

# Guidelines for **Low-Contact Community Engagement**



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# INTRODUCTION



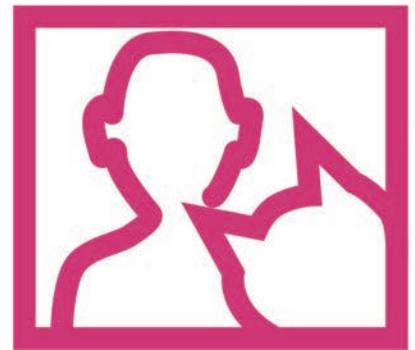
The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people interact. Public gatherings create health risks, limiting the ability of government agencies to seek input into public projects through traditional, in-person meetings.

Although it is challenging to facilitate a public process when people can't safely be in the same room, current conditions have sparked a great deal of innovation and creativity. After the health crisis subsides, many of these new ideas and best practices for community engagement should continue.

For example, remote meetings offer convenience for working parents, people with disabilities, and anyone who would like to avoid leaving home for a meeting on a cold and rainy night. Outdoor events are useful for engaging people in parks and public spaces, meeting them where they are and seeking their input in the context of where projects are being planned. Community surveys, interactive websites, and phone-based applications are all getting better, out of necessity. These tools will continue to be useful, even when people can get together safely again.

Community resilience is often defined as the ability to bounce back from a crisis. But perhaps the pandemic offers an opportunity to bounce forward and to engage residents in more inclusive and productive ways.

This guide is a collection of best practices to meet a current and urgent need for alternatives to public meetings and community gatherings. But many of the suggestions gathered here can also be part of a long-term and evolving toolkit for community engagement.



# LOW-CONTACT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



The Covid-19 crisis has brought many community-centered planning and design projects to a standstill. As conditions begin to return to normal, community engagement practices will need to be adapted in response to new realities.

These community engagement guidelines were developed in partnership with Bike Cleveland and Clevelanders in Motion with funding from Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through the Cuyahoga County Board of Health.

The guidelines are a work in progress, intended to help public agencies and non-profit organizations navigate the community engagement process under unprecedented public health challenges. We welcome additional ideas for low-contact community engagement. Please share what's working for your community with our team at [cudc@kent.edu](mailto:cudc@kent.edu).

Specific platforms, tools, and companies are referred to in these guidelines for convenience, although this is not meant to be an endorsement. What works in one community may not make sense in others.

These guidelines are not intended to be comprehensive. New tools and strategies are emerging everyday. We encourage you to share your engagement approaches for inclusion in future editions of the guide.

Sources for these guidelines include:

- **Public Meetings/Hearings During Declared Emergencies** Ohio Department of Transportation, Office of Environmental Services, March 2020  
<https://tinyurl.com/ODOTguide>
- **Opening Up America Guidelines** US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica>
- **Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement Guide** Race and Social Justice Initiative, Seattle Office for Civil Rights, April 2009 (Rev. 01/11/12)  
<https://tinyurl.com/inclusiveoutreach>
- **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0** World Wide Web Consortium  
<https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20>

## THREE PHASES OF REOPENING

Community engagement efforts based on state and federal guidance, health conditions, and safety concerns.

### Phase One

#### Emerging from lock-down



Gatherings of up to 10 people

Vulnerable populations remain sheltered in place

Schools & youth organizations remain closed

### Phase Two

#### Living with COVID



Gatherings of up to 50 people with strict physical distancing

Schools & youth organizations reopen with strict physical distancing

### Phase Three

#### A New Normal



Gathering size unrestricted

Vulnerable populations can resume public interaction but need to maintain physical distancing practices

## Public Engagement in Each Phase

Choose engagement strategies that use appropriate physical distancing to protect community members, especially the most vulnerable populations.



### OUTREACH THROUGH FOOD & GROCERY

Grocery Store Engagement • Food Bank Partnerships

### OUTREACH WITHOUT THE INTERNET

Public Access Television • Town Hall Conference Calls • Project Hotline • Engagement by Mail

### DIGITAL OUTREACH

Project Websites • Cell Phone-based Engagement • Online Engagement Platforms • Social Media Strategies • Video Conferencing



Storefront Engagement • Temporary Kiosks • Sidewalk Decals

Walk Audits

Front Yard Focus Groups

Youth-focused Workshops

In-person meetings, with alternative engagement options for vulnerable populations

In-person meetings, that include vulnerable populations



# Phase One **Emerging from Lock Down**

When physical distancing and stay-at-home requirements are fully in place, it's best to delay community engagement efforts until the health risks have subsided. However, for urgent or fast-moving projects, some communication with community residents and stakeholders may be needed.

Lean on existing partnerships. Community development organizations, faith-based institutions, schools, and other groups are likely to be communicating directly with the neighborhood populations that need to be reached. Coordinate with these partners to get project announcements into newsletters, shared on their social media accounts, and communicated through their service delivery channels.

Some possible approaches for no- and low-contact community engagement include:

## **Grocery Store Engagement**

- It's best to develop relationships with local grocery stores prior to a crisis, so you have an established point of contact. Recognize that during a crisis, grocery store staff will be busy and under stress, so keep your requests simple and to a minimum
- If a grocery store has a community bulletin board, post clear and eye-catching flyers and fact sheets that people can read at-a-glance.
- Update your flyers and fact sheets frequently, whenever you have new information to share.
- Remember to remove or replace your flyers when the information is out-of-date.

## **Food Bank Partnerships**

- Prepare fact sheets that can be included in food bank packages and in lunch packs for students when school is not in session.
- Food banks are always busy and much more so in a crisis. Consider making a financial contribution to the food bank in exchange for including your informational materials in food bank packages.
- Have your project team take a volunteer shift at the food bank if possible.

## **Public Access Television**

- Public access stations are a way to reach residents who have a television but not a computer and internet access. Cleveland's [TV20](#) is a useful platform for sharing information, especially with households that lack internet access.
- Public access programming is useful for broadcasting information and can be combined with paper and digital surveys and other tools described on the following pages, to allow for questions and input from community members.

## Town Hall Conference Calls

- If you have project information that needs to be shared broadly, consider setting up a Town Hall meeting via a conference call line that can accommodate many callers. There are many paid services. [FreeConferenceCall.com](https://www.freeconferencecall.com) is available at no cost and can accommodate up to 1,000 participants.
- Set a time for the Town Hall that will be convenient for participants. Consider offering at least two options (i.e. a weekday evening session and a Saturday afternoon session) with the same content.
- Live translation is difficult on a conference call so consider scheduling additional calls in the languages spoken in the community.
- Ensure that meetings are well-advertised through community partners. Prepare an agenda in advance and distribute in paper format and through social media.
- Keep the Town Hall meeting short and focused. Start and end the call on time. Test the technology beforehand.
- Practice what you want to say ahead of time but don't be overly scripted. Avoid reading your presentation on the call—people might find this boring and hard to follow. Try to keep a conversational tone. Speak slowly and clearly. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms.
- Consider recruiting and paying a community leader to present information since people tend to absorb information better from a familiar voice, rather than an outsider.
- Town Hall conference are good for sharing information but don't work well for collecting community input. It's important to establish ways for participants to provide feedback and ask questions via email and a phone contact or project hotline.
- Consider phone interviews for key stakeholders and to ensure representation from hard-to-reach groups.

## Project Hotline

- Set up a phone line with an easy to remember number.
- Prepare pre-recorded messages about your project and update them frequently.
- Give people an option to leave a message. Limit the length of messages to two or three minutes—people can call back and leave multiple messages if they have a lot of questions or ideas to share.
- Check for messages frequently and provide a personal response if a caller leaves a phone number or email address.
- Establish regular call-in hours during which people can call in and speak to a live person to share their ideas and ask questions.
- More than one person may have the same question, so incorporate questions and ideas from call-in sessions into subsequent pre-recorded messages.

## IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Offer multiple ways to engage in different locations, times, and ways to help more people participate and feel safe doing so.

Delay engagement efforts if at all possible while still in Phase One; extend project schedules to allow more time to reach community members.

Vulnerable populations include the elderly, anyone with a compromised immune system, people with pre-existing medical conditions, and people experiencing homelessness.



# Phase Two **Living with COVID**

When stay-at-home restrictions are lifted but physical distancing is still necessary, you can try a blended strategy of in-person and remote engagement. This is especially important for reaching vulnerable community members who will continue to self-isolate even after stay-at-home orders are lifted.

## **Engagement by Mail**

Not everyone is comfortable with digital technology and some people don't have computers or cell phones, so your engagement strategy should also have a paper component.

- Develop a project newsletter, fact sheet, or postcard that can be shared through the mail.
- Work with community development corporations and block clubs to see if they maintain a list of people who prefer to be contacted by mail. If such a list is available, you can do a targeted mailing. Otherwise, a neighborhood-wide mailing might be needed. If you plan ahead, you can use bulk-rate postage, which is less expensive, but also slower than first class mail.
- If you're looking for community input, a short, well-designed survey or questionnaire can yield lots of feedback. Include multiple choice and yes/no questions, but also leave space for people to expand on their responses if they'd like. Invite people to provide their name, a phone number, and/ or an email address, but do not require this information.
- Always include a stamped, pre-addressed, self-sealing envelope to make it easy for people to respond to surveys and questionnaires.

## **Project Websites**

- Project websites should be designed to be clear, informative, and easy to navigate.
- Determine the primary purpose of the website and the common paths that visitors will take once they're on the site. Make sure the primary purpose and common paths are clear of any barriers that could potentially prevent access or cause frustration.
- Avoid complex graphics and design features that require a lot of bandwidth to function properly.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) includes websites as "places of public accommodation." Websites with inaccessible components can be seen as discriminatory against persons with disabilities, in violation of the ADA.
- Provide text alternatives for any non-text content so that it can be changed into other forms people need, such as large print, braille, speech, symbols or simpler language.
- Make it easier for users to see and hear content including separating foreground from background. Provide good contrast between text and background.
- Audio content should primarily focus on speech. Avoid background music or make it possible to turn background sound off.
- Make all website functions available from a keyboard.
- Make content readable and understandable.
- For additional guidance, consult the World Wide Web Consortium's [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0](#)

## Cell Phone-based Engagement

- Community members may not have personal computers, laptops, tablets, or reliable Wi-Fi, but an increasing percentage of people of all ages have cell phones. According to the Pew Research Center, 81% of US residents have a smartphone. So design your digital outreach in ways that are easy to access through a cell phone screen.
- Keep project websites clear and simple so they can be easily viewed on a cell phone.
- Develop surveys and questionnaires that can be completed on a cell phone. This means mostly multiple choice and yes/no questions, rather than questions that require typing in longer answers.
- Use temporary signage to get site-specific community input via text messaging.



SOURCE Glendale, California Public Art Master Plan

## Online Engagement Platforms

Many platforms are available for online community engagement including [coUrbanize](#), [Crowdbrite](#), [Crowdgaugue](#), [Mindmixer](#), [MetroQuest](#), [PlaceSpeak](#), and many others. (See a *comparison of popular platforms on the following page*) These platforms vary in function and cost. It's best to try a demo version before you to commit to a specific platform, but most offer a range of tools, including:

- **Information sharing** Provide project information, timelines, and updates.
- **Idea Submission** For open-ended questions, participants can submit ideas and feedback, and support what others have expressed using ratings and commenting tools.
- **Map-Based Idea Submission** Participants can drop pins on a map to identify places they'd like to see improved or otherwise bring to the attention of local leaders.
- **Surveys** with open- and close-ended questions around common themes allow residents to provide feedback.
- **Instant Polls** For quick feedback on issues, participants can select from a list of choices.
- **Photo/Video Share** Participants can submit photos and videos of places they value or want to see improved. Visual preference surveys can be created so that residents can vote for their preferences.
- **Monitoring and analysis** Understand who is participating in the process to see whether some segments of the community are over- or under-represented.

## Comparison of Popular Online Engagement Platforms

PRODUCT	PROS	CONS	BEST USED FOR
coUrbanize	<p>Targeted outreach tools with dashboard to monitor interactions</p> <p>Can physically post questions for text responses to find out what people who live and work in a neighborhood need</p> <p>Google Translate integration with a choice of 18 languages</p>	<p>Primarily designed for private development projects rather than community planning</p> <p>Community members need to create an account and sign in to participate</p>	<p>Constructive conversations, educating communities about plans &amp; projects</p>
Crowdbrite	<p>Visually-oriented. Participants post virtual sticky notes on maps, photos, and design sketches</p> <p>Participants vote on ideas and see results in real time</p>	<p>Higher cost than other options</p>	<p>Place-based charrettes, both virtual and in-person</p>
Crowdgaugue	<p>Collects demographic &amp; geographic information on participants to provide insights about which groups support a given position</p> <p>Open source and lower cost than other options</p>	<p>Possible privacy concerns since participants' personal data is collected</p>	<p>Online educational games; comparing multiple scenarios &amp; evaluating impacts</p>
MetroQuest	<p>Participants can contribute instantly with no mandatory registration step, attracting broader participation</p> <p>Allows for specific input that can be tabulated and analyzed</p> <p>Tailored by MetroQuest in collaboration with project team</p>	<p>Not set up for open-ended input</p> <p>Participants respond to project team but can't share ideas with each other</p>	<p>Surveys, ranking priorities, comments on maps</p>
MindMixer	<p>Participants can brainstorm open-ended ideas</p> <p>Conversational—participants communicate with project team and each other.</p> <p>Standard format; can be deployed out-of-the box</p>	<p>Requires people to register before participating. Since only the most motivated stakeholders will typically register, may result in lower participation and less input from hard to reach groups.</p> <p>Can be difficult to analyze open-ended input</p>	<p>Crowdsourcing, open-ended ideas</p>
PlaceSpeak	<p>Participants are linked to their physical location, ensuring that input is coming from communities affected by a project</p>	<p>Participants may have privacy concerns</p>	<p>Location-based polls, surveys, and discussions</p>

For a detailed review of digital engagement platforms, see [Tools for Civic Engagement](#) from the Government Finance Officers Association.

## Social Media Strategies

- Share information across a wide range of social media platforms to capture a wider audience.
- Only post with a purpose. Carefully consider who the post intended for and how does it inform, educate, or benefit that audience.
- Experiment with video content. It doesn't need to be professionally produced.
- Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms offer user-friendly polls for engagement.
- Monitor comments on your posts and look for re-posts from neighborhood leaders and influencers.
- Ask community members to create user-generated content by issuing a call for photos or videos of existing neighborhood conditions or examples from elsewhere of things people would like to see in their own neighborhood.
- Facebook Live and Instagram Live allow for real-time interaction with community participants.

## NOTES ON WI-FI ACCESS

School districts and community organizations may be able to provide laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to families that lack internet access.

Some cellular providers have offered free wireless internet access during the pandemic.

Most public libraries provide free Wi-Fi service. Often, the Wi-Fi signal extends beyond the building and can be accessed from outdoor spaces around the library and library parking lots event when the library is closed.



Wi-Fi signal at the E. 131 Street branch of the Cleveland Public Library extends to the front steps, a popular gathering space pre-pandemic. Community residents can continue to use this resource, while maintaining physical distance.

## Comparison of Popular Videoconferencing Platforms

PRODUCT	PROS	CONS	COST
BlueJeans	Up to 75 participants with Pro package Unlimited meetings 25 Hours of meeting recording/host	Connection sometimes lags with groups of over 20 participants	\$13.99/host/month for the Pro package
GoToWebinar	Up to 500 participants with the Pro package; up to 1,000 participants with the Plus package Provides meeting transcription	Limited to 5 webcams at a time Requires participants to install software Most expensive option	\$249 per month for the Pro package
Webex	Allows for up to 100 participants with the Pro package Lowest cost option	Smallest number of participants as compared to others Made for smaller meetings	\$19.95 per month per host for the Pro package
Zoom	Allows for up to 100 participants with the Pro package, up to 1,000 with the large meeting add-on Show up to 25 video feeds at once Active speaker view shifts feed to active speaker	Plans and add-on options are initially confusing Transcription not available at the Pro level and requires a higher package with a minimum of 10 hosts/licenses	\$154.99 per month for the Pro package with the video webinar add-on (500 participant capacity)

### Video Conferencing

There are many video conferencing platforms, most with free and paid options.

- Public meetings need to be open to all, so meeting links can be shared widely. But take precautions to make sure meetings are not disrupted by outsiders.
- Ask people to register for the video conference in advance. However, don't exclude people who didn't pre-register.
- Create a waiting room to admit participants.
- Set screen sharing to "host only" and turn off the annotation feature so a disruptor can't take control of the meeting.
- You can also block private chats, turn off file transfers, and restrict custom backgrounds to reduce opportunities for disruptions.
- Disable the feature that allows removed participants to rejoin.
- Begin the meeting with a quick technology tutorial.
- Record live sessions and post them online.
- Invite participants to submit comments in multiple ways during the meeting and as a follow-up, such as a phone hotline, email or Google form.
- Consider interactive online polling tools to keep participants engaged. Live polling tools such as [Mentimeter](#), [Poll Everywhere](#) or built-in options in video conference applications, allow you to ask focused questions during a virtual meeting. For the best response rates, ask questions that can be answered with a yes or no, or a one word answer.



## On Site Engagement

- If there is a vacant storefront in the project area, eye-catching window displays can provide project details, the project website address, the phone number for the project hotline, and details on upcoming meetings or conference call town halls.
- A storefront display can also offer project fact sheets and surveys on paper, with a dropbox for returning surveys. These displays should be monitored frequently to collect completed surveys and to ensure that papers aren't blowing around.
- If a vacant storefront isn't available, sign companies often have temporary kiosks available to rent, which can be customized based on project needs.
- Sidewalk decals with project information can be applied in high traffic areas, in addition to or in place of a storefront window display.



## Walk and Bike Audits

Walk and bike audits are in-person assessments of walking and biking conditions in a community. When you can't host a group walk audit due to social distancing requirements, you can give people materials to conduct a self-guided walk audit.

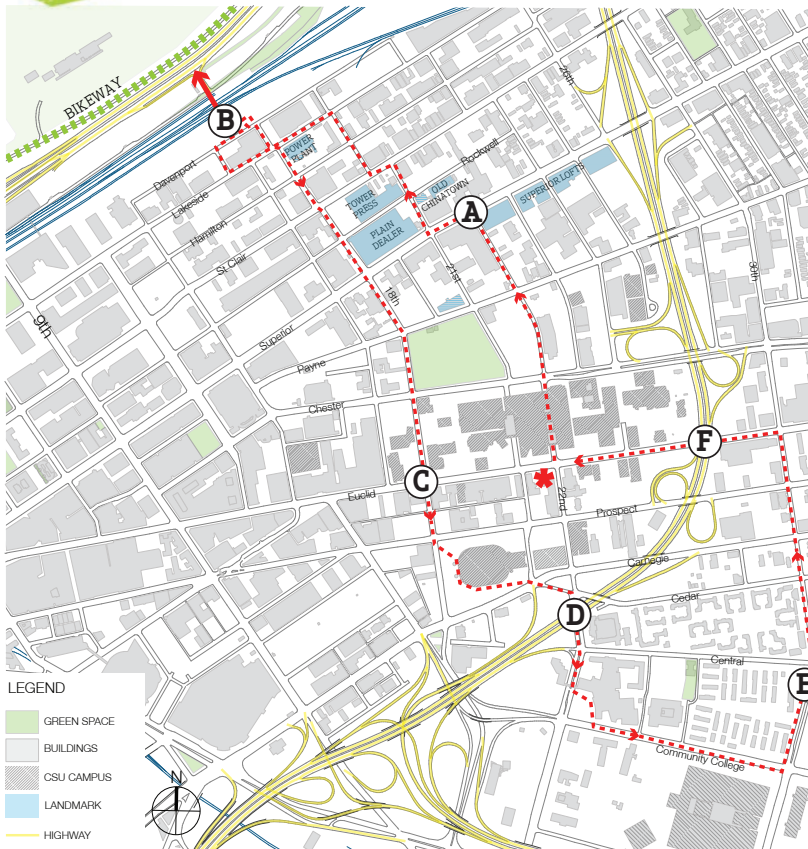
- Customize a standard walk audit form to the specifics of your project and ensure there are self-guided instructions. AARP's [Walk Audit Toolkit](#) is a good place to start.
- Distribute forms to volunteers and partners.

- If your project area is large, assign individuals to specific locations.
- Compile findings and feedback from the walk audits into a digital presentation to share with participants. Consider using a map-based presentation format such as [Google Earth Projects](#) or [ArcGIS Storymaps](#) to compile photos and virtually "walk" through the area together.



### 2 HOUR WALK: North & South Connections

use hashtags: ✓ #EastsideAsset ✗ #EastsideBarrier



From 1-5, rate the quality of walking here:

<b>(A)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<hr/>					
<b>(B)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<hr/>					
<b>(C)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<hr/>					
<b>(D)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<hr/>					
<b>(E)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
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<b>(F)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
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<b>etc:</b>					
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Sample comment form for a self-guided walk audit.

# Phase Three **A New Normal**



[www.cleveland.com](http://www.cleveland.com)

All of the engagement strategies in the previous phases can be used as conditions gradually return to normal. But the challenges of COVID-19 may be with us for a long time and traditional community engagement practices will need to change to protect the health and safety of participants.

## **Front Lawn Focus Groups**

During periods of lock-down, people may enjoy spending time outdoors and interacting with neighbors at a safe distance. Recognize and respect that these gatherings are primarily social, but it may be possible to organize an informal focus group in this setting.

- Consult with the local community development corporation (CDC) staff to see if they are aware of any informal social gatherings that occur in the target neighborhood.
- Determine if a CDC or the city maintains a list of block clubs. If so, reach out to block club leaders to see if it's possible to talk with neighbors when and where they naturally gather.
- Develop an eye-catching flyer and sidewalk decals that describe your project, link people to a project website, and list the date and time when a focus group will occur.



- If possible, recruit a neighborhood leader to help organize the focus group and offer a gift card in thanks for their assistance.
- Facilitate a friendly neighborhood conversation. Front lawn focus groups are not the place for lengthy, formal presentations.
- Take notes, but it's best not to record these conversations.
- Prepare an illustrated project fact sheet or list of frequently asked questions as a leave-behind so participants can share information with neighbors not in attendance.
- Be sure to provide a phone number and email address in case residents have further ideas and questions after the focus group is over.
- In mild weather, consider an outdoor venue with protection from the elements and good air circulation, like a picnic pavilion.
- Determine maximum capacity for the meeting venue ahead of time. Station someone at the entrance to allow for controlled entry. Mark six foot spacing on the sidewalk with tape so people maintain a safe distance while waiting to enter.
- If you anticipate lines to enter, make sure the area where people are waiting offers shade, coverage from rain, and places to sit down. Provide bottles of water and personal-sized bottles of hand sanitizer for people while they wait.
- Purchase and provide face masks for public meeting participants. Local and national suppliers offer masks at affordable prices for bulk purchase. For an added cost, you can print a project logo and website address on the masks.
- Offer single-serve, nutritious snacks to meeting participants.
- Be sure to thank participants for sharing their ideas. This is always important, but especially in stressful times.
- Include a liability statement on meeting announcements, agendas, and other materials to alert people to the potential risks of participation and to provide other ways for people to participate (website, paper surveys, project hotline, etc.)

## In-person Meetings

In-person meetings may be possible in some form, as restrictions begin to ease.

- Organize multiple small meetings or work shops (ten people or fewer) rather than one large meeting.
- Consider having an early meeting group nominate one or two persons from their meeting to attend a subsequent meeting and report out on their meetings insights.
- Encourage participants to register in advance by email or phone so you'll be able to plan based on attendance numbers.
- Choose the biggest meeting venue you can find. Space seating and displays to allow for safe physical distance.



Student participants in [Making Our Own Space](#), a design/build workshop for youth, created a 'friend-zone' bench with built-in social distancing.

## Youth-focused Workshops

Young people are eager to shape the environment around them. They have fresh ideas and important insights that deserve to be heard.

- Community engagement efforts can provide learning opportunities for young people in the neighborhood.
- When libraries and recreation centers reopen, these are excellent places for connecting with young people.
- Connect with youth-serving organizations (like faith-based institutions, educators, and youth development groups) who have maintained connections with young people during times of social distancing--they may have helpful resources in terms of how to best reach youth.
- Develop surveys with youth issues in mind. Consider recruiting and paying a few local teens to be part of the project team.

# Evaluating Low-Contact Community Engagement Efforts

Community engagement strategies need to be adapted in response to the current crisis. The most effective new strategies will also be useful when conditions return to normal.

The effectiveness of engagement efforts should be tracked throughout the project, so adjustments can be made as needed. An after-action review should be conducted at the end of the process so that the best engagement techniques can be shared and replicated, and ineffective techniques can be discontinued.

## Participant experiences

The experiences of participants can be evaluated through public meeting evaluation forms, opinion surveys and questionnaires for community participants, and interactive polling during public meetings. Sample questions include:

- Were your concerns addressed at the meeting?
- Did you feel like your input was being heard?
- Was the meeting content relevant to your interests?
- Was the technology effective and user friendly?
- Was the time and format of the meeting convenient?

## Extent of Outreach

The extent of public contacts and the quality of engagement can be evaluated by tracking:

- Attendance
- Range of stakeholder groups that were represented in the process
- Level of participation in the form of questions and comments
- Number of meeting notices sent, fliers distributed, and phone calls made
- Number of requests to be added to the project mailing list
- Quality of participation—were questions and comments relevant and focused?

## Media coverage

Media coverage evaluated by tracking:

- Number of visits to project web site
- Number of Facebook/Twitter followers
- News media reports about the project. What issues did the media cover, both positive and negative?
- Editorials and letters published about the project.



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**REACH**  
Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health

