



Meaningful Consumer Engagement in Pre-Arrest Diversion Programs

Many communities are switching gears in how they respond to people at risk of arrest related to drug use or mental illness. These communities are establishing [initiatives](#) that divert people to [comprehensive health and social services](#). To be fully successful, these programs need to expand planning and implementation teams to engage potential program participants – consumers – as well as community groups advocating for the interests of those participants. Consumers can continuum provide critical information about their concerns, their needs, the service gaps, and the tools and coaching that will be essential in attracting other consumers into the program, improving their health, reducing arrests, and enhancing the well-being of the community. As proven in many other initiatives, engaging consumers in planning improves program design, increases community buy-in and trust, reduces costs and enhances success.

Models for Engaging Consumers as Partners

Effectively and meaningfully incorporating consumer perspectives can take different forms. The most comprehensive engagement strategies use both a formal and informal process to solicit and subsequently use consumers' input.

One strategy for formally engaging consumers is establishing a consumer advisory committee. Some issues a committee can address include: setting program goals, addressing stigma, identifying services to be offered and how they are provided, and reviewing whether the program is working for consumers. Ideally, these committees serve as part of the pre-arrest diversion leadership team and their feedback directly influences policies and practices. The committee format sends a signal that the program prioritizes consumer input while also creating an avenue for consumers to able to work together and encourage buy in for the program.

Informal consumer engagement involves going to the community instead of having them come to you. Informal engagement can take many forms including community meetings, in-person surveys, and talking with consumers while doing street outreach or providing services at local sites. This outreach can be done simultaneously with formal engagement, and input from both can inform the many facets of a pre-arrest diversion program.

For example, in working to develop a Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program, Baltimore leaders are making both formal and informal consumer engagement an essential part of the process. The leaders see this as part of its “user centered” design process.

The program's leaders are engaging consumers through their 12-member community advisory board. This board includes five potential program participants, other residents, business community members, volunteers, and people currently in recovery. They have regularly scheduled meetings and provide formal feedback that is used to inform programmatic changes. One specific way consumer input has influenced the program is by helping develop outreach strategies. Consumers routinely provide law enforcement with trainings on outreach and engagement strategies and, through the advisory board, follow up and help address additional outreach needs.

Community Catalyst works to ensure consumer interests are represented wherever important decisions about health and the health system are made: in communities, courtrooms, statehouses and on Capitol Hill.

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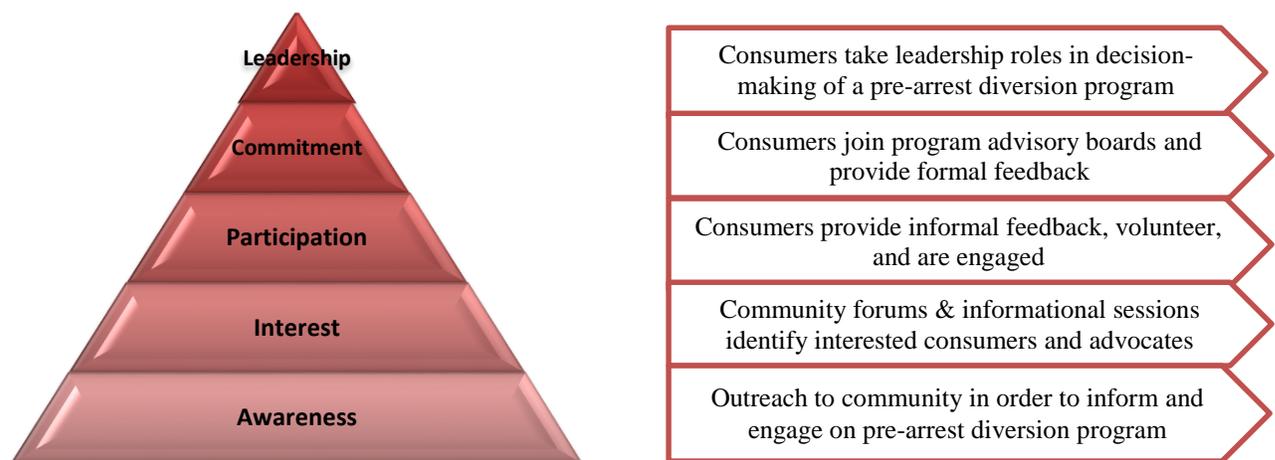
Additionally, the Baltimore LEAD outreach team has built in ways to get informal, but just as important, feedback from consumers. “Aside from the very obvious value and validated best practices of program design, there is no risk, only potential upside to spending time with, sharing with, and learning from members of the consumer community,” says Daniel Atzmon, program manager for Baltimore LEAD. He and other outreach workers, often go out into the community with syringe access and other harm reduction programs that do naloxone trainings, in order to meet consumers where they are. The staff relays information and feedback to program leaders that informs the work of the broader LEAD team. This approach also enables outreach workers to develop relationships with potential participants and gain recognition and trust in the community, both essential components for pre-arrest diversion programs.

Building Trust and Strengthening Consumer Roles

To facilitate meaningful consumer engagement, pre-arrest diversion programs must take into account power dynamics between consumers and decision makers and address mistrust that may exist based on past interactions and policies. These dynamics may impede recruitment of consumers as well as retention and participation; addressing them is essential.

A pre-arrest diversion program in Los Angeles has taken a unique approach to build trust and put consumer voices at the center. The LA team built their decision making around the question "How do we get people to own this process, and own this program?" According to Karren Lane, Vice President of Policy at [Community Coalition](#) and a member of their diversion leadership team, they have created a process that requires consensus from the leadership team, the city attorney’s office and the community. This process helps establish equity among all the key players while they are at the planning table. While this approach is challenging at times, as it calls for collaboration and compromise and goes beyond surface level consumer input, Lane says it is well worth the effort because of the strong consumer buy-in it has created.

Strategies for Engaging Consumers



Communities must take into account their unique and individual engagement needs. L.A.’s ability to engage consumers through a consensus approach might not work where coordination of services and partners is more disjointed or physically spread out.

Programs can use a pyramid of engagement that is incremental and strategic.

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Bringing consumer voices to the table requires an intentional approach that takes into account that consumer voices have been historically and systematically left out of decision making spaces. Planning ahead shows consumers that their input is fundamentally necessary and worth investing in. Creating a pyramid of engagement strategies can provide many opportunities for involving consumers and building their capacity to participate.

Consumer Recruitment

The motivation for consumers to engage in efforts to establish diversion programs differ from other stakeholders - for example, while cost savings and recidivism rates may be a key factor for local officials and law enforcement, consumers might prioritize access to services that reduce the harms of drug and alcohol use. Therefore, in order to engage consumers, programs must develop pathways to engagement that align with consumer priorities.

- Engage consumers during community outreach or harm reduction services, such as syringe services or naloxone trainings
- Partner with local emergency departments and health centers where consumers are frequently found
- Coordinate with local food banks and community service providers that are addressing consumers' immediate needs
- Partner with consumer organizations, such as those representing people returning to the community from incarceration, working on criminal justice and addressing poverty

Supporting Participation

- Take into account time commitments, limitations and demands of consumers and create a variety of options for participation and input, such as focus groups, community meetings, or advisory boards.
- Consider providing incentives such as food or gift cards, which let consumers know their time and input is valued.
- Hold meetings at times convenient for the consumers you want to attract. For example, an evening meeting time might not work well for consumers in transitional housing where an early curfew is set, or a 3:00 pm meeting on a weekday might not be accessible to parents during the school year.
- Ensure space is physically accessible and takes into account consumers with disabilities
- Provide bus passes and set up carpools and other available options for reliable transportation.
- Provide childcare or create a child-friendly atmosphere for parents whose participation might depend on this.
- Provide tutorials on complex policy issues before they are discussed
- Provide staff support to consumer advisory committees

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