

# Preview the Action Guide on Centering Community

“From People to Place and Power: Coalitions that Succeed by Grounding Efforts in Community Context” is the fourth installment in the Guiding Collective Change series.



What does it take to create lasting and meaningful change in your community? The answer is right there: it's the community itself.

**Centering community is the heart of this guide.** We take a deep dive into the stories and data to share with you what this means and how to do it. How can a coalition place its community's unique history, culture, and context at the forefront of its work? The six communities who used the Evidence2Success® community-centric approach to share their successes and

learnings. They adapted a process of change—using specialized guidance, knowledge and tools—to address the well-being of the youth in their unique communities in ways that advanced their community improvement goals.

## What Are Key Benefits of Using a Community-Centered Approach?

**Community** involves a geographic area where people and groups live and interact, creating and reflecting a unique culture and context. **“Centering”** residents of that community means seeking out and listening to their needs, voices, perspectives, and history to identify priorities and make decisions. Prioritizing these voices, plus practices like allowing flexibility and building local capacity can contribute to transformative and lasting change.

Enter the Evidence2Success community-centric approach: a **structured—yet flexible—five-phase process** of community change. By bringing together local wisdom, strengths, and priorities with data-driven research and practical know-how, you can build the skills and strengthen the relationships you will need to enact transformative, lasting changes in your community.

Step by step, the data showed communities treading this path to change:

- **Communities kept making progress** in their systems change efforts, completing an average of 79% of community change activities across all phases and communities.
- **Variations in pacing** reflected how **communities attended to their own** priorities, contexts, and needs.
- Coalitions engaged **cross-sector partners** and included **racially and ethnically diverse local representation**.

**Read about how reflective and reflexive practices** enabled coalitions to center community and bring the right people to the table. They looked at who was making decisions, compared that to the local context, and took steps to create a group that more closely reflected that context. In one community, this meant realizing **“truly it requires more than one voice”**. In another, **“things caught fire in a good way”** when resident involvement increased.

**Communities used strategies that put the community at center:**

“So, it wasn't just our work. It would belong to the community work as a whole.”

Coordinator, Selma,  
Dallas County, Alabama

What Is  
Transformative  
Community Change?  
What Is a Community-  
Centered Approach?

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Key Benefit 1:  
Move Forward and  
Sustain Community  
Change

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Key Benefit 2:  
Bring the Right  
People to the Table

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Key Benefit 3:  
Integrate Data Use  
for Real Community  
Change

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**Harnessing community data** led all communities to drive varied kinds of change. Read three case studies to see how **Mobile, Alabama; Providence, Rhode Island; and Kearns, in Salt Lake County, Utah**, used a community-centric process to leverage data to achieve important changes that were specific to their context at the time.

In the case of **Mobile, Alabama**, leaders invited the entire coalition to look at the results of the youth survey collection. Previously skeptical members became energized, leading to **“a stronger sense of urgency and a shared vision for action.”** Broad involvement with data helped the coalition choose a program that was worked in their community. Members felt empowered to reach out to groups in similar communities who were using programs of interest. According to one local leader, the process **“laid the groundwork for a community-driven approach”** that continues.

### An Insider's View: Tips For Adapting Your Systems Change Effort to Your Community's Culture and Context

Adapting a systems change process to your community's unique context and culture is complex and requires trust. Prioritizing prevention science to support youth well-being adds another layer. Consider these lessons learned from the six communities' experiences.

**Take stock of the socio-historical/political context of your community.** It's critical and can be difficult to understand what forces have shaped your community. Considerations include knowing community norms for conversations about race and ethnicity, and what that means for how and where discussions take place. It can mean hosting meetings near residents' homes or even sending a bus out into the community to gather feedback.

**Equip your team with tools for addressing structural and systemic inequity.** Training can offer all participants shared access to language and skills for discussing structural and systemic inequities in productive ways. Practices like disaggregating data or backmapping can develop awareness and impact planning and often require ongoing support.

**Establish a monitoring process.** How do you keep engagement robust after the initial enthusiasm wanes? Establishing a structured process to monitor progress in a routine and planned way can sustain ongoing work. Meeting with communities doing similar work or engaging coaching to share ideas and brainstorm solutions can infuse new energy and provide support.

**Routinely reflect and prepare to flex.** Paying attention to the evolving context can lead to adjustments. Sometimes progress does not follow a straight or upward trajectory. But relationships built on trust and follow-through will provide a solid foundation.

### What's Next? Let's Think About Systems Integration

This approach invites a broader reimagining of how public systems, sectors, and residents can work together to create an environment where children can thrive. Coalitions that recognize the value of each system, take a community-historical whole systems perspective, and recognize, invite, and engage relevant systems are on the road to creating holistic, community-centered solutions that support the well-being of youth and families.

#### ***How will your coalition center community in its community change work?***

Click the link to download the full Action Guide: [“From People to Place and Power: Coalitions that Succeed by Grounding Efforts in Community Context.”](#)

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Success Story  
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“...we learned that [if] those programs aren't relevant, and they're not designed for people, their culture, their experience, it doesn't work.”

*Executive Director,  
Providence, RI*

**PennState**

