Guiding Practices for Meaningful Community Engagement

A Practical Toolkit for Building Healing-Centered Systems Through Authentic Community Partnership

Introduction

This toolkit is designed for government program managers, policymakers, and service providers who want to move beyond traditional community engagement toward genuine partnership. It draws from California's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), the 12 Calls-to-Action from the Youth at the Center Report, and insights gathered from communities across California.

The young people, families, and community members who informed the original report were clear: they are tired of being asked what they need, only to watch funding flow to outside solutions. They want self-determination—not empowerment handed down from above. As one participant put it, "Those who are at the center of the problem are also closest to the solution."

This toolkit offers practical strategies for honoring that insight. It is organized around four core questions:

1. Why does meaningful engagement matter?
2. What does authentic partnership look like?
3. How do we build trust with communities that have been harmed?
4. What does this look like in practice with specific populations?

Use this guide as a working document. Adapt it to your context. And return to it as your practice evolves.

Part I: Foundations

Why Meaningful Engagement Matters

Government agencies exist to serve the public—but policies and programs are most effective when they reflect the real needs, experiences, and wisdom of the people they are meant to serve.

When communities are authentically involved:

- Programs are more relevant and responsive.
- Trust grows—especially among communities that have experienced systemic harm.
- Gaps and opportunities that data alone cannot reveal become visible.
- Solutions are more sustainable because communities have ownership.
- Accountability and transparency are strengthened.

When engagement is superficial or extractive:

- Communities feel used rather than heard.
- Programs miss the mark despite good intentions.
- Trust erodes further.
- The same mistakes get repeated.

The bottom line: Meaningful engagement is not an add-on to good program design. It is the foundation of it.

Core Values for Community-Centered Work

These eight values guide effective community engagement. Use them as a touchstone when planning initiatives, making decisions, and evaluating your work.

1. **Equity and Inclusion:** Actively include historically marginalized communities. Ensure they have meaningful access, voice, and leadership in shaping decisions—not just seats at the table.

2. **Trust and Transparency:** Be clear and open about your goals, limitations, timelines, and decision-making processes. When you don't know something, say so. When you make a mistake, name it.

3. **Respect for Lived Experience:** Honor community wisdom and the knowledge that comes from living through challenges the system is trying to address. Lived experience is expertise.

4. **Shared Power and Collaboration:** Move from consultation to genuine partnership. Enable community co-leadership and shared decision-making. The people most impacted by the work should help design it.

5. **Cultural Humility and Responsiveness:** Approach communities with curiosity and a commitment to ongoing learning. Tailor strategies to cultural, historical, and local contexts. Recognize that you are not the expert on someone else's experience.

6. **Healing and Accountability:** Acknowledge past harms—including those caused by the systems you represent. Remain accountable to community expectations and feedback. Demonstrate commitment to repair through action, not just words.

7. **Continuous Learning and Adaptation** Stay flexible. Adjust approaches as needs change and new insights emerge. View your strategies as dynamic frameworks, not rigid plans.

8. **Sustainability and Long-Term Relationships:** Engage for the long-term health and resilience of the community, not just a single project. True partnership is not transactional.

Part II: From Consultation to Partnership

The Spectrum of Engagement

Level	Description	Community Role	Power Dynamic
Inform	One-way communication	Recipient of information	Agency holds all power
Consult	Seeking input on predetermined options	Advisor with limited influence	Agency makes final decisions
Involve	Community has defined roles in implementation	Participant in execution	Shared tasks, not shared authority
Collaborate	Shared planning and decision-making	Partner in design	Power is negotiated
Community Control	Community leads design and implementation	Decision-maker	Community holds primary authority

Reflection questions:

- Where do your current engagement practices fall on this spectrum?
- Where would community members say they fall?
- What would it take to move one level further toward shared power?

Signs of Authentic vs. Extractive Engagement

Not all engagement is created equal. Understanding where your current practices fall on the spectrum helps identify where to grow.

Authentic engagement looks like:	Extractive engagement looks like:
• Community members are involved from the beginning—not after decisions are made. • Participants are compensated fairly for their time and expertise. • Feedback visibly shapes outcomes. • Relationships continue beyond single projects. • Community members hold decision-making roles, not just advisory ones. • Communication flows both ways consistently. • The agency is willing to change course based on community input.	• Community is consulted after plans are already set. • Input is gathered but rarely influences decisions. • The same community members are asked to participate repeatedly without compensation. • Relationships end when the project ends • Community feedback is filtered through agency priorities. • Communication happens only when the agency needs something. • Difficult feedback is dismissed or minimized.

Practical Steps for Moving Toward Partnership

Before launching an initiative:

- Identify communities most impacted by the issue.
- Research existing community-led efforts already addressing the issue.
- Align with state teams and established partnerships to minimize duplicative engagement and reduce community burden.
- Reach out to community leaders and organizations to explore a partnership—not to pitch a predetermined plan.
- Ask: What are you already doing? What do you need? How can we support rather than duplicate?
- Budget for community compensation, not just participation.

During design and planning:

- Include community members in decision-making roles, not just feedback roles.
- Compensate community advisors at rates equal to professional consultants.
- Create multiple ways for people to participate (in-person, virtual, written, varied times).

- Share draft plans and be willing to change them based on input.
- Be transparent about constraints—what can and cannot change.

During implementation:

- Maintain consistent communication with community partners.
- Close feedback loops—let people know how their input was used.
- Create mechanisms for ongoing community feedback, not just initial input.
- Address problems openly when they arise.
- Celebrate community contributions publicly.

After the project:

- Share outcomes with community partners.
- Acknowledge what worked and what didn't.
- Maintain relationships even when there isn't an active project.
- Support community capacity beyond your specific initiative.

Example: Transforming Together

An implementation guide was created to support counties in developing and strengthening their own Ecosystems of Care through collaborative, equity-centered approaches. The guide emphasizes community engagement, shared ownership among partners, and the meaningful inclusion of youth and families with lived experience. In addition, the guide recommends use of a shared leadership structure to include agency directors, chiefs and superintendents, and parent/youth representatives to address the complete spectrum of child and youth service delivery issues and processes. The guide underscores that community engagement is not symbolic consultation but shared ownership, where lived experience informs strategy, compensation recognizes expertise, and families and youth serve as true partners in designing and evaluating an ecosystem of care that reflects what communities actually need.

Part III: Building Trust with Communities That Have Been Harmed

Why This Matters

The behavioral health system has not just failed to meet the needs of some children and youth—too often, it has caused harm. Communities know this. They carry this history into every interaction with government agencies.

Young people in the original CYBHI listening sessions expressed an inability to feel hope about real change, or willingness to engage with programs, without harm being acknowledged and repaired. Trust cannot be assumed. It must be earned.

A Framework for Rebuilding Trust

1. Acknowledgment: Name past failures and current shortcomings directly.

- Document and publicly report systemic failures.
- Create space for communities to share their experiences of harm.
- Recognize how policies have perpetuated inequities.
- Speak plainly about what systems have gotten wrong.

CYBHI representatives modeled this by standing before communities and acknowledging that systems created within white dominant culture "aren't trusted or inclusive." This directness—rather than defensiveness—opened space for different conversations.

2. Responsibility: Take ownership for harm caused by systems and policies.

- Accept that trust must be earned through consistent action.
- Recognize the impact of historical trauma on communities' willingness to engage.
- Understand that skepticism is reasonable given past experiences.
- Share your plan for addressing identified harms.

3. Repair: Take concrete action to address harm and change systems.

- Implement policy changes that address identified sources of harm.
- Direct resources to communities most impacted by previous policies.
- Fund community healing and capacity building.
- Support community-led solutions rather than agency-designed interventions.

4. Accountability: Create ongoing mechanisms for community feedback and oversight.

- Establish paid community advisory roles with real decision-making authority.
- Include community members on governing boards.
- Create regular feedback processes—and respond to what you hear.
- Report publicly on progress and setbacks.

What Trust-Building Looks Like in Practice

DO THIS...	NOT THAT...
• Show up consistently, even when there isn't a specific ask. • Follow through on commitments—even small ones. • Admit when you don't know something or have made a mistake. • Give community partners credit publicly. • Be transparent about constraints and limitations. • Ask how community members want to be engaged, rather than assuming.	• Promise what you can't deliver. • Disappear after getting what you need. • Dismiss difficult feedback. • Take credit for community-generated ideas. • Treat community engagement as a box to check. • Assume that one conversation builds a relationship.

Part IV: Engaging Specific Populations

Youth Engagement and Leadership

Young people are not just recipients of services—they are experts in their own experiences. Meaningful youth engagement places them as partners in designing the systems meant to serve them.

Why it matters:

- Programs designed with youth input are more relevant and effective.
- Youth build leadership skills, confidence, and a sense of purpose through participation.
- Engagement fosters belonging and strengthens community trust.
- Youth bring creativity and innovation that adults often miss.
- Centering historically marginalized youth creates more equitable systems.

Pitfall	Alternative Approach
Tokenizing youth voices	Share real power and compensate youth fairly
Adultism and lack of trust	Practice co-leadership; assume competence
One-size-fits-all programming	Center local and cultural contexts
Focusing on deficits	Use strengths-based approaches
Short-term or performative engagement	Build long-term pathways and relationships
Inaccessible spaces and times	Design for inclusion; meet youth where they are

Practical steps:

- Train adults in youth development principles before launching youth engagement.
- Establish clear roles and expectations for youth partners.
- Compensate youth at rates equal to adult advisors.
- Create safe spaces for authentic voice—not just polished presentations.
- Develop feedback processes so youth know how their input was used.
- Build pathways from engagement to leadership over time.
- A strong example of meaningful youth engagement is the California Youth Empowerment Commission.

Rural and Geographically Isolated Communities

Rural communities face unique challenges, including geographic isolation, limited provider availability, connectivity barriers, and fewer resources. Engagement strategies designed for urban contexts often miss the mark.

Key considerations:

- Distance and transportation can make in-person participation difficult.
- Internet connectivity may be unreliable, limiting virtual engagement.
- Relationships and word-of-mouth matter more than formal outreach.
- Communities may have a history of being overlooked or treated as afterthoughts.
- Local organizations and trusted messengers are essential partners.

Practical Steps:

- Partner with existing community organizations rather than starting from scratch.
- Offer multiple participation formats (phone, mail, in-person, virtual when connectivity allows).
- Bring engagement to the community—don't expect community to come to you.
- Allow more time for relationship building.
- Compensate for travel time and costs.
- Recognize that "rural" is not monolithic—communities vary significantly.

LGBTQ+ Communities

LGBTQ+ youth face elevated rates of mental health challenges, often compounded by discrimination, family rejection, and lack of affirming services. Engagement must prioritize safety and respect.

Key considerations:

- Never assume someone is out to everyone in their life.
- Confidentiality is critical—outing someone can cause real harm.
- Many LGBTQ+ youth have experienced rejection or discrimination from systems meant to help them.
- Affirming language and practices signal safety.
- LGBTQ+ youth in rural areas face compounded isolation.

Practical Steps:

- Ask about pronouns and use them consistently.
- Ask: "Who else knows?" and "Is there someone I should use different language around?"
- Build relationships with LGBTQ+-affirming providers and maintain updated resource lists.

- Create visible signals of inclusion, such as displaying affirming flags, using inclusive language, sharing pronouns, and adopting inclusive policies.
- Address bias and discrimination even when LGBTQ+ people aren't present.
- Support policy changes that protect LGBTQ+ rights in schools and organizations.

Communities Impacted by Substance Use

Stigma around substance use prevents many young people from seeking help. They fear judgment, punishment, loss of housing, or school discipline. Effective engagement requires meeting people where they are.

Key considerations:

- Frame substance use as a health issue, not a moral failing.
- Use person-first language (person who uses substances, not "addict").
- Recognize that abstinence may not be immediate or realistic for everyone.
- Harm reduction approaches prioritize safety and trust.
- People with lived experience of substance use and recovery are essential partners.

Practical Steps:

- Train staff in nonjudgmental, harm-reduction approaches.
- Center voices of people with lived experience in program design.
- Provide practical resources focused on safety, not just abstinence.
- Address underlying factors (mental health, trauma, housing instability).
- Use peer-led approaches to reduce stigma and increase relevance.
- Advocate for policies that support treatment over punishment.

Justice-Involved Youth

Young people involved in the justice system often carry experiences of trauma, system harm, and exclusion. They may have deep mistrust of government programs. Engagement requires particular attention to power dynamics and safety.

Key considerations:

- Justice involvement often reflects system failures, not individual failures.
- Many justice-involved youth have experienced harm from the very systems meant to help them.
- Confidentiality concerns may be heightened.
- Pathways out of the system matter more than programs within it.
- Lived experience of justice involvement is expertise.

Practical Steps:

- Partner with organizations led by people with lived experience.
- Create clear pathways from engagement to employment and leadership.
- Address expungement, record-clearing, and other barriers to reentry.
- Ensure confidentiality and safety in all engagement.
- Advocate for policies that support healing over punishment.
- Compensate participants fairly and create real opportunities.
- Learn juvenile justice vocabulary to better understand youths' perspectives and stories.

Native Communities

Engaging Native communities is essential to creating systems that are equitable, effective, and grounded in the realities of those most impacted. Partnership must be built on respect, trust, and recognition of Tribal sovereignty. When Native voices are included early and meaningfully, policies and programs are more culturally-responsive and sustainable.

Key considerations:

- Honor cultural protocols and diversity. Native communities are distinct, with unique histories, governance structures, and cultural practices.
- Learn about the Tribes local to your region, including their leadership structures and decision-making processes.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and generalized assumptions.
- Acknowledge historical and intergenerational trauma and approach engagement in trauma-informed ways that prioritize accountability over extraction.
- Recognize Tribal sovereignty and engage with appropriate government-to-government respect where applicable.

Practical Steps:

- Begin with respectful outreach to Tribal governments and Native-led organizations. Whenever possible, request meetings through appropriate leadership channels and attend community events only when invited (unless they are open to the public).
- Spend time listening before proposing solutions. Create space for Tribal leaders, Elders, youth, and community members to share priorities, concerns, and ideas in their own words.
- Partner with local Native-serving organizations, Tribal health programs, and urban Indian centers to host conversations in trusted, culturally familiar spaces.
- Follow through. Provide compensation for time and expertise, clarify how information will be used, and return to share how Tribal input influenced decisions. Consistent communication and accountability are essential to building lasting trust.

Part V: Quick Reference Tools

Checklist for Community Engagement

Young people are not just recipients of services—they are experts in their own experiences. Meaningful youth engagement places them as partners in designing the systems meant to serve them.

Before you begin:

- Have you identified which communities are most impacted?
- Have you researched what community-led efforts already exist?
- Have you budgeted for compensation, not just participation?
- Have you identified potential community partners to co-design with?
- Are you prepared to change your plans based on community input?

Design and outreach:

- Are community members involved in decision-making roles?
- Are you offering multiple ways to participate?
- Have you removed barriers (transportation, childcare, timing, language)?
- Are you being transparent about what can and cannot change?
- Have you communicated how input will be used?

During engagement:

- Are you listening more than talking?
- Are you creating space for difficult feedback?
- Are you documenting what you hear accurately?
- Are you following up on commitments?

After engagement:

- Have you closed the feedback loop?
- Have you shared how input shaped outcomes?
- Are you maintaining relationships beyond this project?
- Have you acknowledged community contributions publicly?

PART V

Reflection Questions for Teams

Use these questions in team meetings, planning sessions, or individual reflection.

On power and partnership:

- Who is making decisions in this process? Who should be?
- If community members described their experience of this engagement, what would they say?
- What would need to change for this to be a true partnership rather than consultation?

On trust:

- What history do communities bring to this interaction with us?
- What have we done to earn trust? What might be undermining it?
- Are we following through on our commitments—even the small ones?

On access and inclusion:

- Who is not in the room? Why not?
- What barriers might be preventing participation?
- Are we reaching communities most impacted, or communities easiest to reach?

On learning:

- What have we learned from community input that surprised us?
- What have we changed based on what we heard?
- What would we do differently next time?

Future Recommendations

Meaningful community engagement must begin before decisions are made, not after priorities are set, funding is allocated, or solutions are designed. Early outreach allows community partners to help shape direction, strategy, and implementation from the start, rather than simply responding to predetermined plans and feeling like an afterthought.

In January 2026, Children, Youth, and Family Network (CYFN) organizations, community partners, youth, and CYBHI leadership gathered in Sacramento for the CYFN Statewide Convening. We intentionally used this opportunity to gather input from youth and community members about what support looks like to them and how systems can better support the mental health of all children and youth, much like what was done for the Youth at the Center Report. We hope this information helps strengthen and deepen the ongoing engagement with communities and youth as future behavioral health initiatives continue to evolve across California.

What community members describe as “support” is deeply relational. It lives in family, friends, loved ones, and trusted community partners. Support is not something delivered from above; it is something felt. It looks like a shoulder to cry on, words of encouragement, open conversations, and constructive critique offered with care. It means being listened to and seeing action follow. It also means being welcomed into spaces without fear, where support feels like a step forward rather than something intimidating or clinical. Several responses emphasize autonomy and dignity, asking for space to help themselves and to be trusted as experts in their own lives and experiences.

Community members also connect mental health to purpose, spirituality, culture, and belonging. Positive community, culturally responsive care, and programs that reflect the identities of young people were lifted up repeatedly, including specific mention of Pacific Islander youth. Support is not one-size-fits-all. It must be culturally grounded, affirming, and rooted in real relationships. The desire for more arts, music, and sensory-engaging activities suggests that healing is not only therapy in an office, but expression, creativity, movement, and connection.

When imagining what they would add to the world to support all children and youth, respondents point to both systems change and universal access. They call for unlimited mental health services and dedicated mental health classes in schools, more funding,

and an overall ecosystem of care. Many envision universal healthcare, universal basic income, and broad acknowledgment that mental health matters. The message is clear: mental health support should be woven into daily life, not treated as a crisis response.

Across responses, a few strong themes emerge: relationships, cultural responsiveness, safe and welcoming spaces, youth voice and agency, school-based access, and structural investment. Community members are asking for a system that listens, acts, and creates the conditions for young people to thrive, not just survive.

Closing Reflection

Community engagement is not a checklist or a single event. It is an ongoing practice of showing up, listening deeply, sharing power, and following through.

The young people and families who shaped the 12 Calls-to-Action asked for something both simple and profound: to be seen as experts in their own lives, to be trusted with decisions about their own healing, and to be partners—not just participants—in building systems that serve them.

Meeting that ask requires more than good intentions. It requires changing how we work: slowing down to build relationships, sharing resources and authority, acknowledging what systems have gotten wrong, and staying present even when the work is hard.

This toolkit offers strategies and frameworks, but the real work happens in relationships. It happens in conversations where you listen more than you talk. In moments where you admit what you don't know. In decisions where community voice genuinely shapes the outcome.

When we commit to that kind of engagement—sustained, humble, and grounded in partnership—we help build systems that are more equitable, more responsive, and more aligned with the communities they serve.

The communities that have been harmed by behavioral health systems are watching to see if this time is different. How we engage will shape whether it is.

Resources

Community Engagement Frameworks:

- The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership (Rosa González)
- WHO Community Engagement Levels
- CDC Framework for Program Evaluation

Youth Engagement:

- SAMHSA Behavioral Health Resources for Youth
- Youth Engagement Toolkit by YouthLead

Cultural Humility and Healing-Centered Approaches:

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Culture and Trauma
- SAMHSA Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center

Substance Use and Harm Reduction:

- SAMHSA National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- Open Doors Training Resources (contact CYBHI for access)

LGBTQ+ Resources:

- The Trevor Project: Crisis intervention for LGBTQ+ youth
- California LGBTQ+ Health and Human Services Network

CYBHI Resources:

- CYBHI Equity Framework and Toolkit
- Children, Youth, and Family Network Final Report and Recommendations
- Youth at the Center Report

This toolkit is a living document designed to evolve with community input and emerging practice. We encourage adaptation based on local context and community needs.