

PART TWO

Partnering on Community Engagement with Community Based Organizations



Robert Castagna

Purpose

The Resilient Mystic Collaborative (RMC) co-facilitators share experiences engaging with community based organizations, so that other watershed scale collaboratives diving into this important work might relate to and learn from their story.

Background

The **Resilient Mystic Collaborative** is a partnership among 20 cities and towns supported by community based organizations (CBOs) in Greater Boston's Mystic River Watershed. Together, they work to protect people and places from climate-intensified risks and vulnerabilities that cannot be managed within individual municipal boundaries.

Why partner with CBOs on community engagement

In equity-centered climate resilience planning, municipalities and regional collaboratives focus on projects that close preparedness gaps between high- and low-resourced communities **(see our resource on centering equity in community engagement)**. To do so successfully, they must understand lived

experiences, needs, and aspirations of the people they work to support. CBOs who serve priority populations (e.g., low-income residents, seniors) are deeply embedded in the communities they serve. They have established relationships of trust, and they often have the community engagement skill set required for equity-centered climate adaptation work. They also understand that their communities are those affected first and worst by extreme weather.

Partner CBO GreenRoots hosted a "Cool Down Chelsea" outreach event to educate about extreme heat.



Daria Clark

A challenge for the field

Although the consultant fields for engineering and construction are well-established, no such equivalent exists for community engagement. RMC members believe that the best way to do authentic community engagement is through CBO partners. However, many CBOs are direct service providers (e.g., food distribution, community health, after-school programs) and community engagement subcontracts take them away from their core missions. This is not a challenge that any one organization can solve on its own (see some suggestions in the next section). One idea is for funding programs to require quality community engagement such that a professional consulting field could be supported, as are engineering, design, and permitting firms are.

In proposing a scope of work for their Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program (MVP)-funded **Lower Mystic Climate Vulnerability Assessment**, RMC members included over \$100k in subcontracts to CBOs for outreach to learn about how infrastructure failure during extreme storms would affect people's lives. It's fair to say that this was a step forward from traditional approaches to community engagement, which either assume an engineering firm will conduct the engagement or that if CBOs are asked to participate, they will

do so for free. RMC members learned, however, that providing adequate compensation for trusted partners is only one part of setting up the engagement for success.

Lessons learned on partnering with CBOs

Relying on CBOs to conduct community outreach is a complicated matter that deserves care and an equity- and justice-based approach. Trying to answer the following questions is a good place to start with CBO engagement, based on RMC members' experience:

- **Analyze potential partners**
Do we know whether there are CBOs with sufficient capacity and relationships of trust in the communities we want to reach? Do the CBO partners we imagine wanting to work with us actually exist?
 - RMC members had a list of potential CBO partners in mind when they drafted the project proposal, but had not done a full analysis of their respective capacities and potential interest in the project. The lead contractor was from outside the watershed and lacked direct relationships.

Some of the municipalities lacked local non-profit partners. Where CBOs are missing, expect community engagement to take substantially longer and to be done by project partners with sufficient skills and training to ensure representative participation.

- **Engage early**
Are CBOs involved in the project's design and planning from the beginning? Is the project as much their idea as anyone else's, or is it at least something they want to support because it aligns with their values or mission?
 - RMC members did not collaborate with CBOs to develop the design for the infrastructure and social vulnerability project. In retrospect, this was a significant oversight. A project team member made this point well when she said, "giving people money to do work they did not ask for is not exactly consistent with principles of justice."
- **Plan appropriately**
Do we have a plan to adequately support and leverage the CBOs in terms of communication, sample materials, back-up plans, and focused work time?
 - RMC members found that their CBO partners were operating above-capacity at all times. They were always trying to do too much with too little. If they were to work with CBOs in this capacity again, they would:
 - ◆ Anticipate turnover, as staff changes happen relatively often.
 - ◆ Have longer working meetings to dedicate time to read and thoroughly review materials and discuss questions (vs. reviewing between meetings).



The Little Mystic Channel Steering Committee is a group of residents helping to lead the design of a climate-resilient park along Little Mystic Channel in Charlestown.



One of seven public meetings engaging over 1500 community members in the Malden River Works, an effort to create a climate-resilient public riverfront park.

- ◆ Produce baseline communications materials in all relevant languages early in the project so CBOs have common speaking points and simple, standard language to use to describe the project.
- ◆ Have explicit, thoughtful conversations about the connections RMC members see between climate and the CBO's work, and ask them to explain connections they see. Then help articulate those connections in a way that will help them in conversations with community members.
- ◆ Plan time and money for translation services specifically for communications with the CBO partners. It is critical to plan sufficiently for translation services for external documents and meetings. They would also plan for the possible need for translation within the project and CBO team. Some of the most powerful and trusted community organizers and leaders might not feel comfortable participating in group planning meetings conducted in English.
- ◆ Ensure the CBO's time is being used to the greatest advantage by taking on the public involvement work that doesn't require the CBO's expertise. By limiting the CBO's scope of work to those activities that only they can do (i.e. direct engagement that benefits from their knowledge of the community and relationships of trust), the project team can develop more equitable partnerships and reduce the potential for burnout.

Additional Resources

- *Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning* from the Urban Sustainability Directors Network
- *Centering Equity in Climate Resilience Planning and Action* from the Antioch University New England Center for Climate Preparedness and Community Resilience

This product is the part of a broader toolkit to inspire and inform watershed-scale climate collaborations. **Learn more here.**

This resource was developed in collaboration by the Resilient Mystic Collaborative and Mass ECAN Slow the Flow Work Group, written by S. Callahan with input from J. Wormser, C. Hulet, M. Ocana, Z. Murphy, K. Patel, P. Mande, and D. Mattes.

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This was made possible thanks to support from the UMass Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment, and the Barr Foundation. The Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment and UMassExtension are equal opportunity providers and employers, United States Department of Agriculture operating. Contact your local Extension office for information on disability accommodations. Contact the State Center Director's Office if you have concerns related to discrimination, 413-545-4800 or see ag.umass.edu/civil-rights-information.