

# Sustaining Community Engagement Infrastructure Through State Public Health Programming

As public health priorities shift and funding streams change, structures that support community engagement may dissolve. This leaves state and territorial health agencies with the complex challenge of preserving relationships with families and community members that they built over time through trust and collaboration. Without intentional sustainability planning and strategic use of existing infrastructure, agencies risk losing valuable connections that enhance program relevance, effectiveness, and public trust.

Sustaining community partnerships that improve optimal health for all — established before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic — is essential for preserving relevant public health prevention programming. Strategic collaboration with state public health programs (e.g., the Title V Maternal and Child Health (MCH) program) offers agencies a practical way to preserve state and community engagement efforts during periods of reduced funding and emerging priorities.

## Why Family and Community Partnerships Matter

Family and community partnerships build trust, improve program relevance, and ensure public health initiatives respond to real needs. When families and community members help shape programs, agencies benefit from stronger support, deeper insight, and better outcomes.

Centering around individuals with rich experiences navigating systems/services designed to support them enables agencies to create programs that align with local priorities and address complex challenges more effectively. These relationships, however, take time to build and require long-term infrastructure to maintain. When engagement efforts depend on temporary funding, agencies risk losing vital connections, communication pathways, and feedback mechanisms.

## A Foundation for Preserving Community Partnerships

State public health programming can support state agency engagement efforts and serve as a steady foundation during change. For example, the Title V MCH Services Block Grant, which [requires states to meaningfully engage families and community members](#), provides flexible funding that states use to build and maintain infrastructure (e.g., dedicated staff, advisory groups, and compensated engagement activities) fit for their context and priorities. Although grounded in MCH, Title V infrastructure often supports other programs and initiatives across the health agency.

As a population-focused program, Title V addresses a wide range of public health issues that impact mothers, children, and families. Many partnerships formed under other public health initiatives remain relevant to the MCH population, and shared family and community engagement between programs can provide a foundation for ongoing collaboration. This continuity helps enrich Title V efforts while preserving connections that support future program work.

## Spotlight on Colorado: A Model for Sustainable Engagement

Colorado offers a strong example of how state public health programs can use flexible funding and a population-based focus to build engagement infrastructure that supports the entire health agency. For the FFY 2021–2025 block grant cycle, [Colorado invested Title V funds](#) in structures and processes that support broad-based engagement – resulting in interconnected strategies and resources that position the state to sustain partnerships, even as individual programs or funding streams evolve. These include:

- **Dedicated Staff and Leadership:** Colorado supported a full-time staff person to focus on community engagement and contracted a Family Leader through a community-based partner organization with Title V funding. These roles are embedded in agency operations and contribute to planning and coordination efforts across programs, making it easier to maintain engagement even when individual initiatives or funding streams end.
- **Established Engagement Structures:** The Community Advisory Board and Youth Partnership for Health offer built-in opportunities for families and youth to inform policy and program development across the health agency. These structures are well-positioned to integrate new focus areas or partners as priorities shift, offering continuity for relationships formed under other initiatives.
- **Agency-Wide Collaboration:** Title V leadership helped establish and co-lead a division-wide Community Engagement Workgroup, which developed shared tools and practices used across the agency. By institutionalizing these resources, Colorado has reduced dependency on any one program or funding stream for sustaining engagement.

Because these staff roles, structures, and tools are not limited to a single-issue area, Colorado’s infrastructure is well-positioned to sustain trusted relationships as programs evolve. Even as the focus or structure of engagement shifts, the state is equipped to maintain continuity with partners by preserving relationships built through past initiatives and continuing to support meaningful community input across public health efforts.

## Practical Considerations

### For State and Territorial Health Officials

- Promote internal coordination and identify shared engagement needs.
- Invest in joint infrastructure to reduce duplication and maximize engagement reach.
- Include state public health program leaders in cross-agency strategic planning and sustainability efforts.

### For Programs Seeking Partnership Sustainability

- Collaborate with state public health programs, such as Title V, to share or transition engagement structures (e.g., advisory boards and outreach networks).
- Treat community partnerships as enduring assets, not tied to one funding stream.
- Document key relationships and insights from ending programs to support continuity.

### For State Public Health Programs Focused on Community Engagement

- Assess internal capacity and identify where engagement coordination is possible.
- Use new collaborations to further program priorities and strengthen collective impact.
- Clarify roles and expectations to support agency goals while preserving core program functions.