Evaluating Community Involvement Activities

Overview

Evaluation is a key component of an effective community involvement program. Without concrete feedback, it can be difficult for a Superfund site team to know whether their *community involvement plan* (CIP) or activities are working as anticipated. For this reason, it can be useful to solicit feedback and gather information that will help the site team evaluate how well each approach or activity is meeting its intended objective.

Why This Is Important

This activity is important because evaluating community involvement efforts can help the site team improve outreach. Evaluation results can be used to adjust specific activities or the overall community involvement approach, if necessary. Even informal feedback can be used to make mid-course corrections and to address issues or shortcomings as they arise. The site team will gain a better understanding of what works or does not work in each community.

Asking for feedback and acting on the results, when appropriate, demonstrates that the site team is genuinely interested in what the community thinks. By taking actions based on community feedback, the site team can demonstrate its willingness to listen to and work with the community to achieve a better cleanup and enhance *reuse and redevelopment planning*.

Implementation

Evaluating community involvement efforts calls for determining whether individual activities or the overall community involvement approach is meeting intended goals. Is community involvement meeting intended objectives? Are you reaching the intended target audience? Are members of the community acquiring the knowledge or taking the actions that you intended to encourage?

Part of this effort should be to identify how to evaluate effectiveness by developing measures of success;

*This and all tools in the Community Involvement Toolkit should be used in conjunction with the **Community Involvement Handbook**, which provides guidance to EPA staff on how EPA typically plans and implements community involvement activities at Superfund sites.*

identifying, collecting, and analyzing measurement data; and implementing corrective actions based on the feedback received.

Evaluation does not have to be complicated or resource intensive. Developing measures of success can be as simple as asking for feedback on a specific activity or on the overall CIP. Feedback can be gathered in a variety of ways, including via feedback cards, written surveys, *community interviews*, or focus groups. Sometimes, more sophisticated, formal evaluations can help provide new perspectives. The information gleaned from evaluating feedback can be used to improve processes and can lead to better decision-making and increased public satisfaction.

How to Use

Informal feedback may be obtained through conversations after a community meeting or via emails or phone calls from community members regarding specific or ongoing outreach efforts. Be sure to keep a record of significant conversations and comments, as appropriate.

More formal evaluations are conducted through surveys, evaluation forms, or interviews. Completing a survey is one way that members of the community can convey to EPA how well the Agency is addressing their concerns about the cleanup and how successful the Agency's efforts are in enabling them to participate in the site decision-making process.

The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) of 1980 (44 USC §3501 et seq.) applies whenever identical information is collected from 10 or more public

respondents. To meet the need for evaluating community involvement at Superfund sites, the Office of Management and Budget approved a Community Involvement Customer Satisfaction Survey that EPA developed. (The latest approved survey is included as an appendix to the *Community Involvement Handbook*.) Site teams can use this survey to gather feedback on Superfund community involvement from community members, while complying with the PRA.

The Community Involvement Customer Satisfaction Survey is a comprehensive survey protocol with sections requesting feedback on (1) overall EPA community involvement efforts, (2) EPA efforts at keeping communities informed, (3) public meetings, (4) the relocation process, (5) institutional controls, (6) technical assistance, and (7) other activities, such as reuse and redevelopment planning. This survey is not intended to be given in its entirety. Community involvement coordinators (CIC) and site teams can use the questions in the Customer Satisfaction Survey to prepare their own customized surveys. They can ask community members to complete a survey on paper or online, using commercially available software approved for use by EPA, such as Survey Monkey. A few questions from the survey can be included on a simple postcard feedback form that is distributed to community members and collected when completed.

Feedback can be used to make immediate changes to community involvement activities as issues arise. Responses by community members to customized surveys using questions from the Community Involvement Satisfaction Survey can help the site team improve individual activities or its overall community involvement approach.

When to Use

It is always important to listen to feedback from community members and to use this information to continuously improve community involvement efforts. Conducting a survey can be useful at almost any time, but it may be most appropriate to do so at important milestones in the Superfund cleanup process, particularly after periods of intensified community involvement activity. It also may be a good idea to ask the community for feedback during periods of relatively low community involvement activity, when there are few site activities. Doing so may help reveal unmet community needs that might have bearing on current or future site activities. Another time to seek feedback is when

you are uncertain about how well your community involvement approach is working and it would be helpful to have more information to guide ongoing or future efforts.

Plan ahead if you choose to use a survey. It usually takes about a month to prepare and conduct a survey. Conduct your survey at a time when you believe most people will be paying attention and are likely to complete a survey (e.g., it probably isn't a good idea to distribute a survey over a holiday period or during peak summer vacation time). To obtain a good response rate, publicize the effort in advance and continue outreach to encourage people to respond throughout the survey period. It also may be useful to enlist local community groups or municipality staff to help publicize the effort and encourage members of the community to respond. The results of a survey or other forms of feedback can be used at any time to make appropriate adjustments to the way community involvement is conducted during the remainder of the cleanup.

Tips

- Informal evaluations can be conducted easily throughout the Superfund process via conversations and normal interactions with community members.
- Before conducting any evaluation activity, consider how you plan to use the feedback and design your questions or feedback mechanisms to collect the information you will need.
- To evaluate an individual activity or your overall community involvement approach, the questions you ask should be tied to the specific objectives of the community involvement activity you are addressing.
- Consider conducting an evaluation whenever you update or revise the community involvement plan for a site. The results of the evaluation can provide useful insights that can be used to improve the community involvement approach going forward. There is no standard rule about when to update or completely revise the CIP. Consult the Community Involvement Plan tool for more information.
- Consider including the results of your evaluation as an addendum to your CIP. It is a good way to show the community that you seek and value their feedback. In addition, the information may be useful when a new CIC or project team assumes responsibility at the site. The CIP and evaluation will provide useful information about how to approach community involvement at the site going forward.