# BUILDING BLOCKS OF TRUST





CREATING AUTHENTIC AND EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND WATER UTILITIES

To achieve equitable and sustainable water systems and increased public investment in water infrastructure, strong and authentic relationships between local community groups and water utilities, built on trust are critical. River Network and the WaterNow Alliance went to community organizations and water utilities around the country who have formed successful partnerships to learn what it takes. In Building Blocks of Trust: Creating Authentic and Equitable Relationships Between Community Organizations and Water Utilities, we share what we learned from these successful partnerships and hope that you can use their lessons learned to catalyze even more of these vital partnerships for healthier rivers and communities.



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR PRIORITIZING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

### WATER

+ Make
information
easily
accessible
(e.g., dedicated
websites and
direct outreach)

## s + Create a culture

- of transparency
  that facilitates open
  conversations

  Be upfront about your goals and
- concerns and share them intentionally
- + Be realistic about organizational capacity to avoid overpromising
- + Consider working with a 3rd party facilitator to open up dialogue
  - + Get out ahead of bad news

# COMMUNITY GROUPS

and agenda

- Bring
  additional
  partners in with
  you who can
  represent different
  parts of the
  community
- + Model
  party transparency and
  accountability
  by being
  transparent
  about goals

# WATER UTILITIES

- + Consider whether fresh faces and/or leadership change can help move past previous missteps
- + Acknowledge that trust is low and is worth rebuilding
- Identify ways to bring the utility and community to a shared table for constructive conversations including use of a 3rd party facilitator
- Build skills and use approaches that support transparency, consensus building and center the practice of listening to understand each other's perspectives

# COMMUNITY GROUPS

Be openminded about engaging with a utility making authentic efforts to rebuild trust



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR RESTORING COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE

#### WATER UTILITIES

- Water utilities provide opportunities to learn more about utility operations (e.g. provide tours of utility facilities and hold utility open houses)
- + Create a citizens' academy to educate community members on how the utility works
- + Include
  community
  members on utility
  boards and water
  utility staff on
  nonprofit boards
  and advisory
  committees

#### **COMMUNITY GROUPS**

- + Community groups take time to learn about the water utility and its operations
- + Be empathetic to challenges facing utilities
- + Conduct outreach to utilities in ways that recognize they are juggling lots of competing interests



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR DEEPENING COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING OF UTILITY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR HIGHLIGHTING SHARED GOALS TO LEVERAGE MUTUAL BENEFITS

# WATER UTILITIES

+ Consider
utility goals
and objectives
broadly to
identify ways
the utility could
benefit from
working with
community
organizations

- + Identify shared outcomes between utility and community group
- + Find ways the utility and community group can contribute to achieving those shared goals by identifying, leveraging and contributing respective expertise and experience
  - + Look for funding, strategies, or other opportunities available because of this mutually beneficial relationship that might not be available otherwise

# COMMUNITY GROUPS

+ Assess
community
goals and
identify how
working with
the water utility
can be mutually
beneficial

#### WATER JTILITIES

- promote existing opportunities for community members to inform utility decision making processes
  - + Establish communitybased advisory councils

#### COMMUNITY GROUPS

- + Create mechanisms
  where they don't exist and be
  clear about their purpose, for
  example supporting or engaging in
  Community-Led Research
- + Be creative and inclusive in engagement approaches to allow for a variety of schedules and styles to facilitate engagement by underrepresented community members
- Identify
  and support
  community
  members
  interested in
  serving on utility
  boards and
  committees



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR INCLUDING THE COMMUNITY AS PART OF UTILITY DECISION MAKING

#### WATER UTILITY

- + Identify the ways in which the utility does—or could—provide broad value to the community and integrate that into operating documents
- + Evaluate how utility internal institutional structures can be updated to foster flexibility and increased community engagement and integrate that into job descriptions and competencies
  - Institutionalize communitycentered decision making processes
    - + Designate specific utility staff to serve as community liaisons with an eye toward making a good fit

#### **COMMUNITY GROUPS**

+ Work together

to identify how

community

voices, values and

information can

be integrated into

utility processes

- + Advocate and offer support for utilities movement in this direction
  - + Explore ways to amplify the benefits of community-oriented actions local utilities are taking



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ADOPTING A COMMUNITY-FACING ORIENTATION



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CULTIVATING LONG-TERM COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS WITH INTENTION

# WATER UTILITIES

+ Create avenues
to elevate
community
members as
leaders on utility
supported efforts
intended to meet
community needs

# + Attend community and utility events to create opportunities for personal connection

- + Extend individual personal relationships to others within the community group or utility
- + Find ways for open, direct formal and informal communication and use those channels regularly
  - + Listen to understand

#### COMMUNITY GROUPS

+ Include water utilities in regular communications and attend their meetings

#### WATER UTILITIES

- Seek ways
  to compensate
  community groups
  for their work
  via collaborative
  funding
  applications or
  direct fee for
  service
- Identify ways to formalize personal relationships to deepen and solidify the partnership
- + Build flexibility into formalized relationships to allow for evaluation, evolution and expansion
- + Keep formalities to a minimum to achieve desired outcomes while balancing administrative burdens

#### COMMUNITY GROUPS

Establish
clear metrics,
data and lessons
learned to share
with utility
partners to inform
project work



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BUILDING FROM PERSONAL TO MORE FORMALIZED RELATIONSHIPS