

Aligning Systems with Communities to Advance Equity Through Shared Measurement:

Community Listening Summary—Asheville, NC

The various systems within communities—such as public health, housing, education, and health care—directly influence the health and well-being of community members. One system cannot address the holistic needs and concerns of community members, so systems must work with each other and with community members to collectively align their actions with the needs and priorities of the communities they serve. Shared measurement is one way to do this. Shared measurement uses a common set of measurable goals that reflect shared priorities across systems and with community members.

Ultimately, shared measurement must benefit people and communities, especially those who have experienced health and social inequities. Partnering with community members is essential to ensure that improvement efforts reflect what matters to communities. The American Institutes for Research and Community-Campus Partnerships for Health partnered with Asheville Buncombe Institute of Parity Achievement, a local community-based organization, to listen to six community members in the Asheville, NC, area. This listening session was held in August 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and a time of national attention on racial equity and justice. This document summarizes what these community members had experienced with systems and services and what is most important to them when systems and services work together toward a common goal.



Community Partner Profile: Asheville Buncombe Institute of Parity Achievement

The Asheville Buncombe Institute of Parity Achievement (ABIPA) promotes economic, social, and health parity achievement for African Americans and other people of color in Buncombe County through advocacy, education, research, and community partnerships. ABIPA offers a holistic approach to address issues of health while focusing on four major areas that impact their ability to successfully establish health parity: education, social, economics, and physical health. Furthermore, public policies and cultural competencies must be enacted to proactively eliminate disparities between the diminished qualities of care. ABIPA is clear the community must address the health and quality of life experienced by African-Americans in Buncombe County, NC, to enrich the life experience of the whole community.

To learn more about ABIPA, visit
<https://abipaasheville.wixsite.com/abipa>.

What do community members want to see improved?

Community members sought improvements in education, economic, transportation, and housing systems. Specifically, desired improvements included more well-paying jobs, minority-owned businesses (especially in the downtown Asheville area), minority representation in government and council positions, and educational and youth recreation centers. These improvements would allow more community members to feel connected to and stay in the area rather than move elsewhere for better opportunities.

I'd like to see economic improvement here, because the jobs don't pay very well, and that's hurtful to us. For folks who are trying to raise families, I'm sure it must be tough. I'm old, so I don't have to raise a family, but it's still tough for me. And so I would like to see growth in our community. I think we have about 27,000 people in our county, and it would be so great to see more African Americans moving in, with businesses, and for those of us who would like to have a business, that we can grow our businesses here.

Community members also discussed the importance of improving public transportation and having more mental health services, healthier food options, affordable housing, and support services for the homeless.

How can community members have an equal role in improvement initiatives?

Community members stated that effective ways to engage communities in improvement initiatives would be having community advisory boards and paying community members for their involvement. The latter was particularly important as community members often face barriers to engaging in these initiatives, such as working low wage jobs, having fewer resources, or having family obligations.

But what happens is that without pay, most people who are making low wages cannot spend that kind of time. Because I've been in a lot of advisory committees over these years, and if they don't pay you and you have to travel somewhere, well now we don't travel, we do Zoom but . . . I had to travel to a lot of these places and spend my time after work or even during the workday, and I wasn't getting paid for it. So it was tough. It was very tough, but I did it. But some people can't do it because they have a family to raise or just don't make enough money on their job to do that.

Community members noted the same concerns are discussed repeatedly in meetings but remain unaddressed. To feel that their input was heard and is valued, community members must see action instead of words.

In the last eight years, I've been a part of lots of input sessions that have taken place, and the city actually, or county actually, took time to do things in the day, things in the evening. They were mindful that people worked. But then what got frustrating is to see the same things being repeated again. The same questions, and then it's like, "Okay, what are you going to do about it?" It just felt like it's not going anywhere or even if people, their input is taken in, you don't see anything out in the community that reflects that they really took what you said, and then went anywhere with it. You know the majority, they didn't ask for, but there it is.

How can communities hold systems and leaders accountable?

Community members said the basis of accountability for local government and community leaders is documentation and transparency; progress reports that include goals and progress toward those goals; and opportunities for formal and informal discussions about concerns directly with leaders.

Our sheriff made a nice speech at the Black Lives Matter event in Murphy, that was the biggest one in Western North Carolina. He made a great speech, and I keep saying to myself, “I’m going to him face-to-face and ask him, ‘Okay, what are you going to do about the things that you said?’” But it would be good if it wasn’t just [me] by [myself], but to get with a couple of other people in the community that heard him say it and say, “Now you said you want to get more African American people involved in law enforcement. What have you done toward that right now?”

How do you know improvements work for everyone?

Community members said that they would know improvements are benefiting everyone when they have equal access to opportunities, services, and resources across all neighborhoods, racial, and ethnic groups.

One simple thing within this particular county, there are lots of kids that . . . because we didn’t have the community center and there’s one little playground that has unsafe structures, slides are rotten, blah, blah. You would actually see kids having to walk all the way across town to go use the pool, like 15 minutes away, and they would have to trek. So when I don’t see that anymore, you know they have something right there.

In addition, community advisory boards would be a valuable way of determining if improvements were working for all.

I feel like there should be a representative from each of these groups, these community groups to take the lead and be able to give us some feedback as a whole, as community, as a whole, to what it is, how they’re benefiting from these systems. Are the systems doing what they said they do? Have the systems put in the time and the effort and the commitment that they said they were going to put in?



Community-Identified Priorities

- Establish a community advisory board to provide input about community needs to local government and systems leaders
- Provide financial resources for community members who participate in community improvement initiatives
- Provide community members with regular progress reports from local government and systems leaders that detail improvements or service goals and progress
- Document community concerns and create an action plan to ensure concerns are addressed in a timely manner

Contributors

Asheville Buncombe Institute of Parity Achievement & Asheville, NC, community members

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