

Tips for Engaging Communities Virtually

The 2020–2021 Community Outreach and Engagement (COE) Activities Across the Translational Research Continuum Supplement awardees, representing **23 National Cancer Institute (NCI) Cancer Centers** across the country, worked diligently with their COE teams to complete their projects in the face of challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the funding period, awardees shared resources, best practices, and lessons learned with one another, with two common themes. First, how do we successfully build community relationships in a virtual environment and, second, how do we engage stakeholders virtually? Cancer Centers' best practices included use of platforms accessible to community members and provision of technical support and clear communication to reduce barriers. Most importantly, Cancer Centers' team members suggested keeping virtual meetings fun and engaging to reduce onscreen fatigue, build rapport, and encourage high participant retention.

This tip sheet is intended to share key takeaways from the funded COE supplement teams and is not meant to be a comprehensive summary of all virtual community engagement strategies or NCI endorsement of specific platforms or resources.



TIP 1 – Choose the right virtual platform

Use a web application that works for your audience and community, including:



Zoom

> works well for larger groups



Ring Central

> is a free and collaborative virtual meeting platform and messaging application



WebEx

> works well for large conferences and allows unlimited recording coverage



Microsoft Teams

> is a project space that allows users to share and store documents



Social media apps like Facebook and Twitter Live



> are free resources that many community members can access



Slack

> is a project space that allows users to share and store documents



TIP 2 – Ensure meetings are interactive and plan for online data collection

Enhance participants' sense of togetherness and collaboration through engaging activities, including:

- **Online polls to gauge participants' thoughts:**

 [Mentimeter](#)

 [Zoom poll](#)

 [Slido](#)

- **Online white boards to collaborate and collect details:**

 [Mural](#)

 [Google Jamboard](#)

 [Miro](#)

- **Video discussions:**

 [Flipgrid](#)

- **Concept mapping**

(e.g., stakeholder mapping, systems mapping, social network mapping, community asset mapping) to help with planning and understanding complex systems:

 [Kumu](#)

- **Music, icebreakers, and jokes**

- **Shorter meeting times and scheduled breaks**

- **Breakout rooms for small group engagement**

The following suggested platforms capture qualitative and quantitative information:

 [REDCap](#)  [Qualtrics](#)  [Zoom](#) and other audio/video-capable platforms (qualitative interviews)

It is important to share results with your community members and stakeholders.



TIP 3 – Practice mindful communication skills

Technology only goes so far. The following practices may help foster effective communication to successfully engage with your community:

Make mindful introductions

- > Plan ice-breaker activities at the beginning of a meeting (e.g., two truths and a lie).
- > Begin meetings with easy-to-answer questions.
- > Introduce your COE program and focus on community benefits.
- > Allot time for introductions, using the chat feature as needed if time is limited (e.g., type your name, city, and fun fact about your hometown).
- > Ask attendees to share information about their organization/program and their current work.

Focus on good communication

- > Communicate early and often.
- > Be willing to accommodate participants' communication preferences.
- > When in doubt, schedule a call to follow up or clarify key information.
- > Maintain regular communication between meetings (e.g., through listservs, email, text messages, social media, phone calls).
- > Share information and resources both online and offline.
- > Provide tailored data in an easy-to-read format (e.g., infographics).
- > Continue partnerships even when your project ends.



TIP 4 – Practice recruitment and retention strategies

The following work well for virtual meetings with vulnerable and underserved communities:

Ask partner networks and stakeholders to help with learning more about the community. Examples include:

- > Community advisory boards
- > Local health/cancer coalitions
- > Community health advisers/workers
- > Schools
- > Churches and libraries
- > Community and social service organizations
- > Participant referrals (e.g., snowball sampling)

Consider providing incentives, such as:

- > Drawings or honoraria for participation
- > Raffle prizes to encourage participants to stay to the end of the meeting

Practice good scheduling techniques:

- > Recognize that there may be competing priorities.
- > Stay flexible with meeting times and be respectful of participants' time and scheduling needs.
- > Send agenda and meeting materials in advance of the meeting to provide participants time to review and prepare their comments and feedback.
- > Send calendar meeting reminders.

Keep the meetings interesting:

- > Make sure the information is relevant to your audience and presented in formats available to them and appropriate for different health literacy levels.
- > Keep the conversation flowing and encourage interaction as appropriate.



TIP 5 – Know your population

Having a good understanding of your audience will aid in your virtual meetings, particularly with vulnerable and underserved communities. Try to:

Make adaptations and provide resources:

- > Provide laptops and other technology as needed.
- > Consider offering incentives or stipends for time spent in meetings, if possible.
- > Offer multiple methods for community members to join the meeting, including video and telephone.
- > Recruit using accessible platforms (e.g., radio, social media).
- > Be empathetic and flexible to meet the needs of the community.

Work with trusted stakeholders:

- > Reach out to organizations that serve specific populations and ask for suggestions as to whom in their organization can collaborate or assist with your activity.
- > Ask about the intended audiences' access to and experience using the internet and web-based meeting platforms.