

Research for Equity and Power: Increasing Resident Civic Engagement Through Advocacy and Organizing

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Background

- This project aims to engage residents in Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh in **advocating for change on equity and equitable development issues facing their communities**.
- Numerous studies show disparities in health, education, employment, income, transportation, housing, food, and other issues facing residents in under resourced communities, particularly communities of color.
- While nonprofits and advocacy organizations are working to address these issues, **residents with lived experience are often not aware of these campaigns, nor are they connected with residents from other communities facing the same issues**.
- Through this participatory research we are working with residents to **increase civic engagement around equitable development and equity issues** by building their advocacy and organizing skills and working with them to develop and implement an Action Plan to impact policy issues that cut across their communities.

Research Questions

- In what ways does engaging residents around equity issues and training them in advocacy and organizing skills impact their levels of civic engagement?
- How does strengthening resident civic engagement around equity issues increase their ability to influence changes in equity in local communities and at a regional level?
- How does furthering resident civic engagement strengthen networks at a regional level?
- How can participatory approaches be used for long-term, sustainable, and impactful policy change?



Creating connections and cross collaboration among residents and advocacy organizations can increase residents' ability to participate in new and ongoing organizing and engagement activities and influence equity issues across their communities.

Our research informs AmeriCorps efforts to understand how increasing civic engagement through an intentional community-partnered and co-designed training and advocacy project improves equity and ultimately strengthens communities.

“We need to be more organized ourselves and know what to do when it’s our time to organize.”
Participant

The program “made me feel a little bit more confident to approach people and tell them my thoughts and what I want to change.” Participant

“We actually were able to put the stories out there and share and be in the room with the community.”
Participant



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Project information:
<https://www.ejgp.org/advocacy-and-organizing-training>
Cohort 1 Resource Guides: <https://www.ejgp.org/infoguides>

Research design

- **Partnership:** University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and Equitable and Just Greater Pittsburgh
- Guided by a Steering Committee consisting of local advocates, organizers and residents
- **Participatory action research** and qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (surveys) methods
- The research consists of a **seven-session advocacy and organizing training series** facilitated by local issue-based and community advocates, followed by an **advocacy action plan and project** to address an issues selected by participants that affects their neighborhoods

The first cohort selected **housing** as the cross-cutting community issue they wanted to work on. Their project included:

- **An Awareness Campaign** and **Resource Guides** about Tenant Rights, Evictions and Unhealthy Housing, informed by a housing survey participants conducted with residents in their communities
- **A Housing Advocacy Forum** sharing these resources and hosting a discussion highlighting residents’ lived experiences with housing issues and people working to address these issues.

Preliminary results

- Participants’ **motivations for involvement in the program were but deeply personal**, driven by issues such as gun violence and housing, supported by a belief that if they did not act, no one else would.
- Participants also highlighted the **importance of being informed community activists**, organizing effectively, and **holding policy makers accountable**. **Collective decision-making processes** and the opportunity for everyone to voice their experiences with housing were highly valued by participants.

Preliminary survey results showed that residents:

- **Increased civic engagement attitudes and behaviors**
- Learned how to **strengthen participation** in civic associations and community groups and **connect** with others about issues in their community.
- Learned how to **influence people who make decisions about their community**.