METROLAB NETWORK

GenAI for Local Governments: Community Engagement Guidance

A MetroLab Network Guide

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About This Policy Guide

MetroLab Network is a nonprofit in Washington DC that aims to equip local governments with science and research. It serves as a convener of an emerging academic practice focused on integrative, use-inspired, community-focused research, done in partnership with local government and communities.

The “In the Lab” program supports a national effort for practitioners, by practitioners, to produce policy guidance on emerging policy needs. In August 2023, when governments had barely begun the conversations on the concept and use of the “new AI” in the market, MetroLab Network launched the GenAI (Generative AI) for Local Governments Task Force as a new edition of its “In the Lab” program. It convened 130+ individuals to develop policy guidance that includes process recommendations, and a resources library. The task force comprised 45 unique local governments, 16 universities, 25 private sector companies, and 16 other stakeholder groups including four federal agencies, nonprofits, and coalition organizations.

As a result of this work, MetroLab is publishing three separate deliverables that together, represent a complete body of work. First, we are publishing a policy guide specific to community engagement. This guide includes ways to proactively engage communities to proactively shape GenAI policies such as community education, ways in which local governments can increase transparency, and more. Second, a call to the research community. At every turn, we asked what research is needed to further efforts on understanding the technology and its impact. We are providing an updated list of research questions as identified by the dozens of stakeholders involved with the task force. And finally, a white paper on cybersecurity and privacy. This whitepaper identifies the unique ways AI is impacting cybersecurity and privacy protections, for example, citing the increasing difficulty in enforcing consent and the right to be forgotten mechanisms.

Intended Uses. These publications intended to be several things:

a. A useful tool for practitioners, co-developed by practitioners (with the guidance and input of expertise from individuals from academia and other organizations with relevant expertise).
b. A living guide housed on the MetroLab Network website, and curated, updated, and refined there through a multi-functional online platform to help local governments as they keep pace with rapidly evolving AI policy guidance and regulatory best practices.

c. A reminder of several legal considerations that permeate data governance—while a few lawyers were involved in this project, it is incumbent upon us to tell you that this is not legal advice.

Over the last year, the members of the GenAI task force have collaborated intensively to explore the potential role of community engagement in this adoption and operation of AI and Generative AI by local governments. A key aspect of their exploration was focused on the recognition that establishing trust with communities can go a long way in ensuring its successful and safe use. The methodology is grounded in practical experiences, real-world implementation concerns, and diverse perspectives.

Methodologies

The Task Force utilized the following principal steps/methodologies in producing this Guide:

1. **Subcommittee Meetings:** Online meetings/virtual sessions of "Community Engagement Subcommittee" composed of volunteer members to identify the scope of discussion including specific areas and potential hurdles.

2. **Data Collection Methods:**
    - Resources such as existing community engagement practices of local governments, case studies were identified to assess the status quo.
    - Members shared their experiences on the basis of their experience with new technologies in the past.
    - New use cases were explored and discussed to guide the development of tools and policies.

3. **Drafting and Feedback:** Initial drafting of an outline of this guide by the MetroLab Network team, followed by its online review during a series of subcommittee meetings wherein extensive feedback was provided.
    - An online meeting, and an additional call for the members to provide their feedback on the refined draft of the guide.

4. **Sharing** of the guide in an online platform on the MetroLab website in November 2024 as a downloadable document.

5. **Limitations:** It is essential to acknowledge that GenAI and AI are rapidly evolving technologies. With each passing day, a new dimension of their operation and use is making the headlines. In such circumstances, the needs of a community to understand and use these technologies in a safe capacity are also subject to change. Additionally, limited data discussing long-term impact of technologies on communities has been a challenge as well. Through this guide, our hope is to provide an initial template of discussion for local governments, to encourage trustworthy and safe use and regulation of GenAI, informed by the concerns and needs of local communities.

Community Engagement Guidance

*"People want to know what AI can do **for** them and what it can do **to** them."*[1]

The potential of Generative AI has made local governments curious to explore its possible benefits. However, it is critical to remember that community engagement plays a significant role in mitigating the risks associated with this technology. This guidance was developed after consultations with the subcommittee members of our task force. The objective is to proactively contribute to GenAI policy development and inform local governments on how to build a two-way communication channel between communities and its policymaking process. Each community offers a unique set of considerations and through this guide, we aim to integrate that thought into the practical steps, performance metrics and possible drawbacks.

A. How Can the Community Inform GenAI Policy?

I. **Make the engagement inclusive:** Informing the residents is not the only goal of community engagement. This process becomes a success when the communities are able to shape decision-making through their empowering contribution. Alignment with grassroots values and needs is critical.

1. Different Forms of Community engagement:

Public Forums: Frequent town halls or meetings where residents get the opportunity to discuss what GenAI can achieve for them and which GenAI applications will be more useful.

Online Platforms: Designated websites or portals to facilitate an active feedback loop.

Resident Advisory Boards: Convening AI-focused groups represented by different communities.

[1] Anthony ('Tony') Luppino, Rubey M. Hulen Professor of Law and Director of Entrepreneurship Program, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law

Case Study I: The City of Boston's "Beta Blocks" program involves residents in testing and providing feedback on new urban technologies, including AI-driven solutions[2].

2. Messenger Identification:
Train community leaders as "AI Ambassadors" to bridge the gap between technical concepts and community understanding.

Engage trusted and influential locals (e.g., librarians, teachers, religious leaders) in the feedback mechanism and in assessing what kind of information to disseminate to ensure maximum engagement.

3. Education-focused Efforts:
Host "AI/Generative AI for Good" hackathons or events where community members take the lead on the imminent issues they want to be solved and co-find local

[2]City of Boston (2021).Beta Blocks. Retrieved from https://www.boston.gov/departments/new-urban-mechanics/beta-blocks#:~:text=Beta%20Blocks%20is%20a%20new,able%20to%20offer%20a%20hand.

solutions for them. Appeal to both technical and non-technical members of the community to participate.

Organize "Future of Our City" workshops to allow community members to freely express how they can see the local landscape evolving in the future.

4. **Feedback Mechanisms:**
Create a "GenAI Feedback Loop" that operates in real-time and allows the residents to share/report their experiences with the AI systems and processes.

Institutionalize a clear process in which you can revert to the residents who provided inputs, informing them how their feedback was taken into consideration and what the final outcome will be. This helps in building trust with communities.

5. **Impact Communication:**
Publish an annual "AI Impact Report" detailing how community input has shaped AI policies and implementations.

In addition to the feedback loop, create an informal interactive thread on a dedicated website providing information on the AI-led services to enable the residents to share their thoughts, particularly with respect to the feasibility of new use cases and governance structures.

II. **Make Community Education Accessible and Actionable:** Educating the residents about the form, scale and kind of value that AI can add to their lives is crucial.

1. **Easy-to-understand and Simplified Communication:**
Develop an "AI in Our City" guidebook, explaining current and potential AI applications in local government.

Create multilingual infographics and short videos explaining AI concepts relevant to city services.

2. **Partnerships with Local Institutions:**
Collaborate with libraries to offer "Digital/AI Literacy" courses.

Partner with local tech companies or universities to provide "AI for residents" workshops.

The Toronto Public Library (TPL) is a classic example of how a local library can simplify the complex world of technology for its residents. Following its endorsement of the Cities for Digital Rights declaration in 2019, TPL received funding from the city council to launch an innovative digital safety and literacy program.

TPL has a hands-on approach to spreading awareness about new technologies, particularly AI. In the past, it has offered in-person programs and staff-led workshops focusing on digital privacy and algorithmic literacy. It has also produced a video series titled "Let's talk privacy" and developed a unique Do-it-Yourself Machine Learning Kit. Through these efforts, TPL has established itself as a go-to resource for accessible learning on complex technological concepts and digital safety issues.

The 'Let's Learn Tech' team at TPL exemplifies extraordinary commitment to last-mile tech literacy. This dedicated group regularly organizes events such as the "AI Fundamentals Online Learning Circle," encouraging a community of tech-savvy library users. By bridging the gap between cutting-edge technology and public understanding, TPL has redefined the role of libraries in the digital age as a symbol of digital literacy and technological empowerment.

Case Study II: The Toronto Public Library offers a "Digital Literacy and AI" program, helping residents understand AI's impact on daily life[3]

3. Mitigating Challenges and Identifying Opportunities:

Update privacy and data governance principles through an open forum discussion wherein residents are invited to openly explore community concerns.

Showcase success stories of how AI is making city-wide public service delivery efficient. For example, optimized traffic management or more efficient waste collection.

[3] O'Connor, S., Barbara Sobol, Wong, W.(2023). Citizenship in the age of data: the critical role of libraries in digital literacy. Toronto Star. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/citizenship-in-the-age-of-data-the-critical-role-of-libraries-for-digital-literacy/article_d76beadc-9f8d-11ee-a0b4-3748b15f9758.html

III. **Take proactive steps to ensure transparency:** Encourage open communication about GenAI use to build trust and increase resident/citizen participation.

1. GenAI Use Cases:

Create and maintain a public registry of all AI systems being used for city operations, including information about their intended purpose and impact.

Provide clear, simple and easily accessible information on how AI is being used by different departments (e.g., chatbots for customer service, predictive maintenance for infrastructure).

2. Responsibility and Oversight:

Establish an "AI Ethics Committee" represented by both experts and residents.

Publish information regarding the competency (qualifications and training) of the staff managing AI systems.

3. Equity Considerations:

Conduct AI Audits to assess if the AI systems are aligned with their intended purpose or reinforcing existing inequalities.

Engage third parties to perform independent evaluations on a regular basis.

Proactive outreach with marginalized communities to take their input on how AI could better serve their needs.

In July, 2020, a Public Participation Playbook was issued for City of Raleigh residents. This playbook serves as a foundation block for participation decision-making. It includes practices such as issuing public meeting notices in various languages, conducting such meetings at locations easily accessible through public transit etc.

The New York City Government has taken a leap forward in digital governance by releasing a comprehensive Digital Playbook. This initiative is the result of extensive community engagement, involving months of conversations and meetings with city residents to thoroughly assess their needs and expectations. The city government has committed to publicly reporting on their progress in meeting the demands of residents. They intend to share concrete metrics that will allow both officials and citizens to measure the effectiveness of their efforts.

IV. **Clear Policy Development: Before implementation of GenAI for community engagement, establish comprehensive guidelines.**

1. **Performance Metrics and KPIs:**

Accessibility in different languages: Track engagement rates across different language groups.

Resolution rates: Monitor how effectively AI tools resolve resident queries without human intervention.

User satisfaction: Create post-interaction surveys to assess community experience with AI tools.

2. **Opt-out Options:**

Ensure all AI interfaces have clearly visible options to opt out of a call with an AI system/tool and speak with a human.

Since 2020, **the City of Kelowna has emerged as a leader in the use of AI-powered chatbots to enhance city services for its residents**. Notably, Kelowna was among the first municipalities to use AI technology to streamline its housing permit approval process. These innovative chatbots serve as the initial point of contact for citizens, efficiently handling an impressive 38% of user inquiries without requiring staff intervention. This automation has significantly reduced the workload on human personnel while providing prompt responses to residents. Staff members vigilantly monitor resident interactions with the chatbots, using this feedback to refine and enhance the AI's performance in a targeted manner.

Through this implementation process, Kelowna's tech team has collected valuable insights. It was observed that AI tools excel in addressing general information queries but may be less suited for handling specific inquiries. For more specific queries, the customer calls are directed to human staff/representatives. This helps the city in ensuring that it complements rather than replaces human expertise where necessary.

Case Study III: The City of Kelowna's chatbot not only offers opt-out options but also learns from these instances to improve its service[4].

V. Responsible Implementation: GenAI tools should enhance, not detract from community engagement

1. Enhancing Human Capacity and Capability:

Train staff to work alongside AI tools, focusing on how AI can support their roles.

Show how AI can help the staff by enabling them to make more time for comparatively complex interactions with residents.

New Jersey AI Assistant to Train Employees: In July 2024, New Jersey introduced the NJ AI Assistant, a learning tool for state government employees. This initiative presents an AI chatbot with comprehensive training, enabling staff to responsibly use generative AI in government services. The training module was developed in partnership with InnovateUS that reflects New Jersey's commitment to empower its workforce. Early adopters have already seen a 35% faster response time to citizen inquiries. By balancing innovation with responsible implementation, New Jersey is positioning itself as a leader in government AI adoption, focusing on enhancing efficiency while prioritizing ethical use and data security.

The State of Oklahoma has launched a free online course available to 10,000 residents at a time. The state closely monitors course completion rates and participants' ZIP codes to gauge impact and tailor outreach efforts, particularly to rural communities. This data-driven approach allows for targeted engagement through partnerships with libraries and community organizations. The course is part of a broader AI strategy, which includes the formation of a task force on AI and emerging technologies.

2. Accessibility:

Make efforts to provide AI-compatible screen readers, similar assistive technologies for residents.

Provide multiple mediums of interaction (text, voice, visual) to cater to different needs and preferences of the residents.

VI. Use Cases and Implementation

1. Chatbots for Basic Inquiries:

[4] City of Kelowna. (2024). Chatbots aim to improve access to City information and services. Retrieved from https://www.kelowna.ca/our-community/news-events/news/chatbots-aim-improve-access-city-information-and-services

Implement an AI chatbot, conversing in multiple languages, on the city website to answer common questions about services, events, and policies.

Use chatbots to guide residents through processes such as permit applications or tax filings

2. Multilingual Engagement:
Provide real-time translation, powered by GenAI, in community meetings to encourage participation from non-English speakers.

Use GenAI to translate city communications into multiple languages, ensuring broader reach.

3. Data Analysis:
Use GenAI to analyze community survey responses to identify dominant themes and sentiments.

Use GenAI tools to monitor social media for identification of emerging community issues or concerns.

4. Personalized Communications:
Tailor newsletters according to resident interests and past interactions.

Provide an AI-driven "Citizen Platform" that gives personalized updates on local issues, events, and services relevant to each user.

5. Measuring Success: Align KPIs with specific community engagement goals:
Compare the volume and diversity of feedback before and after AI implementation.

Track engagement rates among previously underrepresented groups.

Measure reduction in response times and increase in issue resolution rates.

Regularly compare AI-assisted analysis with human expert analysis.

Implement and regularly monitor these metrics with the community to ensure AI is meeting its intended goals and purpose.

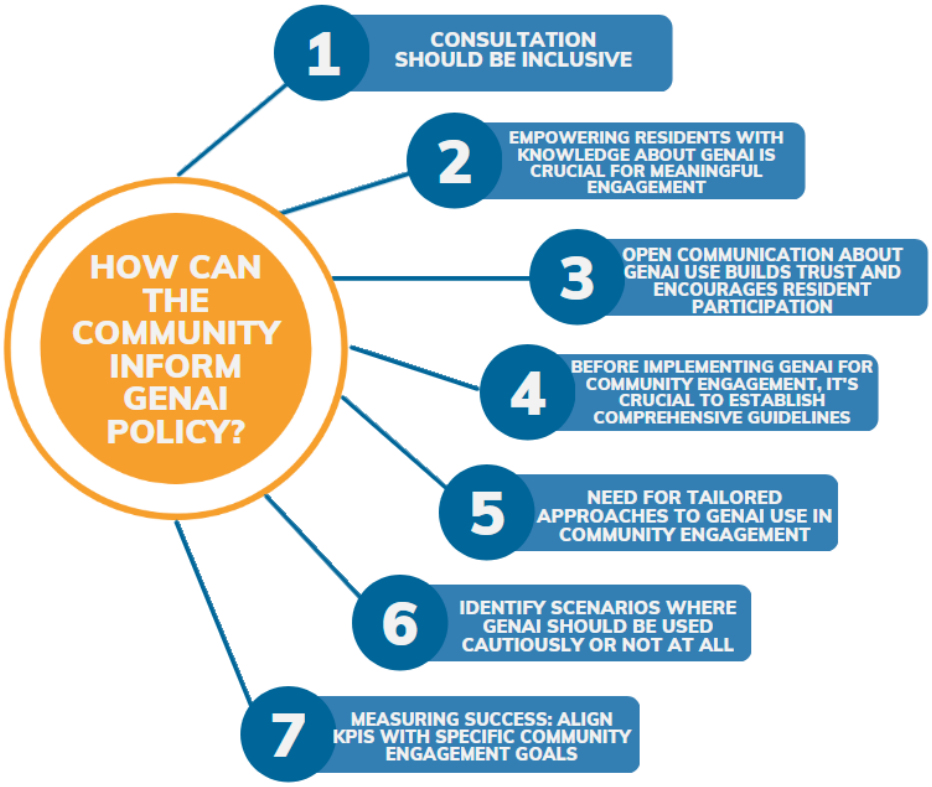

Figure 1. How can the community inform Gen AI policy?

Generative AI can serve as a new chapter for transformed community engagement at the level of local governments. Active resident involvement in AI policy development and use can make the civic processes inclusive, prompt and accountable. Emphasis on transparency, ethical use and prioritizing the community's needs are sine qua non for responsible implementation of this technology. While our efforts to understand the expanse of this technology continue, it is equally critical to remember that as local governments, our goal is to use AI to support and build stronger and more engaged communities.

B. How to Responsibly Use GenAI as a Communication Tool to Engage with Residents?

I. Accessibility and Inclusivity:

Ensure that GenAI tools are available in multiple languages to communicate with diverse communities.

Design and develop GenAI interfaces to be accessible to people with disabilities, for example, by offering audio interaction options.

Make easy alternatives available for those who are not comfortable with or unable to use digital tools.

II. Human Oversight and Intervention:

Establish a "human-in-the-loop" system where complex issues or issues requiring urgent attention are promptly escalated to human employees for redressal.

Regularly review AI interactions to ensure accuracy and appropriateness of responses.

III. Personalization with Privacy:

Account for resident preferences and previous conversations to frame GenAI-enabled communications while being transparent about the data used and providing opt-out option.

Establish stringent measures to protect data and information of residents used in such communications.

IV. Continuous Learning and Improvement:

Use the new information about city-based services, policies and community opinions to update the GenAI models frequently.

Improve the response quality of the AI models through resident feedback.

V. Support Human Interaction:

Emphasize on using GenAI for routine and repeatable processes, allowing human staff to utilize their time for more complex or sensitive interactions.

Ensure that the process to switch an interaction from an AI system to human staff is not cumbersome.

VI. Clear Communication of AI Limitations:

Explicitly address what the GenAI tool can and cannot do. For example, "This AI can give you information on what day your trash pick-up arrives. Your service request stating that you missed your pick-up cannot be filed by it."

Make sure that disclaimers are included about the possibility of errors in AI responses and urge residents to verify important information.

VII. Responsible Content Generation:

Ensure that humans review the communications drafted through assistance from GenAI to check for accuracy, appropriateness, and tone.

Implement safeguards to prevent the generation of biased or inappropriate content.

VIII. Feedback Mechanisms:

Residents should be able to easily report issues or violations or make suggestions through easy-to-use feedback options.

Establish a process to regularly monitor such feedback to improve operations of AI systems.

IX. Community Education:

Enable residents to effectively communicate with GenAI tools through provision of easy-to-understand resources.

Offer online tutorials, webinars or in-person workshops on "Understanding and Using Your City's AI Services."

X. Ethical Use Guidelines for GenAI and AI use:

Develop and publish ethical guidelines for GenAI use in resident communications for public consumption.

Ensure all AI and GenAI-generated content aligns with communication standards of the city.

XI. Crisis Communication Protocols:

Establish clear protocols for the “when and how” of using GenAI during emergencies or crisis situations.

Establish processes to make sure that quick dissemination of accurate information takes place during emergencies (natural, man-made or public health).

XII. Multilingual and Cultural Sensitivity:

Ensure that GenAI models are trained to be culturally sensitive and conscious of local considerations.

Culturally appropriate and accurate translations should be made available for diverse communities.

XIII. Performance Monitoring:

Establish KPIs catered to effective communication, such as response accuracy, resident satisfaction rates, and issue resolution times.

Publish reports regularly for public consumption on the performance of GenAI communication tools.

XIV. Development through Iteration and Refinement:

Begin with initiation of pilot programs for GenAI communication tools and expand on the basis of community feedback and performance metrics.

Engage residents in the consistent refinement of these tools through beta testing and feedback sessions.

By implementing these recommendations, local governments can plan their GenAI journey of enhancing communication with residents while maintaining transparency, accessibility, and trust. However, it is important to remember that GenAI can improve human-led community engagement, not replace it.

About MetroLab: MetroLab Network is a nonprofit in Washington DC that aims to equip local governments with science and research. It serves as a convener of an emerging academic practice focused on integrative, use-inspired, community-focused research, done in partnership with local government and communities. We cultivate partnerships between universities and local governments to drive research-informed, evidence-based policy and enable data and technology transformation; we foster a peer network of stakeholders from academia and local government that constitute an applied, interdisciplinary field of research and practice; and we connect to an ecosystem of federal, philanthropic, and civic partners with a shared interest in the promise of civic research and innovation.

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MetroLab Network
1701 Rhode Island Ave, NW
3rd Floor
Washington, DC 20036
www.metrolabnetwork.org
info@metrolabnetwork.org