

## Case Study: Public Engagement in Action

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### ***Facing Heroin: Strengthening Our Community, Androscoggin Valley Community Conversation in Berlin, NH and the Emergence of Stand Up Androscoggin Valley Coalition***

*As a regional civic engagement initiative and partner of NH Listens at the Carsey School of Public Policy at University of New Hampshire, North Country Listens received funding from the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the NH Charitable Foundation from 2014 – 2018. North Country Listens' mission is to help residents talk and act together to create communities that work for everyone.*

#### **Citizens Academy to Community Conversation**

In the fall 2015, the Berlin Police Department learned more about North Country Listens during a new public engagement project with City of Berlin departments called Citizen's Academy. The Police Department recognized a need and opportunity for assistance engaging the local community about the opioid crisis in the region. During this time, the social media conversation about the police department and opioid concerns had intensified, and opioid related medical incidents were escalating. The police department acknowledged that they "couldn't arrest themselves out of the problem" and understood that the opioid crisis was indicative of broader community challenges. The department asked North Country Listens to help engage the community in problem solving to address these challenges together.

#### **Collaborative Planning**

In partnership with the City of Berlin and Police Department, North Country Listens held a series of framing meetings to engage cross-sector partners and plan for a community dialogue. These partners included Police Department leadership and investigators, local and regional social service agencies, health provider organizations, State Prison psychologist, emergency medical services, area hospital physician and leadership, regional inpatient treatment center, and school officials. The framing efforts resulted in a community engagement event that included a stakeholder panel to provide accurate information to the community about substance misuse disorders and

the opioid epidemic locally. The panel included representatives from law enforcement, mental health, substance misuse treatment facilities, schools, hospitals, faith community, and a state attorney who spoke about the statewide opioid crisis for context.

#### **Community Voices to Coalition Action**

There was an outpouring of interest and support for addressing this topic in a constructive, participatory process. Over 200 people attended the event in November 2015, called *Facing Heroin, Strengthening Our Community*. Participants included public leaders, regional stakeholders, and regional residents, students, and individuals and families concerned with and some affected by substance misuse disorders. At the event, participants focused identifying what was needed to support prevention, treatment, and recovery in the local community. Following the event, many of the stakeholder partners involved created a community coalition Stand Up Androscoggin Valley (SUAV) that continues work together four years later with a focus on prevention and includes members who work on substance misuse and mental health treatment and recovery.

Other North Country communities heard about the success and appeal of a community engagement approach and Colebrook held an action forum to identify priorities for building resiliency in the community to support substance misuse prevention, treatment, and recovery.