

PREPARED – Community Roundtable and Discussion Summary

August 29, 2023 | 12:00-1:30 PM EDT

Meeting Objectives

- ✓ Identify and understand grantee experiences with EPA data and reporting requirements.
- ✓ Identify data/evidence needs and challenges to continue strengthening existing and new partnerships.
- ✓ Identify ways to enhance capacity and address tool development needs.

Introduction

EPA is interested in gathering input to inform its launch of future funding opportunities such as the Promoting Readiness and Enhancing Proficiency to Advance Reporting and Data (PREPARED) cooperative agreement program. The PREPARED program will provide funding for expert evaluators to support the data, reporting, and evidence-building capacity of EPA funding recipients, particularly for those representing small, underserved, and/or Tribal communities that are applying for or receiving EPA funding. On August 29, EPA hosted an online roundtable conversation that featured speakers from four organizations that serve communities that receive EPA funding (a fifth speaker contributed comments in advance). Speakers and attendees were invited to share feedback and ideas on ways that funding reporting requirements can both help and hinder their activities.

Featured Speakers

Jerry Cain	Environmental Manager; Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Choctaw, MS
Helen Chin	President; Communities First Fund; New York, NY (<i>contributed comments in advance which were integrated throughout discussions</i>)
Christina Cummings	Vice President of Operations; Southern Equity PSE/Justice40 Accelerator; Atlanta, GA
Omar Muhammed	Executive Director; Lowcountry Alliance for Model Communities; North Charleston, SC
Manuel Salgado	Environmental Justice Research Analyst; WE ACT for Environmental Justice; New York, NY and Washington, DC



Key Themes

Featured speakers responded to a series of questions in a moderator-facilitated panel. Key themes from speakers' comments are summarized below.

1. What types of data and evidence are needed to support effective and equitable environmental programs and projects in your community, or the communities you work with?

- **Centering community knowledge and expertise.** There needs to be a shift and broadening in the definition of who identifies as a technical expert or evaluator. This can allow for people within the community, who are closer to the problem to be a part of the project design and evaluation process. It is important that the process of creating effective and equitable environmental programs and projects value and uplift the lived experiences and stories from the community.
- **Authentic community engagement.** An approach centered in the principles of Environmental Justice must include meaningful engagement of the community in every aspect of the project or program. Community-focused research and evaluation should be led by the members of the community and supported by the research and evaluation team(s), not the other way around. Research and evaluation activities should also focus on building the capacity and skills of key partners involved in or impacted by the project. For these policies and programs to provide greater benefits and directly impact the communities, they need to be offered a chance to assist in co-creating these programs.
- **Recognizing and including qualitative data.** Qualitative data can play an important role in demonstrating the impact that funding recipients are making in their communities. EPA should consider reframing traditional concepts of the importance of quantitative data, toward an approach that values storytelling and lived experiences. Even in cases where quantitative data may exist, a community may not have the appropriate skillsets or staff capacity to effectively process that data, further highlighting the importance of including analysis of qualitative data that reflects the community's lived experiences.

2. What barriers, needs, and challenges are communities and EPA funding recipients experiencing related to collecting, analyzing, and using data and evidence?

- **Challenges with connection to regulations.** EPA grants require reporting to show data that demonstrate a direct relationship between impact on the ground and meeting regulatory requirements. This can be difficult for communities to show with quantitative data. Storytelling provides valuable information that agencies should recognize and value as evidence of the reality on the ground.
- **Information and reporting requirements.** EPA funding applications and reporting requirements are so burdensome that communities can be deterred from applying for small grants, as they consider that the time and effort necessary to comply with requirements outweighs the benefit of the funding. EPA should lower the application and reporting paperwork requirements for small grants to enable those funds to be efficiently distributed into communities.
- **Staff capacity and technical skill limitations.** Another challenge is the capacity of local organizations that often have smaller staffs, such that maintaining the funding can be more challenging than initially

acquiring the grant. They may not have the capacity or technical skills to collect and analyze some types of data, limiting the ability of organizations to use these types of data and information to support management, decision-making, and communication. Smaller organizations may opt to not pursue EPA grant funding due to capacity or expertise concerns related to taking on the reporting requirements.

- **Time and resources capacity needs.** Smaller and less well-resourced organizations can face high barriers to accessing EPA funds because they lack the resources to comply with reporting requirements. These organizations are also hindered by the need to wait for reimbursement after investing the upfront resources and staff time to provide required documentation. Due to limited resources, organizations may not have the ability to document and provide accurate reporting which can create delays in payments being released to an organization. For Tribes, it is especially challenging that EPA grants may not be combined with performance partnership grants (PPGs) and therefore magnifying their administrative burden.
- **Tribal data privacy concerns.** Tribal data sovereignty is critical when it comes to data sharing, reporting, and ownership. There are examples where federal grant reporting requirements have caused concerns with information about tribal cultural sites, subsistence sources, and other critical areas being shared in ways that do not protect the data, cultural practices, or traditions. When EPA is requesting data for evidence and evaluation, the data often becomes publicly available, which can put sites at risk of being damaged or destroyed.

3. What frustrations or challenges has your community had with data and reporting requirements associated with EPA grants in the past?

- **Difficulty staying in compliance.** One of the biggest challenges is lack of capacity within organizations to keep up with reporting requirements associated with EPA grants. Some organizations may fall out of compliance which in turn affects their ability to apply to future grants. The reporting requirements may also be excessive and inconsistent and require a higher level of expertise to understand what is needed to stay in compliance. Better guidance, perhaps templates, and pre-submission feedback opportunities for how to complete data and reporting requirements are needed.
- **Restructuring data requirements.** A challenge for some organizations, and especially Tribal organizations, is the inability for federal partners to accept and use some of the data collected. For example, Tribes may not be able to submit traditional knowledge that is more qualitative, descriptive, and storytelling in nature, as this data doesn't meet all the requirements. For other organizations it may be that data formed from lived experiences does not meet certain requirements of rigor, resulting in the dismissal of their data from policy recommendations.

4. What institutions and organizations are you currently working with to address your data and evidence needs and challenges? What types of organizations do you think could be important partners related to collecting, analyzing, and using data and evidence in the future?

- **Fostering academic partnerships.** Partnerships with state academic institutions such as universities are beneficial for addressing data needs and specifically working with academics that embody EJ principles, because they already have a value-system and research experience in working with communities and other networks. Community based organizations can partner with Historically Black Colleges and

Universities (HBCUs) to provide students with internships and an opportunity to gain experience they can use to help their communities.

- **Collaboration with regulatory agencies.** It is important to have good working relationships with state regulatory agencies such as EPA, which play a primary role in partnering with communities and providing them with resources to move forward. For Tribes, relationships with federal agencies such as the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the United States Geological Survey (USGS) have provided them with helpful work opportunities that advances the Tribe's community efforts.
- **Improving access to data.** Smaller organizations may have data analysis challenges and fostering partnerships with institutions and organizations that have access to useable data can help. It is important for the communities to have access to the data they may need to move initiatives forward.
- **Centering Environmental Justice values.** When considering organizational partners, environmental justice principles should be part of the selection process. Organizations that center community, are proximal to on-the-ground efforts, and are rooted in cultural appropriate communication are key and will ensure that EJ principles are embedded in the research, evaluation, and data collection being performed by partners. This, in turn, ensures that communities are benefiting from the research and evaluation, and are active partners in the process.

5. What types of capacity-building, technical assistance, and/or tool development support do EPA grant recipients and community organizations need to develop, use, and report data and evidence? To what extent are these needs focused on training versus FTE capacity?

- **Increasing access to technical assistance, training, and resources.** Grant recipients need technical assistance, technology support, system navigation support and general sustained support throughout the grant lifecycle. The technical assistance and training should not be limited to community needs at large but also targeted towards program managers in the municipalities and government offices. Investment in their professional development will provide them with the skills and training to better help communities.
- **Effective data management and communication.** Communities need the skills and visualization tools to manage and communicate their data in a better way and translate that data to make effective changes. When working with other organizations (such as academic institutions) on data analysis, community agreements on how the data will be shared and accessed are important to have in place. Better data management is needed to ensure that the community has continual access to their data.
- **Creating accessible systems.** Having an easy-to-use electronic system for submitting requirements would be a beneficial tool for organizations to have. Additionally, continuous training to use the systems already in place would help build capacity within smaller organizations.
- **Providing sustained funding.** Predictability in funding to organizations is essential so that they can hire more employees, train them, and start building up their capacity for this type of work.

Questions and Answers (Q&A) Section

After the featured speakers responded to moderator questions, attendees had the opportunity to provide comments and ask questions. Those are summarized below.

Questions for the Panelists

How can we begin a shift in scientists' outlook that community data is "valid"? QA/QC is a such a huge part of a state environmental agency's business processes (it's mandatory) that it's hard to get the state onboard with "accepting" community led data.

Partnering with academic institutions to assist in designing the data gathering process will help in recognizing the data resulting from a community's efforts. Social scientists are a great resource to collaborate with because they can help analyze the quantitative data while also understanding the value of qualitative data resulting from lived experiences.

How do the speakers feel about using intermediaries to handle the administration requirements of EPA grants and then the intermediaries would pass through the funds to smaller CBOs. Is this a good option? If not, why not?

There may not be much value in a system such as this because some communities may never see the benefits. If needed, organizations may want to opt for more regional and state/local intermediaries instead of national ones.

It seems like technical assistance will not solve the limited capacity issue. Are there creative ways to build local capacity that could be tapped by multiple local communities (e.g., community colleges, place-based NGOs that can serve multiple communities) to support data, evidence, and reporting needs for multiple local community partners?

There are many solutions that may just not have been thought out yet, but providing a space for open collaboration such as this roundtable is a great way to help bring some of those best practices forward.

Question for EPA

We are getting monthly requests from a senator's office about concerns they have about how we are using taxpayers' money, which is a bit confusing since we are reporting to our liaison with EPA. We talk about everything we do with our EPA person. Is this appropriate behavior from a Senator's Office, why are they investigating us?

EPA has no influence over congressional offices and any inquiries that may come from them. However, EPA needs to be attentive to the fact that these inquiries of grant recipients happen when developing agency reporting practices. Ideally, data and information that grant recipients report to EPA also can help grant recipients respond to congressional and other public inquiries.

Conclusion

EPA hosts thanked featured speakers and attendees and encouraged everyone to send any additional questions to evidenceandevaluation@epa.gov, and stay tuned for updates on informational webinars coming soon.

