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America's Youth Initiative
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Pediatrics 2010;126;S90-S94
DOI: 10.1542/peds.2010-0482D

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Civic Engagement: Bringing in the Real Experts— A Commentary on the Shaping America's Youth Initiative

Civic engagement is sweeping the country. Recognized as a new way to solve old problems, more and more elected officials, government agencies, civic leaders, and nonprofit organizations are turning to the public for input and assistance. But, is it a new way? What does civic engagement really look like? Why is it important? How does it differ from what society has done in the past?

Shaping America's Youth (SAY) took a model of civic engagement, the town hall meeting, applied it to a critical national health issue, and then went a step further by scientifically analyzing the results. Because of my 30-year experience with the civic-engagement field as a practitioner, a foundation program officer, and a director of an academic research center, I was invited by the SAY leadership to review the SAY process and put in it context. From the point of view of an outside observer, I address here the implications of the SAY town-meeting process and provide a framework in support of civic engagement as a useful tool for addressing the complex issues that face society today.

WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Civic engagement is a way that decision-makers can interact productively with people who really matter—those who have a stake in solving the problems in question. Often misunderstood and now elevated to buzzword status, civic engagement develops and strengthens the relationship between government and community, that is, between the decision-makers and the ones whom their decisions affect.

There are a multitude of different interpretations of civic engagement. The term can refer to members of the general public engaging with the civic world. It can describe processes that do everything from providing input to policy-makers to putting people to work side-by-side with government to implement solutions to public problems. Civic-engagement processes can involve people as residents, voters, or taxpayers, in addition to the other roles they play in their lives as representatives of private-sector businesses, nonprofit service organizations, teachers, or police officers, for example. Civic engagement can involve an individual, an organization, a community, a sector of society—any or all of these threads that make up our civic fabric.[1–3]

The Engaged Citizen

Civic engagement describes a relationship that individuals and organizations have with their community and, in many cases, with the public sector, which does much of our civic work. Some of the more traditional forms of engagement include voting, speaking at public hear-

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ings, and writing or phoning public officials, all of which are important manifestations of that government-individual relationship. However, these forms of engagement have their limits.

In today's society, civic engagement is taking on a different meaning. The term now describes new processes for involving and engaging people and organizations in the work of the public sector—processes that are being developed because more traditional processes have reached their limits. These new types of civic engagement allow more deliberation, more discussion, and generally more productive interaction. They also tend to happen earlier in the decision-making process, which relaxes a time constraint and can allow for more creativity and provide more opportunity to craft win-win solutions.[1-3]

A Variety of Models

There are many different models of civic engagement—as many models as there are ways that people work together. These models can involve multiple players such as government, the nonprofit sector, citizens, and the private sector. They can also be used for different purposes: to get input to design policy or to implement a policy that has already been developed. They can use a variety of processes, tools, and structures to engage, including town-hall meetings, working groups, brainstorming sessions, small-group dialogues, and many more. Recent years have yielded the development of new technology and electronic tools that can also be helpful in the civic-engagement processes, particularly when engaging large groups of people.[1-3]

Some examples of current or recent civic-engagement processes include:

- gathering input from residents in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on the city's budget[4];

- cross-sector teams working to reduce air pollution in the San Francisco Bay Area in California[5];
- neighborhood councils in St Paul, Minnesota,[6] and Los Angeles, California,[7] that help make decisions on land-use planning issues; and
- national electronic conversations hosted by the US Environmental Protection Agency[8] and the Obama White House.[9]

WHY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Civic engagement has become increasingly important, particularly in the past decade or two. The way society solves problems is changing. Government is working differently, resources are limited, and public problems are becoming larger and more complicated.

Working With Limited Resources

In the past, government has been charged with much of the burden for solving problems in America. That was particularly true as the public sector took on the New Deal, created the Social Security system for workers, passed the Medicare program to provide health care for people older than 65, and developed Medicaid, Head Start, and other social welfare programs to assist people in need. Over the years, the public sector's resources have decreased while the problems that plague society continue to grow larger and more complex. Limited resources are forcing more interdependence between the public sector and the private and nonprofit sectors, necessitating unified efforts in solving problems. In some cases, limited resources must be pooled, which often results in public-private partnership arrangements.

A New Relationship Between Government and the Public

The relative decline in public resources to solve social problems has

changed the relationship between government and the people. Another contributing factor is the public's loss of confidence in government in general, which decreases with each ascending government level (local, state, and federal). As a result, today's government is taking on a new role that gives the public greater responsibility in its decision-making.

In addition, because of people's loss of confidence in government, legislators are hesitant to legislate, which also places more responsibility on citizens. In some cases, the public has taken away some of the government's tools; for example, California law requires a public vote on all local taxes, and that law itself was the result of an initiative put to public vote. Public issues are often fought in the media, which takes away some of the flexibility that public officials enjoyed in the days before television and Twitter. More and more, public officials are governing by opinion poll.

Complicated Problems Require Complicated Solutions

Finally, the problems we are facing today are more complicated and require more complicated solutions. For example, if the causes of a problem are rooted in more than 1 sector of society, the solution needs to cross sectors as well.

An example is the problem of job loss. The cause of job loss is buried deep in all 3 sectors. The private sector, operating on a for-profit basis, can change what it produces and negatively affect the people who are hired to produce. A poor education system, usually housed in the public sector, can limit the opportunity to move to a different job. A malfunctioning nonprofit sector (which is funded through both private donations and public funds) may not be able to provide child care or other support services that enable individu-

als to maintain their employment. To solve these problems, each sector's contribution to what caused the problem in the first place must be addressed.

We Need to Work Together

So what does this all mean? It means that the sectors need to work together; that the public needs to be more involved in problem-solving; and that all of us, in our personal and professional lives, need to take more responsibility for solving society's problems. And, as illustrated by the SAY initiative, bringing a whole new group of "experts" into public problem-solving can generate more creative and better solutions.

Shifting Responsibility for Problem-Solving

Ultimately, each individual in society is responsible for bringing resources to bear to solve public problems. The resources that individuals contribute are more than just expertise and local knowledge. Individuals can move good ideas into action.

Civic engagement is also a way to shift responsibility for solving the problem to the people who eventually need to take action. An engaged individual is much more likely to do something than someone sitting on the sidelines. However, the engagement must be authentic to be effective.

EFFECTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Authentic Versus "Faux" Civic Engagement

Civic engagement holds much promise in our society. President Barack Obama ran a successful election campaign by taking civic engagement to new levels and is attempting to continue that trend in his presidency. Many local communities are using civic engagement to address difficult problems in new ways and are starting to see results. However, civic engage-

ment is not always as effective as it could be.

To be effective, a civic-engagement process needs to involve people in an authentic way. Unfortunately, some engagement processes are conducted more for show than to capture useful information. For others, the initiators of a process may not have enough knowledge to engage people effectively. In both of these cases, the process may look real but is actually faux civic engagement.

Faux civic engagement can result in useless information and a group of frustrated people who wonder why they spent their valuable time and energy doing what they were doing. Some contributing factors to a faux engagement process include being too rushed, involving the wrong people, asking the wrong questions, and not listening to the answers.

Learning to Listen

One of the most important components of authentic engagement is listening. In the same way that listening is important in building a good relationship between individuals, it is critical when building productive relationships in a community. Learning to listen is not easy, and the assumptions about what constitutes "good listening" are often surprisingly off the mark, especially those held by an organization or an agency doing the listening.

Following are some of the incorrect assumptions often held by organizations that solicit input from the public:

- The organization has to do everything that everyone wants it to do and has a responsibility to follow-up on everything it hears.
- It cannot put parameters on what it wants to know.
- It is not allowed to communicate anything itself to the people from whom it is soliciting input, including

any constraints it may have regarding next steps.

- It is not allowed to have its own opinions or to ask follow-up questions.
- It has to treat all information it receives as equally important.

Effective listening requires that the listening organization:

- ask questions that it really wants answered and not pose questions that have already been decided; and
- carefully consider the answers it gets, even if it does not agree with all of them.

Listening can be even more productive for the organization/agency if it:

- asks questions of a diverse group of people (people, especially if the group is diverse, will no doubt disagree with each other, but there is a better chance of getting a new idea or thought into the mix);
- provides people with background information to inform their thought processes, especially if the questions are complicated; and
- gives people enough time to say what they want to say and to think about it or deliberate beforehand.

Keeping the Public Informed About How Information Will Be Used

Equally important, organizations that engage the public need to determine beforehand how the information that comes out of the civic-engagement process will be used and to let participants know it. Is the information for the organization's own use? Will it be used to inform other opinions (eg, those of a policy-maker)? Will it be one of several tools that the organization will use in its decision-making, or will it be the only one? Does the organization intend to follow-up on the information by taking action itself or by using the information to help motivate others to action? Clear and mutual understanding of the answers to these questions

will help the engaging organization use the information more effectively, as well as build trust with participants.

The Importance of Follow-up

Effective civic engagement does not have to stop at the input or planning level. Prompt and active follow-up on the part of the participants can be crucial to effective results, particularly if the results depend on community support, community behavior change, or other community action. Using civic engagement to gather input can also help move an initiative to the next step: the civic-engagement process at any phase helps connect participants more closely to the issue or problem at hand and to one another. Building teamwork and collaboration early on lays the groundwork for more effective action down the road.

SOLVING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY PROBLEM: THE SAY INITIATIVE

The practice of civic engagement can be particularly useful when addressing a human health problem such as childhood obesity. The problem of childhood obesity, similar to many health-related problems, has many roots: it is connected to human behavior, manifested in lifestyle choices, and influenced by how a community is structured. Clearly, childhood obesity is a difficult and complex problem that will take time to solve. Just as the problem of childhood obesity is rooted in the factors listed above, the solution to the problem is rooted in them as well.

For a complex problem such as this, consulting traditional experts is not enough. Participation from every sector of our society is required, including parents and other family members, doctors and other health providers, school administrators and teachers, public officials and policy-makers, and the children at risk. It is only by engaging all involved parties that society can

harness the expertise and action needed to develop and implement a truly effective solution.

Bringing in the Real Experts

As described elsewhere in this supplemental issue of *Pediatrics*,[10] the SAY initiative developed a national engagement process that brought together >2700 local area residents in town meetings in 5 major cities across the United States. SAY engaged these individuals because they are the real experts who will solve the child obesity problem. They are experts because of the roles they play in their communities as parents, children, educators, administrators, and volunteers. Others might work for a major employer in the community, be active members of their church or chamber of commerce, or coach a Little League team. As members of their communities who are familiar with local resources, these individuals can also contribute valuable knowledge about where to find nutritious foods, the accessibility of local parks, the state of the local medical systems, and other services critical to solving the problem of childhood obesity.

The 2700 participants in the SAY civic-engagement process were chosen not because they were necessarily experts in the medical causes of the problem, or even in all the health-related consequences of child obesity, but because they were familiar with, and wield, some of the tools to solve the problem, whether they are making responsible lifestyle choices for their families, working to make their community a healthier place to live, or encouraging policy changes at the state and national levels.

The SAY Initiative in the Civic-Engagement Context

Within the broad range of examples of civic-engagement processes taking

place in America today, the SAY initiative process is unique. One reason is the large size and scope of the process. The choice of AmericaSpeaks and the 21st Century Town Meeting format reflected SAY's interest in involving great numbers of participants, a hallmark of AmericaSpeaks' work. Even for AmericaSpeaks, however, a 21st Century Town Meeting in multiple cities is unusual, even more so when taking into account the fact that the community meetings occurred at different times (a period of 18 months elapsed from the first to the last meeting). That posed a particular challenge for the SAY initiative team, which sought to compare data collected in different places, from different people, and at different points in time.

The town-meeting format involved "deliberative dialogue," which included discussions among people around the table, thinking through complex problems, and coming up with creative solutions. Deliberative dialogue is a common and crucially important component in any civic-engagement process, both to engage the participants (laying the groundwork for follow-up and community-based action) and to elicit thoughtful and, therefore, better responses. However, in this case the deliberative dialogue also posed a challenge to data analysis. The open-ended nature of the questions elicited a set of responses that would initially seem virtually impossible to standardize. The fact that the data were collected in different places at different points in time only made the standardization more important and more challenging. SAY recognized the challenge and understood that no previous civic-engagement process of this magnitude had involved such a level of analysis. (Deliberative Polling, a process developed by Dr James Fishkin at the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, also

used data analysis to compare 1 set of participants' views before and after a deliberative process.[11])

What the SAY Process Tells Us

What is most important about the SAY civic-engagement process is the information that came out of it: that people in 5 different communities across the United States produced a similar set of suggested strategies for tackling an important problem. Subjecting the input of the citizen-participants from 5 distinct town meetings to independent analysis by a team of statisticians with experience in evaluating social science data was a unique follow-up action and can serve the project well. Data analysis, particularly of a scientific nature, can be important to the more skeptical participants, and observers, who perhaps may not wholly trust the process or wonder what order could come of a seemingly chaotic group of voices. A consistent response across communities or across neighborhoods also demonstrates the integrity of the project methodology. (That is not to say that an inconsistent response across communities means a process does not have integrity; communities may think differently from each other about certain issues.) In addition, a response that is consistent from state to state can help send a clear message to observers and decision-makers who

think and work on a multistate or national level (eg, those at federal agencies or members of Congress).

Another interesting outcome of the SAY civic-engagement process is the apparent disconnect between strategies currently used by programs to address childhood obesity and the strategies that came out of the community meetings. As pointed out in the SAY project report,[10] few of the 1100 programs surveyed in the first stage of the project were influencing early childhood development by targeting parents and caregivers during that time. Yet, many of the strategies that came out of the community meetings focused on that crucial period of development. Perhaps more civic engagement could help with that disconnect, for example, by bringing parents and local programs together in a dialogue to explore the areas of disconnect and develop a plan together to address those areas.

FROM INPUT TO ACTION: NEXT STEPS FOR THE SAY INITIATIVE

A critical next step for a civic-engagement process, especially one that begins by asking questions, is follow-up action. If a convening organization has used authentic engagement to solicit input, when the time is right to move from gathering information to action there already exists a group of

engaged individuals who have the knowledge, opportunity, and motivation to move to that next step.

The SAY civic-engagement process has planted the seeds for that action. Important next steps involve addressing the crisis of childhood obesity at all levels of society, particularly in the communities where the strategies were developed. Policy-makers should develop legislation at the national and local levels that provides necessary incentives and funding for healthy foods and products. Employers can provide opportunities for healthy lifestyle choices at work. Educators must teach children how and why they should exercise and eat healthy. Health care providers will need to deliver useful advice to both parents and children. Many of the people who participated in the town meetings, who play one of the roles above, provide other connections to the community, and/or have 1-on-1 relationships with at-risk children, are natural candidates to move the SAY initiative forward.

The SAY initiative has shown that even with a complex social challenge, non-expert citizen-participants can, when engaged in a deliberative, organized process, provide coherent, reproducible solutions. We will all watch with interest in the coming years as these actions unfold.

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