

## 801 Community Engagement Performance Measures

Community engagement is effective if the objectives of the community engagement plan or activity are achieved. These objectives may be broad, such as ensuring that public input is carefully considered for a specific project. They may also be narrower, such as soliciting input from a certain group of stakeholders. A variety of methods and measures can be used to gauge progress in meeting community engagement objectives.

This section provides guidance on basic concepts, how to evaluate whether a plan or activity is achieving community engagement objectives, key steps in the evaluation process, a sample performance measurement framework, and potential data sources and evaluation techniques.



## Important Terms and Concepts

Indicators of performance are defined based on organizational *goals* (what the agency wants to achieve) and *objectives* (how the agency proposes to achieve the goal). *Indicators* establish measurable performance targets. For community engagement, qualitative data obtained through surveys will be a primary data source for measuring *targets*, as discussed below.

A set of indicators, rather than any single indicator, is often needed to obtain an accurate picture of performance in relation to an objective.

Targets establish a desired level of performance at a given point in time. Agency or individual progress in meeting the target provides insight into how well the community engagement activity is performing. Together, the goals, objectives, indicators, and targets serve as a framework for community engagement performance measurement, as illustrated below.

The following terms and concepts are important to understand when undertaking a performance measurement effort:

**Goal:** The overarching purpose of the program or activity

**Objective:** Specific statement of how the agency plans to achieve its goal

**Indicator:** A variable selected and defined to measure progress toward an objective

**Target:** A realistic, measurable criterion for evaluating an indicator

**Performance Measure:** A process of defining and monitoring indicators of organizational performance in relation to specified targets.

## Example Community Engagement Performance Measures Framework

<b>Goal:</b>	All interested parties have an opportunity to participate fully in the decision-making process and public input is carefully considered
<b>Objective:</b>	Provide <b>equitable</b> access to transportation decision-making/Use a variety of <b>methods</b> to involve and engage the public
<b>Indicator:</b>	Convenience of meetings and events to public transportation/Access to information by persons with disabilities
<b>Target:</b>	80% of meetings are within one-eighth of a-mile of a transit stop/100% of electronic material is Section 508 compliant/100% of meetings and events are located at ADA compliant facilities

## Establishing an Evaluation Framework for Community Engagement

The Public Involvement Plan (PIP) or Community Awareness Plan (CAP) typically consists of community engagement goals, policies, objectives, and descriptions of community engagement techniques. Therefore, the goals and objectives of a PIP or CAP should be written before attempting to define appropriate performance indicators.

Below is an example of a community engagement goal and objectives. They are typical of PIPs and could form an initial basis for an effective performance measurement framework.

## Example Community Engagement Goals and Objectives

*Goal:* Ensure that all interested parties have an opportunity to participate fully in the transportation decision-making process and that public input is carefully considered.

*Objectives:*

1. Provide equitable access to transportation decision-making.
2. Inform the public early, clearly, and continuously.
3. Use a variety of methods to involve and engage the public.
4. Carefully consider public input in transportation decisions.

## Identifying Appropriate Indicators–Outputs versus Outcomes

Indicators are those items used to measure or “indicate” progress toward an objective. When identifying indicators, consider whether the indicator addresses what really counts in regard to community engagement and not just what can be easily counted. Too often, evaluating the community engagement process becomes an exercise in counting heads at a public meeting or hits on a website, because it is easier to monitor products and services delivered (outputs) rather than results of the PIP or activity (outcomes).

To know if what is getting counted really counts, begin by preparing a set of performance indicators that help to explain whether a community engagement objective has been met. These indicators should attempt to monitor outcomes and not just outputs. Sets of indicators addressing both outcomes and outputs may be needed to obtain an accurate picture of performance. A set of sample indicators are provided below.

## Example Community Engagement Indicators

### **EQUITY: Provide equitable access to transportation decision-making**

Indicator E-1: Access to information and participation opportunities by persons with disabilities

Indicator E-2: Convenience of meetings and events to public transportation, where available

Indicator E-3: Geographic dispersion of community engagement opportunities

Indicator E-4: Convenience of meeting or event time

Indicator E-5: Convenience of meeting or event location

Indicator E-6: Availability of information in languages other than English

### **INFORMATION: Inform the public early, clearly, and continuously**

Indicator I-1: Clarity and adequacy of project information

Indicator I-2: Response time to inquiries from the public

Indicator I-3: Awareness of affected parties of the proposed transportation action

Indicator I-4: Affected parties feel that ample notice was provided of public meetings

### **METHODS: Use a variety of methods to involve and engage the public**

Indicator M-1: Participants are involved using multiple techniques

Indicator M-2: Affected parties feel they had an adequate opportunity to participate

Indicator M-3: Perception of the value of methods used

### **RESPONSIVENESS: Carefully consider public input in transportation decisions**

Indicator R-1: Agency partners feel that their input was considered

## Potential for Bias

One issue that complicates any evaluation of community engagement is that results may be biased by influences outside an agency's control. For example, a group that opposes a transportation project may report dissatisfaction with the agency's community engagement process, regardless of the quality of that process or the efforts made to address their concerns. Compounding this issue is the fact that controversial projects may draw more opponents than supporters to a community engagement event.

The potential for bias in evaluating community engagement activities can be reduced, or at least better understood, by evaluating performance systematically and by using sets of indicators, rather than relying on a single indicator or evaluation effort. Evaluation results can also be categorized by level of controversy, level of environmental review, or other characteristics that indicate whether a potential for bias may exist. Categorizing evaluation results also provides insight into the possible need for refinements to the community engagement approach by size of project or level of controversy expected.

## Setting Targets

A target establishes a desired level of performance for an indicator. As such, it should be both realistic and measurable. One way is to simply choose a reasonable target based on past experience or best practices. The target can then be refined when sufficient data becomes available through the performance monitoring process.

A complete set of example targets is provided in the report [Performance Measures to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Public Involvement Activities in Florida](#). For the purpose of illustration, consider the following examples. "Agency partners feel that their input was considered" is an indicator of

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agency responsiveness. A reasonable target might be for a majority of agency partners (i.e., 75%) to feel their input was considered. Setting the target at 75% rather than 100% recognizes that it may be unrealistic to attempt to satisfy all participants, given limited resources and the potential for bias noted previously.

Targets might be further broken down by type of respondent, as follows. A short follow-up survey of those who participated or commented would be needed to determine the result, as discussed below in **Surveys and Questionnaires**.

Indicator R-1: Agency partners feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of government units feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of organizations feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of user groups feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of individuals feel that their input was considered.

Where an indicator is monitoring something that is required by law, then an appropriate target would be to achieve 100% compliance. For example, the ADA requires government meeting locations and information to be

Indicator E-1: Access to information and participation opportunities by persons with disabilities

Target: [100%] of meetings, events and project-related information sources are accessible to persons with disabilities.

accessible to persons with disabilities. In this situation, it would be reasonable to set targets at 100%, as shown in the example below.

This target would involve documenting whether meeting and event locations are ADA-accessible. It would also involve evaluating whether project information is provided in a manner that is accessible to those with disabilities, when requested.



## Data Collection

Community engagement performance measures rely in large part on qualitative information, as opposed to quantitative data. How participants feel about the quality of the efforts made to involve them tells us more about performance than the number of people who participated. The degree of public satisfaction with a community engagement process or activity can only be understood by asking participants and, in some cases those who chose not to participate, for their opinion.

Data needed to measure indicators should also be cost-effective to collect. Although data on meeting attendance and other outputs may be routinely collected or readily available, data on the outcome of community engagement activities will involve other methods of gathering information.

Comment forms, questionnaires, and short surveys are all cost-effective methods that can be employed for this purpose. Geographic information system (GIS) analysis, internet tools, and staff debriefings or logs are other useful and relatively low-cost methods for collecting data needed to evaluate community engagement performance.

### Surveys and Questionnaires

Surveys and questionnaires are essential data collection tools for evaluating community engagement. They are often the only way to obtain the qualitative data needed from the public for the evaluation. Surveys can be conducted in person, by phone, via internet, mailed, or emailed, and can either target specific groups or be a random sample.

Surveys can be distributed at meetings to be turned in or mailed back, inserted into publications, or mailed directly to potential respondents. Return postage for mail surveys is typically prepaid, as this leads to higher response rates. An advantage of email surveys is little or no reproduction or

distribution costs. To use email surveys, it is necessary to have email addresses for the targeted respondents, and random distribution is generally not an option. Alternatively, questions may be asked by telephone or in person, allowing for follow-up questions and more in-depth discussion. Example surveys are provided on the next page.

### Statistics

Basic statistics, such as percentages, can be useful in evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of a community engagement program or activity. Survey responses can be calculated and compared to preset targets to determine performance in relation to a given indicator.

Once documented, evaluation results may be tracked over time to assess whether performance has improved, remained steady, or declined. They may also be aggregated across a number of projects for a sense of agency-wide performance over a specified period of time.

### GIS and Internet Tools

GIS and internet tools are useful in evaluating indicators and targets with geographic elements. For example, Indicator E-2 provides the following example targets:

Indicator E-2: Convenience of meetings and events to public transportation, where available

Target: [60%] of community engagement events are within one-eighth of a-mile of a transit stop.

Target: [60%] of community engagement events are within paratransit

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Information about transit availability to the meeting location can typically be downloaded directly from the area transit agency's website. A useful tool for this purpose is Google Transit®, a web-based application that maps public transit and other transportation systems, as part of Google Maps®.

## Example Survey

We are committed to providing interested parties with the opportunity to participate in our transportation decision-making processes. Our records indicate that you have participated in some way in the following project. We appreciate your time in answering a few brief questions.

Project:

Project Description:

Which of the following best describes your role?

- Interested individual
- Government/agency representative
- Representative of an organization
- Representative of a user group

I was given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process:

- Strongly Agree     Agree     Disagree     Strongly Disagree

My ideas were considered in the decision-making process:

- Strongly Agree     Agree     Disagree     Strongly Disagree

Comments:

Some transit agencies also provide detailed information on their websites detailing transit stop locations in the service area.

## Staff Debriefings

Staff debriefings are an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of a community engagement process or activity in relation to agency objectives. A debriefing session following a specific involvement activity can help staff identify effective practices and potential areas to improve prior to the next event. Below are a few questions to contemplate during in-house debriefings.



*In general, what seemed to work well? What didn't?*

Staff perceptions and general comments received from the public can be valuable in beginning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a process or technique.

A common problem for transportation agencies is lack of attendance at public meetings. If key segments of the community are not attending a public event, this may indicate a variety of issues. The timing and/or

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*What type of feedback did you receive from the public about the event?*

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*Are enough people in the affected community participating in the community engagement activities?*

*Were those who participated representative of the affected community?*

*Did the audience include those who were expected to have an interest in the project?*

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locations may be inappropriate for some audiences. The notifications may not be reaching the intended audience. Area residents may not believe their comments are important or will be considered. They may simply prefer other ways to be informed and involved in the decision-making process. A follow-up survey with those invited and interviews with key stakeholders can provide insight into the reasons for low attendance and how to address the issue in the future

*Are there significant unresolved issues on the project?*

Consider the results of any surveys, comment forms, questionnaires, or personal comments received by staff in relation to the meeting or event. If many people indicated that the meeting was not at a convenient location, consider whether there is another potential meeting site closer to the

affected area. Another alternative might be to attend scheduled meetings of interest groups in the area, or to provide updates via newsletters with information on how interested parties can provide comments or get involved. Alternatively, positive comments about meeting format provide reinforcement that the format is appropriate for reaching the intended audience.

*Did the public seem to understand the information they were provided?*

*Are the right communication techniques being employed?*

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When providing information to the public it is important to keep the message clear, simple and informal. If the comments received are irrelevant to the project, this indicates people do not understand the information they were provided or what information/input is being sought. The public may have unrealistic expectations about how they can influence the project, their role in the decision-making process, or the type of decisions being made during the current phase of project development.

The level of involvement needed will vary according to the nature of a

project and the level of public interest or concern. If significant opposition to a project remains following the community engagement effort, then it is likely that all relevant issues have not been identified and resolved to the satisfaction of the community. Continued dialogue and additional involvement opportunities are needed to develop acceptable solutions. Additional efforts may also be needed to demonstrate to the public how their input is being used.

## Improvement Strategies

Performance measurement is a valuable management tool, as it provides essential information on how to improve upon past results. A common saying is “what gets measured gets done.” Certainly, there is some truth to this saying. However, it is only true if the results of the performance measurement effort are translated directly into improvements to the community engagement process or techniques evaluated.

Each time a community engagement evaluation is performed, a list of improvement strategies should be identified and then implemented in subsequent activities. When the targets for performance are not met, this is an indication that improvements are needed. Positive results help to inform what activities or approaches work best and should be used again