CHAPTER 1
Actions to Support Community Power-Building Organizations
Partnering with community power-building organizations

Public health departments around the country are increasingly partnering with community power-building organizations (CPBOs) — which organize communities most impacted by inequitable systems — to advance health equity. These partnerships are yielding exciting outcomes, including greater trust and deeper relationships between governmental public health and communities, power building and sharing, and policy shifts and systems change to transform material conditions in communities most impacted by inequities.

This resource outlines how health departments can partner with CPBOs, how to build the internal foundations and authentic relationships for partnership, and walks through 4 concrete actions health departments can take to bring these partnerships to life:

- Give CPBO partners access to health data and evidence to support their campaigns
- Create accountability mechanisms within the health department
- Leverage relationships across the government
- Leverage relationships across the wider nonprofit and funder ecosystem

What are CPBOs?

CPBOs are community organizations that support base building, often around a certain location (e.g. a neighborhood, city, or state), demography or identity (e.g. youth, formerly incarcerated people, tenants, undocumented immigrants) or issue (e.g. health equity, environmental justice.) They’re also sometimes called grassroots organizing groups, movement-building organizations, community organizing groups, and base-building groups.¹

Not all community-based organizations are CPBOs. What differentiates CPBOs is a commitment to organizing and base building. CPBOs are deeply rooted in and accountable to communities, making them adept at navigating intricate local politics to create real change.

Check out this resource on how to find a CPBO in your area!

¹  https://www.lead-local.org/glossary
Why build community power and partner with CPBOs?

CPBOs explicitly work to transform who has power and how power operates, focusing specifically on building power and fostering leadership among those most impacted by structural oppression. Community power-building is a process for achieving health and racial equity, in that CPBOs organize people to work together to identify and improve the social, economic, and environmental determinants of health. It’s also an outcome in and of itself: transforming inequitable systems of power and redistributing decision-making power is inherently good for community health.

Partnerships between health departments and CPBOs result in transformative improvements in communities’ material conditions by leveraging the unique institutional strengths and cultures, types of power, and connections of both organizations.

Notably, partnerships with CPBOs benefit health departments, too. CPBOs can help safeguard the role of governmental public health when it comes under attack, as we’ve seen during the COVID pandemic. And CPBOs can be a voice to advocate for shared policy and systems change goals when health departments’ capacity is stymied due to political constraints.

Build an Internal Foundation for Partnerships with CPBOs

Many successful collaborations with CPBOs have been built in times of urgency, requiring the boldness to “build the plane while flying it.” In an ideal situation, however, health departments spend time establishing a strong internal foundation for these partnerships in a more sustainable and ongoing way.

The following strategies can help create an internal foundation for successful partnerships:

- **Build buy-in:** This is particularly relevant for policy and systems change work, and can involve shifting power among departmental staff and leadership.
  - Check out this HIP [resource](#) to help staff plan ahead for various types of collaboration with CPBOs.
  - Consider informing your jurisdiction’s elected or administrative leadership about your partnerships with CPBOs (weighing the pros and cons of this visibility), ideally identifying electeds that can help champion the work.

- **Get it in writing:** Include the issues that CPBOs care about in your department’s guiding documents, such as Community Health Needs Assessments or Wellness Plans — which can also be an opportunity to collaborate with community members. These documents establish a base of support and can protect you if things become internally contentious.
• **Identify resources:** Partnership takes resources to support both your staff and CPBOs’ efforts. Look for short-term sources like foundation grants, emergency funds, and hospital community benefit dollars to demonstrate proof of concept, while building support for longer term partnerships via categorical funding and discretionary sources.

• **Staff the work for success:** Assign or hire staff who bring humility, awareness of CPBO approaches, and a deep understanding of community priorities, cultures and communication styles. **Hire staff from the communities they will serve.**

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**Establish trusting relationships with potential CPBO partners**

Successful health department-CPBO partnerships require authentic relationships founded on trust and shared values rather than transactional needs. Community members and CPBOs often carry distrust of government institutions because of the role these institutions have played in perpetuating health inequities, today and historically. Many communities have also seen countless health assessments, surveys, and plans in their neighborhoods lead to little real change.

To establish a foundation of trust, health departments must explicitly commit to holding themselves accountable to communities and repairing the harms of inequitable policies and systems.

**Some strategies to foster deep relationships include:**

• **Move at the “speed of trust.”** Real partnership takes time to build. Reach out long before your grant application deadline or big hearing. Check out this [resource](#) on how to have a successful one-on-one with a CPBO.

• **Attend and participate in CPBO events.** Be a consistent and helpful contributor and build genuine relationships with staff and members.

• **Pay CPBOs and their members for their time and expertise,** just like you would any other professional contractor.

• **Be real about what your department is ready to support,** what you may be able to grow into, and what is off the table. Don’t promise what you can’t deliver. Do strategize together about what you can change.

• **Institutionalize partnerships and relationships to ensure they withstand staffing changes.** Too often, partnerships fall apart because they are only as deep as individual staff members. Ensure durability by building a cadre of staff invested in partnership and embed collaboration into broader departmental processes.
Actions to Support CPBOs

The following reflect coordinated and strategic actions that health departments can take to show their commitment to CPBOs and to build long-term, trusting relationships.

1. **Give CPBO partners access to health data and evidence to support their campaigns.**

   **Identify what information would be helpful and strategic:** Discuss what information or data is currently being used in the policy discussion, what is available, and what may be strategic to use in the policy context.

   **Prepare and share evidence for CPBOs to use:** Health departments have access to extensive data and evidence that can and should be used to inform decision making—but CPBOs often don’t know this data is available, and it never reaches decision makers. Compile relevant data into fact sheets or briefs to describe the relationship between a CPBO’s priority and health (e.g., the health impacts of a proposal, or general community conditions.) Discuss and translate dense data to make it more usable.

   **Encourage a request for information:** Ask your CPBO partner to submit a letter/request to the health department and/or to an elected official asking for health data and evidence related to the partner’s issue or proposed policy. By requesting the information, CPBOs can make it more politically acceptable for you to publish potentially controversial data or health analysis. Talk with the CPBO partner about what information is available and helpful to include in the response document, as well as how long requests may take. Explore whether other agencies have data that could also be useful to answer the request and connect with staff from that agency.

   **Shape the debate:** Publish interviews, reports, statements or other communications pieces to support CPBO priorities. This can include direct support for their positions, or more subtle support such as publishing data that raises the profile of a health issue and shifts public opinion towards solutions you may not be positioned to directly advocate for.

2. **Create accountability mechanisms within the health department.**

   **Make yourself known publicly as an available resource:** In some situations, all a CPBO may need is the name and contact information for someone who will be responsive to their community’s needs. Identify a person or team in your department who is willing to respond to requests and identify them as such on your website, stating explicitly that this person/team can be contacted about a range of issues, particularly related to social determinants of health.

   **Establish a community advisory body with authority to direct the department’s work on social determinants of health:** Ensure the body has some kind of regulatory or implementation authority, and that it can guide work on social determinants of health and policy, systems, and environmental change work. Name lived experience, and experience with community organizing, power analysis, community engagement, racial justice, systems change, and/or policy advocacy, as skills desired for board positions.

   **Build community oversight and accountability into grants and funding proposals:** Require that grants and other funding proposals include community advisors and/or oversight committees, particularly from impacted communities, at the outset of an initiative to inform all aspects of the work.
Hire organizers to work as health department staff: These dedicated staff, who should have expertise in organizing within impacted communities and power analysis/mapping, can hold relationships with CPBOs. They can help health department leaders think strategically about how to explicitly and implicitly move power within and outside the agency. Prioritize hiring staff from the communities they will serve.

3. Leverage relationships across the government to support CPBOs. While building support, this will also help create external accountability for the health department to be responsive to the CPBO’s needs.

Leverage relationships with elected officials: Meet with value-aligned members of your City Council, Board of Supervisors, and/or other elected body to express your support or perspective on a CPBO’s priorities. Where that is not politically feasible, present health evidence and analysis that helps make the case. Let elected officials know that you’re available to research, write, or weigh in on the CPBO’s priority issue or bring the health department’s expertise into relevant policy discussions.

Leverage existing government accountability structures: Health-in-all-Policies task forces, Community Health Improvement Plan steering committees, comprehensive planning processes, and community advisory groups often have capacity to focus on CPBO issues. Integrating CPBO priorities into these processes is another ongoing way to increase accountability for those issues.

Resource CPBOs: When possible, grant resources to CPBOs or contract with them to work on the social determinants of health. Contracts that involve outreach and policy change are especially easy for CPBOs to piggyback on their existing organizing and advocacy. RFP and contracting procedures often have to be adjusted to allow smaller contracts with simpler reporting requirements. In the meantime, some departments have utilized larger community based organizations to make pass-through grants to multiple smaller CPBOs.

4. Leverage relationships across the wider nonprofit and funder ecosystem to support CPBOs. This will build support while also helping to develop a cadre of champions across the public health system to provide support.

Work with intermediaries, like public health advocacy groups: Most public health departments have relationships with main line health organizations who do advocacy — like the American Lung Association, American Heart Association, anti-tobacco groups, public health institutes, and others. These organizations are well positioned to speak to and lobby around CPBO issues. Advocacy groups can also bring in health evidence and develop public resources if a health department is unable to, and they can be strong advocates for getting the health department on record around a specific issue. However, they often need a push to take on social determinants of health that they may consider outside of their traditional lane. Consider raising awareness of relevant issues on networks like Public Health Awakened or Spirit of 1848.
Work with legal experts to understand what laws can support the health department in advancing health-protective policies: Connect with values-aligned legal groups (e.g., Changelab Solutions, Network for Public Health Law) to understand whether CPBO priorities can be supported via your department’s current authority, or through an expansive interpretation of the department’s authority. Identify opportunities to navigate what’s legally allowed and within the health department’s jurisdiction in order to support CPBOs.

Advocate for funders to support CPBO work: Health departments can help bridge relationships to funders, and help CPBOs frame their work to gain access to health-related funding that they may not typically have.

Managing risk in an inherently political context

Many CPBOs are focused on building greater accountability and responsiveness from government and the private sector because they are ultimately accountable to community members’ needs. This can make working with CPBOs more challenging than with other kinds of community partners — but it’s also what makes CPBOs impactful allies in achieving policy and systems change.

Given this context, while some of the actions in this document can be taken more publicly, others may be “quieter,” occurring behind the scenes. Each action will require an assessment of local political conditions as well as the potential risk to your health department.

Here are some strategies to consider while developing relationships with CPBOs:

- **Clearly understand what your CPBO partners are looking for**: What are the issues they are organizing around? What’s the historical context for the partnership? Where do they see the health department adding value? Come to agreement around the roles you can play in their campaigns, which roles you can commit to initially, and how you will communicate with one another throughout.

- **Assess challenges and your risk tolerance — and prepare for the politics**: Work with the CPBO and other partners to understand the potential challenges, risks, and consequences of taking a particular action. Can you withstand the risks, and how might that be different based on the positional authority of those taking the risk? How will you handle fallout and support staff if they take the risk?

- **Strategize with your internal team**: Who are you working with internally to support the CPBO? How can you create internal capacity to support the CPBO? What are your internal colleagues’ roles, and how will you protect and support each other? How can you support health department leadership to build relationships with the CPBO?
Additional Resources:

- This Health Equity Tip blog post outlines how to get connected with community organizers in your area.
- **This resource** details how to find community organizers in your area.
- HIP’s Health Equity Guide resource describes strategic practices to advance health and racial equity, as well as power-sharing, within governmental public health.
- The Lead-Local initiative is an excellent resource illuminating why and how community power can catalyze and sustain conditions for healthy communities.
- This NACCHO article explains why public health departments should commit to shifting and sharing power, and provides frameworks and examples of public health department and CPBO partnerships.
- Power-building Partnerships for Health is an initiative that cultivates powerful collaborations between local health departments and CPBOs to advance health equity.

About Human Impact Partners

Human Impact Partners transforms the field of public health to center equity and builds collective power with social justice movements.

For more information about this resource, please contact info@humanimpact.org. To learn more about building relationships between CPBOs and health departments, please contact Megan Gaydos at megan@humanimpact.org.

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