



# Seven Principles of Community Engagement

Prevention specialists have long understood that the most effective and lasting initiatives are done *with* a community—not *to* a community. Community engagement is especially relevant for prevention initiatives that address problem gambling, which is thoroughly intertwined with disparities in health outcomes, socio-economic status, and substance misuse.

“With a diversity of voices we can do better prevention, and we can reach more people in our community,” says Emily Bhargava, a training and technical assistance associate with the Massachusetts Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling Prevention.

In April 2025, Bhargava co-led a webinar with colleagues Haner Hernandez and Sarah Jerome [that explored the steps that prevention practitioners can take to engage community actors in problem gambling prevention.](#)

## Here are seven core principles to keep in mind:

- **Careful planning and preparation.** Engaging a community in problem gambling prevention happens slowly. Prevention specialists have to be willing to listen, to learn, and to build connections before trying to implement any sort of plan. Preparation also includes identifying ways for community members to become authentically involved in the initiative. “If we expect to engage people in the work, we have to bring them along and let them guide the work,” says Bhargava.
- **Inclusion and demographic diversity.** Community engagement requires that all voices are included in conversations about problem gambling. Make sure you are bringing people with diverse life experiences to the table. This includes leading voices in the prevention community, people with lived experience of problem gambling, and people who represent local cultural and ethnic communities.
- **Collaboration and shared purpose.** “Community engagement doesn’t just mean working together on something—it means working together for something,” says Bhargava. A shared purpose gives the community the motivation to find a shared path forward to prevent problem gambling. When that shared purpose is lacking, partners may not see a reason to join efforts, choosing instead to go their own way.

## Here are seven core principles to keep in mind (cont'd):

- **Openness and learning.** When working with a community, be open to hearing about their experiences, successes, and failures. Bhargava stresses that prevention practitioners should lead with a validation of racism and other forms of oppression that they may have experienced. Above all, “be open to learning from community members about what they have tried and what their results have been.” Effective prevention programs will often start in a community’s effort to create a more livable, healthier environment for everyone.
- **Transparency and trust.** People doing prevention must be transparent about what they intend to do, why they want to do it, and what they hope to achieve. That transparency builds trust—and can also lead to community buy-in and collaboration.
- **Impact and action.** An intervention can have a positive, neutral, or negative impact on a community. Prevention practitioners should consider all possible impacts of a problem gambling prevention initiative and share them with the community. Those conversations can help inform necessary changes, making the program more impactful and sustainable in the long run.
- **Sustained engagement and participatory culture.** “Community-based prevention projects are not just ‘one and done’ initiatives,” said Bhargava. “If you are going to meaningfully engage a community, you have to do it over time in a way that shares power.” One way to do this is to hire, promote, and retain people who reflect the community’s diversity. Remember that they are invested in making their community a safer, more secure, healthier place—and they have tremendous lived experience to draw upon. That knowledge is an asset and can lay the groundwork for continued community buy-in that helps your program succeed for years to come.

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