

Community Engagement Checklist for Syphilis & STI Reduction and to Advance Syndemic Approaches

Effectively responding to the syphilis epidemic requires addressing gaps, missed opportunities, and barriers in public health and healthcare systems. By engaging with the community, Health Departments can better identify and address specific factors contributing to these challenges within their jurisdiction.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to community engagement but this checklist was developed based on the experiences of 14 local and tribal health departments funded by NACCHO to initiate community engagement efforts to develop collaborative community syphilis reduction plans. For more information about the project, [access the full report](#).

Use Data

Use epi and surveillance data to identify priority populations, geographic areas, or relevant demographic details for community outreach efforts. Also, utilize the knowledge of your health department to design assessment approaches.

Understand Local Community

Invest time in understanding the community's historical and local context. Before approaching the community, health departments should be mindful of any trauma or mistrust that community members may have with public health, healthcare, or local government more broadly. Be receptive to feedback and ready to rebuild trust.

Assess Capacity

Evaluate the time and resources available at your health department to support community engagement efforts. You need staff with capacity in the areas of planning, partnership management, community outreach, epidemiology, and assessment design and analysis. Understanding your current capacity helps you make informed decisions as to the feasibility and scope of your community engagement process.

Utilize Partnerships

Establish and strengthen partnerships with organizations, including non-profits, community-based organizations (CBOs), and healthcare providers that already serve the priority population. Think creatively about the partners you engage, going beyond the usual suspects by reflecting on where your population accesses services, works, plays, shops, and even where they interact digitally. Elevate community champions, trusted individuals with lived experience, to support community engagement activities. Partnerships ensure that your messages and activities resonate with the communities you aim to engage with.

Make Plans

Create a community engagement plan with staff and partners focusing on language, messaging, and logistics. Activities may include town hall meetings, focus groups, surveys, interviews, and community advisory boards. Design an evaluation plan to determine how data will be collected, analyzed, and utilized to inform the syphilis reduction strategy and assess the effectiveness of the community engagement process, ensuring the improvement and success of future community engagement efforts, and consider piloting data collection tools. Develop contingency plans for potential challenges, such as staff transitions, low engagement, shifting priorities, extreme weather events, and emerging issues, including major ones like an infection outbreak.

Train Staff

Provide training for your staff in community engagement principles, data collection methods, trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and evaluation support. This equips them with the necessary tools to connect with the community effectively and ensures quality data collection.

- Provide Incentives**

Ensure you can compensate community members for their time and contributions. If providing direct funds is impossible, offer creative solutions like gift cards or other rewards to acknowledge the work of community members. For longer term, more sustained involvement, consider hiring community members as employees or consultants.
- Utilize Diverse Engagement Tools**

Implement various tools to engage and gather input and feedback from community members. This helps to ensure that the community can be accommodated and that no community members are excluded from the engagement process. Be aware of, account for, and address power dynamics during community engagement activities. Engage Community Health Workers/Representatives (CHWs/CHRs) as they can play a crucial role in grassroots promotion, word-of-mouth efforts, and awareness campaigns because of their role in the community.
- Continuously Assess Activities**

Keep open lines of communication with community partners and stakeholders to ensure a collaborative and strong feedback system. Gather and assess data regularly to verify that the project's initial goals and objectives are being achieved. Conduct ongoing evaluations to gain insights into the effectiveness of your engagement efforts, identify areas for improvement, and determine necessary adjustments. Analyze all data you collect during your community engagement activities and translate that data into actionable insights for new activities or approaches.
- Be Flexible and Willing to Pivot**

Stay adaptable and ready to shift your approach when faced with unexpected challenges and obstacles or in response to partner and community feedback or evaluation findings.
- Celebrate Every Win**

Engage and motivate community partners and stakeholders by sharing any successes with them, including changes to programming that resulted from their feedback, increased testing rates, or decreasing trends in syphilis cases among priority or overall populations.
- Identify and Prioritize Strategies**

Continue to engage the community in identifying and prioritizing strategies and interventions to reduce syphilis.
- Share Decision-Making and Ownership**

Consider sharing ownership of the findings and reports with community partners. This fosters trust, collaboration, and mutual investment in the outcomes. Engage community in determining how to use the findings to design programmatic activities. Clearly assign responsibilities, establish timelines, and define how impact and outcomes will be measured.
- Sustain Community Engagement through Integration**

Build on successes from community efforts to reduce syphilis and address related syndemic diseases and conditions such as HIV, other STIs, viral hepatitis, or substance use disorder. Implement innovative strategies and advance syndemic approaches by integrating funding sources to sustain and expand community engagement activities.