

Lessons and Best Practices from Programs Serving At-Risk Communities Facing Equity Challenges Through Grassroots Outreach

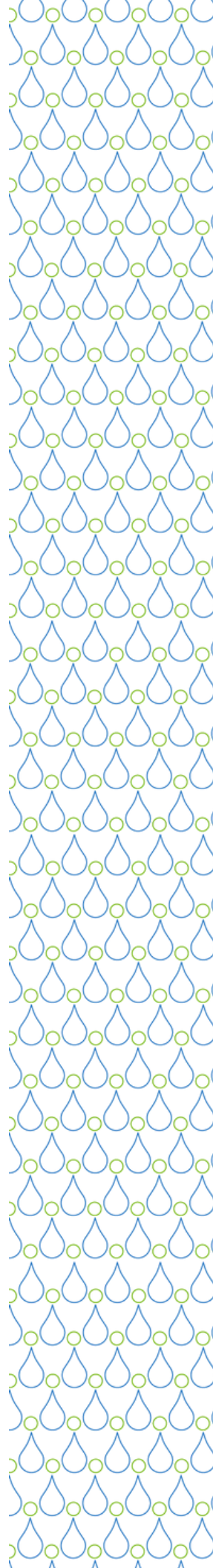
Introduction

- As part of its Project Accelerator initiative, WaterNow supported CHN Housing Partners (CHN) and the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORSRD) with implementing the Water Champions program, a two-year pilot program that utilizes grassroots outreach to serve at-risk communities, administered by CHN, NEORSRD, and the Cleveland Water Department. The Water Champions program aims to both increase the number of residents who take advantage of water and sewer affordability programs and to help the utilities better understand the needs and concerns of the neighborhoods within their service areas.
- As part of its research, WaterNow conducted informational interviews with three local organizations with expertise in grassroots community engagement. In addition, WaterNow surveyed 14 national programs similar to the Water Champions program, which serve at-risk communities facing equity challenges through grassroots outreach, and conducted more in-depth informational interviews with three of these programs.
- The following memo summarizes the findings of this phase, informed by these interviews, and is organized as follows: key takeaways; the process used to identify community programs with grassroots outreach elements; brief descriptions of the selected community programs; best practices and lessons learned across these community programs; and next steps and take-aways for Water Champions and other Community Ambassador programs.

Key Takeaways

- **Elements of Success**
 - “Meet people where they are”
 - Hiring community liaisons from within the community facilitates building relationships with residents through shared knowledge and experiences.
 - Liaisons must be able to speak in terms that bridge the complex issues of water, equity, affordability, and other areas of critical concern for residents, tying them to the resources being provided by the program.
 - Holding weekly or biweekly in-person opportunities for community engagement at central neighborhood locations, and at times that enable those with different working schedules to participate, helps build trust and utilization of resources the program is offering.

- Liaison training, including training focused on racial equity, trauma, and leadership were highly recommended. Additionally, teaching and reinforcing the skill of listening and learning about the cultural context of each community prior to performing outreach, were stressed.
- Multiple touch points and repeated and timely follow-up (often through a number of different mediums like emails and phone calls) were seen as time-intensive but impactful methods to connect residents with resources, encourage the adoption of strategies, and foster participation in affordability programs.
- Incentives, such as emergency kits or gift cards to local grocery stores are useful strategies to engage residents and should be employed intentionally to provide value to residents.
- Tabling events are an opportunity to get creative and showcase engaging and memorable activities or exercises for target audiences.
- Inclusivity is important during the pandemic when not everyone may have access to community meetings held virtually, for instance. Providing phone numbers that also enable residents to listen to and join community meetings allows more people to join if computer access or technology is a barrier.
- Programs that foster professional development and networking opportunities for liaisons are more reciprocal.
- Offering affordability programs on a sliding scale is more inclusive than rigid cutoff limits and keeps residents better engaged and open to other affordability programs that may have different eligibility requirements.
- **Key Challenges**
 - Staff and liaison turnover can pose significant challenges to program continuity and effectiveness.
 - When grassroots programs lack diverse funding sources, the program may be forced to cease operations prematurely (e.g., prior to program saturation) when the primary funder does not renew their financial support.
- **Common Data and Reporting Metrics**
 - Programs tracked sign-ups for specific affordability programs; the addresses and quantity of incentives distributed (e.g., emergency kits); and the number of people engaged at community events. For a program that taught residents energy conservation strategies, it was important to survey and track whether strategies were being implemented, and, in one instance, to collect energy usage data before and after the residents participated in the program, to measure the program's impact.



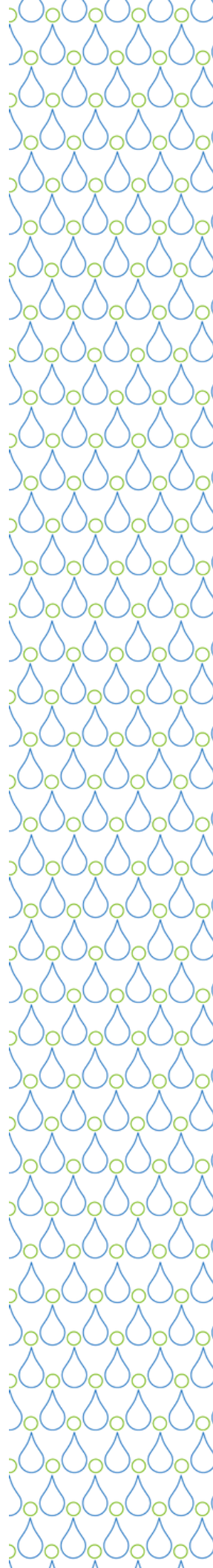
- Surveys and focus groups can be helpful to ascertain how well the program meets the needs of community members and to see if they need more support. However, it can be hard to incentivize participation in these engagements.
- Documentation of the program for funders and other stakeholders can go beyond traditional narration to include stories, podcasts, videos, etc.; these forms of documentation are just as valid as more traditional written reporting methods and may resonate more with community members.
- **Next Steps – Partnerships**
 - Collaborating with other organizations that are interested in cross training and outreach efforts with the Ambassadors helps ensure everyone’s safety, lend moral support, and build off the trust the partnering organization has engendered with its community.
 - Being involved with other similar initiatives engages residents through grassroots outreach and organizational partners.
 - Pinpointing programs that have meaningful and relevant overlapping goals with your organization/program can increase the likelihood of success.

Identifying Programs Serving At-Risk Communities Facing Equity Challenges Through Grassroots Outreach

Selection Process and Criteria

For this research, WaterNow identified community programs with grassroots outreach elements through several different avenues. All of the programs that we identified were then evaluated for both their relevance to the Community Ambassadors program and the comprehensiveness of publicly available information. These programs take place in locations with an existing commitment to make water management processes and outcomes equitable as well as where conversations around these issues are underway.

Next WaterNow compiled a list of urban communities where grassroots engagement was taking place, along with data reporting on their experiences and progress towards these goals. In addition to these resources, WaterNow looked for similar programs, conducting internet searches using keywords such as “ambassadors”, “stewards”, and “advocates.” In total, we identified 14 programs along with their annual reports, web links, and geographic location in order to select two programs of interest to conduct more in-depth informational interviews with.



Best Practices, Lessons Learned, and Challenges Across Grassroots Outreach Programs

Several common themes emerged across the conversations with these research programs: recruiting effective community advocates, community advocate training, engagement and outreach strategies, maintaining relationships with liaisons and supporting their professional development, data collection processes and reporting metrics, the impacts of staff and community liaison turnover, working with funders, and building on the lessons of past programs. These are each described in greater detail in the sections below.

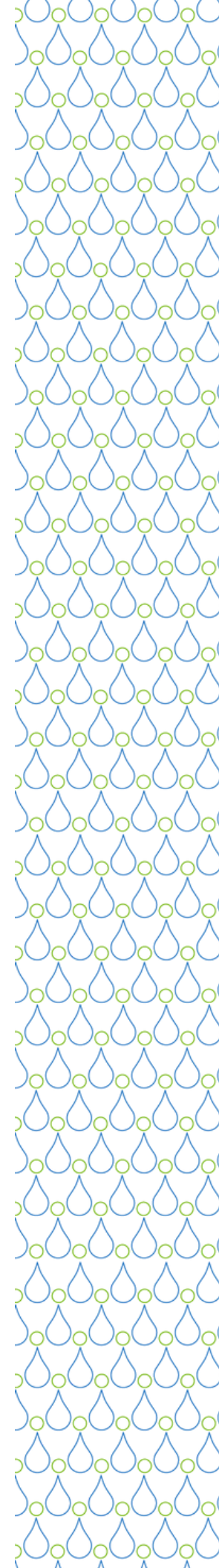
Best Practices: Recruiting Effective Community Advocates

Throughout the interview process, multiple organizations stressed the importance of recruiting ambassadors from or able to relate to the neighborhoods they will be serving. Having community liaisons that can engage with residents—through, e.g., the ability to speak common local languages (such as Spanish), or through their ability to build relationships through a shared knowledge of and experience with a community—enables them to tailor their “experiences and capacities” to that of the communities they are supporting and allow them to “walk together.” A number of interviewees with experience working as Community Ambassadors echoed these sentiments several times, citing the imperative to “meet people where they are.” In particular, Ambassadors must be able to speak in terms that bridge issues of water, equity, and affordability. It’s vital, they emphasized, to remember that topics such as the impacts of climate change on water management may be important to the community advocate, but do not necessarily resonate with those they will be engaging.

Other strategies for recruiting and retaining community liaisons include utilizing existing job posting networks and outreach strategies as well as working with community partners that identify and recruit active members of the community to implement outreach and engagement.

Best Practices: Community Advocate Training

Multiple interviewees expressed the importance of the various types of training for community liaisons, to enable them to learn about each neighborhood before they engage residents there, and to better understand where residents were coming from. Training was seen as vital for putting people on equal footing, facilitating trust with residents, and building trust with staff members of the administering nonprofits. The foundational value of



racial equity training in enabling Community Ambassadors to better learn how to acknowledge, see, hear, and approach community members is essential.

Additionally, it is recommended that training also focus on leadership and trauma-informed care. A number of participants reflected that they found the training and educational components to be rewarding and enriching in and of themselves. Perhaps most essential of all, liaisons need to be good listeners in order to enable them to support community members.

Best Practices: Engagement & Outreach Strategies

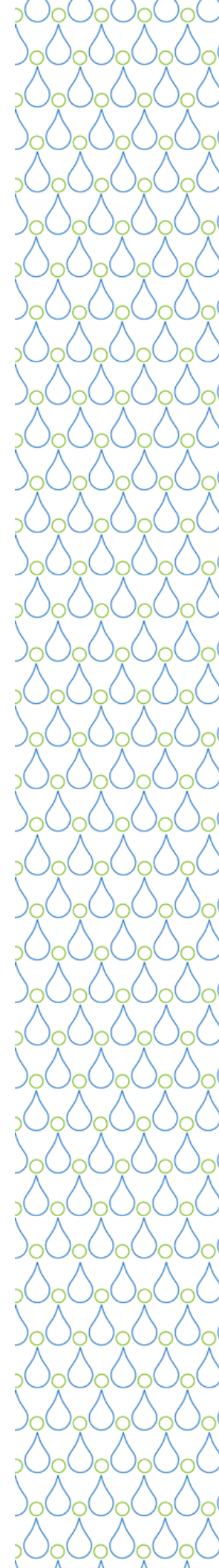
The most salient takeaway we heard from interviewees regarding outreach and engagement with communities was for community liaisons to meet people where they are—both physically, in terms of where outreach occurs, and more intangibly, in terms of how community liaisons listen to and approach community residents.

Specific, Locally-Relevant Messaging

In addition to training and gaining an understanding of each neighborhood and its residents, liaisons are extremely important factors for listening and integrating the core messages and resources of the program, be they climate related issues, etc., to the most critical concerns of residents. This also meant not coming in with a top-down agenda to educate residents, but instead identifying and addressing the acute issues they are currently facing and bringing resources to bear on these topics. To relate concepts of climate change and resiliency to residents, liaisons often needed to take sometimes complex and interrelated issues and boil them down into comprehensible and relatable concepts which tie directly to the health and future of that person's family, or to affordability and their financial bottom line, for instance. To connect with residents, the Community Ambassadors will need to help residents see how challenges with water are connected to other issues and how those issues affect the neighborhood as a whole. For example, liaisons could connect the information they are sharing (e.g., the increased frequency of summer heat waves or rain events) with weather and climate phenomena that residents have likely personally observed and experienced to help connect this broad issue with their personal lives. Finding out how information is relevant to residents is key to success.

Accessible Education Materials

In addition to the critical need to translate materials into other languages,



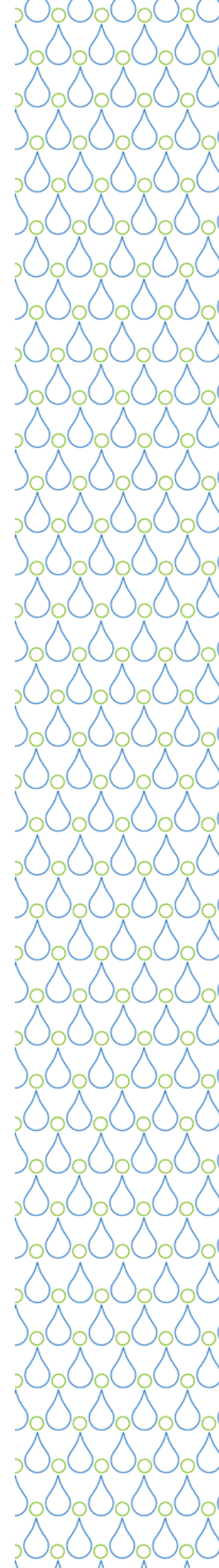
there is also a need to have a grasp on the cultural contexts of each community and to be sensitive to how residents might use resources that are being distributed by the community liaisons. Furthermore, when translating materials, it's often helpful to have someone that speaks the language and works in the environmental field to ensure that the context is relevant to residents. For example, some households might be washing vegetables in water that gets reused multiple times; understanding this type of context will be helpful for the Community Ambassadors.

Additionally, residents receive lots of educational materials, are unlikely to hang onto handouts, and may find a high quantity of materials overwhelming. It is important to pare down the educational materials being distributed to what is most essential. One Community Ambassador, after making a similar point, recommended refrigerator magnets with information such as the program's website, contact information, and water conservation tips, to keep the program and its resources accessible to local residents.

Multiple Touch-Points

Another important takeaway from our conversations was the need for repeated touch points and timely follow up with residents in order to most effectively connect them with resources, encourage the adoption of strategies, and foster participation in programs. Multiple touch points were seen as very effective because people are inundated with information constantly so they often need multiple reminders. For example, a newsletter, Facebook page, communications channels that were dedicated to the program itself (rather than to the administering non-profit), follow-up phone calls, surveys, and in-person, one-on-one follow-up with residents were all effective at communicating to residents.

Another successful strategy was maintaining a consistent presence in the community (i.e. holding regular meeting times at designated, central locations, such as the library). An organization that was accessible to residents with different schedules (i.e. offering weekly/biweekly in-person sessions on weekday evenings and during the day on weekends) became a recognized and relied-upon presence in the community, ensured that residents could sign up for programs on the spot, and made sure that residents were getting the one-on-one support they needed; these are all examples of how to build trust, form relationships with community members, and ensure successful adoption of environmentally-friendly practices.



Incentives for Participation

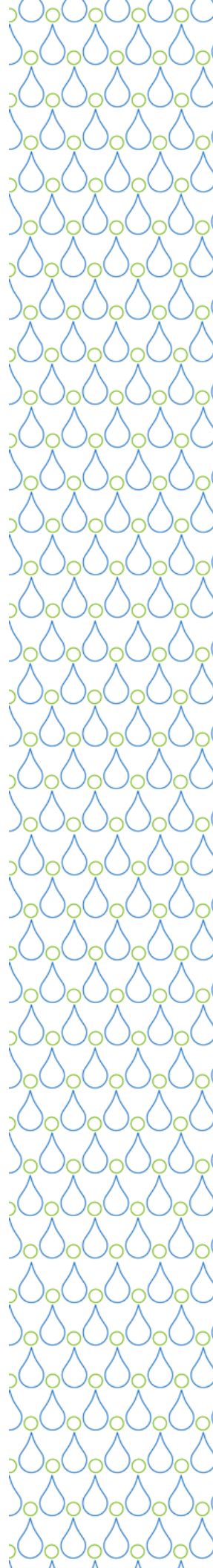
In the interviews, several participants noted that residents are more responsive and likely to engage with liaisons when they are being offered some type of incentive. Liaisons should make sure residents understand why the program is distributing any items and ascertain if residents think the products will be useful to them — even if the items are being distributed for free. There were many examples of this, with a few noted below:

- Gift cards to local grocery stores can help incentivize participation in surveys and focus groups.
- If monetary options are not available, other alternatives exist to compensate people for their time. For example, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, one program gave residents personal protective equipment (PPE) after completing their short survey.
- One program gave out hundreds of emergency preparedness kits and tree planting kits which included instructions for their use and in case of the tree planting kits, long-term care.

Outreach Events and Locations

Participating in numerous existing community events like school fairs or festivals, such as by tabling, is also a successful strategy utilized by multiple programs. This also allows programs to represent themselves in fun, engaging, and creative ways. For instance, one program's tabling event at a Back-to-School fair was extremely successful when employing a multi-faceted display. An engineer friend of one of the community liaisons connected a stationary bicycle to a motor that generated electricity when the bike was pedaled. The bike could charge cell phones and power lights. In addition to the bike display, there was also in depth information on carbon footprints which helped people grasp their own carbon footprint. Attendees were asked to make a commitment to two things that would lower their footprints which increased interaction at the table. Lastly, they included a recycling demonstration for participants to physically put items in the correct bins. The community liaisons shared that they felt they were effective in relating their messages to students and their parents by creating an engaging and memorable experience.

During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, some programs adapted to using Zoom or other online platforms. Having free events online can include more people from all over but it's important to remember that many people do not have Internet access. A more inclusive solution is to include, for instance, dial-in numbers along with any web-conference links.



Best Practices: Maintaining Relationships and Supporting Professional Development

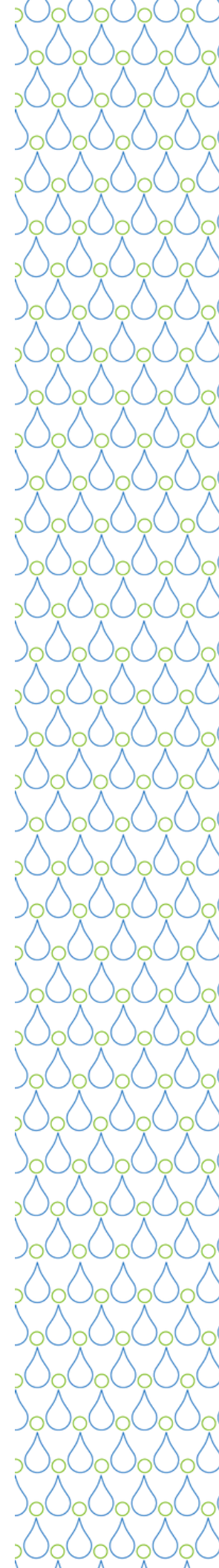
For multiple programs we learned about, it was equally important to ensure that the community liaisons were receiving reciprocal benefits from their engagement with the organizations administering the grassroots programs. Program administrators for both paid and unpaid volunteer positions intentionally fostered professional development, ongoing relationships, and networking opportunities for community liaisons. Some programs met this imperative more successfully than others. For example, high staff turnover at one organization led to challenges with maintaining relationships and retaining community liaisons, documenting engagement with the liaisons, and supporting the ongoing professional development of liaisons.

Particularly once the program ended, this organization lost the staff capacity, resources, and momentum needed to maintain relationships and connections with the former community liaisons. To support Community Ambassadors in giving public presentations and generally communicating the saliency of climate change impacts, it's helpful to work with them to get more familiar and comfortable with the topics and messaging. An interviewee also noted that some of the most successful elements of the program are the training, development, and networking provided to their yearly cohorts. This program, which provides an apprenticeship-style grassroots program focused on training participants for future career endeavors, hosts weekly presentations given by professionals in the community who can relate to the community liaisons and where they come from. Presenters connect to the program participants through their personal stories, demonstrate paths towards successful careers, and join their professional networks. Once the year-long program has ended, the organization can keep track of alumni's progress, welcome them back for limited continuing education sessions, and reach out to graduates with new job opportunities.

Best Practices: Data Collection Processes & Reporting Metrics

Data Collection Processes and Metrics

Data collection methods varied by program, in terms of the type of data collected and the formality of the data collection processes used.

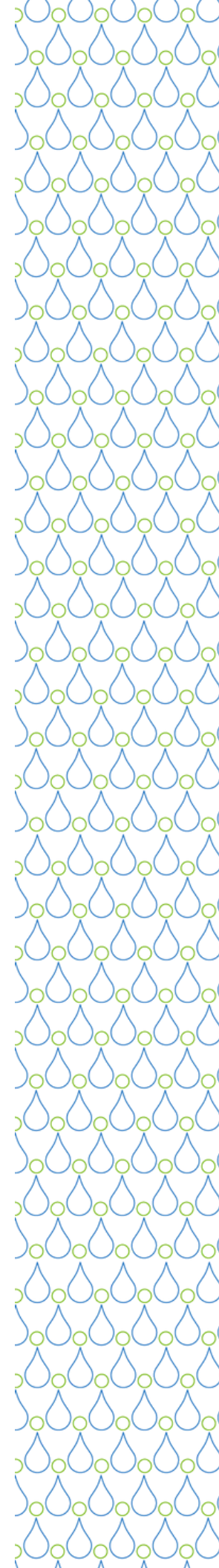


However, for all iterations of the various programs, they uniformly tracked how many residents registered for the program and, if applicable, how many resources were distributed. Some programs also focused their data collection efforts on community events which tracked how many people attended. Several programs were focused on ensuring the quality and depth of interactions with community members. They aimed to foster conversations that enabled liaisons to evaluate residents' awareness of existing issues and programs as well as to clearly communicate any relevant knowledge and resources.

One program relied on one-on-one interactions with program participants at their weekly and biweekly sessions, taking the time at each session to speak with residents individually to help them adopt energy conservation strategies in their homes. This approach was time-intensive, but highly effective in building trust with residents, evaluating their comprehension of energy conservation strategies, and ultimately encouraging their adoption of the program's resources. It's important if an organization can couple these routine in-person check-ins with follow-up calls and surveys about each energy conservation strategy they shared, ensuring numerous touch points. By employing consistent follow up strategies, a program was able to ascertain whether participants needed more support in implementing the tools in their homes and if they were seeing reductions in their energy bills as a result. Another organization also obtained participants' utility data before and after the program, to evaluate its effectiveness in lowering energy consumption. One program also used surveys and focus groups, though this was done sporadically and captured few participants. To incentivize greater participation in both surveys and focus groups, the organization found it useful to distribute gift cards after completion. Another organization collected little data from community members outside of the number of engagements at events. Instead, the program's metrics focus on measuring key performance indicators related to the Ambassadors themselves such as: the types and number of training they receive, the number of sites ambassadors are maintaining, and the number of graduate Ambassadors that obtain employment.

Reporting for Different Audiences

When it comes to reporting back to program funders, be they municipal/utility partners or philanthropic funders, there are a variety of ways to capture the real value being provided by programs. In particular, several organizations stressed that documentation should include stories,



podcasts, videos, etc., and not just written narration; these forms of documentation are just as valid as more traditional written reporting methods and may resonate more with community members. For funders, a few programs reported that it is especially impactful to capture “before” and “after” energy or water use following participation in its programs (e.g., 160 people completed the program and their energy usage decreased X% and they saved X\$ per month).

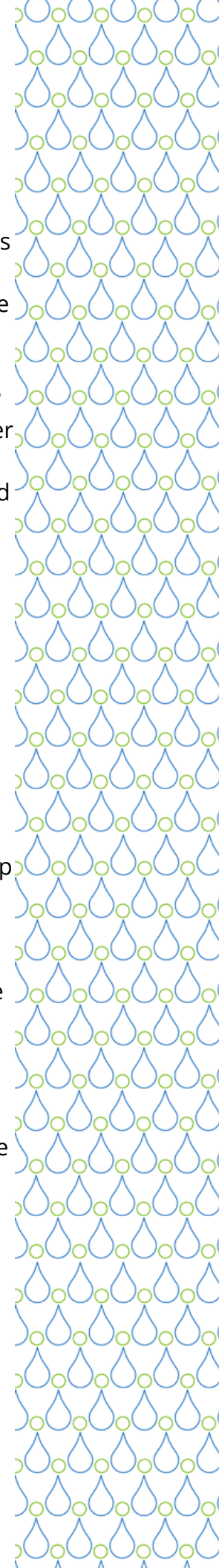
Challenges and Lessons Learned: Staff and Community Liaison Turnover

A number of programs’ administering nonprofits experienced high staff turnover of their respective project managers. Staff turnover can make it challenging to maintain continuity of the program, ensure consistent coordination, and to build relationships with community liaisons. Furthermore, it can also be difficult to maintain the effectiveness of these programs when the community liaisons leave their positions. After the inaugural year of one program, none of the four Ambassadors elected to continue in their roles, posing a significant setback requiring the recruitment of an entirely new cohort.

Challenges and Lessons Learned: Working with Funders

Several organizations shared that they were unable to renew their grants, despite growing engagement with their respective communities and demonstrated need for the programs to continue. The end of these programs was disappointing to multiple stakeholders, including the administering nonprofits, their partners, and the community. Given the time it takes to develop and refine these programs, train staff and others that implement the programs, and build trust with communities, this lack of funding was often seen as a missed opportunity to fully realize the benefits of the resources invested in these programs. Former Community Ambassadors also reflected that when one program ended, it felt like they had barely scratched the surface and that residents were just starting to recognize and grow familiar with the Ambassadors and the resources they were sharing.

Several interviewees noted that it may be somewhat challenging to reconcile the grant deliverables with the on-the-ground reality of program implementation and to translate these realities back to the funders. The funders have their own objectives that they integrate with the grant requirements, which can also change partway through the program. When there is a significant change to the reporting requirements, it can then be difficult to communicate any changes in direction to the community, partners, and liaisons.



Opportunities for the Community Ambassadors to Collaborate with Partners

Conversations with stakeholders illuminated multiple opportunities for collaboration across organizations. For most of the programs we researched, successful partnerships with the Community Ambassador program were highlighted as being at the heart of fostering strong community engagement. We gleaned direct recommendations and precautions for the new program, including the shared view that the Ambassadors should work closely with other liaisons.

Additional Recommendations and Insights on Partnerships

- Coordinating with community organizations to bundle and integrate program offerings with other programs and resources could help the Community Ambassadors build an organization's knowledge of and relationships in communities and help align their outreach with holistic approaches to meet the needs of residents.
- It can be helpful if affordability programs are available on a sliding scale rather than having a rigid cutoff income limit, since strict criteria limiting participation can alienate people from programs if they are not eligible for them.
- Ensuring that all partners are on the same page and have the right resources to fulfill their responsibilities is beneficial.
 - For any community projects that may require maintenance beyond what residents can or will perform, it's vital to consider ongoing maintenance needs and costs, and who will be responsible for those.
 - Previously available funding from the City or County may have been cut back due to the ongoing financial impacts from the pandemic, potentially affecting local organizations' capacity. Looking for opportunities to participate in national, state, regional, and/or local initiatives can also inform policy developments related to the goals of the program.

