

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Community Advisory Group Quick Reference Sheet



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The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is committed to early, direct, and meaningful public involvement in the Superfund process. One of the ways communities can participate in site cleanup decisions is by forming a Community Advisory Group (CAG). A CAG is made up of representatives of diverse community interests. Its purpose is to provide a public forum for community members to present and discuss their needs and concerns related to the Superfund decision-making process. This fact sheet summarizes the main points in establishing a CAG.

CAG Scope of Authority

A CAG can assist EPA in making better decisions on how to clean up a site. It offers EPA a unique opportunity to hear—and seriously consider—community preferences for site cleanup and remediation. The existence of a CAG does not eliminate the need for the Agency to keep the community informed about plans and decisions throughout the Superfund process.

Determining the Need for a CAG

The impetus for establishing a CAG should come from the community, and CAGs may not be appropriate for every site. CAGs may be beneficial at removal sites, particularly non-time critical removal sites, as well as sites involved in long-term cleanups. CAGs can be formed at any point in the cleanup process, however, the earlier a CAG is formed, the more its members can participate in and impact site activities and cleanup decisions. EPA may assist communities in determining the need for a CAG by helping them evaluate the level of community interest in and concern about site activities and examine if there is an existing broad-based group that might function as a CAG, or if there are too many competing interests to make forming a truly representative CAG a realistic option.

Preparing To Form a CAG

A CAG information meeting can be used to introduce the CAG concept to the community. In advance of this meeting, EPA, in conjunction with appropriate State, Tribal, or local governments, should inform and educate the community about the purposes of a CAG and the opportunities for participating in it. This is especially important at sites where there has been relatively limited community participation in the Superfund process.

Because every site is different, techniques appropriate for educating the public about CAGs are likely to vary from site to site. No matter what methods are used, the information provided must be clear and understandable to the community. In many cases, news releases, fact sheets, and public notices in the local news media may be useful for disseminating information about CAGs. Other outreach options—such as flyers, announcements in churches, and personal contacts with community groups or individual citizens—also may be used.

CAG Information Meeting

EPA may sponsor the CAG Information Meeting and, in consultation with the appropriate State/Tribal/local governments, should schedule it as early as possible in the cleanup process. The meeting should be held in a central, accessible location and at a convenient time for community members. The agenda for the meeting should reflect important community concerns raised in relation to the Superfund response. The agenda also may include discussions about the purpose and mission of the CAG, the process and timetable for selecting members, member responsibilities, CAG Operating Procedures, the status of site cleanup plans, and the interface between the CAG and other EPA community involvement activities.

CAG Startup

Although the interval will vary from site to site, EPA should encourage CAGs to be in full operation within six months after the CAG Information Meeting in order to maximize their effectiveness in the Superfund decision-making process. In the interim, the Agency can assist the community in determining the appropriate size and composition of the CAG, soliciting nominees, and selecting CAG members.

Size of the CAG

The size of a CAG will depend on the needs of the affected community. While it often is difficult to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate and to achieve closure in large groups, the CAG should include enough members to adequately reflect the diversity of community interests regarding site cleanup and reuse. Typically CAGs have approximately 15-20 members.

CAG Composition

To the extent possible, membership in the CAG should reflect the composition of the community near the site and the diversity of racial, ethnic, and economic interests in the community. At least half of the CAG members should be members of the local community. CAG members should be drawn from among residents and owners of residential property near the site; others who may be directly affected by site releases; Native American tribes and communities; minority and low-income groups; local environmental or public interest groups; local government units; local labor representatives; and local businesses. If an EPA Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) has been awarded for the site, EPA should encourage that a representative of the TAG group also be included on the CAG to facilitate information sharing between the two groups. Facility owners and other potentially responsible parties (PRPs) also may be included, but the community may choose to limit the number or designate them as ex officio members.

CAG Member Solicitation

EPA may begin to advise the community about opportunities for CAG membership as part of outreach efforts (the CAG fact sheet and any public notices and news releases) prior to the CAG Information Meeting. The information also should be made available through the local information repositories and posted at information kiosks and community centers. It may be necessary to focus solicitations for specific groups. For example, the EPA could send a letter to selected groups representing diverse interests.

CAG Member Selection

CAG members may be selected in a number of ways. For example:

1. In some cases, CAGs may be self-selecting. That is, individuals who believe they represent the diverse interests of their community could nominate themselves;
2. An existing group in the community—such as a group with a history of involvement at the Superfund site—could be selected as the CAG for that community if it represents the diverse interests of the community;
3. The local government could select, in a fair and open manner, members of the community to serve on the CAG;

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4. EPA, with the involved State/Tribal /local governments, could assist the community in organizing a Screening Panel to review nominations for CAG membership. EPA could review (not approve/disapprove) the Panel's list of nominees and offer advice, as needed, to ensure all community interests are represented;
5. EPA, with the appropriate State/Tribal/local governments, could select a Core Group that represents the diverse interests of the community. Members of this Core Group then could select the remaining members of the CAG in a fair and open manner.

Because each community is unique, suitable selection methods will vary; a formal process may not be necessary in every case. The key is to ensure that the CAG will be fully representative of the community and will be able to function effectively as a group.

CAG Member Training

Many of those selected as members of the CAG may require some initial training to enable them to perform their duties. EPA may work with State/Tribal agencies, local government(s), local universities, PRP(s), and others to provide training, prepare briefing materials, and conduct site tours for new CAG members.

Roles and Responsibilities

Generally, CAG members should be expected to participate in CAG meetings, provide data and information to EPA on site issues, and share information with their fellow community members. They must be prepared to fairly and honestly represent not only their own personal views but also those of the community members they represent.

CAG members may select a Chairperson from within their ranks and determine an appropriate term of office. The primary functions of the CAG Chairperson are to conduct CAG meetings in a manner that encourages open and constructive participation by all members; to ensure that all pertinent community concerns are raised for consideration and discussion; and to attempt, whenever possible, to achieve consensus among CAG members.

EPA, as the lead Superfund Agency, should provide the CAG with information and technical expertise on site cleanup and facilitate discussion of issues and concerns relative to Superfund actions. The Agency should listen and respond to views expressed by CAG members, giving them substantial consideration when making site decisions, especially when views are those of most or all CAG members. Even though they are not CAG members, EPA's Site Manager and CIC should attend CAG meetings on a consistent basis to demonstrate the Agency's commitment to meaningful public participation in the cleanup process. Representatives of other pertinent Federal agencies, and State/Tribal/local governments also should attend CAG meetings regularly and serve as information resources for the CAG.

CAG Operation

Each CAG should develop a Mission Statement describing the CAG's specific purpose, scope, goals, and objectives. Each CAG also should develop a set of procedures to guide day-to-day operations. These procedures should address such topics as how to fill membership vacancies; how often to hold meetings; and the process for reviewing and commenting on documents and other materials.

CAG Meetings

CAG meetings should be open to the public. The meetings should be announced publicly (via display ads in newspapers, flyers, etc.) well enough in advance to encourage maximum participation of CAG and community members. CAG members should determine the frequency and location of CAG meetings based on the needs at their particular site. The format for CAG meetings may vary depending on the needs of the CAG. A basic meeting format might include an update on site status by the project's technical staff; discussion of current issues; a question/answer session that includes audience participation; review of "action items," and discussion of the next meeting's agenda.

CAG Response to Requests for Comments

EPA should consider making all documents available to the CAG for the same length of time as it does for State/Tribal and peer review groups. EPA should explain, however, that the comment period for some documents may have to be less than 30 days. In those cases, the CAG should be ready to complete its review and provide comments in the shorter time period. The Agency may have the opportunity to respond to many CAG comments on key documents and other issues during CAG meeting discussions, but, unless otherwise stated, these responses should not be considered part of the formal Agency "Response to Comments" (as required under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act [CERCLA] and the National Contingency Plan [NCP]).

Administrative Support for the CAG

EPA, together with State/Tribal/local government(s), local universities, the PRP(s), and others, may assist the CAG with administrative support on issues relevant to the Superfund site cleanup and decision-making process. This may include support for arranging and documenting meetings, preparing and distributing meeting notices and agendas, duplicating site-related documents for CAG review, maintaining CAG mailing/distribution lists, and providing translation and meeting facilitation services when needed. If meeting facilitation is needed, it is preferable to use someone from the community with facilitation experience or a professional meeting facilitator. A neutral facilitator is particularly effective at sites where some controversy is anticipated.

Additional CAG Information Resources

Additional information about CAGs is available in the Guidance for Community Advisory Groups at Superfund Sites (OSWER Directive 9230.0-28) and from Community Involvement Coordinators Kirstin Safakas at 312-886-6015 or Diane Russell at 989-395-3493.