

Highlights from Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever)

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[Stanford Center for Social Innovation](#) just released an article titled [Community Engagement Matters \(Now More Than Ever\)](#), co-authored by Melody Barnes of the [Aspen Forum for Community Solutions](#) and [Results for America](#) and Paul Schmitz of the [Collective Impact Forum](#). The article is concise and powerful, and it calls for pairing evidence-based programs and data with genuine community engagement and context for best results toward sustainability of community-level change. Without both approaches, top-down efforts will ultimately fail to create lasting change. Specifically, the article states:

“To achieve positive and enduring change, public and nonprofit leaders must create community engagement strategies that are as robust as the data-driven solutions that they

hope to peruse.”

The article highlights examples of successful and failed community change efforts, and offers a set of six factors essential to successful community engagement ([read the article](#) to learn more about each):

- Organizing, rather than mobilizing
- Allowing for complexity
- Working with local institutions
- Applying an equity lens
- Building momentum
- Managing constituencies through change

A few weeks after it was released, Results for America, the Collective Impact Forum and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions hosted a [livestream video discussion](#) about the article, where they spoke with the article authors and the following panel about some of those six factors:

- Maia Jachimowicz, Vice President of Evidence-Based Policy Implementation, [Results for America](#) and former Policy Director, City of Philadelphia
- Michael McAfee, Vice President for Programs, [PolicyLink](#)
- Patrick McCarthy, President and CEO, [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)

I'm going to highlight a few important points raised by the panelists at the March 7th discussion. Speakers are quoted as heard live—please forgive small discrepancies in wording!

“An inhospitable system will trump a good program every time.” —Dr. Patrick McCarthy

On equity and opportunity:

Dr. Michael McAfee - If systems are not performing, don't give [me] a program while my children are constantly having their teeth bashed out with bad systems. That's not authentic community engagement... **It baffles me how we go into communities and we don't want to acknowledge the beautiful design—structurally—of how some opportunity has been designed out of community.** We don't want to even say it. And yet we think we're doing the work. How can that be? The disconnect with the community is—they live it every day. And now you're showing up, and you're afraid to even say [the word] race. You're even afraid to talk about power... The work is what it is—**we have to design opportunity back into communities. Starting with the communities where opportunity has been deliberately designed out.**

Dr. Patrick McCarthy - This is a watershed moment. For the first time in 50 years, a large range of people are talking about equity. Even the negative expressions of racial hatred and otherness are triggering deeper thinking among white folks, who are talking in a different way than white folks

have been talking for a long time. Democrats used to try hard not to talk about poverty and race. **At the Democratic debate last night, two candidates were talking about white privilege and dismantling institutionalized racism—I've never heard a presidential candidate discuss that.** And I give credit to the protesters—because of video, people can't look away.

On relationships:

Paul Schmitz - Vu Le, who runs the blog [Nonprofit with Balls](#), says that we have to be serious about not Columbus-ing! **We're colonizing communities when we import a new great model into a community** rather than partner and build capacity with existing organizations that already have deep relationships in that community.

Dr. Patrick McCarthy: Entering relationships with community members has to be done from a humble and learning space—this is the most important lessons Annie E. Casey has learned in over 25 years of doing this work, and getting it wrong often. This does not happen when you come armed with all the data, and your logic model and theory of change... In the nonprofit sector, there are still too many conversations downstream about data and disparities, but fewer conversations about who is interpreting that data and making decisions based on it. That has to change.

On what's next

The panelists offered the following as a set of possible investments to improve the success of systems change and community engagement:

- Capitol to fund backbone functions across multiple organizations working for collective impact
- Financing individual family achievement plans; what if some amount of available funding went not to nonprofits, but directly to families to take up their own agency?
- Build infrastructure to support leadership and government when they want to implement evidence-based programs in partnership with the community and to help reflect this interest to their constituencies
- Neighborhood-level folks have very little access to useful data—bring the data infrastructure for integrated data systems to the community so that residents could have the data they need to advocate on their own behalf
- Look at the issues community residents care the most about—housing, education, jobs, safety and transportation—for each of those areas, develop plans for government departments to help community members drive solutions in these areas
- Explore how does federal policy promotes or block community engagement, and address what needs fixing

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With the panel's ideas in mind, what would you invest in to improve outcomes of community engagement and systems change in your community?