

Engaging Communities Is a Critical Tobacco Control Strategy

For decades, the tobacco industry has [disproportionately targeted communities of color](#) increasing rates of menthol cigarette use and tobacco-related health disparities. By prioritizing community efforts, health agencies can confront these disparities by fostering trust, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness. Funded by CDC's Office of Smoking and Health (OSH) and in partnership with The Center for Black Health & Equity (The Center), ASTHO initiated the Increasing State Menthol Capacity Learning Collaborative consisting of eight state tobacco use prevention teams each paired with a local community-based organization. The program fosters strong linkages between state commercial tobacco control programs and community-based partners to reduce menthol and flavored product use.

The Role of Community Engagement

Community-based initiatives are pivotal in tobacco control efforts, as they enable stakeholders to:

- **Understand history, context, culture, and geography.** Underserved communities possess a keen awareness of the origins of their problems and how decision-making processes affect them.
- **Embrace community voices.** “No one asked us” is the most common feeling communities most impacted by a problem share when decision-makers act without including them.
- **Build organizational capacity that sustains change,** creates credibility with decision-makers, and empowers communities to meet challenges head-on and garner support for their initiatives.

Barriers to effective community engagement include insufficient training, funding, communication, and planning, plus disorganization, under-acknowledged communities, over-committed leaders, and inability to change course.

Learning Collaborative at a Glance

Eight state health teams (IN, MN, NY, PA, RI, MI, WA, WI)—each paired with a community-facing organization—kicked off the Increasing State Menthol Capacity Learning Collaborative in January 2023 with a shared vision and plan to reduce menthol and flavored product use. The Collaborative worked to: (1) improve capacity to identify and implement strategies to prevent menthol and other flavored tobacco product use, (2) strengthen collaboration between state commercial tobacco control programs and community-based partners, (3) tailor interventions to those most affected, and (4) understand the role of policy interventions and/or systems change and culturally-appropriate cessation strategies.

ASTHO, OSH, and The Center provided peer-to-peer learning, technical assistance, and networking opportunities to help project teams draw from the group's various resources, expertise, and experiences. For example, each state team participated in five virtual, expert-led learning sessions, which provided training on SMARTIE goals, equity-centered community engagement strategies, and effective communication messages for policies that restrict or eliminate the sale of flavored tobacco products. In addition, technical assistance provided the project teams guidance on their established workplan objectives and helped them navigate community-specific challenges.

Menthol Capacity Building Strategies

Each team worked to address health inequities of their chosen target population with culturally-tailored actions in one of three strategies: (1) Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change, (2) Menthol Cessation, or (3) Counter

Marketing/Public Education. Teams focused on African Americans ([nearly two-thirds](#) of whom start by using tobacco with menthol), youth, Latinx, immigrant populations, and the LGBTQ+ community. Each team curated state-specific infographics, factsheets, webpages, and media campaigns to examine the role of policy in reducing menthol and flavored tobacco product use. Others engaged legislators or held educational events.

Key Takeaways and Next Steps

1. **Community Engagement and the Menthol Landscape:** Despite challenges, [preemption](#) should not stop community engagement work. While state or federal laws and regulations may change, the communities most impacted—and their voices, experiences, and advocacy efforts—remain and are essential in driving meaningful change. Ongoing awareness of the [disproportionate impact](#) of menthol and other flavored tobacco products on marginalized communities underscore a continuous need for community engagement and policies that prioritize health equity.
2. **Partnering for Influence and Advocacy:** Community engagement fosters awareness of the unique challenges that marginalized populations face, ensuring that initiatives are tailored accordingly. In the face of preemption and other regulatory challenges, [community voices](#) are critical for national change.
3. **Mobilizing Support through Collaboration:** Partnerships between state agencies and local organizations allow capacity building and resource sharing. Such partnerships help mobilize broader support with both constituents and legislators, share best practices/lessons learned, and collectively address challenges.
4. **Funding Local Initiatives:** Effective community engagement often requires financial resources. Examples include facilitating quality meetings as needed, developing educational tools for community dissemination, using paid and social media, and obtaining individuals to implement key activities (e.g., employees or subject matter experts).

The collaborative's participants further encourage:

- **Sustaining and strengthening partnerships** with community-based organizations, state health agencies, and national partners to leverage stakeholder expertise and insights.
- **Investing in ongoing capacity building efforts** to equip communities with the knowledge, skills, and [resources](#) to address tobacco-related challenges effectively (e.g., training, [resource sharing](#), offering technical assistance, and funding community-led initiatives).
- **Engaging with policymakers, community leaders, and others** to raise awareness about the negative impact of menthol and other tobacco products. Advocate for evidence-based policies (e.g., [e-cigarette flavor restriction](#)) at the local and state level to inform national discussion.
- **Sharing lessons learned**—both successes and challenges—with others.

Special thanks to the following jurisdictions and organizations for their participation in the learning collaborative:

- *Indiana / Minority Health Coalition of Madison County*
- *Minnesota / NorthPoint Health and Wellness*
- *New York / Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center*
- *Pennsylvania / Latino Connection*
- *Rhode Island / Oasis International*
- *Michigan / Urban League of West Michigan*
- *Washington / Center for Multicultural Health*
- *Wisconsin / Jump at the Sun*