Improving Community Engagement,

Westport Washington

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Executive Summary

       The city of Westport asked our team to research strategies to improve communication between the city government and citizens and increase public engagement. A main focus was adapting our research to Westport's specific demographic needs, including a sizable population that doesn't speak English and an older than average population. Additionally, Westport's status as a tourist destination was also a consideration, as the city also saw a need to increase their awareness of local matters to promote safety and responsibility. The final report came up with a variety of communication platforms and engagement strategies that the team deemed feasible for the City of Westport to implement in the near future.

Introduction & Client

       Westport is a small town on the Washington coast with a population of about 2,000 people. They are home to one of the first above-ground earthquake and tsunami structures in the U.S., and are currently building more; however, they have often struggled to communicate information about earthquakes and tsunamis to residents despite their critical proximity to the coast, and have also struggled with low attendance at City Council meetings and low responses or minimally diverse responses to community issues which have arisen. They have a greater population of residents who are 50 and older than the county overall (Census), and have struggled to find ways to reach this population, primarily because of barriers in technology access and education. Westport has also struggled to reach historically marginalized populations, including the Latine population, which makes up 8% of the racial demographic in Westport. One of their major issues has been addressing a language barrier, as 11% of the population speaks Spanish at home and 1% of the population speaks an "Indo-European" language at home, but

many government information platforms and communication strategies operate primarily in English. This means that addressing language and communication barriers, as well as creating increased platforms for education, are crucial to engaging Westport's residents in government issues.

Purpose & Scope

The purpose of this project is to assist Westport in finding new and creative ways to engage the community, with language and social barriers in mind. Westport had requested assistance in finding a comprehensive communication platform, which could be used both to alert the public about natural threats, and also to provide two-way communication about other government issues and events. Westport also wanted proposed strategies to increase youth and community involvement and engagement in sea level rise and climate change education. Finally, Westport wanted specific suggestions for ways to engage older populations and historically marginalized populations, and to increase communication, education, and engagement with those groups. We have provided recommendations to Westport with communication platform analyses, as well as resources, strategies, and programs which Westport could use to engage the holistic population. These recommendations were to increase signage and fix translation issues; begin hosting teach-ins on various topics; create an emphasis on the Regional Fire Authority; provide resources for tourists; take advantage of digital accessibility resources we provided; and initiate tabling programs, as well as implementing a mobile city hall. These recommendations include specifications about implementation and have been provided to Westport officials, and will additionally be presented to a Westport City Council meeting on Dec. 12, 2023.

<u>Methodology</u>

The methodology of this project consists of three steps: initial research, site visit, and recommendation creation. The first step, initial research, is based on getting a general overview of the topics we are working with to better understand them. These topics include communication platforms, community engagement, and digital accessibility. Research about communication platforms consisted of first, seeing what communication platforms are available on the market, and second, using analogous case studies to determine what platforms could work best for cities similar to Westport. For community engagement, the research centered around various community engagement strategies that have boosted engagement in cities similar to Westport, as well as how various barriers to community engagement could be overcome. Finally, with digital accessibility, the research was concerned with compiling methods that can be used to teach people about technology and make technology more accessible.

The second step of our methodology was to gain context-specific information about Westport through a site visit. This site visit served the purpose of identifying barriers, needs, and dynamics within Westport which can inform which components of our step one research we apply. The site visit included taking an initial independent tour of Westport, talking with local store owners, and taking a guided tour and discussion with city officials. The site visit was a critical step in our process as it informs the specific needs of our community engagement plan.

The final step of this project is to combine the research from step one and the context-specific information from step two into a set of recommendations for the City of Westport in relation to improving community engagement. Based on the site visit knowledge about barriers and dynamics, the research from step one can be specifically applied to address the

needs of Westport. The final step will also include summarizing the recommendations into a final presentation as well as a final report.

<u>Results & Conclusions</u>

The digital accessibility research identified several key concepts and mitigation strategies for addressing digital inaccessibility, many of these may be useful to the city of Westport as older people, who make up a large proportion of the city of Westport, are often unfamiliar with modern computer technologies (Bou-Zeid, Hill). While this is often a barrier to technological accessibility, the authors of this particular study emphasized that widely, people are willing and excited to learn about using computers when given the opportunity and assistance (Wandke). Building on this, peer support groups were identified as a successful mitigation effort (Perminow). The authors of this study stressed that peer support groups were preferable to standard teaching methods. The article also discusses that technology accessibility for older populations will be an evergreen issue as technology continues to advance. Digital accessibility measures should also take care to ensure access for other marginalized communities and BIPOC, services like translation and providing public wifi in public places are suggested as a good place to start (Cardona, Moran). Because of this, we conducted extensive research into the strategies that are used by governments to make technology access more equitable, in order to support Westport's goal to increase and diversify participation and access to knowledge (Greene).

The community engagement research had many valuable takeaways that became guiding principles of our community engagement recommendations. The first takeaway from the community engagement research is that engagement must not be performative. In order for engagement to be effective, people must feel like their input is actually being valued and used.

Some strategies to prevent performative engagement are bottom up community engagement (Chista 2022), delegating power to community members (Arnstein 1969), utilizing deliberative democracy practices (Biddison 2018), and prioritizing underserved communities (Albright 2022). The second takeaway is that there are specific variables that impact community engagement which include: a sense of community, community identity, social well being, place identity, trust in the community, and trust in institutions (Talo 2018). Next, community engagement adaptation is critically important, and methods that cities can use to adapt are rapidly responding to change, adopting diverse techniques, broadening participation, and supporting the exchange of knowledge and social learning (McKinley 2021). Finally, through the research it was clear that a lack of communication infrastructure for non-english speakers directly leads to inequitable outcomes (Quadri 2023). These key takeaways from the research directly influenced the types of community engagement strategies that we are recommending for the City of Westport.

After conducting research, we conducted a site visit to get a better understanding of how feasible the strategies that we were suggesting would actually be in the context of the Westport community. Upon arriving downtown, we were immediately made aware of the apparent danger of tsunamis, as we could see the waves crashing over the seawall just steps away from the main row of shops. A shopkeeper told us that many shops faced routine flooding issues, and she built hers raised above the ground to avoid these problems. This confirms the need of the community for comprehensive alerts and education regarding the matter of a tsunami. We learned from City Manager Kevin Goodrich and Councilman Troy Meyers that Westport planned on building a new state of the art vertical evacuation structure downtown, and we saw this as a perfect opportunity as a space for community engagement. The multipurpose nature of the structure could allow it to

be a space for teach-ins and gaining more information of tsunami preparedness, as well as being

a draw to curious tourists to also teach them about tsunami safety. Later in the visit, we learned

about a variety of lower income apartment complexes in the city, including the South Bayview

apartment complex that we briefly visited. We saw these places as great opportunities for the city

to try new programs to connect with these residents that usually aren't as active in civic matters.

Finally, we learned about the high community trust of the South Beach Regional Fire Authority,

which led us to do additional research into what community outreach efforts that they could be a

part of to further build community engagement in Westport.

<u>Recommendations & Deliverables</u>

Given our client's desire to improve outreach to underserved members of their

community, our group developed and shared recommendations on communication platforms,

how to utilize partnerships with local organizations, and creative methods to connect with a

larger audience. In order to improve outreach to residents with a limited English proficiency, we

recommend that Westport build upon their current translation services through a wider range of

material provided in the top five languages spoken by residents, as well as through repairing the

city website's 'Translation' feature. Currently, outreach methods regarding city council meetings

consist of one sign in front of city hall, as well as announcements and a schedule posted on the

city's website. We urge Westport to act on improving these current services in order to ensure a

wider range of opinions, lived experiences, and improved attendance at monthly meetings. To

begin this process, we recommend that posters, flyers, and QR codes be posted in popular

gathering places around the city detailing city council meeting dates, times, and locations in the

top five languages spoken by Westport residents. In addition, the 'Translation' feature on the

city's website must be fixed as soon as possible. We have brought this to the attention of the city council on two separate occasions and recognize that it is currently being worked on, but at this time the feature still does not function. During city council meetings, it is also crucial to ensure that translation services exist for those who do not consider English to be their first language, whether that is through a translator, a councilmember, or technological services. To further achieve an equitable meeting space, city councilmembers must invite community members to speak, as there may be anxiety with sharing out, as well as foster an inclusive environment that focuses on a partnership between residents and councilmembers. One method we recommend to the council is to end meetings with action items, which ensure a mutual understanding between residents and councilmembers and create a lasting partnership between both parties.

Our clients have also expressed interest in improving outreach to current residents regarding tsunami safety information. To achieve this goal, our first recommendation is to explore implementing a digital communication platform that informs each resident of emergencies, regardless of their internet connection status. We presented the city council with five options, Voyent Alert, Text My Gov, Remind, Civic Plus, and Text-Em-All, and mentioned that all are strong options that will be able to reach a significant portion of the city's population in the event of an emergency. Some options have features such as Built-In Translation and Two-Way Messaging while other options don't. Each digital communication platform is equipped with its own special features, but we strongly recommend that Westport chooses an option with Built-In Translation as well as the option to receive a text message, a phone call, or an email, as residents will have different preferences from one another. The table below outlines the differences between these five digital platforms, as well as the estimated cost for each platform based on Westport's population size.

	Voyent Alert	Text My Gov	Remind	Civic Plus	Text-Em-All
Notification Type	Text, Call, Email	Text	Text, Call	Text	Text, Call
Approximate Price	$2,400/year *	$2,500/year + startup cost	Free*	$7,000/year + startup cost	$399/month *
Built-In Translation	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
2 Way Messaging	Yes – limited	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Special Features	Best for emergency alerts	Automated	Very easy to use	FEMA's IPAWS integration	Surveys

*variable pricing by features

Table 1: Comparison chart of digital communication systems. Source: Author.

In order to educate the local community on these digital communication strategies, as well as on tsunami shelter construction, tsunami safety, and other current topics, we recommend that the city council incorporate teach-ins at McCausland Hall, a meeting space on the north end of the city. These events are meant to serve as informational sessions for residents on current tsunami preparedness measures, shelter construction news, and digital communication platform awareness. We recommend teach-ins as a precursor to city council meetings, as there may not be enough time to teach the same amount of information during meetings, and also as a method for more effective community engagement. Teach-ins ensure that a wider range of residents are informed, therefore increasing civic engagement in Westport on important decisions regarding emergency safety and preparedness. These events would ideally be held on a regular basis and

include a take-home component, including one-page summaries or flyers of talking points, again

available in the top-five languages spoken by community members. While teach-ins fulfill the

informational component of effective community engagement, we recommend that the local

government of Westport also incorporate a mobile city hall program in order to ensure feedback

from residents is collected and utilized in final design processes. This program would allow

residents to take on more of a leadership role in various planning processes, fostering a lasting

partnership between community members and city councilmembers. To begin a mobile city hall,

we recommend that the local government use a city or county vehicle (such as a truck or a van)

in order to set up tables, chairs, whiteboards, writing utensils, and various community resources

such as flyers and voter registration materials, in different locations across Westport. Based on

conversations with councilmembers, we believe that locations with the best opportunity for

outreach are the South Bayview Apartment Complex, the VFW Building (adjacent to South

Bayview), West Aire Trailer Park, Kila Hana Camperland, various churches around the city, and

the cul-de-sac parking lot off of Ocean Avenue near the beach on the west side of town. A

mobile city hall program would ensure the city council directly interacts with the communities

they have the most difficult time engaging with, as well as provide an opportunity for charrettes,

informational opportunities regarding digital communication networks and tsunami safety, and

receiving feedback on the same issues. A smaller-scale recommendation with the same outcome

is a tabling program, which could survey residents on their preferred communication program

and take public comment on current tsunami shelter construction plans.

     Much of Westport's income relies on the tourism industry, and because of the temporary

nature of their stay, the tourist population has proved difficult for the local government to

connect with regarding tsunami safety information. To mitigate this, we again recommend the

use of QR codes posted in popular gathering places across the city. Through this method of outreach, it is easy for tourists to access safety information and directions to the nearest tsunami shelter in the event of an emergency. In addition, the use of an AM Radio broadcast and flashing signal sign when driving into town would also help spread awareness of safety resources to tourists entering Westport. In addition to the tourist population, Westport is also host to a significant number of senior citizens, who may require additional support in accessing tsunami safety resources and shelters. In order to help with this, we recommend that the local government include resources from the website of the Regional Fire Authority (RFA) at teach-ins, mobile city halls, city council meetings, local events, and on the city's website as a method of reaching the older generation. RFA resources include beach safety, home safety, fall prevention, and much more, and it is crucial that this information is widespread and available in the top five languages spoken by Westport residents. The final recommendation we make for outreach geared towards the elderly population of the city is for the local government to create a brief 'How To Guide' for using emergency technology. Ideally, this would exist as a one-page document and improve access and digital accessibility of the reader through providing quick facts about technology use and navigating the internet as a digital citizen. Examples are listed on our final presentation and in the 'Other Information' section of this document and can either be directly posted on the city's website or used as a reference in the creation of a new document by the local government. Ensuring that the guide is brief is crucial to keeping the information accessible and easily available to the wider population. We recommend printing out PDFs and having printouts available in the public library and other municipal buildings. PDF files should also be available on the city website and in multiple languages if possible. Again, it is important that this guide be available in a variety of languages, as well as provided as a one-page print-out at teach-ins,

community events, mobile city halls, city council meetings, and on the city's website. With this guide, the city council has a greater chance of reaching a wider audience during emergency events and will be able to save a greater number of lives.

Other Information

Resources for Digital Accessibility:
[Glossary of Computer and Internet Terms for Older Adults](#)

[Tech Tips for Older Adults: Tech Safety](#)

[Tech Support Essentials](#)

[Cybersecurity Essentials](#)

Next Steps

For Westport, we believe the easiest steps to take coming from these recommendations is the wide scale implementation of more translation options on all government websites and informational material. This includes the official website of the city and of strong community resources like the South Beach Regional Fire Authority. City Officials have already been made aware of the problem, but inroads with non-English speaking residents will not be made unless the action taken by the city is swift and made very visible to these residents. Another major milestone coming up for Westport is the construction of a large tsunami vertical evacuation structure located in the city's downtown. This groundbreaking development must serve as an opportunity to increase education on tsunami and earthquake preparedness and safety among both residents and curious tourists alike.

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