

Innovations in Public Involvement  
Structured Interview Report  
City of Seattle's Public Outreach and Engagement Liaisons (POELs)

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**What it is:** Public Outreach and Engagement Liaisons (POELs) are "bridge-builders" who facilitate communication between government agencies and minority communities. POELs are prominent members of their communities and are fluent in multiple languages, which gives participants comfort and familiarity while navigating the city's processes and events. POELs are also charged with providing: Quality translations, fair and equitable facilitation (in native languages), simultaneous interpretation, constituent support at city-hosted events, feedback and expertise on cultural concerns and barriers, accurate records and reports of participant feedback and concerns, and community workshops.



**Interest to NJTPA:** Paterson focus group participants reported that it is critically important that a person doing outreach be from their community and understand their daily struggles. The trusted advocate model exemplified by the POEL program identifies people already recognized as leaders in their communities to mobilize residents around certain issues. Since they live in the communities where they work, POELs are already familiar with many of the people they seek to reach.

### Major Takeaways:

1. **Flexible roles and programs:** POELs are community members recruited by the City of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods to serve as a link between City departments and historically underrepresented communities. POELs have diverse backgrounds, skill sets, and abilities and so serve a variety of functions. POEL's are matched on these bases with projects and events, which vary to suit the community engaged.
2. **Opportunity to foster new, independent leadership:** POELs usually exhibit a combination of strengths and needs in different skill areas. Often the experience and training provided to POELs through the program leads to participants, not only being effective POELs, but also transitioning to community leadership roles beyond the program.
3. **Trust in community member liaisons translates into greater community buy-in:** Traditionally, there are low levels of trust among underserved communities toward public agencies. This dissuades participation in public outreach and engagement activities. Presenting a community member as liaison fosters confidence that community interests are being served. Greater trust leads to greater participation, which leads to more effective program implementation.
4. **Inclusion of new immigrant/small minority communities in services and engagement:** Many new immigrant/smaller minority communities do not have the extensive social and programmatic infrastructure for support enjoyed by more established/larger minority communities. Even a single POEL that serves less visible or more marginalized communities can play an important role by providing information on available resources and supports, or even by simply making public agencies aware the community exists.
5. **Communication and collaboration with local non-profits is essential:** CBOs and other local non-profits are important resources for discovering local minority leaders and recruiting them to become POELs. Events organized by these organizations serve as venues for POELs to engage with community members to raise awareness of services/programs or solicit community input. The City incentivizes non-profits to open their events to POELs by providing assistance in coordinating the event and covering some costs. Having the POELs present to act as interpreters is also to the benefit of the non-profit.
6. **Seattle has evolved the paradigm for utilization of POELs:** Originally, the focus was to organize public outreach events for City-initiated projects and policies, at which POELs played a role of simple facilitation. However, the City has begun evolving the POEL program to reflect a service delivery model in which the needs and preferences expressed by the communities can be better addressed.

7. **Moderate costs for maintaining the program:** The City of Seattle's costs include funding a small, full-time staff and conducting training activities and hourly rates for POELs (on a project to project basis).
8. **As participant recruiters, non-profits are more effective than POELs in producing broad participation:** POELs can serve to promote events and recruit participants; however, their recruitment may be limited to a narrow set of people they know personally. In terms of soliciting broad community participation, local non-profits and other community groups are often more effective as advertising and recruiting agents.
9. **Challenges to evaluating the success of the program:** Like many outreach programs, the POEL concept does not necessarily produce hard data as clear evidence of its success. Useful metrics could include before and after rates of attendance at meetings and rates of people who sign up for services when a POEL is present at an event. Qualitative surveys of those assisted by POELs could be informative, as well.
10. **Frustrations about bureaucracy surface:** POELs are not necessarily familiar with the pace, bureaucratic procedures, or political processes of government, so may become frustrated if their feedback does not immediately or fully translate into policy. Clearly defined roles for community member participants may help avoid unreasonable expectations. Emphasizing small victories may help participants feel they are making a tangible difference.

### Discussion:

#### *How did the POELs program get started?*

The program started in 2009 and came out of a process of developing a light rail system which had some stations in areas with lots of immigrants, refugees, low-income people, and people of color. The city knew that these stations would have a big impact on these areas and wanted to be sure community members were fairly brought into the planning process. There also was another non-profit organization in Seattle that had a community advocate model that the POELs program was based on. So the program originated from a transportation context, but there was also concern for larger scale impact on housing, economic development, etc.

#### *What are some of the basics of the POELs program?*

POELs are independent contractors with the City of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods that are compensated for their work. They partner with the city in different ways when a department has a project that they'd like to get community feedback on, such as getting the word out about a new initiative, creating new bus stops, changing the master plan, etc. There is a focus on getting feedback from historically underrepresented communities. The POELs clue us in on what kinds of outreach work best in their communities. We have a roster of about 40 POELs, and each

of them represent different communities. POELs have varying backgrounds, skill sets, and levels of experience, so we offer training through a 'POEL Institute' to help them in their outreach. They can be trained on how to facilitate a meeting, tips on interpretation, how to file taxes as an independent contractor, etc. The staff's role, apart from coordinating the POELs, is to act as liaisons themselves to the rest of the department agencies and work with them on how to engage effectively.

***So the POELs program doesn't operate on one outreach model or any set program of activities?***

Yes, it's a flexible program because we recognize that not every outreach model fits every community. Historically, the program has operated on a neighborhood planning model where the POELs would get people to turn up to meetings and participate, but the program has been shifting away from that model to more of a service-based delivery model in which we can find ways to provide communities with the services that they need. In that sense, the program has been evolving so that we can find ways to better serve the communities we are targeting.

***What staff resources do you have dedicated to the program? Is there overlap or collaboration with other departments?***

There is a two person staff that is totally dedicated to the POEL program, a program manager and a program assistant. We also have a division director in our department that is involved with this program but oversees many others as well.

There is definitely overlap between this program and other departments. Usually, when we get a project, it is because a department has approached us. Some of this has come from a directive from the major that all outreach and engagement should be filtered through the Department of Neighborhoods, especially when working with underserved populations. Also, there has been a concerted effort to increase collaboration and lessen community fatigue, so interdepartmental coordination has been common recently.

***Of the various outreach models you use, are there any that you use most often or are most successful?***

The one that we have been using a lot is something we call the 'community clinics' model (we are playing around with the wording because 'clinic' often draws an assumption of something health-related). This model focuses on helping non-profits build capacity. We partner with these local organizations and jointly host resource fairs. We send representatives from two or three city departments to meetings or other events that a non-profit is hosting (i.e. – ESL classes, senior meal programs) to talk about various services and programs that those departments are offering (i.e. – low fares, utility discounts, etc.) and get people to sign up for those services and

also provide feedback. We also compensate the non-profit for providing food, which helps to draw more participants. This has been a very effective outreach model and has saved various departments thousands of dollars because the fairs occur during the day (so staff need not work outside of office hours) and it brings three departments into one room at one time rather than having each department go out and hold meetings on their own. We also found out that about 70% of fair attendees have never interacted with city government before, so this can be a good introduction event.

***In the context of these outreach events, what role do the POELs play?***

The POELs provide interpretations during presentations and then walk around with attendees after the presentations to help them sign up for services. This can be a bit hectic because we often have more than 100 people at these events, but the POELs do a great job at finding people that need the most help. Often times, the event organizers know what communities will be present at the event, so we prepare ahead of time to make sure that a POEL is there who speaks that language. Also, in some cases, POELs go to their communities to inform them that events are taking place and encourage attendance. Primarily, POELs serve as interpreters at events, but there have been instances in which they hold their own focus groups in their communities and report back to us. POELs are not necessarily responsible for organizing advertising because in many cases, such as with the ESL classes, the outreach has already been and community members already meet there. More of the recruiting responsibility falls on the local non-profits than it does the POELs.

One thing we discovered when we tried to rely on POELs to turn people out is they tend to rely on their personal networks. Sometimes that works really well, but when you are trying to bring in a broad array of people from a community, a non-profit has more extensive networks from the services they offer, and you end up getting a wider range of people when they do the advertising and recruiting.

***Do you actively seek out potential POELs or do they come to you?***

We are still working on formalizing a new recruitment process. Historically, we've used press releases that get sent out into communities. We also rely on word of mouth. We ask people to submit a resume or an autobiography because some people don't have the means to fill out an application. We also ask for two references. Lastly, we hold a short interview and ask about their experiences in community outreach. We realize that every POEL has a different skill set, so we try not to keep our requirements too narrow. For instance, someone might have a great ability to organize and rally many members in their community, but not know how to write up a formal resume or have professional experience in interpretation or facilitation. We also try to focus on finding new leaders, not just bringing in the people that we already know about who do good

work in their communities. Our hope is to allow POELs to become consultants in their own right when they are done with the program.

*Do you broadly identify neighborhoods that need POELs and recruit based off of that? Or do you seek out POELs as new projects come about that you need them for?*

Some of both, but we tend to try to preemptively seek out POELs as we discover that certain neighborhoods or communities might need them. For example, we just recently found out that there is a growing Arabic-speaking population in a certain neighborhood, so we recruited a POEL that is fluent in Arabic. We've informally been developing a "POEL Jr.", so to speak, to act as liaisons for newer immigrant communities that are a bit smaller and haven't yet developed a network for distributing information and services. Examples include French-speaking Congolese refugees and new Ukrainian immigrants.

Applications overall are taken on a rolling basis. POELs are compensated for their work, but most if not all have full-time jobs, so this is just extra contract work for them. That fact makes it important to have more than one POEL for each demographic because not every POEL will necessarily be available for a given project. A POEL may have one or two projects to work on a year, maybe a little more depending on their availability. So we try to have enough people on the roster to allow them some flexibility, which they appreciate.

*Once you've brought a POEL into the program, what kind of training do they receive?*

We are in the process of developing more training. This year we are offering more training for skills that they will use in their work, such as monthly training sessions about how to be a good facilitator, how to be a good interpreter, and about social justice issues generally. We also try to teach them about how to file their taxes as an independent contractor. But the training is still in the pilot stage and we are working to improve it.

*How do you pay the POELs?*

We have set rates that we use to guide payment so they know ahead of time what they will earn. They receive an hourly wage and then we have other rates such as a "per word" rate if they are translating a document. We also cover mileage and sometimes additional expenses. All of those rates we negotiate with the department before we put together a project budget.

*Are there any projects that you felt were examples of a POEL success story?*

We are trying to develop more ways of measuring our success. One transportation-related success story was a project last year involving a busy 5-way intersection near a high school and light rail station. There had been a lot of accidents there and the department wanted to figure

out some solutions for improving the area. The POELs organized and conducted focus groups and with these focus groups administered surveys that the department had put together. When they got the results, they kept the information separate by community and were able to see how priorities differed in each community. For instance, online (where most white and higher-income residents weighed in), bike lanes and bike safety was a big concern, but that issue didn't show up at all with focus groups held by the POELs. Ultimately, this allowed for a more complex understanding of broader community interests. That scenario is emblematic in that many attempts at outreach don't often get to people that we are really seeking input from, and the POELs allow for that increased level of communication and access.

***Do POELs tend to stay with the program for a long time? Or is there high turnover?***

There is a range. A few people have been with the program since its inception but there have been others who move on because of changing availability or they have assumed other roles.

***What challenges have you faced with implementing this program?***

The city government sometimes operates within a bureaucratic, "business as usual" paradigm, and that can be hard on the liaisons because they might get certain feedback or requests from the communities they are representing, but the response or change that comes from government can be slow in coming to fruition. One major challenge has been in conveying to POELs that the many city departments all have their set way of doing things and there is always a political element to decision-making, so it's often an uphill battle to move quickly and decisively in response to the information POELs take in. We try to emphasize to them that the little victories do count so that they aren't discouraged by what could be perceived as inaction.

***How do you demonstrate those victories to keep resources and support focused on the program?***

We use metrics to measure the outcomes of these POEL-led meetings. One way we do that is by passing out inclusion cards at the community clinics on which we ask about demographic information, experience in interacting with city government, and various levels of awareness about policies, programs, etc. From this data, we can show that POELs are important. For instance, if a high number of participants are LEP, we can explain that translation services are necessary for getting representative feedback.

***Do you think this is a valuable, effective program?***

Yes. The heart of this program is the liaisons themselves. They are generally people who are successful within their communities or home countries, but being a doctor or lawyer in their home country doesn't carry the same weight here. This program allows them to exhibit those strong professional skills in a way that also helps their communities. Also, departments are

starting to see that we need to begin developing different forms of outreach because there are growing populations of underserved people that can't be ignored anymore. Correspondingly, it's becoming apparent that POELs are important resources for developing those new forms of outreach. At the outset of the program, we had 9 projects in the first year, and there are about 30 ongoing projects this year, so the workload has tripled. That might be the most solid evidence that interest in the program has grown, which is owed to successes it has had in past projects.

*Do you have advice about seeking out certain people to become POELs?*

One strategy is to lean on CBOs that are already operating in and have familiarity with underserved communities. We've made a concerted effort to develop relationships with those agencies because they help clue us into who emerging leaders might be.

*Have you had issues with community agencies feeling like you are intruding in on the events that they have organized?*

That does come up, and it's a fine line. We definitely don't want our presence to be an intrusion because we are actually hoping to help build their capacities. So far, it hasn't really been an issue. We work closely with non-profits and other CBOs to adapt to their schedules, and we also avoid invading the spaces where they tend to interact more closely with the communities they represent. Often times, these agencies have their hands full with daily work, so they actually appreciate the additional support from government in coordinating events, covering food costs, and providing interpreters. It removes a lot of the burden on their end, and once they have dealt with us on that level, trust is built.

We had a series of projects last year that involved working with the OED. The POELs were asked to go into specific neighborhoods that have immigrant- and refugee-owned businesses and help them strengthen their connections to local business associations. POELs administered surveys and also invited business owners to events where they could meet other business owners and build connections. However, this proved difficult because most of the targeted businesses were very small operations and they couldn't take the time to come to meetings. So we are in the process of developing a new model for that endeavor, based on what we learned from last year. In the new model, POELs focus their efforts on a concentrated area of a one or two block radius. All of the businesses within that radius are in partnership with larger local business associations. From there, POELs act as a liaison for the small businesses and maintain contact every two weeks to find out what their needs are. It can be as simple as "the street light in front of my business is out and I'm not sure who to call" or as complex as "my business is struggling and I don't know how to make rent next month." The POELs collect this information and report back to us so that we can figure out who to reach out to.