

Engagement Step #4: Community-led Program Planning¹

Many active living opportunities are not reaching socially excluded community members. Sometimes community members are not aware of opportunities. Sometimes community members do not feel welcome. As well, sometimes community members are aware of opportunities and want to participate, but do not have the time, money, childcare, transportation, equipment or self-confidence to do so.

In order to reach the “hard to reach,” target community members need to be involved in the process. This means that planning is done directly with the community; the community will help define, develop and, sometimes, to deliver programs and services. The community will have a personal interest and investment in making the program or service successful. It can be a challenging exercise to give up the lead and “go with the flow” of what community members want and need.

Things to remember

- Community-led program planning is best done once a mutually trusting relationship has been developed with community members.
- Work with them to identify a need or interest.
- Engage community members in planning: This can be tricky as you will have to remember that you are not directing the process. Step back and let the community members lead. You are there to support and facilitate.
- Conduct and evaluate the program and the process. During and after the program, find out what is working well and how the program can be improved.

Project examples

Below are two examples of projects that involved community members in the planning of physical activity programs. Note that the process is not exactly the same in either example, nor is it exactly the same as the Steps to Engagement. Keys to community-led programming are flexibility and the ability to give up the lead.



A joint initiative of
BC Recreation and Parks
Association and the Heart
and Stroke Foundation of
BC & Yukon.



ActNowBC.ca

An initiative of these
BC Healthy Living Alliance
members



KAMLOOPS WOMEN'S ACTION PROJECT (KWAP)²

The Kamloops Women's Action Project was a community-led project that involved a coalition of recreation, health, community service providers, university researchers and low income women working together to create accessible recreation programs. The project was initiated by a group of low income women who identified that lack of access to physical activity was a major barrier to healthy lifestyles for them and their families.

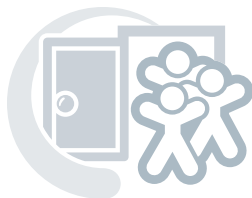
In this project, some low income women took an active leadership role. Some participated on the advisory committee, while others participated in focus groups. Some contributed by completing pre- and post-program surveys, while others learned how to administer surveys to others. These women contributed both physical and intellectual resources to the project.

Low income women were involved in the planning of the programs. They provided input on dates and times, locations, instructors, program content, social activities, transportation and child care. They also worked with service providers to identify what issues were to be addressed by the programs, what programs would be implemented, how to interpret focus group data and made recommendations.

However, because many of the low income women were single parents with heavy demands on their time, many were unable to participate in program implementation and relied on the expertise of the recreation staff. The recreation, health and community service providers acted as facilitators to help coordinate facility space and staff, and secure external funding and other resources to successfully complete the project.

Three unique programs were developed based on the involvement of low income women:

- 1 A self defense class** that helped the women to develop physical strength and confidence because many of the women lived alone and were concerned for their personal safety. Teenaged daughters were invited to participate alongside their mothers.
- 2 A parent and tot (P&T) variety program** that was a hybrid of a traditional P&T program and child minding. This allowed the women to move back and forth between participating in the P&T program with their children, working out in the fitness area or socializing with another mother.
- 3 An introductory fitness program** that was unique because it allowed the women to participate in a variety program with their children until they were settled, then the women would attend the fitness portion of the program. At the end, participants would gather as a large group for story time.



75 women and 150 children participated in these programs. The women would not have participated if the needs of their children were not met. Also, because many low income women were involved in the planning and focus groups, they felt a sense of ownership over the program and its content, and helped to augment the traditional forms of advertising through word of mouth.

“I got back my self confidence so now I can go out in public alone.”

“I have reduced my stress level.”

“I gained confidence and learned a new way to exercise.” (project participants)

“We, like other departments province-wide, face continued pressure to increase revenues and reduce costs. Program revenue is and will continue to be an important consideration for every recreation department, but it cannot be the sole driving force behind the delivery of community recreation.” (recreation department staff)

WOMEN ORGANIZING ACTIVITIES FOR WOMEN (WOAW)³

WOAW was initiated when a recreation department and university researchers organized a workshop to explore ways of promoting physical activity and recreation participation among low income women. Most of the people who attended that initial workshop, including low income women, community service providers and recreation staff, comprised the core group for the duration of the three year project.

This group met regularly throughout the three years. The women revealed that initially they were hesitant to participate in this project because of negative experiences with the local government’s fee subsidy process but decided to attend because they had a positive, trusting relationship with community service providers.

During the needs identification stage, low income women identified that surveys were not a useful method of collecting information from low income community members due to literacy and language difficulties. Instead, information was captured through interviews, discussions and meeting notes.

It was also revealed that despite daily struggles due to material scarcity, the women valued participation in recreation and physical activity because it is a way to build a connection to their community, improve their physical and mental health and role model positive behaviours to their children.

Collaboratively, the group organized activities such as self defense, yoga, tai chi, bellydancing, walking groups, weight training classes, swimming, computer training, stress management and a number of socials. As in the previous example, women involved in the planning of activities also leveraged their social networks to recruit new participants through word of mouth advertising.

In addition to planning and implementing recreation programs, the low income women also began advocacy activities in their community. They made presentations to local officials about poor public transit and met with a senior parks and recreation manager to discuss concerns regarding leisure access policies.

Staff participating in this process identified that the shift from a coordinator role to a facilitator role was challenging. But they were also sensitive to ensure they did not “take over,” even when participants deferred to their experience, and valued the contributions of the women.

“This is not what we are used to. That first meeting was really painful because it took so long to make a decision. We [sport and recreation staff] were looking at each other going “Is this for real? I don’t know if I can do this.” But we need to be committed to this process if it is really going to be for the women.” (sport and recreation staff)

“It [community development] requires a willingness to not control the process. I don’t know if that is a skill or maybe it is a value. It’s about ensuring the right for every person to be an equal participant and that there be equity in the process.” (women’s centre staff)

“I am learning so much from the women. I just hope they realize what an influence they are having on WOAW and the community partners and the organizations we represent.” (sport and recreation staff).

References

¹ Working Together Project (2008). Community-Led Libraries Toolkit. Human Resources and Social Development Canada, Vancouver, BC, 144 pp. www.librariesincommunities.ca.

² Frisby, W. & Fenton, J. (1998). Leisure Access: Enhancing Recreation Opportunities for Those Living in Poverty. Vancouver, BC: British Columbia Health Research Foundation, Vancouver, BC, 88 pp., [ISBN 0-7726-3804-7 Available online on LIN].

³ Frisby, W. & Millar, S. (2002). The actualities of doing community development to promote the inclusion of low-income populations in local sport and recreation. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, (3), 209-233.