

Community Conversations



What it is

Community Conversations are a specific form of group session in which community members are asked to help identify and address critical community needs, issues, and solutions. Normally, these sessions are held in small groups (6 to 15 people). However, conversations can be conducted with subgroups in a larger community session, enabling all individuals present an opportunity to participate. Sessions are generally an hour to an hour and a half in length and are held in familiar, easily accessible, and neutral locations such as local cafes or bars, libraries, community centers, etc.

Why it Works

Many forms of public engagement are merely informative and do not necessarily empower community members or give them confidence that their voices are heard and their participation is meaningful. Ultimately, this limits the enthusiasm people have to participate at all.

The Community Conversations model, on the other hand, provides a more interactive approach. Sessions are designed as a forum to gather detailed input, and then that input is shared with the public so the agency can be held accountable for incorporating it into policy and action. Finally, feedback about the outcomes are requested to continue the flow of communication between the agency and the community.

When participants have an understanding that their input is actually considered and potentially acted on by an outside agency, they will be more eager to maintain a relationship with that agency and provide future input.

When to Use It

The Community Conversations model should be used if acquiring local input is of serious importance to the implementation of a program or development of a project and an agency wants to initiate a cycle of input, incorporation, and feedback. It can also be used as a method of increasing familiarity and trust between the agency and community.

Audience

While this approach to public engagement could be used for any demographic, it will be most appealing to people who are comfortable sharing personal opinions in small group settings or have the potential to be personally affected by the issues being discussed.

Estimated Level of Effort

Effort will be expended to: Plan and organize sessions, recruit participants, reserve spaces to hold sessions, facilitate and record discussions, analyze and draw up reports about participant input, determine how to incorporate input into agency action, and publicly demonstrate how the outcomes were influenced by the conversations to encourage continued participation.

Cost Considerations

Eliciting participation may require offering compensation for time, travel expenses, etc. It may also cost more than a typical public meeting to devise reports and advertise the outcomes to the public.

Resources

[Overview of Community Conversations at United Way of Racine County](#)

[Report on Community Conversations at United Way of Racine County](#)

Examples

[Boston, Massachusetts, Community Conversations series](#)

[Nashville Area MPO, 2035 Comprehensive Plan](#)

[Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, GO TO 2040 Citywide Plan](#)

The Woodbridge Library conducted community conversations to hear residents' thoughts on the future of libraries.

What will libraries look like in five to ten years?

If you haven't filled out a survey yet, please do.

The library's consultants, Library Development Solutions, will conduct Community Conversations in each location to get a better sense of the current and future community needs for library service.



Iselin Branch Library, 1081 Green Street, Iselin
Monday, November 7, 7:00 pm

Henry Inman Branch Library, 607 Inman Avenue, Colonia
Thursday, November 17, 2:00 pm

Fords Branch Library, 211 Ford Avenue, Fords
Tuesday, November 29, 7:00 pm

Main Library, 1 George Frederick Plaza, Woodbridge
Monday, December 12, 7:00 pm

All Community Conversation participants will receive a choice of a thumb drive keychain or travel mug with the library logo!