations and local governments. By utilizing these strategies and resources, community organizations and leaders can effectively engage with local governments and shift more power to communities to promote health and prosperity in West Virginia.

RESOURCES

SAMPLE MOUS: Provide templates for formal agreements.

- [Draft MOU QVDC and Town of Ware](#)

INFORMATION ON FUNDING:

- [Rural Funding & Opportunities](#)
- [All Programs | Rural Development](#)

- [Rural Gateway - HUD Exchange](#)
- [Innovative Approaches to Rural Philanthropy](#)

THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK

THE CENTER FOR RURAL STRATEGIES

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AUTHORS

Colleen Flynn — *Build Healthy Places Network*

Mario A. Guel — *Build Healthy Places Network*

Elaine Darling — *The Center for Rural Health Development, Inc.*

Allison Toler — *The Center for Rural Health Development, Inc.*

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Bark Design

