

# Community Meetings

Community forums and public hearings are two types of community meetings you should consider to assess community opinion. For a local needs assessment, a community forum is a relatively inexpensive and quick way of finding out about people's opinions and perceptions on health, nutrition, and/or physical activity issues.

## Community Forum

A community forum is similar to a town meeting. It's open to the public and includes facilitated discussion on a specific topic. At a community forum people can meet and discuss the barriers and opportunities to eating healthy and being physically active in their own community. In addition to finding out community opinion on an issue a community forum can build community support for an idea or project.

To hold a community forum follow these steps.

1. Meeting Location. Find a site that is accessible and inviting to the intended audience. You wouldn't want to hold the community forum in a corporate conference room in the city's financial district if you are targeting people living in public housing. Market and promote the meeting date, time, and location through media outlets your intended audience uses. You will need more than one meeting, held at different times and/or at different locations if you want opinions that are representative of the different demographic groups within your community.
2. Handouts. Have pens and a sign-in sheet(s) available in the room. Be sure to have multiple copies of an agenda and/or project the meeting agenda onto a large screen or a wall.
3. Open the Meeting. Welcome everyone, ask people to sign in, review the purpose of the meeting including how the information from the meeting will be used. Review your rules for conducting the meeting including things like no interrupting, talking time limits per person, how people will be recognized, etc.
4. Meeting Content. Have a few specific questions to ask the meeting participants. In your agenda you can set a time limit for group discussion on each question. See the sample survey in the Community Opinion Survey for some ideas on possible questions.
5. Close Meeting. If possible, spend a few minutes summarizing the main points raised during the meeting and let people know what happens next. Remind people to sign in and thank them for their time.
6. Note Taking. Have several people on site to take notes. This frees the facilitator to manage the participants.
7. Facilitator. A neutral person who is experienced at managing large group discussions will make a good facilitator. The facilitator needs to try and make sure everyone is heard while keeping within the time limit.

8. Meeting Follow-up. Send people a thank you note for participating and include a brief summary of the meeting.

Holding a community forum on a controversial subject is not advised, because it may be very difficult to keep the meeting civil. There are other ways to solicit community opinion on controversial subjects including holding a public hearing, distributing community opinion surveys, or conducting key informant interviews.

Community forums are key to Preview Forum, a national project that encourages community dialogue between citizens, formal and informal community leaders, and journalists on social issues. The overarching goal of Preview Forum is to use media to help a community deliberate on local responses to national issues. There is a self-guided tutorial on organizing and running such a community forum at its online learning center at <http://www.previewforum.com/learningcenter/>. Preview Forum is a project of Roundtable, Inc. and is funded by The Ford Foundation.

### **Public Hearing**

Public hearings are much more structured than community forums. Hearing committee members listen to testimony, ask questions, and issue a report. Public hearings are a good way to solicit community opinion on a topic that has many different perspectives.

To hold a public hearing follow these steps.

1. Committee Members. Choose the people who will hear the testimony, ask questions of the witnesses, and issue a report following the hearing. The summary report will have greater credibility and impact if the committee members represent different view points on an issue and/or are representative of the community.
2. Witnesses. The committee members should generate the list of witnesses. Again the more diverse this list the more credible the outcome. In addition to invited witnesses you can have a public portion to the hearing. The public should be given a time limit and a list of items or questions to address.
3. Questions. The committee members should decide on the questions they want answered during the hearing. These questions along with the public hearing agenda and how the hearing will be run need to be sent to witnesses with adequate time for them to prepare their comments. If you plan on a public portion to the hearing, this information should be released at this time.
4. Hearing. Witnesses should have prepared their testimony ahead of time and should appear as scheduled by the committee. Time needs to be allotted for committee members to ask the witnesses questions.
5. Final Report. The committee should prepare and release a final report that includes a summary of the view points heard and a conclusion, if one was drawn.