

# Cities of Opportunity

## LEARNING LABS

On February 20, 2024, the National League of Cities (NLC)'s Cities of Opportunity initiative held the third discussion in their Learning Lab series.

The Cities of Opportunity Initiative has seven capacities for action. Each Learning Lab focuses on one of these seven capacities. This Learning Lab focused on the Authentic Community Engagement capacity. This handout reflects the key themes, lessons learned, and city-driven discussion from this conversation.

### Authentic Community Engagement

Building partnerships and relationships with those most impacted and those historically excluded in a way that is transparent, intentional, and with an equity lens.

The [Spectrum of Public Participation](#) from the International Association for Public Participation provides one way to move community engagement from definition into action. It outlines five levels of participation, with community involvement in decision-making increasing from left to right, however; this is not a left to right hierarchy. While it is important to strive for collaboration and empowerment, there is value in engagement at each level. The key to ensuring that each level is done authentically is:



INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION →

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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- **Transparency:** Build trust through transparency by ensuring the community knows how decisions are made, if and at what level they can be involved, and what influence their input has on the final decision.
- **Intentionality:** Consider project goals, capacities, and timelines when selecting a level. Misalignment can lead to implementation challenges, broken promises to the community, and loss of trust.
- **Equity Lens:** At each level, ensure that those most impacted by the issues and those traditionally excluded from having a voice and power in decision making are centered in the engagement plan.

Learn more about CoO Learning Labs and register for the full series.

# What Do We Mean By Authentic Community Engagement?

**PRESENTED BY:**  
**Ruth Thomas Squance,**  
Build Healthy Places Network

The discussion was opened by diving deep and asking the question, what do we mean by authentic community engagement? In answering this question, Squance cited the [Vital Conditions for Health and Well-being](#), a model by the Rippel Foundation which highlights *"the factors that affect a population's ability to thrive"*.



“At the center of this model is Civic Muscle and Belonging, where there is a sense of inclusion and collective agency from a community to influence the place they live and the policies and practices that impact that. **So, as we challenge ourselves to think about this broader definition of what health and equity means, and well-being and thriving, we realize it’s a multi-sector challenge that really is going to require broadening our idea of who is included in the health ecosystem.** And what we’re learning as we do our work is that cities play an important role in this expanded health ecosystem, in that they create the policies, the infrastructure, that connective tissue that enables those multi-sector approaches and coalitions to work.”



**Ruth Thomas Squance,** Co-Executive Director, Build Healthy Places Network

Three cities – **Rochester, MN; Missoula, MT; and Kansas City, MO**– shared their process towards building authentic community engagement, including community co-design, new technology tools, and educational programs.

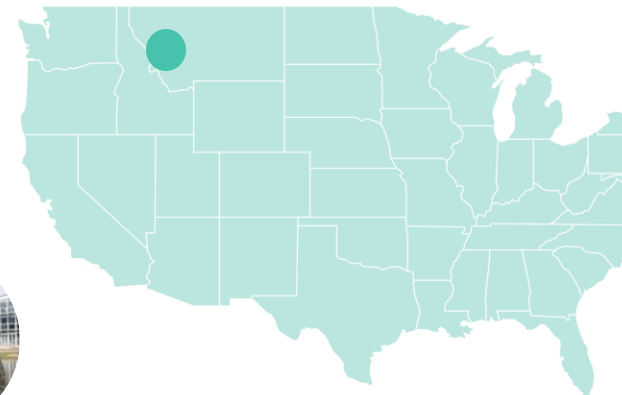


## Missoula, MT: *Expanding Engagement Through Technology*

Donna Gaukler, Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Missoula, Montana presented EngageMissoula, an online engagement platform for the City of Missoula. Through EngageMissoula, city residents can provide input and learn about engagement opportunities for projects across the city. Recognizing the differing levels of engagement required across projects, the site enhances transparency with the community by clearly designating the level of involvement for community within each project. EngageMissoula is an important tool for the city, however it does not stand alone within the city’s community engagement work. It is part of an overarching city-wide culture shift to more authentically engage community members.

“EngageMissoula is not going to be the perfect way to reach audiences that typically have not engaged with government. So, we have to add listening sessions where residents are at. **Build that trust, grow the partnerships, so individuals within those communities are starting to use that tool and encouraging folks that they work with to use that tool.** And so, it’s a multi-pronged approach. But it’s a great place in government for us to not only have robust engagement, but also to archive that engagement which is an important part of our process.”

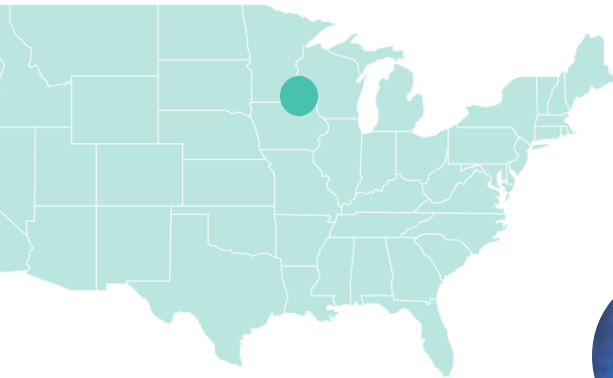
**Donna Gaukler**, Director of Parks and Recreation, City of Missoula, MT





## Rochester, MN: Advancing Equity through Community Co-Design

Chao Mwatela, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director for the City of Rochester, Minnesota, shared how the city uses co-design to intentionally engage marginalized communities in the design and development of projects impacting their lives. The city's unique Community Co-Design model was developed in partnership with Destination Medical Center (DMC) with the specific goal of involving the community in the development process for "healthy and equitable projects, policies, and practices in the Rochester region." The co-design model recognizes that community members are experts in their lived experience and have the critical knowledge needed to identify, develop and implement solutions that will yield real impact. The approach centers community members at every level of development, empowering residents to become local leaders and advocates on the issues most important to them. Furthermore, through the co-design process, governmental trust can be rebuilt, and leaders from within the co-design process become critical connectors and advocates within the larger community.



"Equitable community co-design is an enhancement to human-centered design. And the impetus of this is that **people in our communities are really the experts in their own lived experience.** None of us, even with all of the technical expertise that we have, are really able to clearly understand a problem or come up with a solution as well as the people who are navigating our spaces every day."

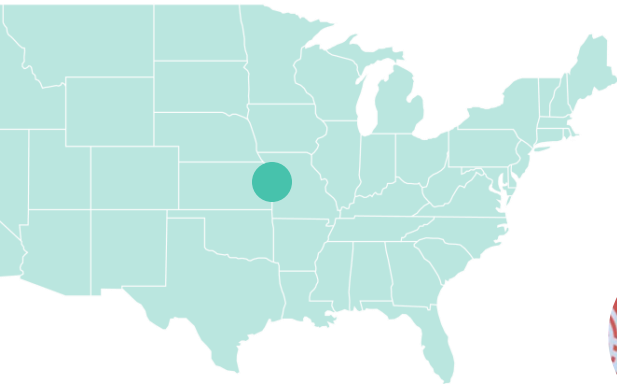


**Chao Mwatela**, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Director, City of Rochester MN



## Kansas City, MO: Empowering Communities through Education

Jeff Williams, City Planning Director for the City of Kansas City, Missouri spoke about [Citizen Engagement University \(CEU\)](#), a nine-week program run by the city to build resident knowledge on city operations. Through the program, participants learn how Kansas City’s government operates, the roles and relationship of its departments and offices, and most importantly the opportunities and structures that exist for them to provide input to the city. CEU offers a critical entry point for residents to engage with the city and builds capacity that then bridges future engagements. Graduates from CEU represent a pool of community leaders, poised to lend their voice across projects and initiatives within the city, laying the groundwork for long-term and sustainable community engagement. Furthermore, as leaders in their community, CEU graduates take on both formal and informal roles connecting their communities with city government and advocating for community needs.



“It’s not, you get a certificate, and then we don’t hear from you again. No, that really is a base and a foundation. **People who participated in Citizen Engagement University have gone forward to become neighborhood leaders.** We have a wonderful connection with the University of Missouri Kansas City, our local university. They, through state funding, do a center for neighborhoods. So then, they take that individual training and train neighborhood leaders.”



**Jeff Williams**, City Planning Director for the City of Kansas City, MO

## Cross-cutting Themes: Strategic Implementation of Resources for Trust Building

Panelists and participants alike elevated the need to strategically deploy resources to build community trust. Across the U.S. city leaders and staff report reduced public trust in government. To bolster trust, cities need to be able to dedicate resources to community engagement activities, however; a lack of dedicated funding for community engagement means cities must be creative in how they strategically deploy resources.

“An authentic conversation means two things. It means hearing things that you don’t necessarily want to hear, and it is understanding that we certainly will try to work to build a consensus as best we can.”

**Jeff Williams**, City Planning Director for the City of Kansas City, MO



“Over the last several years, folks have lost confidence in government, even local government, which typically if there’s confidence in any level of government, that’s where it’s at. I think we’re more divisive than we ever have been, and probably less trusting. But at the same time, **I think there’s an incredible opportunity here to demonstrate that local government is here to serve you and what we need to do is make the change in how we invest our time and resources. The likelihood of gaining more resources to do this engagement is slim. And so we have to think about how we use our time very, very differently.** And that – maybe that process and engagement is often times more important than the speed of results or in final product. Because if we haven’t gone through the appropriate process, if we haven’t done the full engagement, we really haven’t moved the dial on any of our most important items, which is community engagement, so that in a time of crisis the community does indeed trust us.”



**Donna Gaukler**, Director of Parks and Recreation, City of Missoula, MT

## Cross-Cutting Themes: Maintaining Equity as a Priority

Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining equity in the forefront of community engagement to ensure those most impacted are actually being reached by engagement efforts. Panelists highlighted the importance of peer networks in ensuring this reach. Discussing how working with trusted leaders as liaisons harnesses personal connections and can lead to stronger engagement and trust than the city can establish on its own.

“The idea that a community member goes out and speaks to their father, or their brother, sister, grandmother—those are questions and stories that we wouldn’t capture any other way, because I could go in and ask that same question to that community member, but I would not get that authentic response, right? But having a community member who has that relationship doing so, and all of that information gets curated into one place.”

**Chao Mwatela**, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director for the City of Rochester, MN



“There was a community here, one of the first African American middle-class communities here in Kansas City. But there was a gentleman who was a passionate film maker and historian, and he put together a beautiful film on the history of this community that—he was a trusted soul. He was in living rooms we’d never get into. He just spent that time to build community. . . **if you can lean into people in the world of academia that gets you to that very authentic storytelling, it’s a real great place to document some history. You’re just not going to capture it in any other way.**”

**Jeff Williams**, City Planning Director for the City of Kansas City, MO



## Resources

The following links are resources referenced by speakers and discussion participants throughout the Learning Lab.

- [Spectrum of Public Participation](#) – A resource from the International Association for Public Participation offering a visual representation of the various levels of opportunity for public engagement and the promises a city makes to its public each step of the way.
- [Build Healthy Places Network](#) – An organization whose mission is to promote cross-sector collaboration in communities to support development of healthy, equitable neighborhoods and communities across the U.S.
- [REPAIR Framework for Racial Healing](#) – An approach by the Build Health Places Network to community care and healing to lift up the community’s existing work in racial healing to center a community-focused vision for health and equity.
- [Vital Conditions for Health and Well-being](#) – A framework from the Rippel Foundation which highlights the relationship between various factors of health and well-being within a community, highlighting belonging and community muscle as the factor which pulls everything together.
- [Community Co-Design](#) – Rochester, MN’s program developed in partnership with Destination Medical Center to promote a collaborative approach to community programming which puts community members in decision-making roles for ongoing engagement.
- [EngageMissoula](#) – The City of Missoula’s public engagement platform which provides information about government programs and opportunities for various levels of involvement from community members.
- [Granicus | Digital Engagement Platform for Government](#) – The platform which the City of Missoula chose to host their digital engagement efforts through the EngageMissoula site.
- [Citizen Engagement University](#) – Kansas City, MO’s program to orient community members to the inner workings of the city government offices and how they serve to benefit local communities, empowering individuals to become community leaders.
- [KC Spirit Playbook](#) – The City of Kansas City’s comprehensive plan to promote community engagement and development through a shared vision between the public and city government.
- [Mid-America Regional Council’s Public Participation Plan](#) – A plan providing a framework for strategic public engagement through planning and ongoing public participation.
- [April Learning Lab: Aligning City Departments to Advance Equity](#) – The registration page for our April Learning Lab. We hope you’ll join us for another great discussion!