

Office of Equity McGovern Community Engagement Strategy

In May 2024, DHHS (Department of Health and Human Services) invited Milwaukee County Office of Equity (OOE) to participate in the Future State of Community Centers initiative, with a focus on leading community engagement efforts and gathering meaningful input to inform the next steps for strategies to rebuild the McGovern Senior Center. This collaboration marked a significant moment, as OOE had just released its Community Engagement Toolkit, a comprehensive framework presented to the County Board in Spring 2024 (File: 24-737, Original File From 2022: 22-1123). The toolkit centers on the Community Engagement Continuum, a foundational strategy for ensuring that communities, particularly historically underserved populations, are not only included but also actively guiding decisions that impact their lives.

Milwaukee County Office of Equity developed an engagement strategy for DHHS to gather community voices to shape the future of elder housing. The Continuum offers a strategic framework that scales engagement based on issue complexity and community readiness. It includes five progressive stages (see below). Each stage incorporates key principles such as transparency, equity, inclusion, and shared ownership, ensuring community members are partners, not just participants.

- Inform: Share accessible, timely information with the community
- Consult: Gather input through surveys, forums, and interviews
- Involve: Engage residents actively in problem-solving processes
- Collaborate: Co-develop solutions with community partners
- Share Leadership: Transfer power and decision-making to community members

As a result of this collaboration, OOE developed a targeted community engagement strategy for the McGovern Senior Center to address elder housing needs. Guided by the Continuum, this plan focused on ensuring an authentic community voice in every McGovern Housing Project planning phase. These strategies included:

- Government & Key Stakeholder Engagement: Facilitated conversations between local government, service providers, and community advocates
- Community Listening Sessions: Hosted public meetings to gather input directly from older adults and caregivers
- Door-to-Door Engagement: Conducted outreach in neighborhoods to meet residents where they are and lower barriers to participation

- Ongoing Engagement and Advocacy: Maintained consistent communication, updates, and opportunities for continued input and involvement

Through these coordinated efforts, OOE collaborated with DHHS to engage over 200 residents through listening sessions and door to door interactions. These activities allowed us to collect information which served to rebuild trust with residents who often felt left out of decision-making processes. It's important to acknowledge that when resident concerns are left unaddressed, that can lead to disengagement, mistrust, and resistance to change. Throughout this process, we heard several residents state that they had previously felt unheard, excluded, or disconnected from institutions that shape the resources and services they rely on. As a result of being a part of this process, many expressed gratitude and support of the project.

Throughout this process, OOE played a central role in Part II of the Listening Sessions, where OOE led planning, facilitation, and development of evaluation tools to ensure community voices were documented and translated into actionable insights. Additionally, OOE led recruitment, outreach trainings/engagement, and evaluation efforts for door-to-door outreach teams, ensuring consistency, equity, and authenticity in how elder voices were gathered.

This comprehensive approach allowed OOE to apply each stage of the Community Engagement Continuum, ensuring older adults were not only heard, but empowered to co-create housing solutions that met their real needs. The strategy went beyond simply collecting input, it fostered trust, transparency, and shared leadership, ensuring that elder residents are viewed as experts of their own experiences. Through our efforts and collaboration with DHHS, we demonstrated how to center the voices of the impacted population in every step of the process. From listening and consultation to planning and evaluation, OOE in collaboration with DHHS, we have laid the foundation for more responsive, equitable, and sustainable community engagement outcomes. Furthermore, our community engagement strategies demonstrate how, when guided by intentional frameworks, engagement can serve as a powerful catalyst to transform public systems, making them more just, inclusive, and responsive to our communities, making Milwaukee County the healthiest county in Wisconsin.