

**Tips for Community Conversations and Engagement**

The primary role of advocates is to make it easy for decision-makers to give us what we want. Engage your advocate community in a conversation that is designed specifically to share perspectives and personal stories about the issues. Conversations shaped by lived experiences elicit deeper relationships that can apply pressure and influence on lawmakers and other decision-makers.

This document provides an overview and a checklist for meaningful conversations that allow individuals to be influential advocates. Tips:

* Do your homework on a community first. Understanding the roots of racial inequity and health in a community grounds us in respect and curiosity.
* Leave the data-filled PowerPoint presentation at the office. There is nothing worse than defining a community through the data YOU brought to them. Let the community define itself.
* Be prepared ahead of time with well-thought-out questions that focus on solutions and encourage thinking. Open-ended questions elicit personal, real-life experiences and provide an opportunity for advocates to look and listen to individuals who share their mutual passion. The “Who Are My People” exercise is a great way to get community groups warmed up and talking to one another and thinking about their own personal experiences. This activity positions community members as experts of their own experiences and allows an asset-based narrative to unfold from within, if that is the will of participants, rather than having outsiders frame a community based on deficit data.
* Include volunteers, co-workers, board members, and partner organizations in the conversation.
* Be a good listener and engage in dialogue. The ideal meeting is a dialogue, not a monologue. Be flexible and allow the conversation to be a give and take.
* Ask community members if there is anyone else you should meet, learn from, and possibly engage with to get more information.
* Build relationships. When it comes to advocacy, it is all about relationships. Investing time in getting to know your volunteers, not just decision-makers, is time well spent. Communicate frequently, check-in, ask questions, offer yourself as a resource, share new information, and work to get to know these individuals and to have them know you. Remember that your goal is to build an ongoing relationship.
* If your community conversations are held in a district served by key lawmakers, consider inviting the lawmaker to join you - BUT make sure to engage them as equal participants in conversation with other community members – not as guest speakers.
* NOTE: It is important to avoid calling these conversations a “community focus group” or “community listening session.” Our job is not to have a one and done conversation, but to build relationships for deep partnership.

Organizer’s Checklist for Effective In-Person Community Meetings

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|  | **Activity** |
|  | Designate lead organizer for meeting |
|  | Secure date, time, and location that prioritize the convenience of those most impacted by the legislation you are proposing |
|  | Create invitation – with RSVP and directions |
|  | Develop a broad invitation list with contact information |
|  | Invite local organizations to co-sponsor and co-brand the event  |
|  | Develop a meeting agenda with exercises, times and roles |
|  | Develop a script and assign speaking roles and practice with a “dry run”  |
|  | Assign “mingler” to welcome all attendees as they arrive to put them at ease |
|  | If dignitaries will be in attendance, assign someone to serve as informal “handler” to make sure they feel special |
|  | Collect RSVPs – Get phone, email, and any accommodations (sign language, dietary needs, translator, childcare, etc.) |
|  | Create participant contact list – including email/phone numbers in case of last-minute changes |
|  | Send a reminder two days before the meeting (via email, text, and social media) |
|  | Secure a laptop and projector if needed |
|  | Secure ASL interpreter, translator services, and childcare if needed |
|  | Test and practice presentations in advance |
|  | Get refreshments (preferably donated) – *avoid allergy inducing foods like nuts* |
|  | Bring name tags, markers, pens, masking tape, and flip chart |
|  | Create signs to direct people to the meeting |
|  | Bring a sign-in sheet to capture name, email, phone, and home address of attendees |
|  | Bring sign-on letters of support  |
|  | Assign a volunteer to photograph the event – be sure to have photo release forms to get participant permission to use their image  |
|  | Designate a competent notetaker to capture meeting minutes, key discussion points, and action items |
|  | Copy materials and bring participant packets |
|  | Secure onsite help for the day of -- room set-up, registration, seating, and clean-up |
|  | Recognize all dignitaries by name and title at the beginning of the event |
|  | Send thank-you notes and meeting minutes within 3 business days - highlighting assignments, key decisions, and next steps |

**Organizer’s Checklist for Effective Virtual Community Meetings**

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|  | Identify day/time that is convenient for those most impacted by the legislation you are proposing |
|  | Ensure community members have access to the online meeting platform you are using; provide detailed instructions and the phone number of someone who can assist with technical problems during the meeting |
|  | Send virtual invitation and require registration to capture attendees’ contact information |
|  | Invite local organizations to co-sponsor and co-brand the event  |
|  | Develop a meeting agenda with times and roles |
|  | Develop a script and assign speaking roles and practice with a “dry run”  |
|  | Circulate a meeting reminder 24-48 hours in advance  |
|  | Recognize all dignitaries by name and title at the beginning of the event |
|  | Designate a facilitator to track meeting time |
|  | Designate a competent notetaker to capture meeting minutes, key discussion points, and action items |
|  | Recognize all dignitaries by name and title at the beginning of the event |
|  | Remember to keep all attendees on mute, until they are scheduled to speak |
|  | Send thank-you note and include meeting notes within 3 business days |
|  | Other? |