

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY BRIEF

September 2024



*This brief was prepared by Vital Research, LLC to support the Community Engagement Committee's efforts to inform the deliberations of California's Racial Equity Commission. The opinions expressed in this brief reflect those of Vital Research and do not reflect the views of the Racial Equity Commission, Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (GO-LUCI), or the Office of the Governor.*

## Inclusive and Equitable Community Engagement

The Racial Equity Commission is an advisory body charged with developing a Racial Equity Framework, providing technical assistance, and writing annual reports. The purpose of this brief is to inform the Community Engagement Committee's recommended plan of action for the Commission, which may inform future recommendations included in the Framework. To aid with the Committee's proposed plan for the Commission's activities, Vital Research, LLC (Vital) reviewed existing research and models used by other government entities to (a) identify community engagement best practices, (b) propose questions for the Commission to discuss, and (c) suggest timelines and activities for planning and implementation of community engagement.

The Commission's strategy should focus on being inclusive of all Californians, ensuring representation from and elevating voices that are often missing, such as from historically underserved and marginalized groups - particularly Indigenous, Black, Brown, and economically disadvantaged populations.

### Equitable community engagement requires building trust and collaboration.

Community engagement is a process of working closely with community members and organizations to inform, shape, and influence government decision-making.<sup>1</sup> The best way to do this is through a dialogue-driven approach over time, where everyone's ideas and opinions are valued.<sup>2</sup> This approach allows for all voices to be heard and valued, fostering trust-based relationships that go beyond merely disseminating information.<sup>3</sup> Building trust within communities, especially those who have been harmed by past government actions, takes time. Honest conversations about community experiences through dialogue and collaboration can help rebuild trust. Case studies from cities show that when governments build trust with impacted communities, they create policies that better meet the community's needs.<sup>4</sup> Offering different ways for people to participate, like public meetings, key informant interviews, and advisory groups, makes community engagement most effective and meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

### Equitable community engagement is essential for inclusive decision-making.

Engaging community members is not just a checkbox when it comes to racial equity. Genuinely involving the community requires centering the lived experiences and expertise of its members. Failing to involve community voices in the decision-making process risks contributing to systemic inequities and reinforcing power imbalances, which disproportionately affect Communities of Color and Communities with little to no economic resources. Simply put, the absence of effective community involvement in decision-making processes can deepen racial inequities, erode trust, and overlook culturally relevant solutions that could lead to equitable outcomes.

#### Questions for Discussion

- What are the **goals and primary objectives** of community engagement for the Commission? Is it consistent with the Commission's charge?
- **Who are the key partners** that you would like to engage (e.g., community-based organizations, public, elected officials, local governments, state agency staff, California Native American tribes, private sector leaders, researchers, etc.)?
- What **specific input or information** are you seeking from the community?
- How will this input **translate into actionable decisions** for the Commission's work?

# Best Practices for Community Engagement

We present best practices for equitable community engagement to ensure that the involvement is accessible, approached with cultural humility, and responsive to the diverse needs of all Californians.

<b>Cultivate a Participatory Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Engage early with communities so that their input can guide decisions, while making the most of limited staff time and resources.<sup>1</sup></li><li>• Partner with local organizations to build trust with communities.<sup>7</sup></li></ul>
<b>Ensure Events are Inclusive and Accessible</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use several communication channels (e.g., social media, radio, printed materials) to reach different groups. For example, radio is important for languages that are not written (e.g., many Native American languages are primarily oral).<sup>8</sup></li><li>• Work with local and regional organizations serving specific populations to improve outreach for events (e.g., hold joint events, share outreach lists).<sup>1</sup></li><li>• Use plain, everyday language to make sure communication is digestible and relatable. Write at a 6th grade reading level. Avoid jargon and acronyms.<sup>2, 9</sup></li><li>• Provide sign language interpretation and/or captioning and translations for written content. Allocate time to complete translations.<sup>1, 2</sup> Request feedback from disability organizations to ensure materials are accessible.<sup>1</sup></li><li>• Work with philanthropy to support privately funded stipends to cover wages lost, transportation assistance, refreshments, and childcare at the event.</li></ul>
<b>Engage with Cultural Humility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cultural humility<sup>a</sup> is critical for developing meaningful relationships with community members and building legitimacy, particularly given the long history of government mistrust among many Communities of Color.<sup>1, 10</sup></li><li>• Government staff should participate in cultural humility training that creates space for ongoing self-reflection and a critical examination of power dynamics so that community knowledge can be centered when formulating solutions.<sup>1, 10</sup></li></ul>
<b>Develop Feedback Loops to Stay Connected</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Request community input using multiple accessible methods (e.g., public comment, surveys, focus groups).<sup>11, 12, 13</sup></li><li>• Summarize feedback from community partners and outline the action steps in response to comments (e.g., action summary table).<sup>2, 11, 13, 14</sup></li><li>• Request community contacts (e.g., community organization leaders) to fact check content and share best communication methods with communities.<sup>14</sup></li></ul>
<b>Evaluate Community Engagement Efforts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conduct external evaluation by requesting anonymous feedback from participants (e.g., whether participants felt their opinions were heard/valued).<sup>6, 9, 15, 16</sup></li><li>• Conduct internal evaluation by requesting feedback from staff on how the event went (i.e., what went well, improvements).<sup>2, 6, 15</sup></li></ul>

a. Drawing on Tervalon & Murray-García (1998), we define cultural humility as a commitment to self-reflection and self-critique to recognize and address power imbalances between agency staff and community members in order to build relationships and work together on equitable solutions.

## The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership

Vital reviewed several frameworks for community engagement that are used by government agencies and chose The **Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership** framework (The Spectrum) to guide this brief. This framework draws on existing research-based models (e.g., Public Participation Spectrum), and seeks to address equity gaps by outlining a developmental process for government agencies to move towards collaborating and sharing power with community members to make decisions. Adopting The Spectrum will also help to align the Commission’s strategy with many California government entities that currently use The Spectrum to inform their community engagement efforts.<sup>2, 6</sup> The Spectrum involves five levels of engagement:



The five levels in this continuum represent increasing involvement and influence of community members in decision-making processes that lead to more equitable outcomes. The Commission should aim to achieve a place along the continuum where the role of the community shifts from passive recipients of information to active participants. Meaningful community engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach, rather it requires a tailored strategy that evolves as the community’s capacity and desire for involvement also grows. The charge or scope of the Commission does not include Level 5 or “Defer to” and thus will not be covered in this brief.

## Suggested Actions for the Commission

While the Commission is already engaging communities, based on evidence reviewed, Vital suggests additional activities that the Commission can do to move further along The Spectrum.

Spectrum Level	What the Commission is Already Doing	Suggested Additional Activities
Inform or Consult [Levels 1 & 2]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public comment</li> <li>Website</li> <li>Public meetings</li> <li>Social media</li> <li>Livestreams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public notices</li> <li>Newsletter</li> <li>Online surveys/questionnaires</li> <li>Site visits/community tours, listening sessions</li> <li>Infographics, fact sheets</li> <li>Short videos</li> <li>Blog posts</li> </ul>
Involve or Collaborate [Levels 3 & 4]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asset analysis</li> <li>Community meet and greets</li> </ul> <p><i>There is an opportunity for the Commission to grow in their engagement with the community at these levels.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Online voting/poll</li> <li>Interactive workshops, roundtable discussions</li> <li>Public forums</li> <li>Explore partnership opportunities with community-based organizations</li> </ul>

# Planning for Equitable Community Engagement

1. **Establish clear, measurable goals** for community engagement.
2. **Map out all relevant community partners** to ensure inclusivity. Identify community-based organizations (CBOs) and consult with regional leaders who the Commission can collaborate with to engage Communities of Color and Communities with little to no economic resources.
3. **Develop a detailed plan and timeline** that aligns with goals for the short-term (i.e., 3-6 months), medium-term (i.e., 7-15 months), and long-term (i.e., 16-24 months). Identify resources (e.g., translation services, additional staff, training) needed for implementing the plan.
4. **Establish communication channels** to share information with communities with diverse modes of communication to reach all demographic groups.
5. **Identify data collection opportunities<sup>b</sup>** that the Commission can use to gather input from the community and minimizes engagement barriers. Discuss how data will inform future actions, policy decisions, and feedback loops.
6. **Anticipate and create a plan to address challenges** such as logistical obstacles, language barriers, accessibility needs, staff time constraints, budget issues, etc. Consider fundraising for a community engagement fund to support engagement of underrepresented groups.

## Create Detailed Plan Within 6 Months Outlining:

- ✓ The specific input that the Commission is seeking from the community.
- ✓ Programming efforts to involve communities from smaller demographic groups and partners in meaningful ways.
- ✓ Steps to translate community input into actionable decisions or proposals for consideration.
- ✓ Resources and tools needed to engage the community in the Commission's decision-making process.
- ✓ Process for reporting back to the community and relay how community feedback was heard, addressed, and fact checked.

## Proposed Implementation Strategy for Community Engagement

Once the Commission has created a community engagement plan that outlines ongoing involvement, there are short-term actions that can be tackled immediately. Then, some medium-term actions can broaden community engagement, and long-term actions can involve reporting back and exploring ways to move along The Spectrum towards empowering communities.

### Short term (3-6 months)

- **Conduct outreach to inform the community about the engagement process and invite participation.** Partner with local organizations and set up multiple communication channels to reach smaller, hard-to-reach Californians. (Ongoing)
- **Organize and synthesize data already gathered from community** (i.e., community meet and greets, public comments). Identify missing voices in data. Use multiple channels to communicate that commissioners can be invited to visit specific areas<sup>c</sup> to conduct site visits, community tours, and listening sessions. (Ongoing)
- **Develop communications materials that explain the purpose and process of community engagement** in plain language. Translate the materials into languages commonly spoken by California residents. (October 2024)

b. 2023 Chicago Budget Community Engagement Report highlights specific strategies for collecting data in public settings beyond public comment that the Commission may be able to implement for engaging specific communities (Page 11).

c. The California Strategic Growth Council suggests partnering with local CBOs to leverage their networks in involving community through facilitated sessions.

## Medium term (7-15 months)

- **Consider broadening the scope of engagement activities at the Involve and Collaborate levels on The Spectrum**, such as participatory planning sessions or collaborative workshops<sup>d</sup>, based on the Commission's and staff's capacity. This may require exploring partnership opportunities with CBOs to co-create engagement strategies.
- **Develop detailed plans for turning community feedback into proposed actions** that will inform Commission deliberations around tools, methodologies and strategies to advance community engagement strategies.
- **Create a foundation for feedback loops** by building connections with community members and determining appropriate channels to communicate back to communities.

## Long term (December 2025 and onwards)

- **Go back to communities to gather feedback** on draft Racial Equity Framework (Summer/Fall 2025). Consider building capacity (e.g., resources, trainings, funding) within communities, so they are empowered to contribute meaningfully to discussions on the Framework and the Commission's decisions. These efforts can help to create sustainable, long-term partnerships where communities are co-creators in shaping policies/programs that directly affect them.
- **Highlight community input and ongoing engagement in the first annual report**, required no later than December 31, 2026. Report back how the Commission engaged community partners and how their input shaped decisions, and plans for ongoing community engagement. Identify next steps to progress on The Spectrum.

## Closing the Feedback Loop with Community Partners

Community engagement will continue to be an ongoing process. Once the Commission creates and carries out its initial community engagement plan, it's important to follow up with the community to let partners know how their feedback was used and how it influenced decisions.

- At public meetings and through multi-channel communication, acknowledge **partners who provided feedback and engaged with the Commission**. It is especially important to thank underserved or disadvantaged communities who may be especially burdened by community engagement efforts.<sup>2</sup>
- **Create an action plan** that summarizes community input and how comments informed the Commission's ongoing work. Establish ways to sustain trust-building with key partners for continued engagement.
- **Report back what feedback was received and how it was translated into actions** at public meetings, community meet and greets, other communication channels, and in annual reports<sup>e</sup>.
- Evaluate whether underrepresented and historically marginalized populations were effectively reached.

### Questions for Discussion

- What will be our role in translating community input into actionable Commission outcomes?
- How will we hold ourselves accountable to reporting back to the community to share if and how their feedback was translated into actions by the Commission?
- How will we measure our progress on meeting our community engagement goals?
- What will the Commission's process for sustaining and revising community engagement efforts look like to actively engage communities in informing the framework?

d. 2023 Chicago Budget Community Engagement Report includes an example for how they organized roundtable discussions at public forums (Page 17).

e. The Cook County Community Engagement Activity Report (2021) has examples of accessible ways to report back including infographics and action summit.

## Notes

This brief was reviewed by the California Racial Equity Coalition, which is not affiliated with the Racial Equity Commission nor representative of the Commission, Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (GO-LUCI), or the Office of the Governor.

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