



WHO GETS HEARD?

AN ENGAGEMENT DESIGN LAB FOR PLANNING WITH COMMUNITIES

Candy Isabel
GPA Fall Conference 2026



ABOUT ME

Afro-Latina, veteran, and founder of Khamai Strategies, launched in 2019 to help close the gap between organizations and the communities they serve.

My work is grounded in a passion for advocating alongside Black and Latinx communities and creating spaces where people can meaningfully shape the decisions that affect their lives.

At the core of what I do is a belief that communities should not just be consulted, they should have the opportunity to influence their futures and outcomes.





CANDY ISABEL
FOUNDER & CEO



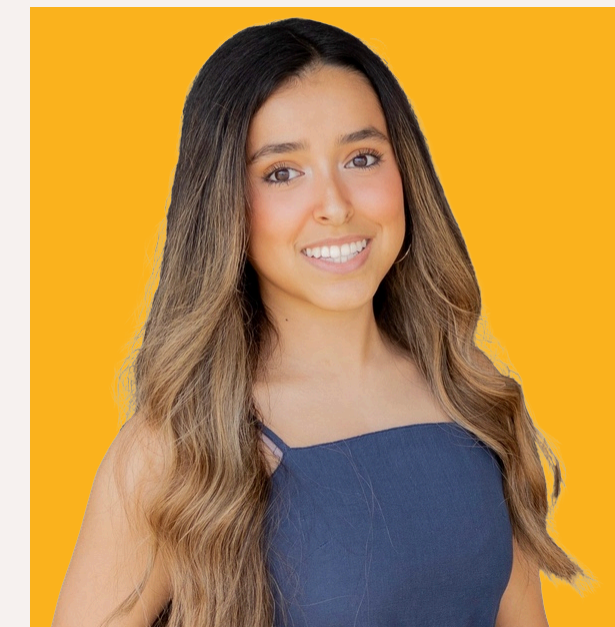
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KHAMAI STRATEGIES

Khamai Strategies is a strategy and engagement consulting firm helping nonprofits, municipalities, and community-serving organizations navigate complex challenges, engage the people who matter, and turn ideas into actionable plans.

**Our work is grounded in a simple belief:
The people closest to a challenge
should have a voice in shaping what
comes next.**

THINK ABOUT YOUR LAST PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT PROCESS.

WHAT DID THE PUBLIC ACTUALLY
HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE?

1. DID YOU KNOW WHAT THE PUBLIC COULD
INFLUENCE BEFORE ENGAGEMENT STARTED?

2. DID THE COMMUNITY KNOW?

3. CAN YOU POINT TO SOMETHING THAT
CHANGED BECAUSE OF THEIR INPUT?

MORE ENGAGEMENT DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEAN BETTER ENGAGEMENT



REPRESENTATION

Who participated vs who is affected?

INFLUENCE

What could participants actually change?

ACCOUNTABILITY

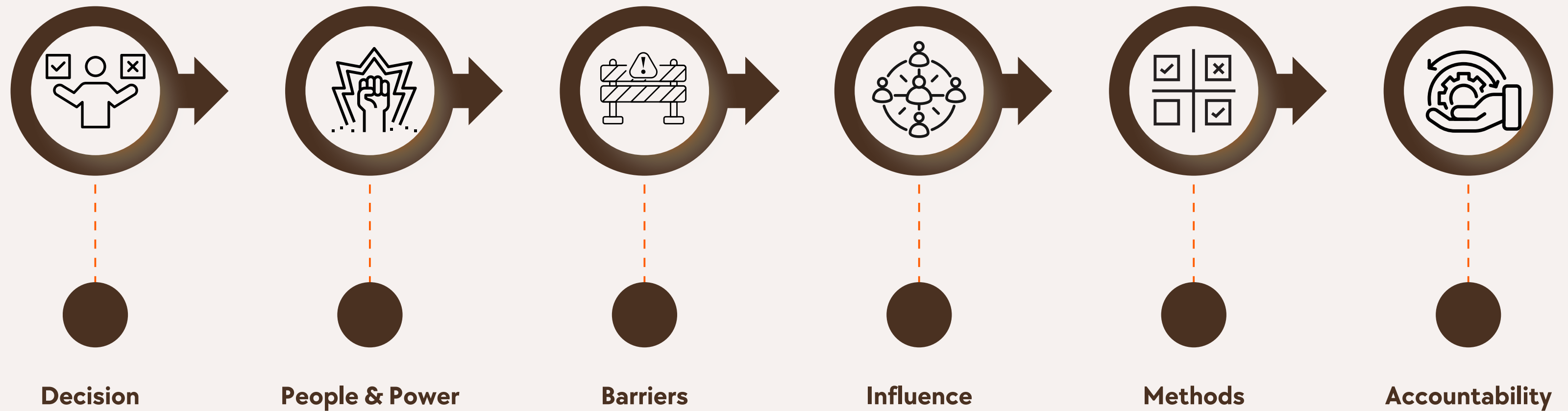
What happened after people gave input?

ENGAGEMENT IS A DESIGN
PROBLEM BEFORE IT IS AN
OUTREACH PROBLEM

ENGAGEMENT DESIGN FRAMEWORK



ENGAGEMENT DESIGN FRAMEWORK



THE PINEHAVEN CORRIDOR

HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

RAPID GROWTH

HOUSING PRESSURE

TRAFFIC & PEDESTRIAN
CONCERNS

REDEVELOPMENT INTEREST



- ### Natural Spaces
- Climate Action & Adaptation Plan
- 1 Plant and take care of more trees in the city, work with partners and offer rewards to protect them
 - 2 Make sure everyone can easily enjoy parks and green areas in the community
 - 3 Look at ways to save water in our city
 - 4 Keep focusing on building green features in our City's infrastructure
 - 5 Support ways of managing land that help the environment sustain itself
 - 6 Find ways to make sure our health stays good even with changes in the climate and environment

Blue
Yellow
Red - low

Nodding On



ABOUT OUR COMMUNITY

THE REALITY

- A preliminary concept already exists
- The city has six months
- Council wants visible public participation
- Staff capacity is limited
- Some communities distrust the process
- Previous engagement did not clearly show how public input was used

Where do you start?

YOU ARE THE
PLANNING TEAM

DESIGN THE
ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

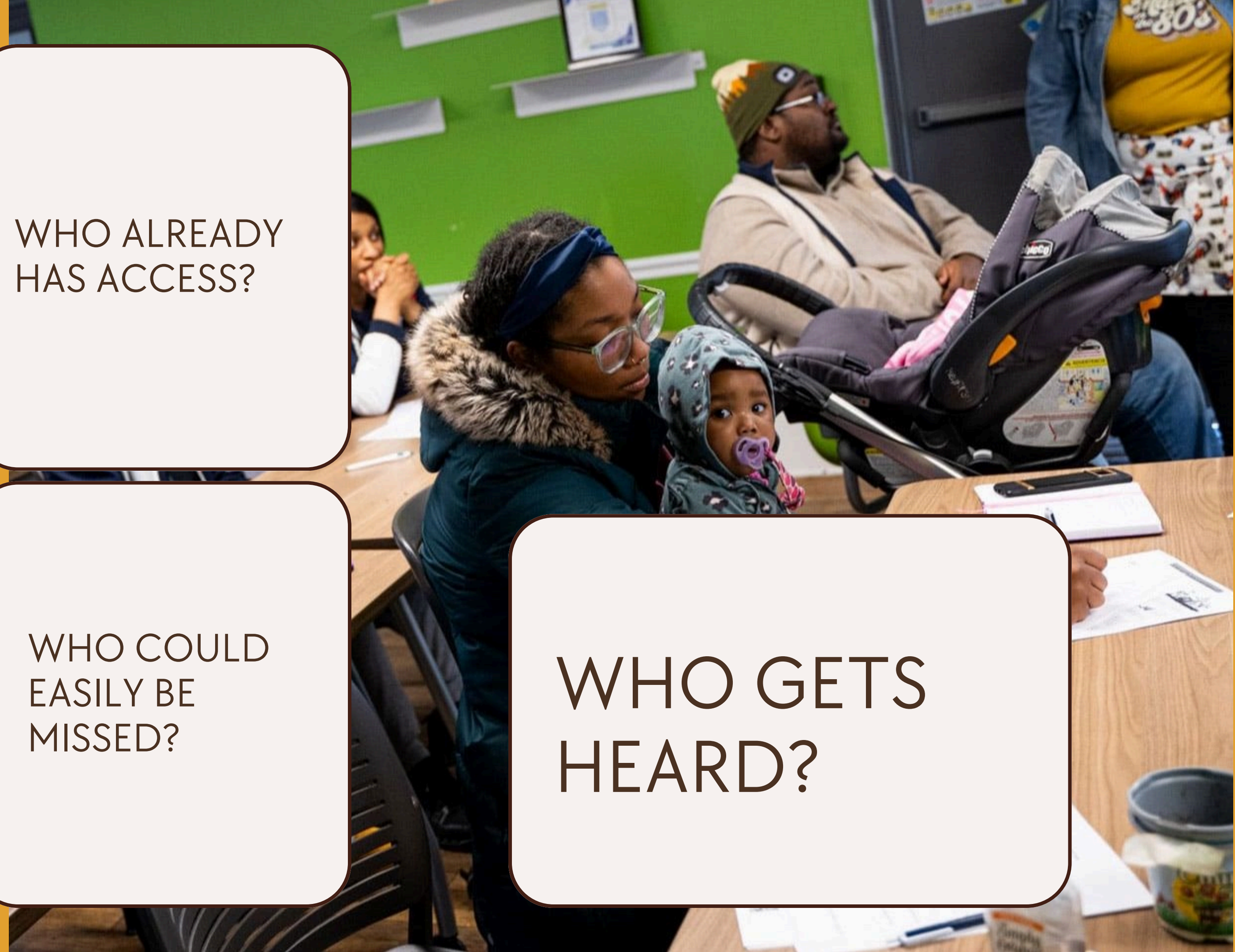
WHO
DECIDES?

WHO ALREADY
HAS ACCESS?

WHO IS
MOST
AFFECTED?

WHO COULD
EASILY BE
MISSED?

WHO GETS
HEARD?



GO DEEPER: WHY ARE THEY MISSING?

low participation is not
always low interest

Language
Work schedules
Transportation
Childcare
Technology

Disability access
Trust
Planning jargon
Previous negative experiences
Unclear influence

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE
ABOUT THE PROCESS,
NOT THE COMMUNITY?



HOW MUCH
INFLUENCE?

INFORM

REACT

SHAPE

COCREATE

DECIDE



Corridor Priorities
Pedestrian Improvements
Housing Strategies
Streetscape Design
Redevelopment Areas
Implementation Priorities

What level of influence should the public have for each?

Are we asking people to participate in decisions they cannot actually change?

if the answer is yes, the issue may not be engagement.

Its expectation-setting

CHOOSE METHODS WITH PURPOSE

AUDIENCE	WHAT DO WE NEED TO LEARN?	BARRIER	METHOD

Listening sessions
Pop-ups
Focus groups
Surveys
Walking audits
Interviews
Participatory mapping
Community ambassadors
Small-group discussions
Visual preference activities
Youth engagement
Multilingual sessions



Council cuts your engagement timeline from four months to eight weeks.

Your budget is reduced by 30%.

What stays?

What goes?

What can you not compromise?



EQUITY DOES NOT ALWAYS
MEAN DOING MORE

Residents consistently identify safe pedestrian crossings near schools and apartment communities as a top priority.

BUT

The draft plan prioritizes aesthetic streetscape improvements.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

CLOSING THE LOOP

Communities should be able to answer:

- What did you hear from us?
- What did you do with it?
- What changed?
- What did not change?
- Why?
- What happens next?



STOP

What is one engagement practice you need to stop?

START

What will you introduce?

KEEP

What is already working?



The measure of meaningful engagement is not how many people participated.

It is whether the people most affected *were reached, understood what they could influence, and can see how their input shaped what happened next.*

QUESTIONS?

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