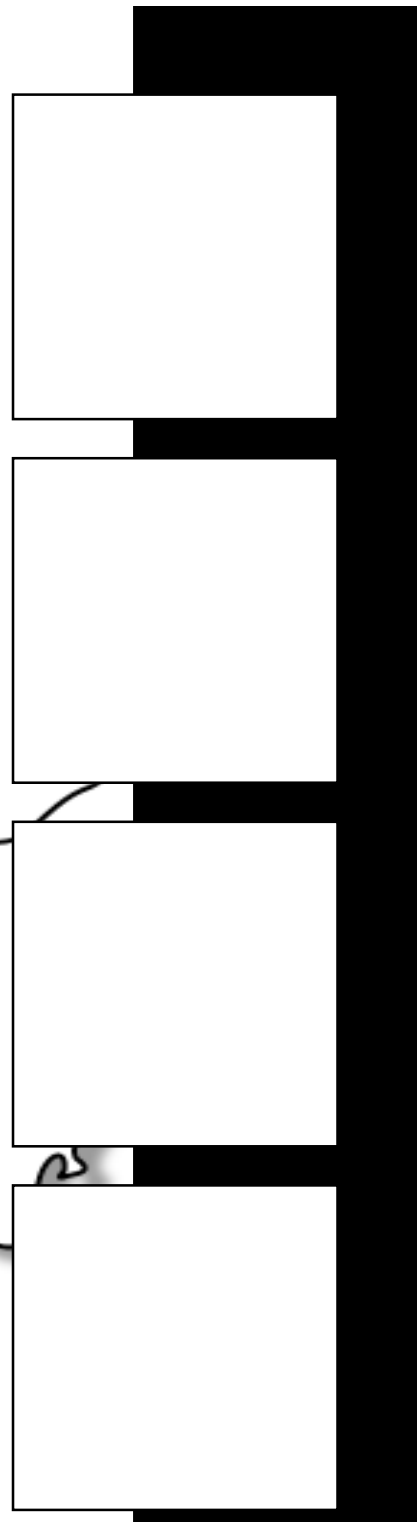




# **A Review of Community Advisory Groups in Region 5: Lessons Learned**



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## **Lessons Learned**

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## **Introduction**

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is committed to early, direct, and meaningful public involvement in the Superfund process. One of the ways communities are participating in cleanup decisions at hazardous waste sites around the country is through Community Advisory Groups (CAGs). A Community Advisory Group is comprised up of representatives of diverse community interests and provides a public forum that allows people in the community to express their views and actively participate in the decision-making process at Superfund and other hazardous waste sites.

As part of its commitment to promoting community involvement at hazardous waste sites, EPA Region 5 conducted an informal review and evaluation of its support to Community Advisory Groups. This document summarizes lessons learned in the course of this review.

Information was gathered via interviews with leaders of six selected Community Advisory Groups in order to learn more about how they are working and to determine what EPA can do to better support these groups. Interviewees were asked a series of questions that allowed them to share their insights and experiences forming and operating a Community Advisory Group and to suggest ways EPA can assist local groups in their efforts.

## Participants

Leaders of the following Community Advisory Groups were interviewed between June 30 and August 31, 1998:

! **The Cam-Or Community Advisory Group** was formed in May 1997 by residents concerned about the spread of ground-water contamination from the Cam-Or site in Westville, Indiana. The site was remediated under the RCRA program during the 1980s, but subsequent testing showed that some contamination remained, and that some drinking water from wells was contaminated. The group's chairperson was interviewed for the evaluation.

! **The DePue Superfund Citizens Advisory Committee** is the Community Advisory Group for the New Jersey Zinc/Mobil Chemical Site in DePue, Illinois. The Citizens Advisory Committee was formed in June 1997 by citizens interested in cleanup and restoration of the site, and clarifying and communicating potential health concerns to Village of DePue residents. The group's chairperson provided information for the evaluation.

! **The Dutch Boy Site Community Advisory Group** was formed in 1997 by residents of two neighborhoods near the Dutch Boy/International Harvester site in Chicago. The CAG has two co-chairs, who represent homeowners' associations for separate, affected neighborhoods on either side of the site. Telephone interviews were conducted with the CAG's co-chairs and another community leader who serves on the group.

! **The Geneva City Dump/True Temper Sports Site Community Advisory Group** was formed approximately two and one-half years ago by residents living near two hazardous waste sites in Geneva, Ohio: the Geneva City Dump site, a municipal landfill; and the True Temper Sports site, a former industrial site used primarily for the production of tools and sports equipment. Remediation of the True Temper Sports Site was nearing completion at the time of the interview, but plans for cleanup of the Geneva City Dump Site still were not finalized. The CAG chairperson and the group's co-founder discussed their group's activities during a June 30, 1998 meeting at EPA's offices in Arlington, Virginia.

**! The North Bronson Industrial Site Community Advisory Group** was formed in the autumn of 1996 to address community concerns about cleanup of the North Bronson Industrial Site in Bronson, Michigan. The community is concerned about the potential economic effects of the cleanup on Bronson and its small business community. There are concerns because the city is a potentially responsible party (PRP), as are three of the community's industrial businesses. The state of Michigan had the lead for the site during the RI/FS stage, and, at the time of the interview, a Record of Decision (ROD) had recently been approved. The CAG chairman was interviewed by telephone for the evaluation.

**! The Pine River Task Force** is the Community Advisory Group for the Velsicol Chemical site in St. Louis, Michigan. Velsicol was an early Superfund site that already had been remediated in the early 1980s. The Community Advisory Group was formed in January 1998 following a somewhat contentious October 1997 public meeting attended by about 150 residents, at which EPA talked about residual river contamination and further cleanup plans at the Velsicol site. The chairman of the task force was interviewed by telephone for this evaluation.

## **Lessons Learned**

### ***CAG Formation***

**! EPA's most important and useful role in support of these Region 5 Community Advisory Groups has been that of motivator — recognizing when formation of a CAG is appropriate, encouraging the community to take the necessary steps, supporting the group's efforts, and providing necessary information and resources.**

In most cases, EPA introduced the Community Advisory Group concept and provided each community with organizational information and administrative assistance for forming a Community Advisory Group, but left it up to the community to organize itself. None of the Community Advisory Group leaders interviewed felt EPA overstepped its bounds or tried to unduly influence whether or how a community should form a group. At the Dutch Boy/International Harvester site, community advisory

group leaders applauded EPA's proactive role in introducing affected community groups to each other and asking the community to form a group. Even those CAG leaders who indicated they and other members of their group were somewhat distrustful of the federal government said EPA assistance was helpful.

**! Organizational information provided by EPA has been well-received and widely used.**

Virtually all of the CAG leaders interviewed said they read and used many of the organizational materials provided to them by EPA. They said the Community Advisory Group Guidance document, fact sheets, and the *Community Advisory Group Toolkit* all were helpful. Most said that they adapted the sample mission statements and other organizational materials EPA provided to structure their respective groups.

One CAG leader said the *Toolkit* made forming a group seem easy by outlining a process for structuring a group and provided many necessary tools and materials. In fact, most Community Advisory Group leaders said they liked the *Community Advisory Group Toolkit*. CAGs that received a copy of the draft *Toolkit* during their organizational phase said they made good use of the materials. Groups that already were well-established generally did not, but most also commented that they wished the *Toolkit* had been available to them when their CAGs were forming. The chair of the DePue Citizens Advisory Committee said his group used the *Community Advisory Group Toolkit* and other materials provided to them, but he thought some of the organizational materials were targeted to groups in larger, more urban communities.

**! These Region 5 communities clearly understood that a Community Advisory Group should be broadly representative of the community. CAGs in areas with environmental justice populations recognize the continuing importance of making special efforts to conduct outreach to these groups.**

The DePue Superfund Community Advisory Committee identified diversified membership as a goal at its first meeting, and the Community Involvement Coordinator from Illinois EPA (which has the lead for the

site) secured translations and helped with active outreach to the area's growing Mexican-American population. The group now has one Mexican-American member.

The chairman of the Pine River Task Force, encouraged the group to focus on outreach to environmental justice groups and to include all segments of the community. He said including all groups can strengthen a Community Advisory Group, even though outreach sometimes can seem burdensome at first. The task force's membership includes a representative of a nearby Indian reservation, and the group has made special efforts to bring site-related information to Hispanic migrant workers.

At the Dutch Boy site, CAG leaders said that almost everyone in the affected neighborhoods is African-American. As a result, they saw no need to conduct outreach for environmental justice purposes. They did, however, make efforts to ensure that the CAG includes a broad cross-section of community residents and grassroots organizations.

At the Geneva/True Temper site, the community does not have a significant environmental justice population, but the CAG did make some effort to involve a small, somewhat transient Hispanic population, which CAG leaders said was not directly affected by the site.

**! Taking time to build trust has been important.**

The community leaders recognized the importance of building mutual trust among themselves before tackling problems. The chairman of the Cam-Or CAG said that he would advise other communities interested in forming a Community Advisory Group to start off slowly, in order to give members a chance to get acquainted and build trust before formalizing the group's structure. He said it was important to members of the Cam-Or CAG that no EPA representatives were invited to attend initial meetings.

At the Dutch Boy site, leaders also emphasized the importance of building trust among groups. They said the key was to focus on common interests, but only after acknowledging that each group has its own agenda and interests.



**! Encouraging participation by non-experts has been key.**

The chairman of the Pine River Task Force emphasized the need to consciously encourage participation by members of the group and community residents who are not experts, rather than letting leaders and experts dominate the group. He said the experience has helped him understand the need to run meetings in a way that empowers all community members.

***CAG Operations***

**! Region 5 Community Advisory Groups have received technical assistance from a variety of sources, but not all communities have been able to obtain it.**

The Pine River Task Force at the Velsicol site, is in the process of applying for an EPA Technical Assistance Grant (TAG). Community Advisory Groups at the Geneva/True Temper Sports Site and the Dutch Boy/International Harvester sites received technical assistance through EPA's Technical Outreach Services to Communities (TOSC) program. The chairmen of the Community Advisory Groups at the North Bronson Industrial Site and the DePue site both said their group's need for technical advice was met by the state, and they saw no need to seek further technical assistance from EPA.

The chairman of the Cam-Or Community Advisory Group, however, indicated that the group has not received adequate technical information or advice. He said the group probably cannot qualify for an EPA Technical Assistance Grant under existing TAG program guidelines prohibiting public officials from serving as officers and requiring the group to provide matching funds.

**! Communities have been satisfied with technical assistance provided through EPA's TOSC program, but not with all TOSC contractors.**

Co-chairs of the Dutch Boy Site Community Advisory Group said assistance provided through EPA's TOSC program has been invaluable, and said the group has a good rapport with their TOSC representative. Leaders of the Geneva/True Temper CAG said TOSC support has been extremely useful to the group, but they perceived their initial TOSC contact to be biased and opinionated. They subsequently contacted the TOSC representative at another university, who provided technical advice, and also advised the group on the cleanup process and how to work effectively with various stakeholders.

**! Community Advisory Group leaders have been satisfied with the types and amounts of administrative assistance EPA provided to their groups.**

The types and amount of administrative support EPA provided to the six CAGs under review varied significantly from group to group. Some groups received significant amounts of administrative support, while others declined the Agency's offer to help in the interest of maintaining their group's independence. EPA provided a range of support services—including organizing meetings, maintaining mailing lists, duplicating documents, preparing and distributing information and announcements, and keeping meeting minutes. Providing mailing services and keeping meeting minutes were the services CAG leaders said were most valuable to them.

Although CAG leaders said EPA's administrative assistance to them was extremely helpful, they agreed that EPA's encouragement and day-to-day accessibility was the most important form of assistance the Agency provided to them.

When asked what other forms of support they would like EPA to provide, no one interviewed indicated that they needed monetary support from EPA to support the group's operations.

## ***Overall Community Advisory Group Effectiveness***

**! The Community Advisory Groups at these Region 5 sites have been an effective way of getting everyone with an interest in site decisions to talk with each other.**

All those interviewed agreed that having a Community Advisory Group has been beneficial. At the Dutch Boy/International Harvester site, EPA introduced affected community groups to each other. Once the two homeowners associations near the site got to know and trust each other, they not only worked together on site issues, but also have begun addressing other common concerns.

The chairman of the Cam-Or Community Advisory Group said the group has given the community a forum for airing complaints and concerns about the cleanup. He noted that people who never would have spoken up at an EPA meeting have voiced their opinions at CAG meetings.

**! Community Advisory Groups have allowed residents at these Region 5 sites to be much better informed about site issues and often have increased the community's voice in the hazardous waste site decision-making process.**

Community Advisory Group leaders from all six sites agreed that formation of their groups has benefitted the community as a whole by allowing citizens to be better informed about site issues and more involved in site-related activities and decisions. CAG leaders at the Geneva/True Temper site reported that the group has had a major impact on the cleanup of the True Temper Sports site, and cited the CAG's success in expanding the scope of the original cleanup plan to include removal of contaminated sludge from a lagoon. They said EPA listened and responded to community concerns by doubling the size of the cleanup and incorporating citizen comments into the work plan. The chairman of the Pine River Task Force also reported that the CAG had influenced cleanup plans for the Velsicol site.

The chair of the Cam-Or CAG said the community never was asked for input before the CAG was established and now has much more influence over site decisions than in the past. He said he is sure that the Community Advisory Group is responsible for a significant increase in activity at the site, after ten years of inaction.

The Community Advisory Group at the North Bronson Industrial Site has been able to provide input directly to the decision-maker, the site project manager from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). The CAG chairman said the group has been satisfied with the decisions that were made in the ROD for the site.

The chairman of the DePue CAG said he thinks the community is gaining trust and has a greater voice in the decision-making process because of the Community Advisory Group.

**! Formation of a Community Advisory Group has improved the relationship between EPA and these Region 5 communities, even where residents generally distrust the federal government.**

All nine Community Advisory Group leaders interviewed agreed that formation of the CAG had improved the relationship between the community and EPA. One CAG leader noted that having a relationship with EPA representatives through the CAG helped “put a face” on the Agency. At the Dutch Boy site, for example, CAG leaders explained that early meetings were confrontational. In fact, meetings often still are contentious, but CAG leaders said a partnership is beginning to form.

The community at the Geneva/True Temper site had an excellent, non-adversarial relationship with EPA from the beginning. Leaders of the Community Advisory Group said that early trust has continued to grow as a result of the formation of the group.

CAG leaders had no complaints about EPA's support to their Community Advisory Groups. They reported that Community Involvement Coordinators listened to their concerns and were responsive to their needs. One CAG leader said it was good to know that there was someone he could call at EPA who always returned calls promptly and could be relied upon to get timely answers to questions that arise. Another stressed the importance of having a Community Involvement Coordinator who could answer technical questions about site issues. Some did express frustration. The leader of one CAG, who was frustrated with delays in getting technical information from the Agency, said formation of the CAG nonetheless helped re-establish a relationship between the community and EPA. He reported that the relationship has improved tremendously over the past two years.

**! High turnover in EPA regional staff, especially among RPMs and Community Involvement Coordinators, has been a concern for Region 5 Community Advisory Groups.**

It was not unusual to hear that a CAG had worked with several EPA Community Involvement Coordinators (CICs) or RPMs in a relatively short period of time. Several CAG leaders expressed concern about frequent changes in EPA staff, which can make it difficult to maintain close ongoing relationships necessary to build trust and encourage cooperation.

**! Some Region 5 Community Advisory Groups have been catalysts for community participation in environmental concerns that go beyond site-related issues.**

Leaders of the Geneva/True Temper CAG said the group is interested in continuing its efforts even after cleanup is completed and promoting a “holistic” approach to other environmental and land-use issues. The Pine River Task Force is looking at a variety of environmental concerns, and leaders of the Dutch Boy Site Community Advisory Group now meet regularly to discuss issues of common concern to residents of the two nearby neighborhoods represented on the group.