



# LISTENING SESSIONS REPORT

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# ABOUT ALL IN LISTENING SESSIONS

The colloquial head nod or the phrase “I see you” that are so prominent in the Black community are indicative of the need for human validation. The need for human beings to be seen, heard and understood as inherently valuable to the collective. For it is our individual stories woven together that make the larger collective narrative, the people are speaking – but are we listening?

More than ever in our current context of a global pandemic in which human beings have been forced to physically stay away from one other, we must work harder to understand the resiliency, esteem and care that come from being seen and heard by others.



# ALAMEDA COUNTY: ARE WE LISTENING?



ALL IN Alameda County's listening sessions were launched in 2015. Committed to listening, learning and understanding what community is saying, mini grants were awarded to community residents and organizations to start the process of on-going dialogues in their neighborhoods.

For its 2016 round of listening sessions, ALL IN requested proposals from nonprofits, businesses, and community leaders within Alameda County to engage residents on community strengths and challenges. Seventy-four Community partners and organizations were awarded grants between \$1,000 and \$3,000 and hosted over 100 Listening Sessions with community residents, reaching over 1,700 people.

On December 7, 2017, ALL IN launched its third round of Listening Sessions by announcing a request for community proposals to conduct community-based research. This cycle expanded upon previous listening session cycles by offering each grantee the option of holding community forums, conducting one-on-one interviews with residents, or a combination of both. After a one-month application period, ALL IN received 50 applications and selected 32 of those applicants to offer mini-grants to hold their own sessions.

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Traditionally ALL IN's community listening sessions have been a way to engage community members and identify what innovative and creative ways Alameda County residents and community partners are combating poverty, as well as better understand the needs on the ground. The process until now has been through recruiting organizations and community groups to hold and facilitate listening sessions within their communities.

*For 2019, we decided to switch it up.*

After three years of external facing listening sessions with community residents, ALL IN decided to turn inward and listen to what County Agencies and partners are doing to engage, build relationships with and support community members.

At ALL IN we want to respect the historical relationship between fact finding and community. The community is often asked what they need by different government agencies and organizations, and suffer from reflection exhaustion, not seeing desired action. The themes of what is needed and the strategies to address those needs are often not in alignment.

For that reason, a new approach was necessary. Led by ALL IN's Coordinator of Community Partnerships, a series of one on one or small group listening sessions were conducted over a three month period in the fall of 2019.

# SAME VISION, NEW PROCESS



Listening Sessions are an integral piece of ALL IN's social fabric. It's important that we continue to hold a commitment to listening to the world around us and those most affected by poverty, and making sure this listening informs the direction, values and work of ALL IN.

We are clear that this is a constant work in progress, and we continue to work to learn how to best respond to community needs with intention, and engage and activate community. The 2019/2020 Listening Sessions investigated what “community” means, why Alameda County departments and agencies engage with community, and what this engagement looks like.

A four section semi-structured interview guide was developed and used to facilitate the interview process (see appendix). Interview participants were identified by category in the following areas: healthcare, anti-poverty, supervisorial districts, criminal justice system and human services.

Although a number of potential interview participants were invited to participate, not everyone was able due to scheduling constraints. Approximately sixteen different people from government agencies and community partners were interviewed.

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SESSIONS

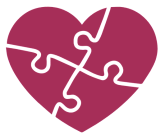
A tremendous amount of valuable information and wisdom was gained through this iteration of listening sessions, and participants were extremely generous with their sharing.

Several reoccurring themes arose, and one thing that came through very clear is that government is made up of people, human beings, many of which are trying to create systemic transformation from within. Doing what they can every day to push agendas of racial equity, critiquing the status quo and wanting to do better.

While we will not break down each theme that arose we will speak to the most prominent:



the varied definition of community



the role of relationships and trust



the fluidity across community  
engagement practices



the idea that agencies want to  
do better and are filled with hope

# THE VARIED DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY

Having a common language is critical in equity work. It is a foundational step in understanding and breaking down oppression.



In speaking with Departments and Agencies about what they consider “community” we saw that the definition varied greatly.

There is no common language when it comes to defining community, in fact the concept was vast and diverse. While language setting is crucial, honoring the diversity and breadth reflects the complexity of what it means to be community and serve community.

For one agency, community can be understood very specific to the population they serve. For example, one agency said, “...in several different ways...we serve children in welfare care. So all kids in and out of homecare become our clients...our tight knit and close community is related to children, their families, then their surrogate families while they're in childcare...our immediate community is the children and anyone who's part of their family.”

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Understanding and lifting up the diversity that makes up Alameda County residents is apparent in an other agency's approach to defining community. This agency reflected the following, "...we try to identify specifically which community we're talking about. We recognize and believe that there are lots of different people that make up the community."

“*There are residents that are not affiliated with any of our programs...[T]here are clients that we're serving...[I]n the past we often referred to anybody outside the public health department or agency as community.*

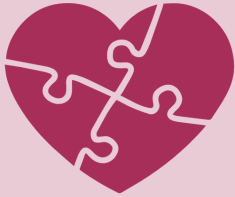
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Seeing all residents of Alameda County as community may have been the most common definition provided. For example, “In the broadest sense, Alameda County residents, usually though I think we have a connotation that it is county clients, those that are the most underserved, those who have been historically disenfranchised by the government...”





# THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST



*"Trust the people and they become trustworthy."*

- Adrienne Maree Brown

While we know the importance of trust in our own personal lives, when it comes to the ways in which government relates to constituents to "the People", trust is not a part of the equation.

In fact, not only is trust not a part of the equation but the stark lack of trust that donors and the public sector have in Black, Brown and Indigenous people paints the backdrop of an ongoing harmful relationship. The value, significance and necessity of relationships and trust between Government systems and the local constituents they work to serve came through loud and clear in the 2019-2020 Listening Sessions.

County employees interviewed in these sessions were very clear about their responsibility in not only working to build trust but working to repair the harm made through broken trust.

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This lack of trust has led to institutionalized practices and structures that penalize communities of color. In Alameda County we are fortunate to have examples to work from that focus on re-building trust. Communication, transparency, and time are critical in this process of re-building trust.

One agency provided an overview on their efforts to break down barriers around mental health, recovery and relationship building with the people they serve. Beyond “serving” their clients, they work to build trust and the systems alongside clients who serve as consumer champion advocates.

*"[There is] a lot of stigma as you probably know towards people who are severely mentally ill or have a substance abuse issue. So, we have a lot of conversations about that and how not to feed into the negative stigma applied towards that population."*

Another county agency recognizes the role of relationship building in the re-building of trust and recognizes that without the relationships there can be no trust.

“

I am a natural proponent to transparency and communication. I think if you want me to trust you, I may not agree with you, but I need to be able to see you. So, I need to believe that I can trust your voice. I can trust what you're saying and doing. And you can only start to garner that trust by open to communicating.

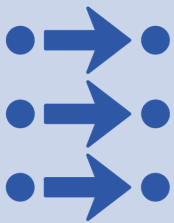
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Given the complicated bureaucratic processes that impact the ways in which government can function, acknowledging and communicating these complicated processes in partnership with the community you are serving is vital.

“Being very honest and upfront when we work with the community about what decisions we're actually going to make by ourselves, though they may have input where the final decision is going to be made, where they have decision making. So really being clear about how decisions are going to be made, especially if it's like a planning process, where we're getting their recommendations or asking, that kind of thing. A value is to be really transparent.”

# THE FLUIDITY ACROSS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES



The ways in which different departments and agencies are practicing community engagement is extremely fluid.

What engagement with community residents looks like and how it shows up across agencies and departments has no fixed shape; it shifts, moves and molds from internal and external pressures and values.

There is no one idea or practice of engagement, in fact the opinions and perceptions about what “community engagement” means from a government standpoint is just as fluid as the practice itself.



For our agency, it is the cornerstone of our work. We're a community action agency, so community is the heart of the work. Our work is based around doing a community needs assessment that we're mandated to do to identify the needs for those living in poverty...



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*"We do what the community needs because we're required to do [so]. Our focus is on entrepreneurship because everybody is not going to get a job, especially in my re-entry population. We pilot innovative programming around homelessness and [providing] them [with] work skills, because a lot of times they can't go into the traditional workforce entry points."*

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We represent government, and so we have to walk this line. We walk this world between community engagement and the community organizing. What we want to do is use the power of this office to really organize the community, which doesn't mean that we succeed every time, but at least we do more than this engagement stuff.  
”

# THE HOPE AMONG PARTNERS



*programs and agencies  
want to do better*

Dr. Cornell West, the self-proclaimed “Prisoner of hope” asks us to consider the difference between optimism and hope.

Optimism he says is based on outside factors showing that a change is possible, whereas hope is not based on outside circumstances demonstrating that things may change. Hope is not a mood but a virtue, a wrestling with despair to generate enough energy to remain Socratic and prophetic.

This constant wrestling with despair, this virtuous quest in remaining hopeful came through at the center of the work done by the listening session participants. This conflict came through in the description of certain programs and through the very hope alive in the spirits of those doing the work.

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*"When [a local funding program] has to do its three-year strategic plan, it is a yearlong intensive process that includes parent cafes, and other kinds of listening sessions, and community engagement throughout Oakland to inform youth development strategies. Oakland Unite does a very similar thing"*



*".... our quality improvement department... helps us to stay focused on how we can improve what we're even providing, and then provide the maximum level of service for our beneficiaries. We're trying to approach [our programming] from a performance improvement driven purpose with outcomes in mind. Aligning ourselves in a way that's reflective of who we'd like to be and then that's what [informs our] strategic plan that [will] help us chart a course to get [achieve our outcomes]. So, I think if we can be transparent and communicate and really be aligned, we can represent what we hope to be."*

# THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Spectrum of Community engagement is a tool produced by Rosa Gonzalez of Facilitating Power. The spectrum is a tool charting a pathway to strengthening and transforming our local democracies. It takes the reader through developmental stages of engaging with community:






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**During the Listening Sessions, we asked interview participants to identify which developmental stage they see their agency sits on the spectrum.**

*“I think we're between two [Consult] and three [Involve]. We certainly inform as best we can through our website and through our annual reports and things. So, we provide the community with information, but getting information from the community is really on an individual client by client basis right now.”*

*“I would say it depends on the initiative. I would say sometimes we are really good at collaborating and involving and other times we're still more in the informing consult phase and I don't know that we are at defer to. I don't know based on the mandates and compliance structure that we have to abide by with the courts that will ever be fully at defer to.”*

*“*  
[W]e inform. We gather input. I think we are learning how to do more of the involvement, and it does vary from program to program.  
*”*



*"This could just be me, but I feel like as a government we're never in a place to completely be able to defer to the people because that's just not how it [works]. [N]ot because we're wanting to control it, but because we are responsible for the stewardship of resources for a much broader community than whatever stakeholder group we're working with at that moment. We won't be able to just totally defer and even if it is as close to deferring to them as you can get in government, I'm still very hesitant to ever call it that."*

*"I think we're kind of a 2.8 if I could. I think we certainly receive a lot of feedback from our community and sometimes we will ask technical questions, and I think even it's, in many places, we ensure that we're meeting those needs and being responsive. I don't know that we constantly enable our stakeholders or community to make some key [decisions] or play a role in helping us make decisions all the time. And we definitely may not consistently have a community driven decision-making process. [We] definitely doing one [Inform] and two [Consult] every day. And mostly because we have to [as part of] our contracts with the state. Three [Involve], four [Collaborate], and five [Defer], I think we do to different degrees [of engagement] depending on [the project]."*

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Being aware that the problems are beyond the walls of one entity; therefore, solutions must also be of this magnitude.

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*It's not about being [in one agency or another]. It's about serving our young people and we have the same motto, same mission and we're [in] meetings together all the time with the joint purpose. So, we've created a community here.*

”

# NEXT STEPS



ALL IN has shared initial reflections from this report with the ALL IN Steering Committee, a committee of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors.

In the coming months, ALL IN will examine the results of this report and identify opportunities to infuse the lessons learned and opportunities outlined into our organizational strategies within our three-year strategic plan.

We remain intentional in our efforts to listen first to our stakeholders and partners to address issues of poverty.

# **APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## **Understanding Vocabulary Objectives**

- When using the term “community” who are you referring to? How does your dept/agency define community?
- When using the term “community engagement” what does this mean? How does your dept/agency define engagement?

## **Rational/Organization/Institutional Objectives**

- Does someone (or a team of people) in your dept/agency/organization lead community engagement efforts?
  - If so Whom?
- Are there any strategic plans (s)/thinking around community engagement?
  - If so, are any lenses used to frame this strategy? (for example, racial equity, health equity lens)
- Do you create community within your department/agency, if so how does your dept create or build community with staff?
- How (if so) are staff in your dept/agency/organization supported to develop/continue building skills around community engagement i.e.: coaching, facilitation etc.?

## **Experiential Objectives**

- What are your most important engagement values?
  - How do you make sure these values show up in the engagement process?
- How can you use more art, play, movement, performance, interactive, didactic in your engagement? (For Example: Dig Deep Youth Mural Project)

## **The Spectrum of Community Engagement Developmental Stages**

- Based on the spectrum of community engagement to ownership, what developmental stage does the work of your dept/agency fall into?
- Where are the opportunities for meaningful collaboration between impacted communities and local government to co-develop solutions to racial and environmental justice?
- What Culture shift and system changes are needed for authentic collaboration between institutions and impacted communities?
- What can you be doing now to lay the groundwork for community ownership?

## **Expanding Understanding Objectives**

- Is there anyone else I should speak to about the community engagement efforts taking place in your dept/agency? Why?
- Why are they the best person/people to speak to, what makes them stand out as engaging with community?

# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

East Bay Children's Law Offices

Behavioral Health Services

Health Care Services Agency

Community Childcare Council (4 C's) Of Alameda County

City of Oakland Human Services

Probation Department (Juvenile Division)

Public Defenders Office

Alameda County Oakland Community Action Partnership (ACO-CAP)

Supervisory District 4

Alameda Alliance Health Insurance

Sheriff's Department Youth and Family Services Bureau (DSAL)





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