



Community Engagement Module

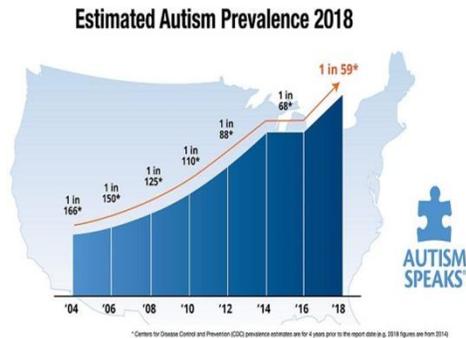
Developed by Dakota and Ramsey County ASD Grant Team

June 2018

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Background of ASD Grant



The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 in 59 children in the U.S. have autism (2018). According to the same study, the local prevalence of autism is 1 in 42, a rate significantly higher than the national average.

Given increased prevalence, as well as feedback from families about a lack of available support, the Minnesota Legislature appropriated funds in 2015 to address gaps in services for people with autism and similar support needs. As part of this initiative, the Minnesota Department of Human Services awarded Dakota and Ramsey County a two-year grant in 2016 to accomplish the following deliverables:

- Increase respite and community inclusion for people with autism and their families
- Train service providers on autism and methods of support
- Strengthen informal networks (friends, neighbors, etc.) for people with autism
- Develop a sustainability plan to ensure work continues after the grant ends

Dakota and Ramsey County embraced a community-based approach to accomplishing the objectives of the ASD Grant. This has included engagement with stakeholders to understand what's working and what's not, leveraging existing community expertise to co-create solutions to shared challenges, and lending resources and support to community-lead efforts to increase capacity and sustainability. This community engagement process is summarized in *Figure 1* and described in more detail in the sections that follow.

Purpose of Module

This module describes the community engagement process used to accomplish the goals of the Dakota and Ramsey County Autism Grant. It is

intended to be a resource for other community-based projects seeking to engage diverse groups of stakeholders to advance shared goals. While this module will guide users through the specific processes used as part of the Dakota and Ramsey County Autism Grant, these strategies should be adapted and customized to meet the needs of each community and project.

Community Engagement Principles and Process

From its beginning, the ASD Grant project was guided by the principles of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD is a method for engaging communities based on strengths and existing assets to develop sustainable solutions to community challenges. According to the Collaborative for Neighborhood Transformation, the following are core principles of ABCD:

- Everyone Has Gifts: People can contribute and want to contribute; gifts must be discovered.
- Relationships Build Community: An intentional effort to build and nourish relationships is core to all community building.
- Citizens at the Center: It is essential to engage community members as actors (citizens), not just as recipients of services (clients).
- Leaders Involve Others: Leaders from the wider community (voluntary associations, congregations, neighborhoods, local business, etc.) can engage others from their sector based on trust, influence, and relationships.
- People Care and About Something agencies and neighborhood groups often complain about apathy. Apathy is a sign of bad listening. People in communities are motivated to act. The challenge is to discover what their motivation is.
- People Are Motivated to Act: People will act on themes they feel strongly about. Agencies often complain about apathy, but every community is filled with invisible "motivation for action". Listen for it.
- Listening Conversation: One-on-one dialogue or small group conversations are key to discovering motivation and inviting participation. Surveys can be useful tools for information gathering but should be paired with intentional listening to encourage relationships.
- Ask Questions Rather Than Giving Answers: Community-members are often asked to follow outside experts' answers to their community

problems. A more powerful way to engage people is to invite communities to address 'questions' and find their own answers, with agencies providing resources to help.

- **Institutions Have Limits:** All institutions – including government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses – are limited in their ability to solve community problems. To be effective, they must engage the rest of the community in solutions.

In addition to the principles of ABCD, the ASD Grant project was also informed by the model of Rapid-Cycle Improvement. This model, often called Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) for shorthand, lends itself to projects that seek to implement innovative approaches to community challenges in a short period of time. Given the two-year timeframe of the ASD Grant, the project team used PDCA principles to assemble multiple stakeholder planning groups that identified pilot projects for testing through the grant. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, the basic steps for PDCA are described below:

- **Plan:** Recruit a team of stakeholders with knowledge of the problem or opportunity. Define what you are trying to accomplish and develop solutions for testing.
- **Do:** Begin implementing solutions. Gather data and observations to support evaluation in "Check" phase.
- **Check:** Evaluate whether implemented solutions resulted in the intended outcomes. Identify themes and lessons learned.
- **Act:** Reflect on lessons learned and make adjustments to plan. Take steps to preserve your gains and sustain your accomplishments, while developing new approaches for unsuccessful activities.

The application of these principles is reflected throughout this module, but covered most specifically in the Advisory Committee and Work Group sections.

Based on these principles, the ASD Grant team used a six-step process to engage the community related to the project. Figure 1 provides an overview of that process, with each step described in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Figure 1: Community Engagement Process



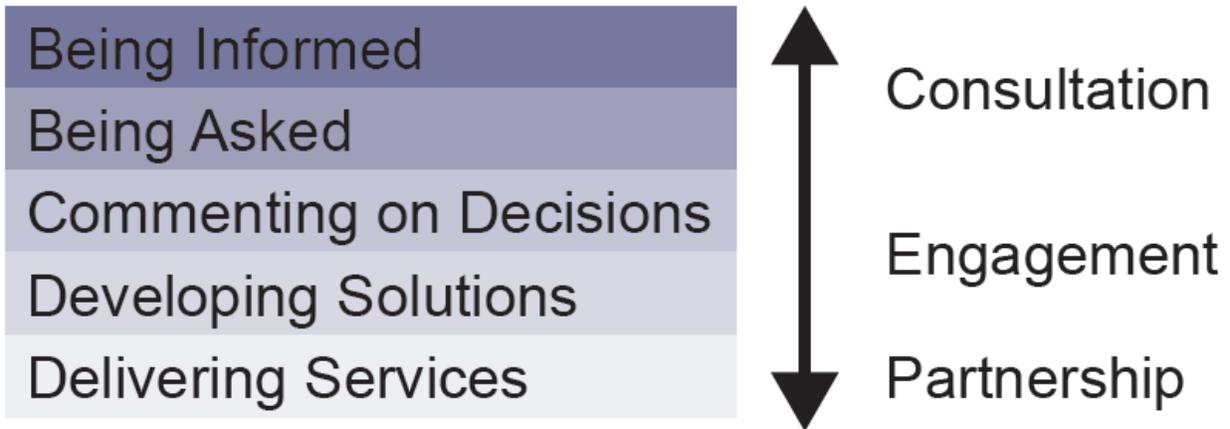
Defining Goals of Community Engagement

Before beginning a community engagement campaign, it is essential to set goals and expectations for what you hope to accomplish through the efforts.

Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with community members to address issues that impact the well-being of those groups. There are countless strategies for how to accomplish this with varying levels of engagement depending on the goals of the effort.

Community Places, a U.K.-based organization that focuses on sharing best practices for community engagement, created a continuum to describe the various levels of involvement which is represented by Figure 2.

Figure 2: Continuum of Involvement



An organization currently providing services to a community may be interested in sharing information with local residents about those services and seeking feedback on their effectiveness. This organization may be seeking a level of involvement described as *Consultation* with community members and other stakeholders. Another organization may be planning to serve the same community and seeking support from community members to develop new services. This co-creation of solutions is often called *Engagement*. A third organization may be interested in empowering the same community to provide its own solutions through *Partnership*. Under such an arrangement, community members and organizations may themselves undertake interventions to meet a defined goal, with resource support from the organization seeking to engage them.

In the case of the ASD Grant, the goal of engagement activities was to identify community members and organizations interested in co-creating solutions that provided respite and community integration opportunities to people with autism and their families. Given this, the grant team spent time at the beginning of the project asking community members “what’s working” for people with autism and their families, with the goal of leveraging those assets to address community views of “what’s not working”.



Listen and Learn

The ASD Grant team spent the first three months of the project identifying stakeholders and conducting interviews and focus groups to understand “what’s working” and “what’s not working” from varying perspectives. Focus groups and interviews served the *Plan* function of the PDAC model for Rapid-Cycle Improvement. Answers to the below questions guided the planning and implementation of this process.

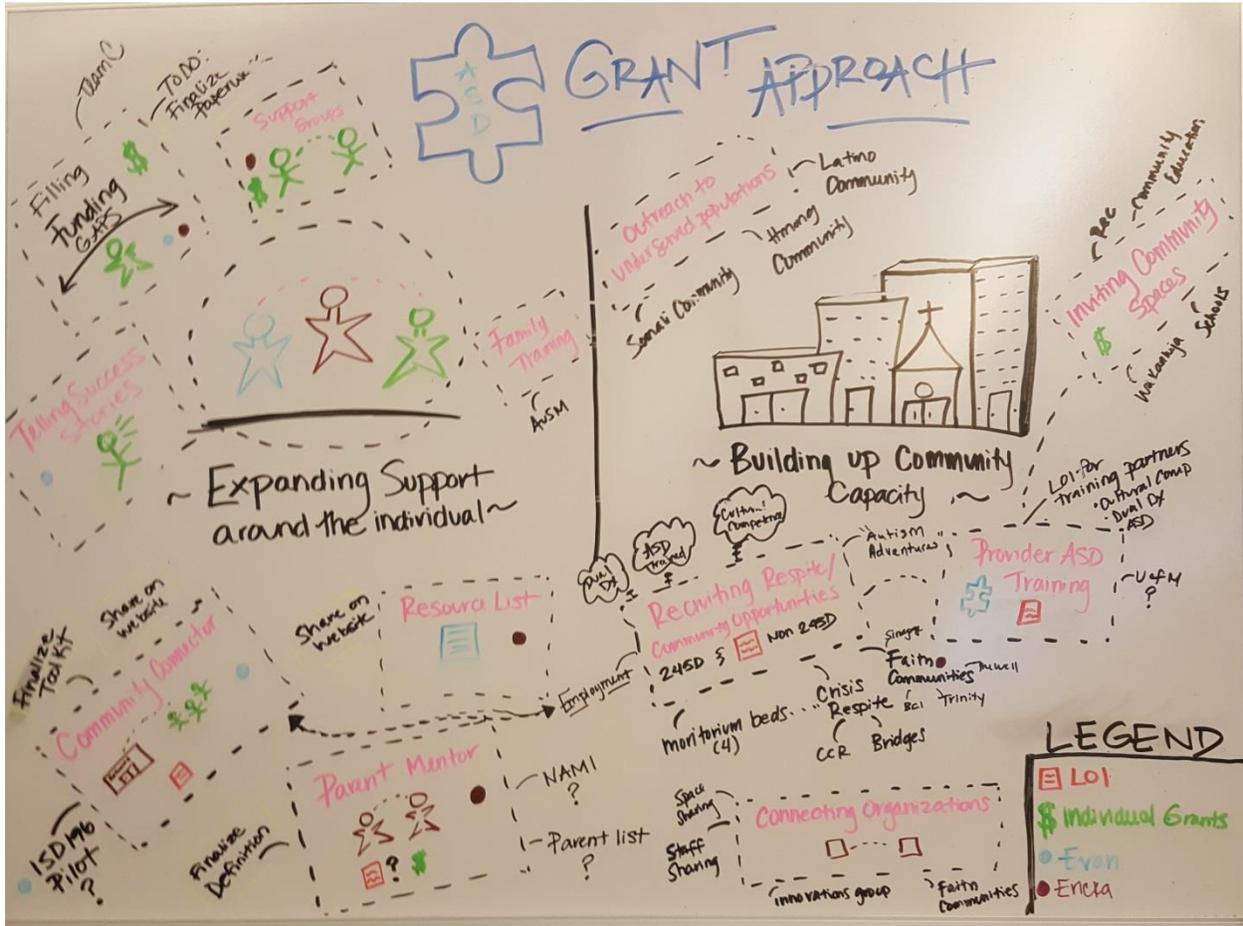
Questions to consider when starting community engagement:

- Who are the key coordinators managing the community engagement process?
- What is the purpose of community engagement?
- What is the time frame?
- Who are the current stakeholders?
- What level of participation is hoped for at each level?
- Who needs to be engaged that currently is not?
- What are some potential barriers?
- What are the intended outcomes?
- Who are the outcomes intended to effect?
- How will these outcomes be measured (evaluation)?

There are a number of ways to answer and document the answers to these questions. For the ASD Grant, the coordinators utilized a process called *mind mapping*. According to the Australian Neighborhood Houses and Centers Association (ANHCA), mind mapping is defined as the simple technique of drawing information in diagrams, rather than sentences. Diagrams take the basic format of a tree, with a single starting point in the middle that branches out, and divides again and again.

Figure 3 provides an example of a mind map used to identify goals and stakeholders.

Figure 3: Mind Map Example



The following stakeholder groups were identified, based on the ASD Grant mind mapping exercise:

- People with autism and similar support needs
- Parents and family members of people with autism
- County staff that support programs for people with autism and their families
- Staff from licensed service providers who support people with autism
- School staff and educators
- Community members and organizations with interest in autism and inclusion

Identifying stakeholders and priority

The grant team created an initial list of stakeholders representing these different groups based on contacts provided by Dakota and Ramsey County

staff. The grant team then began reaching out to these stakeholders and invited them to participate in focus groups or interview sessions to share their perspectives. In addition to contacting the initial stakeholder list directly, the ASD Grant Coordinators also created and distributed flyers to advertise focus group opportunities in the community and engaged the initial stakeholder list to spread the work to other contacts. Given the project's vision for engaging the community to co-create solutions, priority was placed on recruiting people with autism, family members and community members to participate in these sessions.

Focus groups

The grant team hosted several focus groups across Dakota and Ramsey County to listen and learn from stakeholders. Focus groups were scheduled at varying times, both during the work day and in the evenings to accommodate varying schedules. Groups were also offered at a variety of locations across Dakota and Ramsey Counties to ensure accessibility for attendees. Focus groups were marketed through flyers that were distributed through an email list serve and posted throughout the county and community. These flyers were encouraged to be shared as broadly as possible. *Figure 5* represents an example of a focus group flyer created by the ASD Grant team.

Figure 5: Focus Group Flyer Example

**Dakota County Autism Grant
Family Focus Groups**



We want to hear from you!

Dakota County has been awarded a two-year grant from DHS to focus on ensuring access to services and supports for individuals in Dakota and Ramsey Counties with autism or similar support needs. As part of the grant, Dakota County will be partnering with individuals, families, county staff and providers to understand current gaps in support and coordinating person-centered planning, provider training and service development to meet those needs. The initial step is hearing from the community through focus groups. The grant's two coordinators, Evan Henspeter and Ericka Johnson, will be facilitating the sessions.

Please join us for one of the following sessions:

- Monday, October 24th from 2-3pm**
Northern Service Center
1 Mendota Road West
West St. Paul, MN 55118
Room: 360
- Tuesday, October 25th from 6:30-7:30pm**
Minnesota Mental Health Clinic
3450 O'Leary Lane
Eagan, MN 55123
- Tuesday, November 1st from 6:30-7:30pm**
Farmington High School
20655 Flagstaff Ave.
Farmington, MN 55024
Room: 1201
Enter in the south door 16 by flagpoles
- Tuesday, November 1st from 6:30-7:30pm**
Administration Center-Hastings
1590 Highway 55
Hastings, MN 55033
Room: CR.1A



For more information or to [register for a group](#), please contact
Ericka Johnson at Ericka.Johnson@co.dakota.mn.us

Stakeholder interviews

In addition to focus groups, the grant team conducted dozens of individual stakeholder interviews to ensure interested people had an opportunity to participate in a way that worked for them. In these cases, the Grant Coordinators offered to meet at a time and location convenient for each person and asked the same, “what’s working”, “what’s not working” questions as were covered in focus groups.

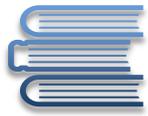
Summarizing focus groups and interviews

A total of 237 people participated in an interview or focus group. *Table 1* describes the various stakeholders engaged through these sessions.

Table 1: Focus Group and Stakeholder Interviews

Category of Participants	# of Individuals
Self-Advocate	7
Parent/Family Member	35
County Staff	71
Licensed Providers	28
Community Members	83
Education/School Staff	12
Total	237

All the interviews and focus group responses were transcribed, and transcriptions were coded and counted using Grounded Theory. According to The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Grounded Theory is a systematic approach to developing social theory by identifying patterns among data. In social research, it is often used to recognize themes by looking for specific words or phrases in data sets. In the case of the ASD Grant focus groups and interviews, when a phrase, such as “valued social roles”, was used it was given a code. Every time that phrase was repeated in other focus groups or interviews it was counted. Major themes were then identified through this process.



Advisory Committee

Following the completion of focus groups and interviews, the grant team invited interested stakeholders to an initial “kick-off meeting” to share findings and themes from the *Listen and Learn* portion of the grant and brainstorm next steps. After information sharing and brainstorming, attendees were asked to complete a questionnaire gauging their interest in on-going participation in the ASD Grant. Specifically, attendees were asked about their interest in joining an Advisory Committee, to periodically inform grant planning and activities, or a Work Group based on a specific concept brainstormed by the group.

Figure 6: Example of Committee Preference Survey

Committee Member Preference Form

Name: _____

Please check which committee you would like to join:

Advisory Committee

Commitment would include: Bimonthly meetings that will be two hours in duration with minimal work outside of meeting times.

Work Group

Specific Area of interest (if known already): _____

Commitment would include: Meeting as needed based on focus area (likely monthly or more initially) with additional work occurring outside of meeting times. Time commitment is estimated at 3 – 5 hours per month for limited period of time.

I am no longer interested in being a committee member

Please circle day(s) and time of day would work best for you to meet:

Monday (am/pm) Tuesday (am/pm) Wednesday (am/pm) Thursday (am/pm) Friday (am/pm)

Comments on meeting availability: _____

Additional questions of concerns (we will respond via email):

Based on stakeholder interest and availability, the grant team formed an Advisory Committee representing a variety of community stakeholders

(family members, service providers, community members, school staff, etc.). This committee was created with the following purpose and meeting schedule:

- Purpose: Representing a broad range of stakeholders, provide guidance to grant team on strategies for achieving goals
- Meeting Schedule: Bi-monthly, 1st Thursday of every-other month

Throughout the ASD Grant, the Advisory Committee was engaged to plan grant activities and provide feedback on specific projects within the grant. As the grant team gathered feedback related to specific partnerships and services developed through the grant, the Advisory Committee played a central role in prioritizing projects to continue, adapt or discontinue.



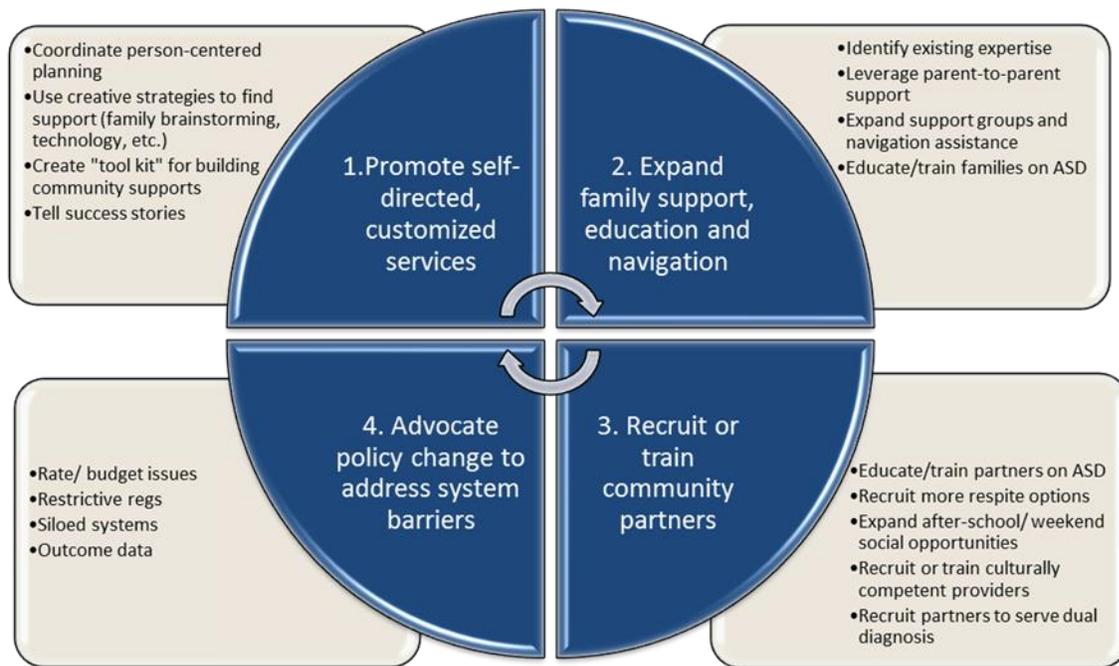
Work Groups

Four major themes emerged from the *Listen and Learn* phase of community engagement:

1. Promote self-directed, customized supports
2. Expand family support, education and navigation
3. Recruit and train community providers
4. Advocate change to address system barriers to inclusion

Based on feedback from the ASD Grant Advisory Committee, work groups were formed to address each theme and define specific actions Dakota and Ramsey County would take as part of the 2-year grant. These groups were time limited with a specific focus and met from January - April 2017. Work groups were comprised of various stakeholders (people with autism and family members, service providers, community members, etc.) and this representation was critical to ensuring grant activities were rooted in community values and driven by community voices. *Figure 7* describes each group's overarching theme (inner-ring) and goals (outer-box).

Figure 7: Work Group Visual



Outreach & Partner Discovery

Initial outreach

The various work groups developed a number of program concepts and recommended piloting them with community partners. To solicit interest from potential partners, the grant team issued a Request for Letters of Interest (LOI) seeking proposals from community organizations interested in partnering on these concepts. The LOI included three program concepts which are summarized below:

- Community Connector Services – help for individuals and families to build a network of informal, community supports (friends, family, neighbors, community associations, etc.) to maximize participation in the community.

- Community Inclusion Opportunities – events, activities or services that promote inclusion of people with autism in ordinary community spaces.
- Training for community organizations and individuals on autism or related diagnoses, cultural competence and supporting people with co-occurring challenges, such as mental health, chemical health, or physical disabilities.

Prior to issuing the LOI, the grant team and work group members conducted outreach to community organizations that had been identified through stakeholder interviews and focus groups to spread the word about the program concepts that had been developed. This included emails, phone calls, meetings, site visits, presentations, etc. with individuals and organizations for the purpose of sharing information about the grant and identifying potential partners for collaboration towards shared goals. The grant team created a custom listserv of individuals and organizations that expressed interest in potentially partnering on these program concepts and sent the LOI to this group when it was issued. The LOI was also sent out through a number of distribution lists maintained by Dakota and Ramsey County which included community organizations and service providers that had previously expressed interest in working with the counties.

Dakota and Ramsey County received 39 letters of interest from organizations interested in partnering on one or more program concepts. Of these, the grant team selected 11 organizations for contracts to partner on program pilots. These contracts and their related projects initiated the *Do* phase of PDCA.

On-going partner discovery

This solicitation was required to satisfy county policies related to competitive procurement. That being said, the grant team continued to engage with various community members and organizations to establish more informal partnerships throughout the grant cycle. These included meetings with self-advocates, parents and family members, as well as community organizations currently supporting people with autism or potentially interested in doing so. As an example of culturally specific outreach, the grant team met with several Somali community members and organizations serving the Somali community to explore collaboration opportunities to support people with

autism and their families. During this process, the team learned of many barriers Somali families face in receiving support related to ASD, including a lack of culturally competent providers, stigma in the community related to autism, housing and employment discrimination, etc. It was clear that community views on caregiver relief are complicated and that solutions must be co-created to reflect community values.

As a continuation of this engagement, the grant team formed a *Community of Practice* to support capacity building for organizations serving the Somali community in Dakota and Ramsey County. Etienne Wenger, a social learning organization, summarizes Communities of Practice (CoP) as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Group members include county staff from social services, public health, and libraries; representatives from a local mosque; Somali advocates for people with disabilities; cultural liaisons at local schools; and representatives from local health services agencies. The CoP meets every-other month in various community locations with the purpose of sharing knowledge and resources, and improving the group’s collective capacity to effectively engage Somali families.

The grant team similarly worked to engage faith communities in Dakota and Ramsey County in support of people with autism and their families. Based on meetings with faith leaders at local mosques, synagogues and churches, it was clear that many faith communities are motivated to do more for families of special needs children but are seeking guidance on how to create programs. In response, the grant team started connecting organizations with experience serving people with autism and similar support with others interested in doing so. This created a ripple-effect with organizations sharing learning and experience with others to strengthen overall community capacity.

In addition to organizations serving the Somali community, the grant team regularly engaged others providing culturally competent services. This included meeting with organizations serving the American Indian, Hmong and Latino communities to provide information on grant resources and explore potential collaboration opportunities. While not every meeting led to a formal partnership opportunity, many of these organizations acted as informal liaisons and advisors to the grant, sharing resources and informing the development of more culturally competent services and training materials.



Listen and Learn, Part 2

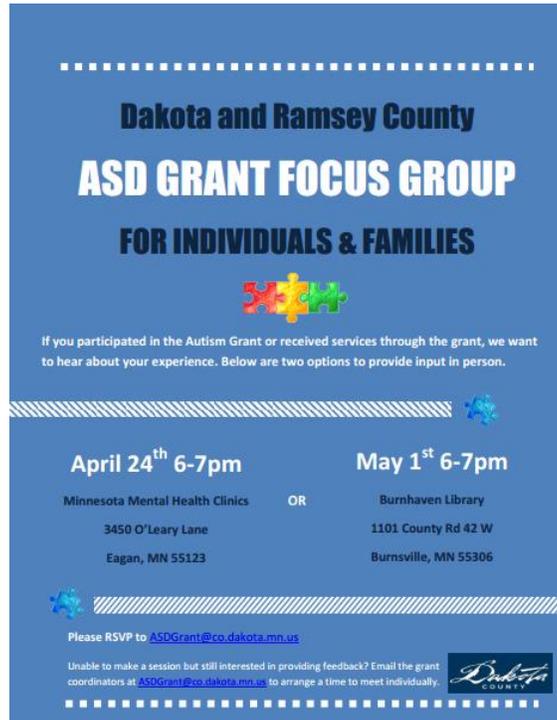
The ASD Grant team gathered regular feedback from various stakeholders who interacted with the project throughout. This included surveys completed by people who received services through the grant, evaluations from training participants and monthly reports from partner organizations on successes and lessons learned. In addition to these evaluation activities, the grant team scheduled follow-up focus groups and interviews prior to the grant's end with various stakeholder groups impacted. Similar to the initial listening sessions, these focus groups and interviews were conducted to learn "what's working" and "what's not working", but with a specific focus on grant activities and partnerships.

Three primary stakeholder groups were identified for phase two of *Listen and Learn*: people with autism and their families, organizations that were partners on the grant, and internal county staff who support people with autism. For this phase, the grant team created a more targeted list of stakeholders and sent personal invites to sessions that were scheduled at varying times and locations throughout the counties.

Focus Groups

The grant team hosted a total of five focus groups for stakeholders to provide feedback. These included two sessions for people with autism and their families, one session for partner organizations, and two sessions for county staff. In addition to personalized invites made to specific stakeholders, the ASD Grant Coordinators again created flyers to promote the focus groups in various community locations. *Figure 8* provides an example of a flyer created for these purposes.

Figure 8: Focus Group Flyer Example



Stakeholder Interviews

In addition to focus groups, the grant team again conducted a number of individual stakeholder interviews in cases when people weren't able to make a group session or preferred to provide feedback individually. These sessions were scheduled by phone or in-person, depending on the preferences of the person being interviewed. As with the focus groups, the target audience for stakeholder interviews was smaller than during the initial *Listen and Learn* phase at the beginning of the grant. This was intentional, as the grant team sought feedback from stakeholders who had specific experience with the ASD Grant and could provide feedback on project strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Summarizing focus groups and interviews

A total of 27 people participated in second round, targeted focus groups or interviews. Table 2 describes the role of stakeholders that participated.

Table 2: Focus Groups and Interviews (Part 2)

Category of Participants	# of Individuals
Parent/Family Member	8
Partner Organizations	12
County Staff	7
Total	27



Share Success Stories & Lessons Learned

The ASD Grant team was intentional about sharing successes and lessons learned and built time into the work plan to support this goal. Successes and lessons were shared via a monthly e-newsletter, interagency collaborative meetings, and presentations and conference exhibits throughout the project. Because the ASD Grant focused on innovative approaches to supporting people with autism and families, these opportunities were used to highlight creative partnerships and the power of community members to address complex social challenges when working together. They also helped deepen engagement with various grant partners by telling stories of shared success and learning.

Below are some highlights of efforts undertaken to promote grant work and new approaches:

- Documented and shared 10 unique success stories, highlighting individual creativity and innovative partnerships supporting through grant
- Created monthly e-newsletter highlighting new resources and innovative approaches: 18 newsletter editions sent to over 300 subscribers
- Shared information with over 500 people, families and professionals via community presentations at resource fairs, conferences and interagency collaborative meetings

- Formed “Innovation Group”, made up of advocates and professionals across several disciplines, which meets bi-monthly to share best practices and explore ways to collaborate in support of people with autism
- Hosted “Community Celebration” of ASD Grant to share successes and celebrate community contributions to project
- Created final report summarizing project learning and shared widely with stakeholders

Outcomes of Engagement

The community engagement efforts described in this module were intended to discover community members and organizations interested in co-creating solutions for people with autism and their families. In total, the grant team engaged more than 1,000 community members and nearly 100 community organizations as part of this discovery process. This resulted in several measurable outcomes in support of the ASD Grant:

- Established a stakeholder advisory committee – including family members, service providers and county staff – which met 10 times over the course of the grant to inform project activities
- Facilitated four, time-limited stakeholder workgroups to define specific activities to be carried out by grant team and partners
- Partnered with 10 organizations to develop new programs in support of people with autism and their families
- Collaborated with more than 30 additional community organizations to provide training, technical assistance and promotional support for programs serving people with autism
- Well exceeded targets for number of people served and community organizations trained established in original grant agreement

In addition to quantitative outcomes, this engagement effort also created an authentic dialogue between Dakota and Ramsey County and the communities they serve. In several instances, community members commented that the level of engagement was far greater than typical projects and programs overseen by county agencies. Especially related to communities of color, the ASD Grant established relationships between county staff and community organizations to address barriers to support

programs for under-served populations. For example, the grant team partnered with a Somali-led organization to provide culturally responsive assistance to Somali families seeking county social services. This partnership not only addressed immediate barriers families were experiencing in accessing services but also created lasting relationships between county staff and community members who will continue to collaborate in the future for mutual learning.

Discussion

The grant team envisioned two potential uses for this module when creating it. First, this module can serve as a resource for other projects seeking to engage the community related to some shared challenge. Though the ASD Grant specifically focused on the needs of people with autism and their families, the principles and strategies used to engage communities are broadly applicable. For example, these approaches could be applied to ending homelessness in a local community, increasing social connectedness for older adults, or addressing food insecurity in low-income communities. Specific activities should be adapted to each community and project but many of the overall concepts are universal.

Second, the grant team hopes this module demonstrates the great value community members can contribute to a project when engaged in the process. Investing in community engagement is not only the right thing to do for organizations serving the public, it is also prudent. The ASD Grant accomplished greater outcomes in a shorter period of time than expected because the community was invested in the project and its success. Without this degree of engagement, the project would not have been able to form so many unique partnerships or reach such diverse audiences. Public agencies, nonprofits and other organizations serving the public would be wise to invest in community engagement and to build time and resources into project plans to support it. Doing so will produce better outcomes for the organizations and the communities they serve.

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

-African Proverb