Health Professional and Community Collaboration Guide
Executive Summary
The cover photo is from the National Medical Association’s participation in the 2014 People’s Climate March in New York City. The photo includes (L to R) Dr. Camille Clare, Dr. Donald Moore, and Dr. Mark Mitchell. (photo courtesy of Dr. Mark Mitchell)
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Executive Summary

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AUTHORS’ FOREWORD

The authors decided to develop a tool for health professionals interested in assisting environment justice groups in achieving their goals, which were often health focused. We considered focusing on what health professionals can do to support climate justice issues, but our environmental justice colleagues suggested it could serve a broader function because the opportunities and concerns are common to community-based organizations more generally and that the document could be instructive for both health professionals and community-based organizations. So we broadened the perspective of this document to address and give examples of concerns from the viewpoint of health professional and the community-based organizations. Many of the principles in this document can be applied even more broadly to other types of non-governmental organizations and other types of professionals. We hope that this document will be helpful for you in your multidisciplinary advocacy efforts. We welcome any feedback that you may wish to provide.
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Community-based organizations and health professionals both bring value, expertise, and resources to support effective advocacy for change. Working together, they can be even more effective and impactful.

Community groups can serve as a bridge or avenue of communication between community members and health professionals. Because community group leaders typically live and work in the community, they have first-hand knowledge, lived experience, and a genuine concern for the health of the community.

Health professionals have knowledge and expertise on health, and often have information and access to data that is unfamiliar to community members, as well as access to other professionals and resources that the community group may not. Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health professionals are often trusted messengers.

However, due to a long history of discrimination and maltreatment, many people of color can be distrustful of health professionals, researchers and related institutions. If health professionals can earn the trust of the community, then they can provide a credible and authoritative voice both to community members and to policy makers.

In summary, health professionals and community organizations often have different, but complementary types of knowledge, relationships, and access to power. By working together, health professionals and community groups can build on each other’s strengths, amplify their voice and reach, and more effectively win policies and systems change to promote health equity and environmental justice.

Before health professionals approach community-based organizations, or community-based organizations seek health professional support, each must consider what they hope to accomplish by engaging and whether a partnership can be valuable for both parties. Are there shared goals? Is collaboration likely to create better outcomes?
Health professionals might benefit from community group support:

- When a health professional or group is concerned about a health threat that is not being adequately addressed and looking for allies and advocacy support (policy research, lobbying, organizing, administrative) to help engage policy makers, especially in areas outside of traditional medical practice or where health institutions are unresponsive. Specific community-based organizations may or may not already be working in this area and be able to provide these supports. If they are not already working on it, they might become interested when they learn more about it.

- If it is easy for a CBO to address your concerns within their current efforts.

- If health professionals can add value to an advocacy campaign or discussion currently being conducted by a CBO.

- If community groups are able to act in situations where others cannot. Oftentimes health professionals, especially those working for government clinics/hospitals, are constrained by rules or regulations that limit their involvement and are not able to “advocate” for certain programs/laws/policies/etc. They need community organizations to mobilize community members to carry out public direct actions and community advocacy to raise the issue so it becomes an agenda item.

A community group may benefit from health professional support:

- When they have health concerns and want unbiased information to better understand an issue, to document and amplify health concerns, or to protect themselves from a health risk.

- When policies or legislation with health implications are under consideration by policymakers (legislators, governmental or corporate decision makers) and the expertise of health care professionals may strengthen community advocacy efforts.

- When the community group wants to validate its health concerns, confirm that information provided by industry or government is correct, respond to accusations that its own statements are incorrect, or add credibility to community health concerns.

- When policy makers are ignoring the health concerns of the community or claiming that the health experience of community residents are not consistent with science.

Once you find a community group or health professional you are interested in working with, determine whether you will complement one another. Filter and synthesize the potential partner’s objectives and priorities to ensure their goals are consistent with yours for the work you want to accomplish. Also review the tactics that the CBO proposes to use to achieve their objectives to make sure that health professionals are comfortable with them. There are many things that health professionals and CBOs can do to support each other’s efforts.
Actions health professionals can take to support community advocacy for policy and systems change include:

- Speak at community meetings and events.
- Gather sign-ons for letters or petitions.
- Help develop a health organization support letter.
- Organize a health delegation to meet with policy-makers.
- Help develop health surveys or connect to those with expertise to do so.
- Synthesize relevant health information and translate to understandable language.
- Provide health information that community groups can use in blogs or social media.
- Speak to groups about health impacts, health benefits, health risks.
- Provide context about whether the community is being disproportionately affected, if you know.
- Connect the community to local health researchers (if appropriate).
- Help to employ useful resources.
- Partner with the community group in grant development and implementation.

Actions community-based organizations can take to effectively engage health professionals in policy and systems change include:

- Share your lived experience about how exposures or policies affect you and your family’s health and any ideas you have on how to solve the problems.
- Share the historical successes and failures and lessons learned (e.g. what happened to your community during the last flood).
- Identify opportunities for health professionals to present at community meetings and events.
- Identify opportunities for health professionals to testify on policy issues at public hearings.
- Identify opportunities for health professionals to speak at community events.
- Draft sign-on letters, op-eds, or talking points to make it easier for health professionals to engage with health policy.
- Offer to include health professionals in your grant applications as paid technical consultants or health educators.
- Draft statements for health professionals to be included in your press releases or on your website.
- Invite health professionals to your organization’s meetings with policy-makers.
- Offer to provide community outreach for a health event.
Depending on the level of engagement required, it may be important to take the time to gain an understanding about the characteristics the health professional and community groups possess, which not only allows one to determine mutual interests, but also sets the tone for the type of relationship to be built. Gaining some perspective on mutual interests determines whether the relationship is transformational or one that is simply transactional. Both can be beneficial.

When health professionals are ready to work with a CBO they should consider how to establish trust. Some strategies to accomplish this would be to meet with the leaders of CBOs that are likely to have common interests and clearly state their intentions and their vision of the relationship. If the CBOs are receptive, a health professional can ask to attend a regular meeting of the organization to observe, or if appropriate, to briefly describe the opportunity for collaboration. It is important to understand that while the trust building process takes time, trust is essential to establishing a resilient and strong relationship with community-based organizations.

As with all organizations, health professional groups and community-based groups have strengths and weaknesses. To be successful it is helpful to recognize and to build on the strengths of each group and to address and overcome the weaknesses whenever possible.

Community-based organizations have many assets which are important for them to establish and grow their credibility and power within a community. It’s important that health professionals recognize, support and, when appropriate, utilize their assets to compliment those of health professionals to achieve your common goals.

Once there is mutual agreement for community-based organizations to work with health professional groups on a project or activity, it is important to establish a clear understanding of each group’s responsibilities and what resources are available. They must establish clear and open communication to maintain a positive and trusting relationship. It helps to establish regular times for each to provide updates and determine a point person from each group for communication between the groups.

Each group should also develop and discuss the process for negotiating and reporting changes to your approach, your goals, or your ability to reach those goals. It is important that the changes in requirements be communicated as soon as they are known. This gives both groups the opportunity to prepare and adjust for the impacts of the change. It is also important to have regular communication to provide progress reports, opportunities for providing ideas for project improvement, and reports of changes in the financial status of either entity. A communication plan helps establish the trust needed for effective partnership. These can be included in a scope of work with defined deliverables and expectations, which can be extremely important and helpful in maintaining the work-flow.

Our hope is that a relationship is established between health professionals and community groups, and that there are mutually beneficial reasons to work together. Not every community group or health professional is going to be the perfect match. In fact, there are cases where a relationship started but did not have the outcomes one or both groups desired. Several real-world examples are detailed in Chapter nine.

In summary, whether you are a part of a community-based organization or a health professional, make an attempt to find the value, expertise, and mutual benefits that can be found in working together to support effective advocacy for change.