

## Technology Tools for Virtual Community Engagement – August 2020

Supplements [Home for All Community Engagement Resource Manual \(published 2019\)](#)

### I. Introduction

This addition to the [Home for All Community Engagement Resource Manual](#) includes key principles of virtual community engagement, options to consider for each virtual platform, and examples of how platforms have been used successfully in public processes across topics. This guide will be especially useful for organizations implementing planning processes where public input is an essential component of the effort, when the primary goal is to ensure ongoing shared learning and support for final outcomes.

The way local government is connecting with community members and with organizations is changing. Especially now in an era of physical distancing when in-person meetings are not an option for the foreseeable future.

While Home for All's core principles of community engagement remain consistent (proactive inclusion, mutual phased leaning, and collaborative action) using “virtual engagement” strategies can work effectively to supplement in-person community engagement, and to connect with targeted audiences from a distance.

The benefits of offering virtual engagement opportunities for community members include protecting health and safety, removing travel time for people who typically don't attend in-person meetings, allowing participants to tend to their personal needs at home, and providing multiple ways to engage. While some community members may find virtual engagement easier to participate in, others will face barriers to authentic engagement. Tailoring the engagement strategy based on community needs is key.



### II. Inclusive and Equitable Community Engagement

Diversity in our communities necessitates outreach and public engagement strategies that consider racial, cultural, and socio-economic complexity. While virtual engagement has a number of benefits, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of virtual platforms, especially for people who have constraints to internet access. One good strategy to remove any potential barriers to participation is asking assistance from diverse representatives (employees and community liaisons) that have the language skills and understanding of neighborhood needs and know how to reach residents . Collaborating with diverse community members to co-create engagement plans and materials such as flyers, surveys and presentations will also help build trust and ensure the materials meet the community's needs. Another strategy is funding trusted community-rooted organizations to develop engagement plans and materials that are inclusive and meaningful , especially for community members who have historically been underrepresented.

Key questions to consider when creating an inclusive and equitable community engagement process, both in person and virtually, include:

- **Collaboration** – Have we connected with a diverse range of community leaders to ensure the engagement strategy and materials are inclusive and meet the needs of this community?

- **Language Assistance** – How can we meet the language needs of our community? How can the use of technical terms (jargon) be reduced? What is the best approach to “previewing” materials to be used in the community to ensure they will be effective?
- **Cultural Humility** – What wisdom and knowledge about this issue already exists? Who is the message coming from? How can this organization support trusted community messengers? More resources from San Mateo County Health on cultural humility can be found [here](#).
- **Inclusive to All Identities & Circumstances** – Holding a practice of asking gender pronouns to be self-identified during introductions supports inclusion and safety for participants so they are appropriately addressed in any conversation. When and how should material be attentive to gender pronouns? How can we best reach out immigrant families and households without documentation to hear their voices in trusted formats? What is the best time or mechanism for families with children, for youth, for older adults, to engage?
- **Timing** – What is the need to move forward with community engagement at this time? Would there be a benefit from a pause or delay to lift up more immediate needs? Has the community been asked about the timing of the process and interest in engaging in the issue?
- **Meeting Immediate Needs** – What are the most immediate needs of this community? How can we provide information about more immediate needs when reaching out?
- **Existing or Past Efforts** – What work has already been done related to this topic? What can we learn from community feedback that has already been submitted?
- **Memorializing Community Expertise:** Once this outreach effort is completed, how can we document and share what we have heard from the community for other departments and organizations to benefit and build off of this information? Documenting a proactive list of hard-to-reach communities and the best strategies for tailored outreach can support future outreach efforts and avoid community engagement fatigue by using what has already been said.

### III. Virtual Platforms

Using virtual community engagement can be accomplished through a variety of methods including videoconferencing, webinars, phone calls, text messages, and even more traditional approaches like mailers and paper surveys. While these virtual channels are important additions to the toolbox of community engagement, they are not meant to replace physical meetings, but rather to supplement in-person meetings with other accessible options. This is especially true for community members that may be disproportionately burdened by health, economic, and personal challenges that inhibit participation.

Some important questions to consider asking peers and community members before selecting a platform include:

- Will this platform help achieve the intended outcome of this engagement?
- Is our organization able to provide language assistance on this platform?
- What barriers might people face with accessing this option?

Type of Virtual Platform	When to use it	Options, examples, resources, limitations
<b>Video meetings with dial in options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community workshops to share information and spark community dialogue</li> <li>• Webinars with question and answers.</li> </ul>	<b>Functions to consider:</b> Polling, translation, chat box, breakout groups, screen share, phone dial in, closed captioning options, real-time translation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attend existing neighborhood/community meetings to either listen about matters of importance, ask organizers to share updates, or co-create a longer meeting.</li> <li>Formal public meetings with public comment</li> </ul>	<p>Consider hosting various monolingual meetings in multiple languages for a better participant experience</p> <p>For community workshops of &lt;100 attendees, consider small break out groups with reporting out to the larger group for community dialogue</p> <p><b>Limitations:</b> Technology skills and internet bandwidth of participants</p> <p><b>Example:</b> <a href="#">San Mateo County Behavioral Health &amp; Recovery 's Race and COVID-19 Town Hall</a></p>
<b>Small group phone meetings</b>	Receive more in-depth feedback from focus groups, especially those who may not have access to or be savvy with technology.	<b>Consider:</b> Incentives for people to participate that meet immediate needs (i.e. gift cards, produce boxes, etc.)
<b>Tele-townhalls</b>	Broadcast information with the option to allow community members to call in to a group phone event to hear information, briefly share ideas, experiences, and ask questions.	<p><b>Limitations:</b> Can only hear from a small number of people without the meeting going too long.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> <a href="#">Congresswoman Jackie Speier's tele-townhall meetings</a> (had to pre-register for this event)</p>
<b>Online Open House</b>	Can be done asynchronously, meaning over many weeks to allow people to participate as they can. Translation can be provided written instead of in real time.	<p><b>Limitations:</b> Person-person interaction</p> <p><b>Example:</b> <a href="#">Walk Bike SMC Online Open House</a></p>
<b>E-Newsletter and Email outreach</b>	Broadcast longer messages through multimedia and engage in two-way dialogue.  Personalized email outreach is highly effective to get feedback from community members but is time intensive.	<p><b>Platforms:</b> Outlook, Mailchimp, Constant Contact</p> <p><b>Example:</b> <a href="#">City of Brisbane Weekly Friday Blast E-Newsletter</a></p>
<b>Survey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get standardized input from a broad section of the community online or by phone.</li> <li>Best paired with other methods (email, text, mailers, phone surveys) to increase participation, especially from those who do not have the ability to take the survey online.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Platforms:</b> SurveyMonkey, Typeform, Google Forms</p> <p><b>Example:</b> <a href="#">County of San Mateo Listening to the Midcoast survey</a></p>
<b>Text Message</b>	Broadcast written or multimedia information and get quick responses, <b>especially for audiences that may not have access to internet.</b>  <a href="#">96% of the US population owns a phone.</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Text message polling</li> <li>"Sign up to receive text message" message on flyers, mailers, websites</li> <li>Receive place-based feedback by asking for feedback via text message about specific intersections</li> <li><b>Examples:</b> <a href="#">SMC Alert</a>, <a href="#">VocaVOTE</a>, <a href="#">City of Oakland Essential Places</a></li> </ul>
<b>Social Media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share multimedia information, having two-way dialogues, <b>streaming live video meetings</b>, receive input.</li> </ul>	<b>Platforms:</b> Facebook, Nextdoor, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Whatsapp, <a href="#">TikTok</a>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide content for community partners and influencers to share to their existing audiences.</li> <li>• Utilize videos with short messages – videos often get more views than photos.</li> <li>• Use Whatsapp to broadcast to groups who opt-in to receive updates</li> </ul> <p><u>72% of US adults use at least one social media site.</u></p>	<p><b>Example:</b> <u>City of Minneapolis TikTok, World Health Organization launches WHO Health Alert on WhatsApp</u></p> <p><b>Resource:</b> <u>Institute for Local Government Social Media Strategies</u></p>
<b>Mailers, flyers, paper surveys</b>	When needing to reach an entire city or town, posting at frequently visited plates.	<p><b>Consider</b> pre-postage for paper surveys that can be mailed back.</p> <p>Flyers can be posted at specific intersections</p> <p><b>Limitations:</b> Low response rate</p> <p><b>Example:</b> <u>City of Brisbane STAR Newsletter (Printed and mailed monthly)</u></p>
<b>Radio</b>	Broadcast information through culturally-trusted sources and hear from a few community members that can dial in and share their thoughts.	<p>Ethnic radio can reach the Latinx and Asian Pacific Islander communities.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> <u>KHMB Domingos en Espanol</u></p>

#### IV. Getting to Work - Resources Needed

The following is a way to visualize effectiveness and resources involved when considering which platform to use, especially when time and money are constraints. Using these platforms together and in concert will usually result in the most effective outcome in reaching a wider audience by providing multiple ways to engage.

Goal	Platform	Resources Needed
<b>Reminder</b>	Email Newsletter Social media Text message Email outreach	\$   Staff time: Low Community tech skills needed: Low
<b>Introductory information – first contact</b>	Email Newsletter Social media Email outreach	\$   Staff Time: Low – medium Tech skills: Low
<b>Checking the pulse of the community on an issue</b>	Text message poll Online or paper survey Phone survey	\$\$-\$\$\$   Staff Time Low – medium Tech skills: Low- medium
<b>Dialogue</b>	Zoom	\$ (software)   Staff time: Medium Tech skills: Medium – high
<b>Collaborative decision making</b>	Zoom	\$ (software)   Staff time: Medium Tech skills: Medium – high

## **Suggested sequences for using platforms:**

While there are many sequences that can work for employing virtual community engagement strategies, the key principles to remember are to provide **multiple ways to engage**, share the **pathways for community members to get involved**, and **post regular updates** to the website.

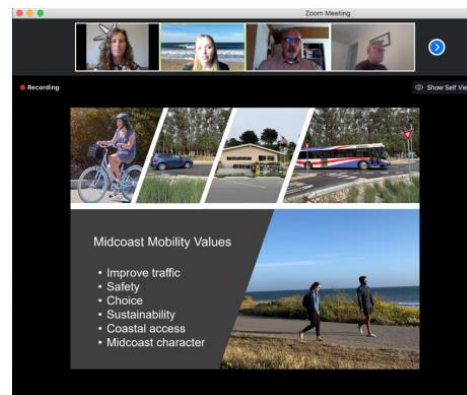
- *E-newsletter > Text message > Mailers > Small group or individual phone conversations with hard-to-reach community members > Virtual online meeting > Online survey for those who could not attend > Regular website updates*
- *Online survey > Prompt to sign up for text message updates > E-newsletter and personalized email outreach > Small group phone conversations with hard-to-reach audiences > Text message updates > Ongoing polling > Regular website updates*

## **V. Case Study for Virtual Community Engagement**

Transportation in the Unincorporated San Mateo County Midcoast

As part of an effort to broaden community participation in shaping the future of transportation on the Midcoast through the [Connect the Coastside Plan](#), County staff has worked across departments to develop an approach to virtual engagement co-created with the community.

- Co-designed an **online survey** with the community in English and Spanish using SurveyMonkey to get general input on transportation using introductory language without jargon or acronyms so all ages and abilities could participate
- Implemented **email outreach** to a variety of organizations and leaders in the community asking them to help spread the word about the survey and meeting, as well as to get their input on what information would be helpful for the community and how best to engage
- Held **virtual public meetings** through Zoom that included breakout groups to allow for facilitated small group discussions to gather input
- Created **multiple ways for the community to participate**, including a comment box on the project website, by phone, by email and through post-meeting surveys.
- **Translated the plan website** and included short videos to explain the project
- Worked with community partners to develop a proactive **outreach strategy to engage underrepresented** groups, including Spanish speakers and youth to understand barriers and opportunities. These approaches included distributing **paper surveys**, conducting **one-on-one phone interviews** and **posting videos to social media**
- Held virtual **focus group meeting** with Coastside youth and worked with the Youth Leadership Institute to co-create the meeting to meet the needs of a youth audience



## **VI. Sustaining Virtual Engagement**

Whether community engagement is virtual or in person, it's essential to consider how to continue an ongoing two-way dialogue, especially after the initial phase of a project is completed. How can you keep your community updated as a process moves forward and invite continued feedback as needed? Some ideas to consider in sustaining ongoing dialogue with your community include:

- **Hosting virtual drop in hours by phone or Zoom:** Participants can make appointments by text message, on your website, or through a link on staff's email signature.
- **Host ongoing poll questions via text message, on a newsletter, or social media** to gauge interest in a variety of topics.

- **Consider sending a monthly newsletter** highlighting successes and challenges, resources about immediate needs, stories and members of your community, and information additional opportunities to engage with your organizations.
- **Maintain an ongoing social media presence** and continue to build your following by co-creating content with your organization’s partners and highlighting each other’s pages.
- **Continue to build relationships:** Schedule brief phone calls with key community leaders on an ongoing basis when possible.
- **Attend existing community, cultural, and other group meetings** to listen in about what’s important to your community right now. If you’d like to participate, show up with cultural humility.

For more information and additional resources, please visit [www.homeforallsmc.org/engagement](http://www.homeforallsmc.org/engagement). Share your experiences with virtual engagement with us at [homeforall@smcgov.org](mailto:homeforall@smcgov.org) or find us on social media @HomeforAllSMC.

## VII. Additional Resources

- [Health Policy and Planning Community Engagement Toolkit](#)
- [Framing COVID-19 - FrameWorks Institute](#)
- [Government Alliance for Race and Equity Tools and Resources](#)
- [21 Elements COVID-10 Shelter in Place](#)
- [Get Healthy San Mateo County: Community Priorities During COVID-19](#)
- [United Neighbors in Defense Against Displacement \(UNIDA\). “The People’s Plan.”](#)
- [How to partner with SMC Health Policy and Planning Fact Sheet](#)
- [“Strategy Tools.” Community Problem-Solving Project @ MIT](#)