

Group Health Foundation

Community Engagement Report –Statewide Poverty Action Network

Poverty Action builds grassroots power to end causes of poverty and create opportunities for everyone to prosper. We envision a state where people of all income levels fully promote and participate in building the fabric of socially, politically, and economically just communities.

To achieve this mission and vision, we engage low-income communities and communities of color across the state to forward innovative policy solutions at the state-level that address the root causes of poverty. Our policy agenda is created by community listening sessions and a board that is always at least 50% people with low incomes, 50% people of color, and 50% people living outside of Seattle.

For the past 15 years, we have traveled around the state every 1-2 years to host listening sessions. We are excited to share our lessons learned over the years, as well as recent updates from our 2018 sessions.

Strong, Authentic Relationships Are Key

Work Closely with Organizational Partners

Poverty Action enjoys thoughtful relationships with many partner organizations, and often by extension, many community members across the state. Often as we plan listening sessions, we begin by reaching out to partner organizations located in our target locations. These partners range from larger service providers to community colleges to small, grassroots organizations. Partnering on listening sessions not only bolsters our relationships with those organizations, but often, the organizational partners become a trusted connection between people experiencing poverty as they share concerns and ideas with us. For example, we work closely with a small community group in Aberdeen/Westport. Each event we plan with that group bolsters our relationship – they tangibly see that we are committed to hearing and incorporating their input – but also, they are a trusted part of their community and the reference they provide for us is key in reaching people who have deep and understandable distrust of systems and organizations.

Similarly, we have had success with identifying a member of partner organizations who can serve as our point person for assisting in organizing, promoting, and even facilitating the listening session. For larger organizations, this is often a staff member, but for smaller networks, this is often a volunteer or the lead of a support group. Having a point person helps with logistics and creates the needed human connection that allows organizations to work and vision together, rather than maintaining formal, disparate, self-interested tasks that are hashed out electronically and rarely converge in person.

Be in Relation with People

We strive to share resources with anyone who participates in our listening sessions. For example, we bring materials to help people access local and state resources. This summer, we have been including information about how to access the benefits of laws that passed during the 2018 legislative session, such as increased monthly funds through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, reprieve on Legal Financial Obligations (LFOs), and broader eligibility for the Housing and Essential Needs benefits.

Follow Up, Follow Up, Follow Up

This is probably the most important part of building and maintaining strong relationships with community members. We always provide additional ways to be involved and supportive beyond our initial contact of the listening session. We invite people to our legislative lobby day on MLK Day, we invite people to meet with their area lawmakers, and we ask if people are interested in testifying or speaking at town halls.

Beyond additional engagement activities, we also work hard to stay in relationship with participants and let them know what policy priorities we have identified based on the input they provided. We identify next steps together and plan for how we can build momentum on addressing the issues that they identified as top priorities. Sometimes that is a phone call with the organizational contact, other times that is a visit from our staff and board to share an update, and at times, it is an adapted listening session the following year. This year, we had a listening session participant ask about interning with us.

Co-design the Solutions – Or Support an Existing Solution

Poverty Action has several community accountability measures built into our organizational structure. As noted above, our board is made up of people impacted by poverty and is accountable to the communities we serve. The board is also integral to the listening session and policy setting process. Board members facilitate sessions and lead the conversation about which policies would best address the concerns raised during listening sessions.

Each session is recorded and transcribed and staff compile themes from those sessions. Once staff have compiled the themes, we share the themes with the board and then have a retreat to discuss options to address the issues that came from the sessions. As time permits, we then bring those policy ideas back to listening session participants for their feedback. This iterative process ensures that proposed solutions respond to people's actual concerns.

We have learned over the years that not every issue needs a new solution. Often there is an effort underway that would address peoples' concerns and we then can lend our support and capacity to that effort.

One example of how we have done this in the past is our work on reforming the LFO system. In 2009, Poverty Action helped pass legislation that restored voting rights to previously incarcerated people. We then created a campaign to register these newly re-enfranchised voters. As we talked with people affected by the prison system, we began to understand the devastating impact of our state's LFO system, and the need to reform this broken system. We added questions about LFOs to our listening sessions and got overwhelming input that we needed to address this issue. Our board agreed. We quickly learned that the ACLU, Columbia Legal Services, and many small grassroots organizations such as Black Prisoners Caucus and I Did The Time were already working on a campaign to reform LFOs. Instead of attempting to create a new solution, we added our capacity to that effort and worked to connect listening session participants to the campaign so they could share their stories and experiences. In the 2018 Legislative Session, significant measures passed that eliminate the exploitative 12% interest rates on non-restitution LFOs.

Originality in health and income equity organizing is rare. We have learned to network and join the ranks of already-existing efforts and add our service and expertise to the process.

Address Systemic Inequities

Listen Before You Listen

Poverty Action has continued to refine our meeting structure to best meet the needs of participants and address systemic inequities. Poverty Action takes several steps to address structural issues during our listening sessions. We provide food, childcare, and a stipend at each session to ensure participants can afford to participate and feel that their time is honored. We also have our board members co-facilitate each session, ideally one person with experience of poverty and one person of color, to reduce power imbalances and encourage people to speak honestly and candidly. Similarly, we are thoughtful about who we ask to facilitate to build trust. For example, we typically wouldn't ask a young white woman to facilitate a session with older, previously incarcerated African American men. When we recruit participants from a direct service organization, we ensure staff or case managers do not attend, again with the intention that people can speak freely.

We also work with partners to determine the exact agenda for the session, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. Historically, we structure our session with two hours of listening, followed by a short 30-minute training about how to meet with lawmakers and a brief meeting with area legislators. In some communities, our partners want the chance to meet with local lawmakers, however, some community members explicitly do not want lawmakers to attend. For example, in one community we work with, one of the pressing concerns is police brutality and the criminalization of homelessness. For those community members, having elected officials there seemed intimidating, invading their platform to share their concerns. In that situation, we kept the session just to the listening portion and staff met with local lawmakers later to outline that community's concerns.

Listen After You Listen

Listening to and honoring people's stories is an on-going process. We are reminded each year that listening sessions are just the beginning of the process. We often receive feedback through calls, emails, and social media posts that add to what we hear during listening sessions. One-time listening sessions hardly constitute a relationship, so we pursue opportunities to continue to hear from participants. Through emails, phone calls, and in-person meetings, we echo what we heard, ask if we got it right, tell them how we are incorporating their stories and solutions, and present opportunities for continued engagement in our policy work. In our follow-up efforts, we often find that people are eager and excited to be part of a broader movement and have many ideas about how they want to engage with us and their elected officials. For example, we hosted a listening session in Everett early this summer. Several of the participants have since asked us to set up a follow-up meeting with their local lawmakers, attended a town hall hosted by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to share their experiences with DSHS programs, and asked for our support in making a social media video series to tell their stories.

But we shouldn't stop there. The input we hear must be incorporated into more than just our policy agenda; it should help us shape how we carry out the work. For us this means that we are constantly

refining both our listening session process, as well as our internal processes: we seek to hire staff and bring on board members who share these experiences and values; we are explicit that our board is an opportunity to learn about board service and build upon existing leadership skills, but we do not expect all board members to come with deep experience with governance and financials. Our staff have thoughtful planning discussions with our board members to determine and prioritize our focus areas for our program work, transparently balancing community needs with political strategy. It has always been the intent for community input to shape our organization, but having an explicit process built into our organizational structure—in the form of listening sessions and our board make-up—helps ensure that we live up to these goals. In a world where it can be easy to do “business as usual,” our organizational structure demands that we center the needs and priorities of people living in poverty in all aspects of our work.

Expect and Learn from Challenges and Missteps

You Will Make Mistakes

We have learned that long-term engagement with communities—rather than one-time tours throughout the state—builds trust that yields honest responses while building power to bring solutions to complex systems. Despite this being a fairly obvious principle, we have certainly made mistakes in trying to live up to this standard. In a small organization with a big mission, it can be especially difficult to prioritize the work needed to support strong relationships, especially with limited resources. Historically, we have had more success receiving funding for our policy work, meaning we must fund our listening session travel and follow up with general operating grants. We prioritize relationships to the best of our ability, but that hasn’t always translated as well as we might hope. One ongoing reality is that relationships change: staff or board members move on, a partner organization’s point person changes, or community members move. Relationships between people do not wholly transfer to relationships between organizations. This can be especially difficult for a small organization like ours where staff turnover is inevitable at some point.

It has also been difficult at times to find the right balance between new connections and continued investment in long-term partners. We have almost certainly made mistakes in attempting to balance these needs with limited capacity, leaving long-time partners wondering if we have forgotten them.

Another reality is that our board currently has limited language diversity, which makes it difficult to facilitate listening sessions in other languages. For example, this summer we are hosting a listening session in Yakima with mostly monolingual Spanish speakers and we have no board members who can facilitate in Spanish. Two years ago, we had an interpreter, but received feedback that that made the conversation more difficult. We have staff that are bilingual, but we typically ask staff to step back and let board members facilitate. To address the concern this year, we are asking staff to co-facilitate with a local community leader in the Yakima area.

Be Flexible

Being flexible with language is one example of how we’ve learned to adapt over the past several years. We are also often reminded of the need to be flexible with timing and scheduling. If we are truly aiming

to reach community members impacted by poverty, we must be able to adapt to scheduling changes or other emergent issues in their lives and communities. For example, we were planning two listening sessions for July 2018, but both partners in those communities needed to push back to August or September to accommodate other challenges. It was a good reminder to us to be flexible, but also that there are opportunities to learn about community issues and challenges even in the scheduling portion of listening sessions.

Poverty Action has also adapted to the need of facilitating to include people struggling with mental health issues. The link between mental health and poverty is clear, but we typically do not have the capacity to ensure that all facilitators are trained in navigating these interactions. We provide as much facilitation training as possible to board and staff, but it is important that facilitators know to be flexible with the conversation and not assume it will proceed exactly as planned.

Similarly, it is impossible to know exactly who will be at each session and what the group dynamics will be. In some partnerships, we have a group of people that already know each other – and often these provide space for the richest conversation. Other times, we have a more open recruitment process. In each case, board facilitators must be flexible enough with the agenda to balance individual stories and desires to speak out with quieter participants' right to share their stories in a way that works for them. Groups can also vary by size. Three years ago, we hosted a session in Kelso and planned for 12 people to attend. The day before the session, six people called to say they couldn't come. On the morning of the listening session, over 40 people showed up. Because we strive to center community experiences, we were adamant that we did not want to turn people away on the morning of the event. We had to quickly adjust the format of the session to include small group discussions, order more food and coffee, run to the store to buy gift cards since we couldn't easily get enough cash stipends on a Saturday, and ask a staff member to co-facilitate once she was done adjusting the logistics. It all worked out and we heard good feedback about the day, but it was definitely a challenge in the moment and required everyone to roll with the needed changes.

Resiliency, On-Going Engagement, Successes Are Cause for Hope

People Want to Be “Part of the Change”

We are amazed at how many people from listening sessions are interested in continuing to be involved in our systems change work. We offer many opportunities for people to join our work and do our best to adjust the opportunity to those interested. Even with our efforts to tailor the work to the community member, we are frequently impressed by how often people stay involved with us. For example, we hosted a session in Aberdeen last summer. We heard very clearly that people did not want to meet with lawmakers after the session, so we did not include that portion of the listening session. We did, however, follow up with the partner organization to invite them to stay involved in our policy change work and several members of the group expressed interest. We were thrilled when four Aberdeen listening session participants joined us in Olympia for our MLK Day lobby day and met with lawmakers to share their stories. As a result of this relationship, the Aberdeen group connected us into their local on-going organizing efforts so that we could continue to support their work and build upon the partnership.

We occasionally hear the concern from prospective partner organizations—particularly service organizations—that impacted community members are facing too many difficulties or crises to be involved in advocacy or organizing. Over the years, we have seen that this is often not true; many people understand that their experience is part of a broader system and they want that system to change. At our recent Everett listening session, participants shared that they appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories since they often just do not have a forum to be heard, no matter how much they have to say. Because we've had so many experiences that demonstrate this, we are often able to assuage the concern of our partners, which serves to open the listening session opportunity to that organization's clients, as well as to change the prevailing narrative amongst some providers.

Community Organizing Works

One of our favorite parts of listening sessions and the corresponding relationships is sharing victories with community partners and engaging them in the next efforts. This summer, we have put together an informational packet to share our legislative successes—and peoples' new rights created by them—with listening session participants. For example, we are heading to Bellingham next month to host a session with a small grassroots organization that supports families of people who are currently incarcerated. They asked us to prepare some materials outlining our state's new LFO reform law and how people can access the benefits of the law. We will go over those at the session, as well as hear their input about what we should do together next.

Similarly, because we have been doing listening sessions for over a decade, it gives us hope every time we stop hearing about a challenge that we addressed through legislative change. For example, in 2005, our board and staff heard about payday lending debt at virtually every listening session, prompting us to launch a campaign to rein in payday lending. The reform law ultimately passed in 2009 and went into effect in 2010. Since the law changed, we rarely hear about payday lending.

Hearing our successes reflected back to us gives us hope that our iterative and flexible organizing model both builds power and produces tangible outcomes for communities experiencing poverty in our state.

Poverty Action would like to thank the Group Health Foundation for seeking input on Community Engagement best practices. Building systems for successful health and income equity requires that those most affected by the inequities are involved in addressing them. We continue to refine and adjust our community engagement practices and hope our reflection contributes to policies—and policymaking processes—that are inclusive and effective.