

Organize a Community Forum

Contents

- Getting Started..... 2
 - What is a community forum? 2
 - Why hold a community forum? 2
 - What would our community forum look like? 2
- Beginning to Plan 2
 - Find people to work with..... 2
 - Preliminary questions. 2
 - Thinking about the Logistics 3
 - Assigning Tasks..... 4
- Planning the Event 5
 - The Importance of Communication..... 5
 - Setting a Date..... 6
 - Finding a Location 6
 - Possible Locations:..... 6
 - Connecting with Community Partners..... 7
 - Calling potential partners: 7
 - Setting the Agenda..... 7
 - Selecting Speakers 8
 - Things to think about when selecting speakers:..... 8
 - Preparing Speakers 8
 - Possible Actions Items 9
 - Evaluation 9
- Publicity and Media 10
 - Getting Turnout at Your Event..... 10
 - Possible ways to increase turnout at your event:..... 10
 - Invite Elected Officials and Local Policy Makers 11
 - Putting Together a Press Plan 12

Getting Started

What is a community forum?

A community forum is an event that anyone can attend, where a panel of experts who have experience in a particular subject share their knowledge and perspectives and where members of the audience can ask questions during a pre-set time. It is a great resource for anyone who wants to learn more about an issue. It is also an excellent way to recruit activists.

Why hold a community forum?

Community forums can be a very effective way to raise awareness in your community and to get people involved in an issue. It can provide an opportunity for activists to join forces to demand action on a set of issues, advocate for change and get local media attention.

What would our community forum look like?

Much of the event depends the time and resources you have available to put into it. It can be as big or small as you want it but in general, a community forum should last about an hour, long enough to educate your audience and short enough to keep their attention. For example, the forum could have around three presenters, each speaking for 10–15 minutes. After all the presenters have spoken, there can be a question and answer session, lasting no more than 20 minutes. Finally, it can conclude with a 5–10 minute wrap-up session, motivating attendees and calling them to action.

Beginning to Plan

Find people to work with.

As a first step, try to identify a group of individuals who will help you plan the community forum. Not only is it a lot of work to do alone, but more brainpower and more contacts will help make the forum even better. If you can't find others to work with, that's fine too. This guide is mostly tailored to a group working to put together a community forum, but you can still use it to guide your planning.

Preliminary questions.

As you begin to plan your forum, there are some preliminary questions you need to answer. The answers to these questions may change as you talk to other organizations

or as you work through specific details. That's okay — it's even good because you want to be responsive to the needs of your partners and community.

What is the most important thing you want to accomplish with this forum?

Write this one down, because you will not want to forget it.

Who can help, and how much time can each person commit?

This should be a positive experience. Be realistic about the commitment each person is able to make so that the rest of the planning can go smoothly.

Who can you collaborate with in the community?

You probably do not have all the knowledge and resources to do everything yourself. There are already groups and advocates in your community who care about these issues and would want to be involved in this kind of event.

What type of budget and resources do you have?

You will need to know this before you secure a location, print handouts, plan refreshments, etc.

Ideally, what would your forum look like?

Spend some time dreaming up a forum that makes you happy and proud. What aspects or elements are most important to you?

Thinking about the Logistics

As with any event, it is hard to anticipate all logistical matters, but the better planning you do, the more smoothly the event will go. Use the following questions to help you brainstorm resources that are available and put your thoughts together for the event.

When, where and at what time will the forum occur?

How long should it last?

How many people will speak and who should they be?

Who will moderate?

Will there be a sponsor for the event?

How will we publicize the event?

What will the room set up be?

Will we need microphones or audio-visual equipment?

Who can we collaborate with for this event?

How will we notify the media about the event?

Should we serve refreshments?

Assigning Tasks

Because there is a lot to do to make a community forum a success, you should ideally start planning the event at least eight to ten weeks in advance. Below is a suggestion of one way to divide the tasks. You may expand, contract, mix and match these fields of responsibility to match the size and personal interests in your team. One person may take on several of these roles, or many people may split them up further. The important thing is that all of these responsibilities are fulfilled and there is one point person overseeing the entire project.

If you are organizing a community forum on your own, then read through this section to see what you should be thinking about.

Team Leader Responsibilities:

- Keep the big picture in mind.
- Keep track of everyone's progress.
- Support each team member with their responsibilities when they need help.
- Manage budget.

Program Coordinator Responsibilities:

- Organize the actual program for the forum.
- Coordinate the agenda.
- Network with local organizations and advocates to find good speakers.
- Moderate the panel during the forum and help move the program along smoothly.

Site Organizer Responsibilities:

- Reserve the site and coordinate all the physical aspects of the event.
- Coordinate the banners, chairs, tables, handouts, sign in table, sound system, refreshments, etc.

Media Coordinator Responsibilities:

- Invite the media.
- Contact local newspapers and television and radio stations.
- Follow up with them in the days and weeks leading up to the event.
- Write a press release.
- During the forum, be available to greet media professionals and provide them with materials.

Publicity Coordinator Responsibilities:

- Build public awareness and "fill the room" for the forum.
- Invite people to the forum through public announcements and advertisements and in one-on-one contacts.
- Invite congressional representatives and local policy-makers.

Planning the Event

The Importance of Communication

Even if everyone is doing phenomenal work, planning a forum can turn chaotic if progress isn't communicated regularly. In many ways, hosting a community forum is like building a house. If everyone works on their own part of the house, without looking at the blueprint, you may have excellent components, staircases, windows, walls, but they will not fit together to make a house. Likewise, even if your community forum has great speakers, a nice venue and good refreshments, it will not go over well unless it fits into a greater plan.

Make sure that you have a system of communication worked out between teammates and keep your team leader updated on all progress so they can be on the look out for any confusion or conflicting plans.

Setting a Date

Ideally, the community forum will take place during times when the issue you want to discuss is topical and relevant. This toolkit lays out a planning and preparation timeline of 5 to 6 weeks, but your team may choose to spend more or less time planning. Identify a space of days to aim for, and be prepared to adjust that date as you talk with your partner organizations, speakers, and the site.

Finding a Location

The location for your event will set the tone. Here are some things to think about:

- Will this place naturally draw an audience?
- Will there be any fee to use this space?
- What kind of atmosphere will best suit the forum you are planning? Are you looking for a small room, a large auditorium, a park, or the steps of your Parliament?
- Will the guests and the audience feel comfortable in the space? (For example, some people may not feel comfortable in a church building, others may need it to be handicap accessible, etc.)
- Is this a site that will be attractive to the media? (Is it easy to get to? Does it lend itself to good pictures?)
- Is the site accessible by public transportation? Is parking easily available?

Possible Locations:

- Community College or University
- Library
- Community Center
- Community Organization Meeting Room
- School
- Church, Synagogue, Temple or Mosque
- Town Square or Public Amphitheater

- City or State Government Building

Connecting with Community Partners

Partnering with community organizations that are interested in your issue will only enhance the success of your forum. Community partners can lend you help and support in getting materials, media coverage, and community attendance at the forum. Make a list of potential individuals and organizations you could partner with for the forum.

Calling potential partners:

1. Ask to speak with the director or other appropriate staff person.
2. Introduce yourself.
3. Ask if he or she has a moment to talk.
4. Explain that you are planning a community forum.
5. Ask if their organization would be interested in participating or if they can refer you to other interested parties or speakers.
6. Set a plan to follow up — be sure to get all contact information.
7. Thank them.
8. Record contact information and follow up with referrals.

Setting the Agenda

Now it is time to plan the format of your forum. This sample agenda below should help you do this. The tone of the forum should be upbeat but serious and it should end positively, looking forward to future action.

Welcome (5 minutes)

Given by one of the organizers, local advocate or celebrity, probably the person who will act as moderator for the rest of the event.

Introduction (10 minutes)

An overview of the issue to be discussed at the forum.

Opening Remarks (10 minutes)

Given by a high profile person if you were able to secure someone.

Panel (10 minutes per speaker):

Moderator facilitates 3–4 panelists speaking about their experiences with the issue at hand.

Question and Answer (15–20 minutes):

Panel and other speakers take questions from the audience.

Call to action (10 minutes):

Moderator or local advocate suggests next step for audience, ideally something that can be begun in the room at that moment.

Positive End:

Make sure that the close of the forum is positive and leads to the next action. Give a rousing closing and send people off prepared to fight another battle, whether it be on this issue or the next.

Selecting Speakers

You will most likely want 2–4 speakers presenting at your forum, representing a variety of perspectives.

Things to think about when selecting speakers:

- Look for articulate and engaging people.
- Think about assembling speakers who reflect the full diversity of culture, experience, and perspective in your community.
- Seek a balance between relying on the strengths of experienced advocates and offering the forum as an opportunity to emerging advocates.
- Be sure all the speakers know about each other and are comfortable speaking together with respect.

Preparing Speakers

Once you have selected and invited speakers and they have accepted your invitations, make sure they understand the set-up and goals of your forum. To help them prepare and to make sure your event is a success, consider doing the following things.

- Send the speakers information about you and your take on the issue at hand.
- Clearly explain the set up of the forum and your desired outcomes.
- Go over the set-up of the event and let them know who will be presenting on the panel with them.
- Be clear about what time the event will start, how long they will have to present and who you hope to have in the audience.
- Follow up with them in the days following the event to reconfirm their availability.

Possible Actions Items

- Set up a letter-writing table and encourage everyone to write a letter to their elected official — be sure to provide a simple sample letter.
- Make a huge banner, maybe from a bed sheet, on which everyone can write their hopes for your issue and give it to elected officials.
- Provide sign-up sheets for participation in coming activities, perhaps sponsored by your partner organizations.
- Circulate a petition to send to your elected officials, local or national.
- Organize a call-in day to your elected official.
- Recruit members for a community coalition to work together.

Evaluation

There are two ways to evaluate the success of the forum. First, distribute evaluation forms to forum participants to gauge their response to the event and get a better understanding of what they learned. See [Appendix 3](#) for a sample evaluation form.

Second, after the event is over and your group has taken some time to relax, set up a time to meet and discuss how the event went. Go through the following questions to see what team members saw as successful aspects of the event and what areas could be improved for your next community forum.

How did the location work out? Was it able to accommodate your needs?

How successful was the publicity plan?

What are ways you could get even more people to attend your next event?

After checking the sign-in sheets against the list of people who said they would come, did individuals and other organizations produce the people they were committed to bring?

Did people come off the street in response to leaflets, posters or advance media coverage?

What was the speaker panel like?

Would you use the same speakers again?

Were there any logistical problems that occurred?

How could they be avoided in the future?

Publicity and Media

Getting Turnout at Your Event

Your event will have the greatest impact if as many people as possible attend. It is a good idea to have a plan on how you will get people to your event so that you do not spend a significant amount of time putting together an event and only have a small group of people attend. Keep in mind that the best strategy to get people to attend is to personally invite them.

Possible ways to increase turnout at your event:

- Make a list of the friends and family you will personally invite.
- Submit announcements to your local papers for events calendars.
- Hand out flyers at community events.
- Place flyers on bulletin boards at community centers, religious institutions, in coffee shops, music stores, bus stops, grocery stores, co-ops, laundromats, local schools and universities — anywhere there are people.
- Ask local newspapers and radio, and/or television stations to run public service announcements about the forum.
- Send invitation letters to all community organizations, groups, businesses, and individuals you want in attendance at the forum.

- If you will be having elected officials in attendance or a local celebrity giving the opening remarks, hype it!

Invite Elected Officials and Local Policy Makers

Inviting elected officials and local policy makers to your event is a great opportunity for them to spend time with constituents and hear about their concerns.

- Send a fax or e-mail to their office inviting them to attend your community forum.
- Explain what issue you will be discussing, why it is relevant to them, and why it is an important topic for their constituents.
- Let him or her know that you will honor them for attending and for previous good deeds.
- Note the date, time and location.
- Explain that he or she will offer part of the opening remarks (giving them a chance to express goodwill and concern for the community and the other speakers) and may choose to participate in the question and answer period.
- Inform him or her that you will be inviting the media to attend and ask about their availability to take questions from the media.
- A week after you have sent the fax, make a follow up phone call to their office scheduler.
- Once they have accepted your invitation go over the details of the event.
- Confirm the date, time and location.
- Explain the set-up of the event and who will be present.
- Discuss what you would like them to say at the event and when they will speak.
- Offer to send them talking points.
- A few days before the event, reconfirm their availability to attend.

Putting Together a Press Plan

You can do as many or as few of the following suggestions, based on the amount of time you have to put into getting media attention. Although it is up to you, keep in mind that the more media attention you get, the greater impact your forum will have.

- Try to get advance media coverage. Send a media advisory to key media contacts a week before the meeting.
- Consider inviting area college media classes to videotape your event.
- Make follow-up calls to media people, city desks, daybooks, and assignment editors a day or two before the meeting.
- Prepare a press packet for distribution to press people at the meeting. It should include a press release and background information on your issue and your organization.
- Prepare visuals. Both newspapers and television prefer taking interesting pictures rather than pictures of talking heads. Prepare some visuals, charts, banners, or stunts that you think might be interesting. The visual should not just be "catchy" but should convey your message.
- Talk with press people at the event. One person should be assigned as the spokesperson and to greet the press.
- Call the press people who did not come to tell them what happened, or send a follow-up press release if you do not expect to get much media coverage.
- Thank the press people for covering your event
- If you received inaccurate coverage, call the media contact to clarify your message.
- If the event was a success but media professionals were not present, publicize the results yourselves.

[Appendix 1: Overview of Team Members' Responsibilities](#)

[Appendix 2: Team Leader Checklist](#)

[Appendix 3: Sample Evaluation Form](#)

Source: [RESULTS Educational Fund's Activist Milestones](#)