

COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Capacity building programs help poor and disadvantaged communities improve their ability to participate in environmental decision-making processes. They encourage citizen involvement in the decision-making process, and provide tools that enable them to do so. Capacity building enables communities that would otherwise be excluded to participate in the process, leading to better, and more just, decisions.

The Department of Energy (DOE) continues to be committed to promoting environmental justice and involving its stakeholders more directly in the planning and decision-making process for environmental cleanup. DOE's Environmental Management Program (EM) is in full support of this commitment. Through its "Environmental Justice and Public Participation Through Technology" project, EM provides communities with the capacity to effectively contribute to a complex technical decision-making process by furnishing access to computers, the Internet, training, and technical assistance. This paper documents innovative initiatives in environmental justice, which offer prospects for future activities. Major activities include: participation in the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice, partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency to support capacity building, and partnership with the National Conference of Black Mayors to reach small-town and rural stakeholders.

DOE takes the position that citizens who are active in environmental decision-making and have a working knowledge of both the procedure and substance of an issue, can make a more meaningful contribution in the decision-making process, which results in decisions that are faster, cost-efficient, and just.

INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as the "fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, income, or education level with respect to development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." The definition further states that no population should suffer a disproportionate share of environmental burdens.

The Department of Energy (DOE) continues to be committed to promoting environmental justice, increasing public participation, and involving its stakeholders more directly in the planning and decision-making process for environmental cleanup. DOE's Environmental Management Program (EM) is in full support of this commitment. Through its "Environmental Justice and Public Participation Through Technology" project, EM provides communities with the capacity to effectively contribute to a complex technical decision-making process by

furnishing access to computers, the Internet, training and technical assistance. This paper discusses EM's participation in the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice (IWG), including an interagency project to help two communities gain access to information and gain capacity to participate in environmental decision-making. The paper also details the Department's partnership with the National Conference of Black Mayors, Inc. to enhance their members' capacity for energy and environmental planning.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING?

Community capacity building can be defined as the process that gives local community groups the necessary tools needed for meaningful participation in agency decision-making. Citizens who come into a decision-making process with little or no information about the process or the subject matter under consideration will find it all but impossible to make a meaningful contribution to the process. Despite the emphasis that Federal agencies have placed on public participation, numerous low-income and minority groups remain out of the process due to an inability to navigate the process or understand the subject matter under consideration.

In order to facilitate public participation where the stakeholder lacks an understanding of the decision-making process or the subject matter, it is necessary for Federal agencies to provide stakeholders the appropriate tools to participate. Federal agencies should assist these communities in developing the administrative, technical, and analytical expertise required to be effective participants in the process. This may involve supporting or developing training and technical assistance programs, providing technical assistance providers, and supporting national and regional efforts working with such affected stakeholders to improve their decision-making capacity.

Capacity building programs help communities improve their ability to participate in the decision-making process. These programs involve citizens early and often in the decision-making process. These programs ensure that stakeholders can directly participate in the planning and decision-making process by the following:

- identifying public concerns and issues;
- providing opportunities to assist in identifying issues and problems, and in formulating and evaluating alternatives;
- listening to the public;
- incorporating public concerns and input into decision-making; and
- providing feedback on the ways that decisions do, or do not, reflect the input received.

DOE works with stakeholders to conduct a variety of capacity-building activities. These include conducting training classes, operating information hotlines, providing technical assistance and making information available on a variety of web sites. Each activity is designed to help our stakeholders become better able to participate in DOE decision-making.

There are several benefits to be gained from helping stakeholders improve their ability for greater participation in DOE decision-making. Some of these are:

- meaningful involvement leads to better and more just decision-making and cost-efficient decisions;
- stakeholders gain a working knowledge of the subjects under consideration and the procedures driving the decision-making process;
- communities are given the tools they need to participate more effectively; and
- many communities would otherwise be unable to participate if not for these programs.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING IN ACTION: THE IWG

DOE participates in the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice (IWG), established by Executive Order 12898. The Executive Order signed by President Clinton in February 1994, calls for making environmental justice an integral part of the mission of 17 Federal agencies to the extent practicable and permitted by law. The goal of the IWG is to increase efforts in identifying, mobilizing, and making use of Federal resources to benefit environmentally and economically distressed communities. The Order identifies specific objectives in the following areas:

- identify disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations;
- coordinate research and data collection;
- conduct public meetings; and
- develop interagency model projects.

It is clear that increased coordination and cooperation among Federal agencies will enhance identification, mobilization, and utilization of Federal resources. In addition, increased coordination and cooperation will enable distressed communities to contribute to environmental decision-making and more effectively access and leverage Federal Government resources.

In June 1999, the IWG began to develop the concept of an Integrated Federal Interagency Environmental Justice "Action Agenda" as a way of incorporating environmental justice in all policies, programs, and activities of Federal agencies. This agenda focuses on the following key areas:

- promoting greater coordination and cooperation among Federal agencies;
- making government more accessible and responsive to communities; and
- initiating Environmental Justice Demonstration Projects to develop integrated place-based models for addressing community livability issues.

Experience has demonstrated that efforts to address the environmental problems of minority and/or low-income communities without meaningful community input will fail. An informed and involved community is a necessary and integral part of the decision-making process in addressing environmental protection and its integration with the community's economic and

social goals. Experience has also demonstrated that environmental problems suffered by these communities cannot be fully addressed within the authority of any single governmental entity. It is, therefore, a goal of the IWG to help impacted communities gain the necessary resources for informed participation in the decision-making process in addressing environmental protection. As a result, the IWG is building dynamic and proactive partnerships among Federal agencies and has initiated Environmental Justice demonstration projects to develop integrated, place-based models for addressing community livability issues.

IWG DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS: PARTNERSHIP WITH EPA

One of the IWG demonstration projects is an effort to increase public participation and environmental justice through technology. This effort has been designed to tackle the challenges presented by the digital divide and build community capacity at the same time.

DOE's Environmental Management Program has partnered with the Environmental Protection Agency to support capacity building in two communities: Savannah, Georgia and the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana. These agencies have partnered to provide computers, training, and technical assistance to establish community technology centers. The partnership of Federal, Tribal, and local agencies, community organizations, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities will help these communities gain access to information and develop the capacity to participate in environmental decision-making processes.

The goal of this effort is to help communities gain access to computers and the Internet in order to expand and develop the capacity to participate in environmental decision-making. The specific activities associated with this goal are to:

- create Community Technology Centers to give communities access to Federal agencies and a wide range of environmental information on the Internet;
- conduct training programs that include computer-based and Internet tools; toxic release, chemical, and risk assessment information; and community economics;
- supervise community use of the training and tools received;
- create and implement youth development programs;
- provide economic development tools, entrepreneurship training, and other resources such as proposal writing and grants management to make the centers economically self-sufficient;
- provide continuous technical assistance from Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other sources via the Internet and e-mail;
- develop a technical assistance web site;
- conduct research meetings with the targeted communities and others to discuss experiences, lessons learned, and implications for the future; and
- conduct research to evaluate the results and examine the implications for program modification and replication.

These activities will serve as models for eventual replication by other communities and Tribes.

The vital key to the success of the community technology centers is continuous technical assistance. Communities can obtain computers from a variety of sources and they can get Internet access for \$20.00 a month or less. However, access to trained, trusted, and reliable technical assistance providers is required to help communities gain a clear understanding of the decision-making processes and provide a ready source to explain the implications of technical and complex alternate choices.

ASSISTANCE TO SMALL-TOWN AND RURAL STAKEHOLDERS: PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF BLACK MAYORS

Local governments play a key role in environmental cleanup but are often stretched beyond their capacities. Local governments should have the opportunity to engage in a direct consultative relationship with the regulated agency and Federal and state regulators. The value of this relationship is greatly enhanced if local governments maintain a capacity to understand and track the complex issues involved in cleanup and waste management. This capability will also be a resource to assist an advisory board that may be established for the community and nearby facilities. (1)

DOE has partnered with the National Conference of Black Mayors, Inc. (NCBM) to enhance their members' capacity for energy and environmental planning through computer-based technology, Internet access, workshops, and technical assistance. NCBM is a professional association for the 480 African-Americans who serve as mayors of towns and cities across America. Some NCBM members serve in large cities such as Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, and San Francisco, while others serve in smaller jurisdictions such as Allport, Birdsong, Royal Oak, and Ridgeville. While NCBM members serve in large cities, the average population for a NCBM jurisdiction is 7,000. Some NCBM jurisdictions carry a low three-digit population.

One of the major components of the DOE/NCBM partnership is the Samuel P. Massie Chairs of Excellence Program (Massie Chairs). This program consists of nationally and internationally recognized engineers and scientists from nine Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and one Hispanic Serving Institution (HIS). The Massie Chairs Program is designed to assist the institutions in producing top-level graduates in the environmental disciplines and to produce groundbreaking environmental research. As a vital component of the DOE/NCBM partnership, the Massie Chairs work with NCBM jurisdictions to address energy and environmental concerns within their borders. Through this partnership, the collaboration between the mayors and academic communities has strengthened. Ultimately, the NCBM/DOE partnership will increase the mayors' ability to govern and provide greater services to their constituents.

The Massie Chairs have been active in numerous NCBM jurisdictions and have saved thousands of dollars for these towns. For example, the Chairs examined a situation in Louisiana where the town was under threat for a daily fine of several thousand dollars for allegedly exceeding discharge limits in wastewater. Because the Chairs' recommendation was implemented, EPA removed the fine and the town did not need to contract with a commercial engineering firm to resolve the problem. This recommendation saved the town several thousand dollars in potential fines and professional fees.

In other situations, the Massie Chairs have identified ways for towns to generate economic development activities to sustain themselves. A prime example is Princeville, North Carolina, the first municipality in America incorporated by and for former slaves and known as the Birthplace of African-American Freedom. The entire town was practically destroyed by Hurricane Floyd in September of 1999. Through the partnership, the DOE is assisting the NCBM in their effort to rebuild Princeville. The city is currently purchasing water from a neighboring town. After the Chairs' assessment of the town, it was recommended to the mayor of Princeville to produce water for their own municipal purposes and sell bottled water as a separate profit center. In both these cases, the Chairs' role in the DOE/NCBM partnership served as a vital link in the effort to improve services, reduce costs, and help the jurisdictions increase their ability to meet the energy and environmental issues they face daily.

Another major effort of the DOE/NCBM partnership is a task force consisting of mayors and DOE representatives. The purpose of this working group is to examine means to increase the ability of municipal stakeholders to participate in energy and environmental decision-making. The task force will define and institute model projects in various jurisdictions that can be replicated in other jurisdictions. One of the first steps in this process is to make sure that the mayors, towns, and cities gain a good understanding of DOE programs and how to access them. By establishing working relationships among mayors and various DOE programs, a process is institutionalized that survives administration changes and DOE employees moving on to different jobs.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that energy and environmentally literate stakeholders, who are active in the decision-making process, can better protect themselves more so than any other entity. However, these stakeholders need the right tools to have more meaningful participation. Effective stakeholder participation can lead to more efficient and less costly environmental decisions. It is DOE's goal to monitor, evaluate, and enhance the capacity building process underway and replicate those in other jurisdictions where warranted.

Computers and the Internet present improved means for access to information from various quarters. The keys to making technology work in the best interest of stakeholders are to insure that they have access to the technology, know how to use the technology, and have access to competent and trusted counsel to help navigate technical and often complex issues. These keys are all included in our capacity building efforts.

REFERENCES

1. Final Report of the Federal Facilities Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee (1996).