

# Fostering Community Empowerment:

## A Prosecutor's Blueprint for Inclusive Community Engagement

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Over the span of two years, the Charles and Lynn Shusterman Family Philanthropies generously supported a diverse array of community events aimed at fostering dialogue and engagement regarding prosecution. This initiative encompassed a spectrum of activities, ranging from dynamic virtual town halls to intimate, in-person gatherings held at local landmarks of significance. Notably, the philanthropic efforts extended to forging partnerships with two Maryland Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Morgan State University and Bowie State University.

The collaborative sessions with these HBCUs brought together a rich tapestry of participants, including faculty members, staff, and the student body, many of whom commute from surrounding communities. It became evident through these interactions that a substantial number of attendees had either directly experienced or knew someone closely affected by instances of crime within their communities. Some individuals shared their personal journeys, recounting moments where they found themselves entangled within the criminal justice system, whether as victims or as individuals facing charges.

The discussions that ensued during these sessions not only illuminated the pressing issues faced by these communities but also yielded valuable insights and recommendations. Central to the listening sessions were recurring themes concerning the transparency and accessibility of the criminal justice system. Participants expressed a desire for clarity regarding the procedural aspects of case filing, as well as greater visibility of elected prosecutors within their communities. It became apparent that there existed many misconceptions regarding the roles and responsibilities within the criminal justice system, underscoring the importance of enhanced public education and outreach.

Reflecting on the essence of justice, a student from Bowie State University stated it best: “Justice, by its very nature, is transparent.” This declaration encapsulates the collective goal of fairness, accountability, and inclusivity within our communities—a guiding principle that continues to inform and inspire our ongoing endeavors with prosecutors in community engagement and advocacy for meaningful change in our criminal justice system.



## Who is This For?

This guide is primarily developed to support local prosecutors in proactively engaging their communities. It can also be helpful for community organizations and advocates as they seek to improve our system of justice.

## Why Engage?

The handling of high-profile police shootings by prosecutors in recent years raises questions about transparency; new reports detailing racial disparities at every level of the criminal justice system bolster what many in the community have been saying for decades. With this new interest, some progress has been made in studying the scope of the problem, and training on implicit bias. However, the community--whom the prosecutors serve--has been left out of the conversation about solving these problems while being forced to live with the outcomes. On issues of community safety, police accountability, bail reform, diversion, decriminalization, and racial/ethnic disparities, among others, communities have the right to be at the table during policy discussions.

Community engagement is a vital public safety strategy. Without robust community engagement, residents may continue to harbor a distrust towards the system. This then manifests in the underreporting of crimes (such as hate crimes), and cases being dismissed or lost at trial due to lack of victim/witness cooperation. Studies [show](#) that engaging with communities reduces violent crime; as such, a more proactive approach is needed by prosecutor's offices to ensure community voices are heard. Meaningful community engagement can hold the key to addressing this problem.

## Who is the Community?

A community is a group of people with similar experiences, values, or interests. This includes, among other examples, sharing a personal identity (race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation), geographical area (street, neighborhood, town), virtual space (social media group), and/or life story (survivor of crime, justice impacted). As you think about communities in your

jurisdiction, remember they do not all have equal representation and power.

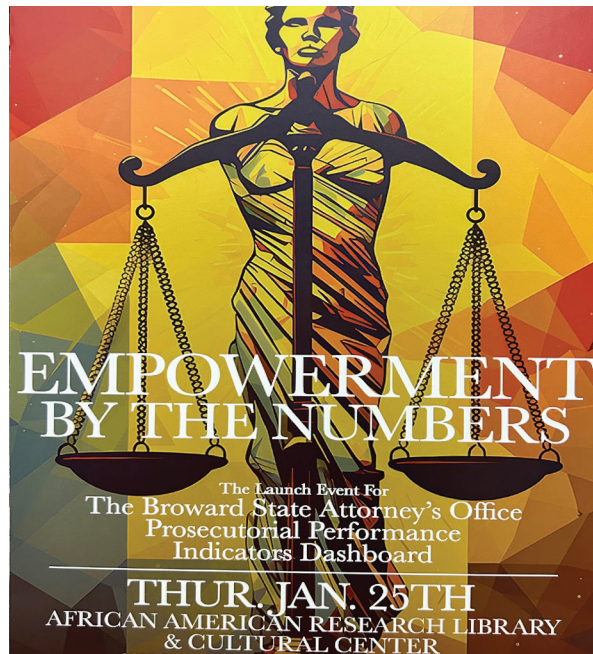
## What is Community Engagement in Prosecution?

Community engagement in prosecution is a set of trust-building, resident empowering, and insight-gathering activities that help improve prosecutorial practices to promote community health and well-being. There are different levels of community engagement, from simply

being present at a town hall meeting, to having a well-resourced community advisory board that guides prosecutorial policy.

Prosecutors should host as well as attend events large and small, actively listen to the residents, and take action alongside members of the community to address concerns. Some concerns may be outside of the realm of a prosecutor, but using the proverbial "bully pulpit" to highlight issues, push for legislation, or additional resources will help make safer communities along with building trust.

Effective community engagement is possible only through sustained relationships, moving beyond meeting with community members to "check the box", or meeting solely during election season. Deepening these relationships allows residents to feel valued and, most importantly, empowered.



## *Community Engagement > Community Prosecution?*

Community prosecution emerged in the 1990s in the wake of the drug crisis. Borrowing from the tenets of community policing, it entails working with community groups to identify local problems and prevent crime. The focus is more on crime reduction and quality of life, and less on fairness and justice. Community prosecution tends to target problems by geographical areas.

Community engagement focuses equally on safety and fairness by empowering communities through sustained partnerships with the prosecutor's office. The feedback is used to inform policy changes to promote greater transparency and reduce disparities. Community engagement considers groups of people united by neighborhood but also by identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation) or experience.

### Where is Your Office on the Spectrum?

Culture of engagement	Information and power exchange	Involvement of marginalized communities	Accessibility for community members	Modes of community engagement	Data and measurement of community engagement
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This blueprint will explore several key areas for successful engagement, including having a culture of engagement, information and power exchange, accessibility for community members, modes of engagement, and data/measurement. Activities are listed on a spectrum, with the aspirational model in the final column. No office reaches the aspirational level overnight, so prosecutors are encouraged to start the process however they can, and build accordingly. We strongly encourage starting with listening sessions to hear about the concerns of the community first, and build the best plan based on what has been learned.

	Introductory			Aspirational		
<b>Culture of Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A line prosecutor or office staff responds to invitations to speak at community events</li> <li>DA is the only person who engages in community engagement</li> <li>Office-wide sentiment that community engagement is the responsibility of DA only</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prosecutor whose partial function is also community engagement</li> <li>No dedicated person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community prosecutor with no caseload, or a non-attorney staff dedicated to community engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some line prosecutors participate in community engagement in addition to their regular duties without tangible rewards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wide swath of office participates</li> <li>Engagement is incentivized and rewarded</li> <li>Engagement is an important consideration in hiring, compensation, and promotion</li> <li>Focus on collaboration as opposed to just listening/talking</li> </ul>	

Creating a culture of engagement is the best place to start because without it being someone’s job, engagement will be inconsistent at best. The ideal model is that every prosecutor sees engagement as part of their work, and brings back ideas that they received as feedback from community members. Incentivizing participation through career advancement models for the line prosecutors that community engagement is an important priority of the office.



**Introductory**

**Aspirational**

<b>Information and Power Exchange</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prosecutor talks to the public in a one-way process</li> <li>Prosecutor’s office talks to media within ethical guidelines</li> <li>Publishing annual report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prosecutor solicits feedback with no follow-up</li> <li>One-time town halls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short-term committees within the office</li> <li>Provides feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prosecutors provide information about issues in the community while also soliciting feedback from community members</li> <li>Feedback is used by prosecutors, and they communicate how that feedback is used</li> <li>Community members are trained and educated about their role in community prosecution, and the nature/ scope of their role is clearly defined</li> </ul>



Offices can look at the San Francisco District Attorney’s program [Safer Together](#), which focuses on how survivors of crime and communities can best heal after a traumatic event. The DA’s office brought trauma as well as medical experts to the community as resources, but the program relies heavily on the community’s feedback as to how they want to be treated. Based on their feedback, funding was allocated to various community-

based organizations to address community concerns. Further, then-District Attorney George Gascon led a delegation of stakeholders to San Quentin Prison. During this visit, they heard the concerns expressed by the incarcerated individuals. Additionally, Gascon initiated the formation of an advisory board comprising formerly incarcerated people.



**Introductory**

**Aspirational**

<p><b>Involvement of Marginalized Communities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marginalized communities (or their leaders) have not been identified, resulting in a lack of outreach</li> <li>• Outreach focuses on more traditional stakeholders (e.g., business owners, HOA, victim groups, law enforcement)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach without understanding the cultural norms of each marginalized community</li> <li>• Outreach only before elections or during a crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of a community advisory board, with intentionality and representativeness of board membership</li> <li>• Representatives of different communities</li> <li>• Ad hoc committees and outside experts used to address specific issues</li> <li>• Prosecutor actively advocating for economically marginalized groups to attract resources and improve their quality of life</li> </ul>
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Special attention should be given to identifying the marginalized communities in the jurisdiction - those who do not normally have a voice or may be reluctant to engage in the system. This includes returning citizens, religious/racial/ethnic minorities, people who identify as LGBTQ+, or people struggling with addiction, mental health, or housing stability. This differs from, for instance, the business community, which has regular and easy access to any political stakeholder.

We have tested several permutations of the community advisory board model. While one size does not fit all, the ideal community advisory board would include community voices that are not traditionally heard in the system and representatives from each of the marginalized communities in your jurisdiction. The danger is to look toward those who have been supportive of the prosecutor’s office, or that are well-known activists/advocates. We encourage offices to look beyond the usual faces, and seek out community members who are impacted subject matter experts, and bring them to the table. This can be accomplished via hosting regular community listening sessions. The feedback received – as well as the people providing input - can lead to identifying future members of the community advisory board. Please see the case study on “Case study:” on [page 10](#) to explore one jurisdiction’s journey to forming a community advisory board.

	Introductory		Aspirational	
<b>Accessibility for Community Members</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In-person at the prosecutor’s office</li> <li>No flexibility in the timing of meetings</li> <li>No translation services, compensation, childcare, refreshments</li> <li>Limited advanced notice of opportunity for meeting</li> <li>Limited publication of meeting results</li> <li>Website that provides basic information about the office in English only</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Website includes information in multiple languages and layperson’s terms</li> <li>Website includes meaningful resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meetings occur within communities’ environments</li> <li>Members are compensated for their time</li> <li>Hybrid meeting option to allow for Zoom participation as well</li> </ul>	<p><b>Consider:</b> Don’t despair if an in-person townhall yields only a handful of attendees. It takes time and consistency to build; additionally, if you have 10 engaged constituents in a room, if they support your message, they will tell 10 more people. Your message of being open to dialogue will spread even though you may not see it firsthand. Another option is to have monthly office hours where any member of the public can come and speak to the elected prosecutor, as seen in Salt Lake County, Utah. This may be more effective in smaller to midsize jurisdictions, but there are also larger jurisdictions such as Montgomery County, Maryland which in addition to having a community engagement unit, rotates line prosecutors to answer public concerns on one day per month.</p>

Accessibility is tremendously important to doing this work successfully. Accessibility includes ensuring that meetings are held in venues that can be accessed by people with all levels of physical ability, but it does not end there. Is the location centrally located in a marginalized community, rather than at the prosecutor’s office? Consider this – people do not come to the prosecutor’s office when life is going well; they come after being victimized, witnessing something terrible, or after being charged with a crime. The building itself may be a source of trauma. As such, having sessions outside of the office and meeting the community where they are helps rebuild trust. Additional aspects to include are language access (are interpreters available?), child care, timing (not everyone has a flexible lunch break to attend meetings, or can leave work exactly at 5 p.m.), and parking/near a transit line. In the new age of virtual meetings, hybrid or virtual-only meetings can increase attendance as well as accessibility - especially for people with hearing or visual challenges.

	Introductory			Aspirational	
<b>Modes of Community Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information sessions with select community members on an ad hoc basis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Series of meetings with select community members to discuss issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DA-led task forces to develop plans to tackle problems within a community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community Advisory Board</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both Community Advisory Boards and task forces</li> </ul>

Offices should use multiple modes of community engagement to address community concerns. A solid example of this model is the [Tap in Center](#) in St. Louis, Missouri. It is a unique program where the prosecutors attend a weekly



resource clinic at a local library. They can connect with residents and provide them with advice in partnership with other community groups. This can serve as outreach and community prosecution, and serve as a springboard for areas of targeted community engagement. Data informed the best location for the project – a traditionally underserved area where many incarcerated people lived before their arrest. It is a partnership between St. Louis County Library, the Missouri State Public Defender’s Office, The Bail Project, MacArthur Foundation Safety & Justice Challenge, University of Missouri-St. Louis, and the St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office.

Another example can be found in Denver, Colorado, where District Attorney Beth McCann created [three Community Advisory Boards \(called Advisory Councils\)](#) – Law Enforcement & Community Relations, Immigration, and Mental Health. Each member represents a different constituency - from advocates, to practitioners and impacted persons.

	Introductory			Aspirational	
<b>Data and Measurement of Community Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Statistics published in annual reports on cases filed and dispositions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publishing critical information related to racial and social justice collected by DAO</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consulting with outside groups to publish objective external assessments of critical factors</li> <li>Community-based participatory research</li> <li>Tracking amount of engagement activities that prosecutors participate in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data is utilized to inform decision-making and improve the collaboration process</li> <li>Solutions for problems are grounded in scientific evidence as opposed to just anecdotes and storytelling</li> <li>Using tracked data of community engagement events to improve strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data is used to evaluate the solutions that were developed</li> <li>Annual performance reviews for prosecutors are refined to incorporate rewards for effective community engagement</li> </ul>

If you are not measuring the work you are doing, how do you know if you are being successful in accomplishing your goals? If the desire is to incentivize line prosecutors to assist in community engagement, their work in this area must be captured. Furthermore, a centralized system is essential to gather feedback from community events and meetings. This feedback should be analyzed for future policy discussions and the eventual establishment of a community advisory board. We encourage using your office’s case management system to gather the relevant data; partnering with local researchers or with the PPI team to craft the appropriate process can help relieve concerns about thoroughness and accuracy. Having data helps the office to understand the current issues and win over internal skeptics. It should be used to assess the progress made after the implementation of policy suggestions from the public or community advisory board.





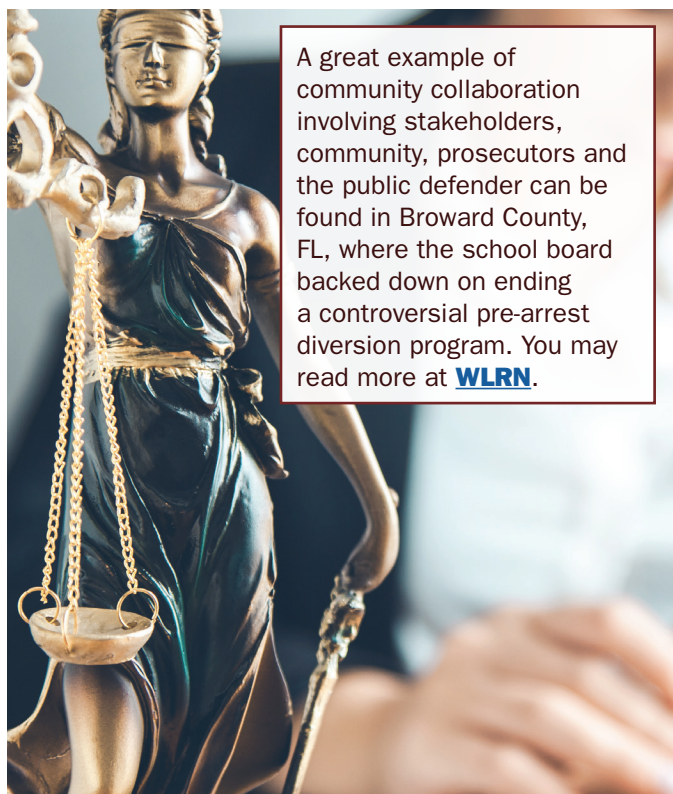
## What Do Offices Need to Consider?

Community engagement is not without its challenges. Members of marginalized communities have felt left out of the political process for generations. Combined with systemic racism, police brutality, and broken promises by elected officials, residents may have a deep-seated distrust of the system. This may manifest in the first few community meetings being adversarial, or having a low turnout. It is important to stay the course so that communities see consistency – which will result in trust. From an internal perspective, prosecutors may have legitimate fears surrounding political polarization resulting in uncomfortable interactions with the community. It is easy to engage with those who support you; the challenge can be reaching across the philosophical divide (i.e. working with abolitionist groups or groups who may favor higher incarceration rates – the “tough on crime” perspective). The office being visible is critical in the end, and the relationships formed will benefit both the community as well as the prosecutor’s office.

## How Do I Make a Plan?

*Answer the following:*

- WHO do we need to engage with? What groups have been traditionally untouched by the SAO? Start with intentional mapping of the various groups in your area, grouped out by category.
  - Impacted people - defendants, victims, families of each
  - Ethnic groups
  - Religious minorities, especially those who are targets of hate crimes
  - Racial minorities
  - LGBTQ+



A great example of community collaboration involving stakeholders, community, prosecutors and the public defender can be found in Broward County, FL, where the school board backed down on ending a controversial pre-arrest diversion program. You may read more at [WLRN](#).

- WHO in the office is responsible for spearheading this engagement? Who is the point person to engage, follow up, and address concerns that have been raised? If it is not someone’s specific job, it will not happen.
- WHY do you want to engage? What do you hope to learn? Understanding the why will help you design a practical engagement strategy.
- WHEN do you want to engage? Make sure enough notice is given so that people can plan to attend. Aim for after work or weekends when more people are available; a virtual session during the lunch hour is an option as well.
- WHERE will engagement take place? If in person, make sure that it is easily accessible to transit, has adequate parking, and that it is accessible to differently-abled attendees. Also consider having child care, interpreters for the largest languages other than English in your jurisdiction, and provide refreshments. The use of virtual spaces can alleviate concerns about access and space.
- HOW will you engage, and with what tactics? How will you compensate those who participate in giving feedback to the office?
- HOW will we ensure that the engagement is sustainable? How can you ensure that community engagement efforts last as a long-term commitment, rather than a temporary program? One tactic is if a community advisory board is formed, ensure that the chair plays a key role. The chair must have a sense of authority and respect within the broader community to be a credible messenger of the work. The chair sets the agenda for monthly meetings and identifies topics that will be discussed while acting as a liaison between the prosecutor’s office and the community advisory board. Lastly, consider a transition plan so that someone is responsible for onboarding new members with historical knowledge.

## Case study:

This jurisdiction is a PPI site where a public-facing dashboard is complemented by the work of a Community Advisory Board (CAB). The journey began with a series of listening sessions, where community members from different walks of life shared their thoughts on the objectives of the PPIs. Through these listening sessions - all of which were conducted virtually and moderated by the PPI team - several leaders rose to the top.

A member of the prosecutor's office reached out to people who were vocal during the listening sessions. Some of these voices included advocates for people struggling with addiction; a member of an ethnic minority; a justice-involved person; and an advocate for restorative justice practices. In the end, half of the 12 CAB members were from the community listening sessions. The prosecutor liaison analyzed the gaps and worked to add a defense attorney, several policy experts, and a member of the faith-based community.

Next, the liaison created a list of topics as a starting point for the CAB from feedback that arose from the listening sessions. The CAB was free to add to this list. Topics included discussing justice integrity through forensics, soliciting recommendations for the District Attorney and the legislature on prosecuting police violence cases, and drafting an internal immigration policy on how line prosecutors should discuss immigration consequences with survivors of crime. The CAB is also used to regularly review the PPI dashboard and provide recommendations on areas of concern. The next goal of the liaison is to empower the CAB further by assisting them in learning how to testify in legislative hearings as well as meeting more of the line prosecutors to further build trust.



At the time of this writing, the CAB has been meeting for 18 months remotely every month. The following policy changes have been implemented as a result of their work:

- Restorative justice – Created a script based on feedback guiding line prosecutors on how to talk to survivors of crime about restorative justice options.
- Immigration - Provided feedback on messaging and outreach to impacted communities about how to work with the prosecutor's office regardless of immigration status.
- Police violence - The District Attorney was presented and is reviewing a draft of legislative concepts on how these cases should be handled.

The liaison has found the CAB to be a positive addition but had key takeaways for offices to keep in mind:

- Provide concrete deliverables and goals for the CAB.
- Don't just meet to say you are meeting – members will become frustrated and disengage if they feel the goal is to rubber-stamp the prosecutor's agenda. Come to the CAB with legitimate questions such as “These are our 3 drafts of a policy. Here are the differences, what do you think?”.
- Bring policies before they are finalized so that the CAB can give meaningful feedback.
- Lean into the CAB for outreach – ask them what is the best way to roll out a new policy? Who should we talk to? Can we talk to your network? Offer listening sessions as an option to have meaningful discussions.
- Do your research. In filling the gaps to identify new CAB members, the liaison looked up each person (utilizing search engines, social media, and in-person interviews when possible), and read what they were interested in as well as who their networks were. Each person should be representing a different community. Look at who would be a good ambassador.

## Takeaways and Final Considerations:

- Include all prosecutors in the office by encouraging them to engage with the community 2 hours per month.
- Incentivize line prosecutors through time off, performance reviews for promotions, or an annual stipend for working at community events.
- Provide training on how to handle tough discussions to avoid public relations issues.
- Host listening sessions
  - Can be done around specific topics (for example hate crimes, gender-based violence) or in general (what are your thoughts on justice in this community?)
  - One option is to advertise widely to the public; another is to have targeted meetings with service providers, survivors, returning citizens, or other stakeholders.
  - This is a way for the elected prosecutor to engage, with the line prosecutors, to hear what the community is thinking.
  - Make note of vocal participants, especially those who may not come from larger or well-known organizations. They can help form a community advisory board.



- Creation of a community advisory board
  - If meetings are held in person, pay for parking, provide refreshments, and compensate \$50-100 per meeting
  - If meetings are remote, it is a good idea to still compensate the members, but consider utilizing gift cards, or a meal delivery service.
  - A great resource is located [here](#).
  - Offices may want to do boards by location (for instance, if the jurisdiction encompasses multiple counties, have one board per county); or by affinity (ie, AAPI Board, African American Board, LGBTQ+ Board, etc.).
- One size does not fit all. You cannot approach any one community like a monolith
  - For instance, one cannot assume all Spanish-speaking community members have the same concerns; one must approach based on age, as well as ethnicity, and be sensitive to cultural differences. If you do not know, ask advocates in advance.

- Keep evaluating
  - Use a local researcher or another outside validator to make sure that this is working.
  - Tools include internal surveys of prosecutors as well external surveys/discussions with key stakeholders to measure the effectiveness of engagement.
- Step out of your comfort zone
  - It is easy to engage with people who are supportive, or who you have relationships with. To build trust and create change, prosecutors have to confront each one's discomfort with change and criticism.
  - Think about impact - while it is easy to read at a private school rather than discuss the criminal justice system at an under-resourced school in a tough neighborhood, who would benefit from your presence more?
- Be targeted in your approach
  - Identify who you have not been engaging with, and why.
  - Make sure that as you move forward, you have identified the most marginalized communities, and have a plan for meaningfully engaging.
    1. Create a list of leaders/organizations who are from said communities
    2. Ask about cultural norms so that you do not inadvertently offend anyone.

