CONVENING DELIBERATIVE FORUMS

Courtesy of the Maricopa Community College Center for Civic Participation

These are steps that successful community conveners take to ensure a robust, well-attended forum.

FIRST STEPS

1. Know your issue – Read the discussion guide on the issue.

2. Determine the goal of the forum – What is the expected outcome? This will influence which materials will be needed during the forum (e.g., participant questionnaires) as well as how to end the forum (reflective questions, questions for feedback).

3. Secure community partners who can share resources and secure participants. If working directly with a partner for targeted invitations, work with a specific list of stakeholders that represents categories of people who are impacted by the issue.

4. Work with partners to identify individuals within the stakeholder categories. Who could best represent the voice of that category?

5. Encourage partners to think of alternative individuals just in case the first individual you contact cannot attend.

6. Work with community partners to decide on the date and time for the forum in your community. Please consider other community events that would compete with the forum, making it impossible for important community leaders to attend. Also, what constitutes a good time for a forum changes depending upon the community or the day of the week.

7. Find a location for the forum and reserve the time. Consider using a "safe" or neutral location (public library, community college, church meeting room, etc.). Allot at least 4½ hours for a forum, one hour before for set up, 2 - 2½ hours for the forum and, one hour afterwards for tear down. In choosing a location please think about:
   - The kind of set up will you require
     i. See diagram below for setting up chairs for a forum
     ii. Tables for materials, refreshments, sign-in
   - Any audio/visual equipment needs
   - Number of people attending
     i. If the room is too big, people feel uncomfortable
     ii. If the room is too small, they tend to get irritable
   - Atmosphere of the room
     i. Dark rooms make participants quiet and less interactive
     ii. Lots of windows make it hard for participants to concentrate especially if the is a lot of activity outside
     iii. Sufficient wall space to hang flip chart paper, if possible
     iv. Comfortable chairs are helpful

MAKING THE INVITE TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

8. Send invitations at least two weeks in advance that include information on the issue and specific logistics (site map to meeting location). If the forum is open to the general public (rather than by invitation only), use partner communication tools to effectively advertise — newsletters, web, email blasts, etc.

9. Work with partners to make follow-up calls of invitation. When calling people to invite them to a forum, create a "speech" for your phone calls inviting guests that includes information about the purpose of the forum.

10. Begin making calls to your targeted participant invite list. This is a process of networking. One of the results of being actively engaged in convening the public is, after the forum is over, you will be much more connected to your community.

11. As calls are made and RSVPs received, confirm with the invitee correct contact information so that reminder phone calls (and/or emails) a few days prior to the forum can be made, as well as follow-up materials sent after the forum.

12. If the individual can't attend, ask her/him to recommend someone else in the same stakeholder category who might be a good substitute for them. If appropriate, you can also ask for suggestions for participants in other categories.

13. After you have successfully invited a representative from each stakeholder category, (there may be one or two missing and that's okay; no one is expecting perfection) create a listserv of the email addresses so you can send an email reminder a couple of days before the event.

14. Send the completed participant list to the community partners via email.

15. A couple of days before the forum, email all forum participants reminding them to attend.

16. Call participants the day before the event. Remind them of the date, location, and time, and leave them your name and telephone number for any questions.

17. Track confirmations to ensure that you have enough moderators/recorders for a successful forum. If you are expecting a large group, consider dividing participants into smaller groups of 8-12 for most of the forum, providing a moderator and recorder for each small group.

THE DAY OF THE FORUM

18. Be available by phone so participants can reach you.

19. Greet the participants as they arrive and help them sign in and join the forum.

20. Provide refreshments.

21. Place flip charts in a location that can be viewed by all participants.

22. Provide enough issue guides or advisories and participant questionnaires (if appropriate to your forum).

Deliberative Forum Room Configuration

- No tables in front of chairs, people tend to "hide" behind them.

- No one person is more important than the other, so make sure the moderator is NOT seated at the head of the room...if there is a "front" of the room.

- The recorder and flip chart stands are best situated as part of the circle, if the room does not permit – the configuration shown below is workable.

- If the chairs swivel, it can be distracting so stationary chairs are preferred.

- Everyone should be able to see each other at all times so it is best to have a "perfect" circle.

- If possible, the moderator should be across from the recorder.

- Provide sufficient wall space to hang completed flip chart papers. Participants will need to review everything that's been said to determine next steps, if applicable.

Recorder

Circle of Chairs

Moderator