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INTRODUCTION

Engaging individuals and communities served by home visiting programs, as well as other groups involved in the home visiting field, as research partners is an essential approach for facilitating innovation in precision home visiting research. Incorporating multiple perspectives from these key interest groups during the precision home visiting research process can promote research that reflects the realities of home visiting practice, minimize challenges with implementing interventions, and shorten the translation from research to practice by accounting for real-world contexts up front. In addition, it can facilitate the implementation process for research-based interventions by promoting support from key interest groups and increasing the credibility of research.

People from key interest groups, including families and home visitors, can help improve research on sensitive topics (e.g., substance use or child abuse and neglect) by providing first-hand knowledge and shaping appropriate methods for studying these topics. People from key interest groups can also support engagement with families who researchers have not effectively engaged in the past (e.g., families who may have had previous negative experiences with social services) by leveraging existing relationships or building trust through shared experiences. In addition, when people from key interest groups are engaged in research, their research knowledge and skill development grows. This knowledge and skill can be applied to their work outside of the project and strengthen the quality and sustainability of programs and interventions being studied.

Key interest groups are groups of people who are affected, positively or negatively, by an issue and those responsible for taking action. In addition, key interest groups include people who can influence the direction and success of a project, either positively or negatively.

Engaging key interest groups should begin early in a project. Researchers should engage people from key interest groups as research partners throughout the life of a project to inform topic selection and study design, data collection methods, interpretation of results, and methods for disseminating findings.

Engaging people from key interest groups in research can also support effective research processes. Researchers should implement strategies to promote engagement, including listening to voices of those most affected by precision home visiting research outcomes and reflecting on the ways their own backgrounds may shape the focus of a project and level of engagement with key interest groups. In addition, they should foster communication among partners to build and maintain relationships with people from key interest groups throughout a project.

ENGAGING KEY INTEREST GROUPS IN PRECISION HOME VISITING RESEARCH

Precision home visiting researchers should actively work with people from key interest groups to identify research topics of interest, design and carry out a precision home visiting research study and disseminate resulting evidence. Key interest group partners can strengthen researchers' applications of [the Precision Paradigm](#) (Figure 1) by sharing their expertise. For example, families or home visitors may have perspectives on challenges related to reach and engagement that can support the refinement of research questions to more accurately understand barriers to expanding home visiting usage.

Figure 1. Precision Paradigm

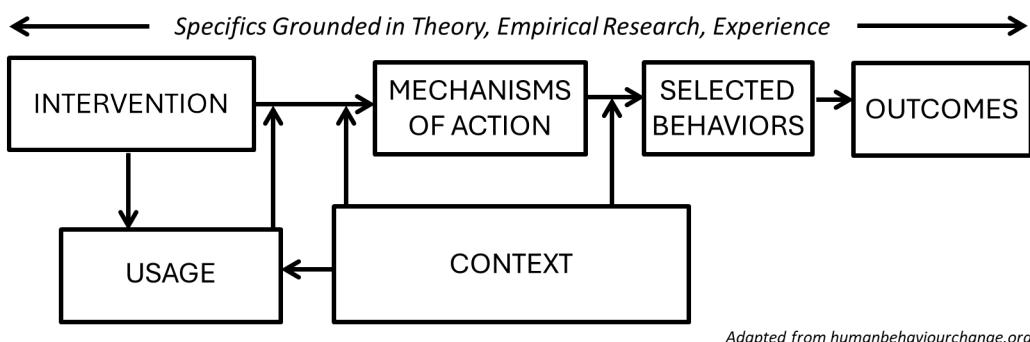


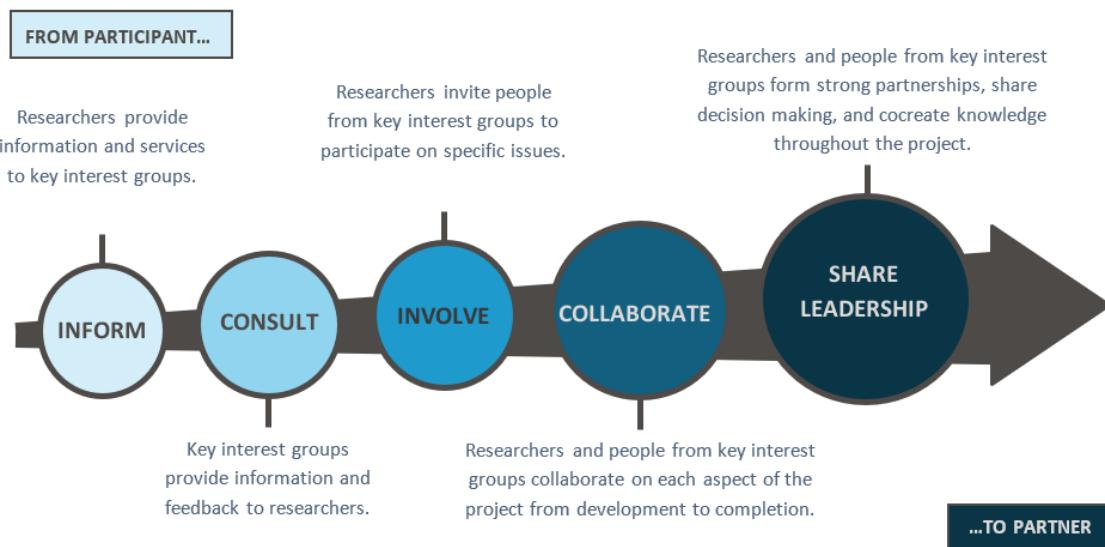
Table 1 lists examples of the key interest groups who may be involved in precision home visiting research and practice.

Table 1. Examples of key interest groups in precision home visiting research

Key Interest Groups	Examples in Home Visiting Research
Participants	Families eligible for home visiting and current or past home visiting participants
Providers	Home visitors, home visiting supervisors, educators, and managers, and other service providers
Funders	City, state, tribal, federal, and private sources of funding for home visiting services
Payers	Medicaid (e.g., reimbursement for depression screening, developmental screening) and federal and state funders
Policy makers	City, state, tribal, and federal government officials, federal government agencies (e.g., Administration for Children and Families), and advocacy organizations
Developers	Home visiting model developers and assessment or measurement developers
Researchers	Home visiting researchers and evaluators

The degree to which people from key interest groups engage in a project exists along a continuum, with minimal participation on one end and strong partnerships and shared leadership on the other (Figure 2). The placement of a project along the continuum, as well as the engagement approach for different key interest groups, will vary. It can also be dynamic, starting at one point on the continuum and advancing during the course of the project as a research team strengthens their understanding of and approach to engagement.

Figure 2. Continuum of engagement in research



Thinking about engaging key interest groups in research may bring to mind specific research and evaluation approaches, such as community-based participatory research, community-engaged research, and utilization-focused evaluation. These approaches can serve as frameworks that guide *how* to engage key interest groups in precision home visiting research. In this resource, engagement is used as an umbrella term to encompass these frameworks, as well as other strategies for connecting with and valuing the perspectives of groups of people who are involved in and affected by home visiting.

Finally, engaging people from key interest groups in the precision home visiting research process differs from involving them in a project as research participants. For example, conducting a focus group with families who participate in home visiting to answer a research question would *not* be considered a strategy for engaging families in the research process. Understanding family perspectives on research questions is an important part of research; however, engagement in research means involving families, and other key interest group partners, in the process of designing and conducting a project and interpreting findings.

Incorporating key interest group perspectives in precision home visiting research

While precision home visiting research aims to engage key interest group partners deeply and meaningfully (i.e., toward the right of the continuum in Figure 2), it may take time to build the relationships necessary to reach that level of engagement. In addition, there may be instances where deep engagement is not feasible. For example, rapid-response projects, such as those that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, may require research teams to prioritize gathering information quickly and limit the ability to spend time on relationship development and incorporation of input from multiple key interest groups.

DEVELOPING AN ENGAGEMENT PLAN

The next set of activities walks through the process of identifying goals for key interest group engagement, specific people from key interest groups to engage, and processes for engaging them. Activities include reflection questions and directions for adding information to the accompanying Research Engagement Plan Template (Appendix A), an actionable document to guide engagement with key interest groups in precision home visiting research. The template includes examples to guide development.

Setting the stage: Reflections on previous engagement experiences

The first step in planning for engagement is to examine past and current practices around engaging key interest group partners in research. This can help identify strengths, areas for growth and improvement, frequently engaged key interest groups, and key interest groups to engage more often in future work.

Reflection questions: Using Table 1 (above) as a guide, for each key interest group discuss the following questions:

- Have you engaged this key interest group in past work?
 - If no, why haven't you engaged this group? Is there a reason to engage this group moving forward?
 - If yes, what approaches were successful for engagement? What challenges did you face with engagement?
- What has worked well with your overall approach to engaging key interest groups in your work?
- What could be improved in your approach to engaging key interest groups in your work?

Activity 1. Define engagement goals

Now, focus on the specific precision home visiting study that this Research Engagement Plan Template will inform.

Reflection Questions: Discuss the following questions to define your engagement goals. Goals may change as the project evolves, and there may be different goals for different key interest groups.

- What is your broad goal for engaging key interest groups in this precision home visiting research project?
- What changes are you willing to make in response to the expectations or priorities of different key interest groups? For example, are you willing to reconsider your research question? Are you willing to change your study design?
- Are there aspects of your project that you are unable, or prefer not, to change in response to the expectations or priorities of key interest groups? For example, are there funding requirements that must be met?

Engagement Plan Step: Based on reflections above, draft at least one goal statement to guide engagement with key interest groups for the precision home visiting research study (Research Engagement Plan Template, Activity 1: Define engagement goals).

Activity 2. Plan for engagement

Use the next set of reflection questions and engagement plan steps to complete Activity 2: Plan for engagement in the Research Engagement Plan Template.

Identify key interest groups and people from these groups

With the goals from Activity 1 in mind, identify which key interest groups and specific people from key interest groups can help achieve them.

Engagement Plan Steps:

- 1) Identify the key interest groups to engage to design and carry out the precision home visiting research study, not as research participants but as research partners. The key interest groups from Table 1 above provide a foundation for this step, but not all may be relevant depending on the goal of the precision home visiting study. In addition, there may be other key interest groups to consider for a given study. Add these groups to row 1 in the table.
- 2) Identify specific individuals or organizations for each key interest group in row 2 of the table.
- 3) Add contact information for individuals to row 3 of the table. If you are not ready to identify specific individuals yet and are instead focusing on organizations, return to this step once you have identified specific individuals.
- 4) Add your goal for engaging each individual or organization to row 4 in the table. Consider whether there are areas in the Precision Paradigm (Figure 1) where each individual or organization can provide critical insight.
- 5) In row 5, indicate whether or not you have engaged these individuals or organizations in the past. For people you have engaged, indicate the engagement approaches you have used in the past.

Examine context

Just as it is important to examine how context affects intervention implementation, it is also important to consider contextual factors that may affect how key interest group partners engage with the research process. Consider the goals that different key interest group partners may have for participating in precision home visiting research to begin understanding the context of their participation.

Reflection Questions: Think about the goals that each identified key interest group partner may have for engaging in a precision home visiting research project.

- What might they hope to get out of engagement?
- How might engagement benefit their work or experiences?

In addition, consider the context of existing relationships with the key interest groups identified.

- How would you describe the relationship between your program, agency, research team, or department and the key interest groups identified?
- How does your relationship differ for different types of key interest groups?

Engagement Plan Step: Add information about relationships with each key interest group partner to row 6 of the table.

Reflection Questions: Think about the broader context for the precision home visiting study and relationships with key home visiting interest groups and people within those groups. When thinking about context, consider the relationships and specific histories of the different groups.

- What are the dynamics between key interest group partners? Between the research team and different key interest groups?
- What is the history of the program or approach you are examining and how it has been implemented? For example, are you examining a voluntary versus mandatory home visiting program?

Engagement Plan Step: Add notes on dynamics and historical context to row 7 of the table.

Choose levels of engagement

Next, identify current and target levels of engagement. Refer to the continuum of engagement in research (Figure 2) to find the level at which a key interest group partner engages in current work or has engaged in past work, and the target level for engagement in the precision home visiting research study. Remember, increasing engagement levels is a gradual process—it may be challenging for a person to move from the inform level to the share leadership level within one project, but aiming to engage one or two levels above current engagement can set the stage for sharing leadership in the future.

Engagement Plan Step: Using the continuum of engagement in research (Figure 2), identify the current level of engagement in row 8 and the target level of engagement in row 9 for each key interest group partner identified in your plan.

Reflect on research team strengths and areas for improvement

Turn attention to the research team that will be conducting the precision home visiting research study. Reflect on the research team's strengths and areas for improvement with regard to readiness to engage partners from the key interest groups that have been identified for the study. There are likely structures in place that will help facilitate engagement, but there may also be structures or skills that the research team will need to build to effectively engage.

Reflection Questions: Reflect on the research team's strengths in terms of both soft skills (e.g., communication, adaptability) and technical skills (e.g., knowledge of study design).

- Revisit discussion from “Setting the stage: Reflections on previous engagement experiences.” Are there skills that facilitated successful engagement? In cases where engagement was not successful, were there skills that would have helped facilitate successful engagement?
- Are there skills that will be particularly important for effectively engaging key interest group partners in the precision home visiting research study?
- Are there members of the research team that have certain strengths to support engagement? These skills may be different for different key interest groups.
- Are there skills your team would like to improve to effectively engage different key interest groups?
- Are there outside experts you may need to engage to effectively connect with certain key interest groups?

Engagement Plan Step: Add notes on your readiness to engage each key interest group partner identified in your plan to row 10. Consider adding detailed notes about ways to improve readiness, if needed, in this row.

Highlight individual skills and supports

After examining the research team's strengths, turn to the strengths and types of supports different key interest group partners can bring to the project. Identify the skills that key interest group partners possess, resources they might have access to, relationships they may be able to facilitate, and the unique perspectives they bring to the work.

Engagement Plan Step: Record strengths for each key interest group partner identified in your plan in row 11 of the table. In row 12, add the specific types of support each partner can offer to the project.

Plan engagement activities

Examine the unique strengths and considerations for engaging each identified key interest group partner. For precision home visiting research projects that intend to engage families and home visiting participants, the Institute for Patient- and Family-Centered Care's guide on engaging patient and family advisors provides information about factors to consider—for example, engaging interpreters if needed or providing incentives for participation.

Engagement Plan Step: Add planned engagement activities for each key interest group partner identified in your plan to row 13 of the table. These activities may change as the project evolves and can be updated as needed.

Many key interest group partners may be new to the concept of precision home visiting research. Before engaging partners in research design and development, provide training and share resources on precision home visiting in a way that considers their background and prior experience with research and home visiting.

The next part of this section will explore establishing and maintaining engagement throughout the life of a project.

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING ENGAGEMENT

Developing an engagement plan in the early phases of a precision home visiting research study provides a solid foundation for future engagement. However, to fully benefit from the time invested in these planning efforts, engagement must be carefully established and actively maintained throughout the study.

Establishing relationships with key interest groups

An engagement plan should guide all engagement activities. As engagement begins, it can be especially helpful for creating buy-in that will build toward lasting and meaningful engagement. Having a team member identified as the liaison or point of contact for a key interest group or an individual from a key interest group distributes responsibility for engagement across the research team. It also ensures that attention to engagement is consistently part of the precision home visiting research study.

Engagement Plan Step: Identify the research team lead who will communicate with each key interest group partner identified in your plan in row 14 of the Activity 2 table in the Research Engagement Plan Template.

When establishing research engagement relationships, the engagement plan should guide the following activities:

- Communicating high-level engagement goals to key interest groups, defining roles and responsibilities of all partners and conveying the value each perspective adds to the project.

- Articulating, for each key interest group partner involved in the project, the benefits of engaging as a partner in the project.
- Drawing on context, benefits of engagement, and motivations to plan and execute engagement activities. For example, keeping these factors in mind and using strengths-based language can help with crafting outreach materials as well as engagement activity goals and objectives that signal the research team's commitment to including perspectives from partners across interest groups.
- Aligning methods of engagement with the type of key interest group, a person's preferences for giving and receiving information, their strengths, and the needs of the project. For example, home visiting program leadership may be more accustomed to engaging via a one-on-one meeting scheduled with a calendar invitation, whereas parents may prefer meetings in group or more informal settings.

Tips for maintaining engagement

Overarching strategies for maintaining engagement include:

- **Commit to engaging key interest groups.** Foster an environment where team members hold one another accountable to this commitment. Recruit key interest group partners early and build time and structures into team processes to sustain engagement. For example, designate roles for meetings (e.g., notetaker, facilitator, parent/family liaison).
- **Budget for engagement.** Staff will need time to plan ongoing engagement activities, incorporate input, and coordinate stipends and travel. Further considerations include costs for virtual meeting software/platforms, IT/technical support for meetings, and printing to provide materials to key interest group partners participating in the project. Technology (e.g., use of online/digital project management and collaboration tools, online surveys to gather quick input or vote on decisions) can create budget efficiencies. Some key interest group partners may also need additional support to fully engage in a project and use technology elements that are less familiar or used in their day-to-day activities.
- **Facilitate transparency, honesty, and trust.** Engaging key interest groups is effective when there is open communication from start to finish, and key interest group partners are included in major decisions.ⁱ If input from key interest groups is invited but not clearly represented or incorporated in final decision-making, a key interest group can become less interested in engagement efforts moving forward.
- **Be aware of power dynamics.** Consider when and where meetings occur, who is facilitating or leading an effort, and whether there are multiple avenues for participation (e.g., options for giving input or asking questions in-person, via survey, or in a one-on-one conversation).
- **Plan for conflict and be flexible.** Bringing together people with different perspectives and experiences can produce new ideas and innovations and raise competing priorities and views. Addressing differences can be time consuming, especially as relationships are developing. However, a shared understanding or process for resolving conflicts will help navigate differences and maintain focus on achieving the project's goals.ⁱⁱ
- **Create skill-building opportunities.** Short trainings on topics such as conflict resolution, listening, or how to use a virtual meeting platform provide tangible skills that key interest group partners can apply within and outside of the project. Reinforce skills learned in trainings throughout the project to foster trust and promote continued contributions from all key interest group partners participating in the project.

- **Recognize contributions.** Determine what recognition is meaningful to different key interest group partners involved in the project and document and report back to them any instance where their input informs a key decision. Also, identify ways to acknowledge key interest group contributions to the project in external facing products (e.g., co-authorship, involvement in presentations and other dissemination activities, acknowledgement statement added to dissemination products).
- **Revisit and revise engagement plan frequently.** Review the engagement plan and goals before key meetings or events, at key transition points in the project (e.g., from study design to implementation, from data analysis to dissemination of results). Also, revise the plan as needed after big events to capture new information on engagement preferences, things that worked or did not, and new potential partners.

PCORI's Engagement Resources webpage has a variety of engagement tools (e.g., templates, webinars) and examples to support engagement.

Activity 3. Plan for maintaining engagement

Reflection Questions: Keeping in mind the tips above and the information already added to the engagement plan, discuss the questions below to outline resource needs and define timelines for maintaining engagement efforts throughout the project.

- Are there special budget or resource considerations related to engagement for the project (e.g., event/convening costs, food and beverage costs/restrictions, institutional and/or funding policies regarding stipends for participation, additional travel and/or childcare costs for meetings)? PCORI has a compensation framework that may be helpful for thinking through the budget implications of key interest group engagement.
- What tangible and/or monetary resources are already available to support engagement efforts for the project (e.g., virtual meeting software license, stipend funds, meeting space, 20 percent of research assistant's time, budget information from past/current projects that included key interest group engagement for estimating costs)?
- What resources need to be secured to support engagement efforts for the project?
- How might the resources needed to support engagement vary over time and by key interest group? For example, are there times where all key interest group partners will be engaged, or only some?

Research Engagement Plan Steps:

- 1) Complete the *Key interest group engagement resource assessment* section of Activity 3 in the Research Engagement Plan Template.
- 2) Consider the research stages where you would like to engage different key interest group partners (e.g., research question development, participant outreach, analyzing data). In the Activity 2 table, list the phases that you will engage each person from a key interest group identified in your plan in on row 15.
- 3) Consider the length of your project, the precision home visiting research elements it will entail, and the key interest groups to be engaged. In the *Updating engagement plan* section of Activity 3 in the Research Engagement Plan Template, draft at least one goal statement to indicate how often, or at what critical timepoints, you will revisit and update the plan.

EVALUATING ENGAGEMENT

While engaging key interest groups is valuable for many reasons, it is also a big undertaking. It is important to evaluate engagement efforts throughout a project to understand whether precision home visiting research teams are truly doing their work in a different way and whether it adds value to the precision research process.

A range of evaluation methods can be used to adjust and sustain relationships as needed. The evaluation approach selected by a team will depend on the project's engagement goals and the resources available. A **simple approach** might include tracking meetings and events in an engagement plan with brief notes about successes and challenges or administering an occasional short satisfaction survey at the close of a meeting with key interest group partners engaged in a project. An **intermediate approach** could entail slightly longer surveys administered on occasion to capture information about each partner, why they agreed to participate in the project, how they were able to contribute, and the factors that helped or hindered their participation. A **detailed approach** might involve formal interviews that provide in-depth information about each partner's feelings and contributions to the project or a regularly administered, detailed survey. PCORI's Engagement Tool and Resource Repository includes examples of simple and more detailed engagement evaluation tools. The PCORI Ways of Engaging – ENgagement ACTivity Tool (WE-ENACT) also provides a pool of items that may be of interest for evaluating the role of key interest groups in research projects.

The information gathered from evaluation activities should be used to improve the engagement plan. While it is important to identify challenges, it is also important to celebrate successes in engagement. Writing up these successes, as well as methods that worked, and sharing them with key interest groups can support continued buy-in and deeper engagement.

Activity 4. Plan for evaluating engagement

Consider the engagement plan goals for the precision home visiting study, as well as the key interest groups that will be engaged, then create a plan for evaluating engagement outcomes.

Research Engagement Plan Steps:

- 1) Discuss whether the approach to engagement evaluation will be simple, intermediate, or detailed. Indicate the level under Activity 4 in the Research Engagement Plan Template.
- 2) Identify the specific engagement evaluation activities that will be included in the approach and add them under Activity 4.
- 3) Discuss how you will know that efforts to engage each key interest group or individual from those key interest groups have worked and how you will know that engagement efforts added value to the precision home visiting research study.

APPENDIX A. RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT PLAN TEMPLATE

Refer to the resource above for guidance on how to complete this template. For each section, tailor the number of fields/entries to meet the needs of your project.

Project title:

Lead staff:

Activity 1. Define engagement goals

Example: Goal 1 – Ensure project goals align with key interest group priorities.

Goal 1:

Goal 2:

Goal 3:

Activity 2. Plan for engagement

	<i>Example</i>	Person 1	Person 2
1. Key interest group	<i>Providers</i>		
2. Specific organizations or individuals	<i>Brenda Hughes, lead technical assistance and training provider at pilot site</i>		
3. Contact information	<i>bhughes@pilotsite.org</i> <i>555-123-4567</i>		
4. Goal for engaging key interest group in the project	<i>Identify the potential challenges and benefits that a new assessment approach would present for TA and training. Help shape thinking around “Usage” box in Precision Paradigm.</i>		
5. Prior engagement? If yes, list approaches.	<i>Yes, brainstorming session with TA and training providers on priority topics during a pilot of a new training series</i>		
6. Relationship with key interest group partner	<i>We do not interact with Brenda frequently, but in the past, we have</i>		

	<i>Example</i>	Person 1	Person 2
7. Notes on dynamics and historical context	<i>had positive interactions when partnering on projects</i>		
8. Current level of engagement	<i>Brenda's supervisor is a member of the research team</i>		
9. Target level of engagement	<i>Consult</i>		
10. Notes on our readiness to engage this partner at the target level	<i>Somehow prepared to engage – we have engaged with her on past projects</i>		
11. Strengths of this partner	<i>Connecting with families and understanding the training needs of home visitors</i>		
12. Types of support the partner can offer	<i>Connecting our team with home visitors, sharing experiences about past changes to training and TA approaches</i>		
13. Engagement activities	<i>Monthly advisory group throughout the duration of the project, bi-weekly calls during the project design phase</i>		
14. Team lead for communicating with this partner	<i>Project PI</i>		
15. Priority project phases for engaging this partner	<i>-Research question development -Recruiting focus group participants</i>		

Activity 3. Plan for maintaining engagement

Engagement resource assessment

Special resource considerations for engaging key interest groups

-
-
-

Available resources to support engaging key interest groups

-
-
-

Resources needed to support engaging key interest groups

-
-
-

Updating engagement plan

Example: Goal 1 - For our five-year precision home visiting study, we will commit to quarterly updates to our engagement plan. Goal 2 - We will also review and update the plan as a team when we are preparing to transition from planning to data collection, from data collection to analysis, and from analysis to dissemination.

Goal 1:

Goal 2:

Goal 3:

Activity 4. Plan for evaluating engagement

Approach to key interest group engagement evaluation (i.e., simple, intermediate, detailed):

Possible evaluation activities:

What indicators will demonstrate the success of your engagement efforts at the end of the project?

SUGGESTED CITATION

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