

How to Organize a Town Hall Meeting

A Planning Guide

The following guide presents step-by-step instructions for convening and facilitating an effective town hall meeting. A town hall meeting is an informal public meeting around shared subjects of interest. For many years, town hall meetings have been an important tool for informing citizens about emerging issues, gauging where a community stands on a subject and identifying and implementing solutions to a problem. These meetings also serve as an avenue to get messages out to the public, generate news media coverage, jump-start local advocacy efforts by mobilizing community support and identify individuals and organizations for future collaborations.

PLANNING A TOWN HALL MEETING

*Three Months
Before Event*

STEP 1: Form A Planning Committee

A good way to make your event as successful as possible is to form partnerships with a variety of organizations and other likely allies, and work with them to plan your event. These relationships will raise the profile of your town hall meeting and increase public awareness and attention. Your partners will also be able to help you establish the event's credibility and secure free services such as audiovisual equipment, space or refreshments. All planning partners and supporters should be publicly recognized as sponsors of the event. Some possible partners include your local or state agency responsible for alcohol and drug services, your state's member of national prevention and recovery networks, community recovery organizations, treatment and recovery centers, Drug Courts, educators, youth in the community and faith-based institutions. It is recommended to have at least four people on your planning committee, including both adults and youth. It is helpful to recruit your planning committee as early as possible as they will be integral in helping plan, manage and promote the event. Sometimes, more than one committee or subcommittee may be appropriate, such as a logistics committee or media committee who can work independently and report back to the planning committee.

*Three Months
Before Event*

STEP 2: Research the Unique Characteristics of Your Community

Before organizing your town hall meeting, it is important to understand your community's unique issues, challenges and opportunities for change. Review local data from a variety of sources and develop a community profile based on solid research. This information will help you know how to focus the discussion and give your program and presentations credibility.

This profile should include the community's demographics, distinct culture, political environment, history of alcohol and drug problems, opportunities for treatment and recovery support services and social and historical barriers to obtaining help.

*Three Months
Before Event*

STEP 3: Identify Your Objectives

No two town hall meetings are alike. Your meeting's content, format and objectives will depend on the particular concerns and needs that you and your partners have identified. For example, your objective could be to inform families and residents about the problem of addiction and the need for treatment and recovery services in the community. Others may want their town hall meeting to be a forum for a call to action, such as increased services, new policies or improved community collaboration.

*Ten Weeks
Before Event*

STEP 4: Determine The Format of Your Town Hall

Your format will depend on what you are trying to achieve. One of the most common formats is a briefing by a panel of three or four people and a moderator. The panel discussion typically lasts approximately 35-50 minutes, and the question and answer period usually lasts about 30 minutes. Policymakers and the general public are the primary audience for this type of town hall.

Another format possibility is a media roundtable. This would typically include two to four panelists who bring different viewpoints to an issue. They have a moderated discussion designed to highlight the issue and then take questions from reporters, who are the primary audience for this format. Media roundtables can be held in a small setting such as an office conference room or a classroom.

A third format option is a policy panel. At a policy panel, the public presents their opinions to panel members, who are community leaders that receive testimony from residents. Speakers from the general public give their accounts and urge the panelists to adopt certain measures or recommendations. In this format, the policy panel can convene after the meeting and issue its findings or recommendations based on what they have learned from the public.

MEETING LOGISITICS

*Ten Weeks
Before Event*

STEP 1: Selecting the Place and Date

Finding the appropriate location is an important step in the planning process and should be determined as early as possible. In some cases, the location can help set the tone for your meeting. It is imperative to select a

place that is easy for residents and local media to get to. Some ideas are city hall, treatment centers, community centers, universities, colleges and public libraries. The event date and time are equally important. When selecting a date, check out community calendars to avoid competing with community events. When selecting a time, think about your target audience, or who you want to attend. If you want your friends and neighbors who work to attend, an early evening is probably your best bet. If you need to know how many people will be coming, set up a way for people to RSVP. As long as you are able to get a satisfactory number of RSVPs, the event should not be rescheduled.

*Ten Weeks
Before Event*

STEP 2: Identify and Invite Panelists

Trusted, well-respected speakers are key to your meeting. They will help draw attendance and media coverage. However, it's also important to include a local angle on your issue, so consider including individuals from your community who can provide an interesting vantage point on the issue being addressed.

When putting together your panel, think about your objectives for the event and what perspectives you want attendees to hear. The most interesting panels usually feature experts with a broad range of experience, including academic researchers, community leaders, individuals with clinical backgrounds, elected officials, treatment providers and counselors. In addition, include individuals in your community who have personal experience with the issue. For example, a good mix for a panel could be a medical expert, preferably an M.D., a law enforcement official who is interested in ending the revolving door of people with addiction, a family member who hasn't been able to get help for their child and/or a person who has been in recovery from addiction for at least two years. You can contact the public relations department of a local university, hospital or medical center to secure a medical expert. Invite panelists by first speaking with them and then following up with formal printed invitations sent by mail or simple letters mailed, e-mailed and/or faxed.

*Ten Weeks
Before Event*

STEP 3: Identify a Moderator or Facilitator

The facilitator or moderator you select should be a well-respected community figure, such as a local educator, reporter, high-level city official or community leader. This person will be responsible for facilitating the panel discussion and fielding audience questions to panelists. Consider a moderator who is adept at collaboration and is not a polarizing figure.

*Two Months
Before Event*

STEP 4: Prepare Panelists and Media Spokespeople

You will want to make your panelists comfortable with their colleagues and with their role. The following tips will help ensure that your panelists are fully prepared for their role in your meeting:

Give all panelists the background information on the event—in writing—as soon as you have confirmed their participation.

Schedule an informal preparation session with the panel about 60 minutes prior to the event.

For all speakers, and especially for young people, find out if they and/or their parents are comfortable with their name being released to the media, and if they will agree to be photographed or filmed.

It is also important to identify individuals who will serve as media spokespeople and provide comments to the press. These individuals could include local officials who can discuss the nature and the extent of the issue being addressed and the need for solutions in your community; community-members who have first-hand experience with the issue; and citizens who can talk about the next steps that you will be taking as a result of your event.

*Two Months
Before Event*

STEP 5: Staff Your Event

A key step in planning your town hall meeting is to identify people who will help out on the day of the event. Someone should be assigned to handle requests from the media; to greet and seat panelists and members of the audience; to distribute materials; to record comments and questions from the audience; to manage equipment set-up; and to handle any other important logistical matters. All participants do not need to be paid staff members; some of the roles are great volunteer opportunities! Ensure that all staff and volunteers know their roles, feel prepared to carry out their responsibilities and know whom to go to for assistance on the day of the event.

*Two Months
Before Event*

STEP 6: Prepare Materials to Distribute On-Site

Prepare packets to distribute to attendees when they arrive. You can include speaker biographies, agendas, evaluation forms and informational materials such as fact sheets about your organization and your co-sponsors/planning partners. Depending on the topic, you may want to research and distribute information about it and how people can get and stay involved. You should also use the information that you researched to develop targeted, localized materials that make the issue relevant to citizens of your community.

PROMOTING A TOWN HALL MEETING

*Two Months
Before Event*

STEP 1: Getting the Media There

Write a news release before contacting anyone in the media, because they will always ask you to send one to them. Make sure that you include the name and phone number of at least one (preferably two or three) easily accessible contact person(s) who will be able to reply to media inquiries before, during and after the town hall meeting.

To get the media to attend and report on your meeting, it is not enough to

simply invite them; you must let them know why the event will make a good story, and why it is important for the community to know about your efforts. The first step in this process is creating a targeted media list to identify reporters who cover areas or "beats," such as health or medical issues, alcohol and drug problems, parenting, lifestyle and family or teens. Reporters who have reported on addiction and alcohol and drug problems or covered other events hosted by your organization should be at the top of your list. Most print and broadcast media these days can be found with a "Google" search on the web. If you prefer, there is a set of reference books in just about every public library called "Standard Rate & Data," which usually has a pretty up-to-date listing of every publication and broadcast outlet in every U.S. city -- along with the names and phone numbers of editors, news directors, etc.

You can also call your local newspaper, radio and TV stations to identify reporters who might be interested in attending and reporting on your event. Another way to identify friendly reporters is to keep track of who is writing articles or covering stories about your issues. It is a good idea to ask supporters of the event or panelists if they have existing relationships with any members of the media in your local community. The next step is to send an email media advisory to reporters on your targeted media list at least one week before your event. Don't forget to ask to have your event listed on their "daybooks," where all local events that will be happening on a particular day are posted. The advisory should emphasize speakers and should be followed up with phone calls to reporters that you have identified. When you talk to reporters, stress the newsworthiness of your event, the local angle and the main goals of the event.

*One month
before event*

STEP 2: Other Ways to Promote Your Event

Another effective way to promote your town hall meeting is to enlist the support of other organizations that you work with, whether or not they are part of your planning committee. Your outreach efforts combined with theirs can help increase your publicity. Once you have figured out your target audience, there are different strategies for inviting them to attend. If your target audience is community stakeholders, business leaders and parents, issue personal invitations and advertise through PTA meetings or other outlets.

If your audience is the general public, then add your town hall meeting to the event calendar in your local newspaper by contacting the calendar editors at the publication. Another cost-effective way to promote your meeting is by posting flyers, posters or banners in visible, popular places such as schools, community centers, coffee shops, grocery stores, faith-based institutions, public libraries or hospitals. Don't forget recovery houses and 12-step clubhouses! Keep in mind that you may have to pay to have your ads in some places like a local newspaper. And there are many ways to attract people via social media including blogs, Facebook, Twitter and more.

*One Month
Before Event*

STEP 3: Create Press Kits

You will need to prepare materials to hand out to reporters. The easiest way to distribute materials is to create a press kit. It should include the media advisory and/or news release, a fact sheet with local statistics about your issue (e.g., addiction and recovery), brief biographies of speakers, as well as copies of any reports or case studies. A number of agencies offer local, state and national data on addiction and recovery, such as:

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment Partners for Recovery:
<http://pfr.samhsa.gov/>

Faces & Voices of Recovery: <http://www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org>

Join Together: <http://www.jointogether.org>

National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors State
Overviews: http://nasadad.org/index.php?doc_id=966

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism:
<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>

National Institute on Drug Abuse: <http://www.nida.nih.gov/>

Online state profiles: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/states.htm>

Recovery Community Services Program: <http://rcsp.samhsa.gov/>

Recovery Month website: <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:
<http://www.samhsa.gov>

HOLDING YOUR TOWN HALL MEETING

*Two Weeks
Before Event*

STEP 1: Setting Up Your Meeting

To ensure a successful event, assign volunteers and staff to different tasks.

Room set up: Some people should arrive early to make sure the room is set up properly and to make any last-minute adjustments. Check on tables, chairs, podiums, equipment or visual displays. For large meetings, you may need to have a sound system, including table microphones for the panelists, as well as a stage or elevated panel table in the front of the room. Small meetings, with 25 or fewer attendees, work well with a roundtable setup, with panelists on

one side of the table and attendees around the remainder of the table. Extra chairs can circle the perimeter of the room to accommodate additional guests.

Sign-in/registration table: You will need to set up a sign-in table, where you can collect names and contact information for everybody who attends as well as hand out materials.

Sign-in sheets: Remember to have separate sign-in sheets, one for the general audience and one for members of the media. This information will be invaluable as you conduct your follow-up activities and plan future meetings. You can also subscribe attendees to your organization's newsletter or listserv.

Handouts: At the sign-in table, you may want to have agendas and other information, as well as press kits for reporters. If you plan on discussing specific documents, have copies available.

STEP 2: Conducting Your Meeting

The meeting should begin with a welcome and introduction by the head or spokesperson of the host organization or planning committee. The welcome and introduction should last no more than five minutes and should explain the purpose of the meeting, welcome guests and introduce the moderator.

The moderator should then begin the panel discussion with a brief introduction of the issues that will be discussed, a review of the format and introductions of each panelist. It usually works best to have all of the panelists speak and then each should have three minutes to answer a question from the moderator. The entire panel discussion shouldn't last longer than 50 minutes.

After the panel discussion, the moderator should begin the question and answer period, taking questions from the audience and fielding them to the appropriate panelist. Depending on the size of the audience, it may be helpful to set up a microphone in the center of the room or to walk over to audience members and allow them to speak into the microphones. The question and answer period should last about 30 minutes.

After the question and answer period, either the moderator or host organization should wrap up the meeting by thanking everyone for coming. Encourage attendees to take the first step – just one action, no matter how small. Encourage those who like to lead, mentor and organize to assemble a small group to take more concerted actions. Provide contact information for those who want to follow up after the meeting.

STEP 3: Coordinate Media Interviews

Leave enough time after your briefing for media interviews. Generally, you should set aside 30 minutes after the question and answer period ends to

coordinate the interviews between members of the media and your spokespeople. In many cases, media will request an advance interview, so make sure someone at your organization is always available to handle requests for media interviews.

AFTER THE MEETING: WHAT TO DO NEXT

Your efforts do not end with the town hall meeting. In most cases, the meeting serves as a catalyst for future strategies and initiatives. To truly achieve your goal, you will need to conduct a number of follow-up steps in the weeks following the event.

*Two Weeks
After Event*

STEP 1: Conduct a Debrief

No more than two weeks after your town hall meeting, reconvene the key individuals who were involved in planning the event to discuss how it went. Discuss whether you achieved your objectives and how you want to put the information and ideas that emerged into practice in the community. It is also a good idea to obtain feedback from the panelists.

*Three Weeks
After Event*

STEP 2: Develop an Action Plan

After the debrief, write up the comments from the panel discussion and the question and answer period, giving an overview of the briefing and summarizing the problems and solutions offered by the community and panelists. Think about what the next steps could be and develop an action plan. Some possible ideas are policy recommendations, information dissemination or media outreach. Your report should also include clippings of any coverage your event received in newspapers, as well as scripts from any radio or TV coverage.

STEP 3: Using Town Hall Meetings to Build Your Advocacy Work

One of the most useful resources that you can develop from your meeting is a list of the names and contact information of everyone who attended. This database can become your mailing list for future events and a source of potential supporters and volunteers. The database can also serve as a resource to identify people who might be interested in appearing before city councils or speaking at legislative hearings.

*This guide was adapted from and informed by the following sources:
Upper Hudson Peace Action; How to Organize A Town Hall Meeting
Recovery Advocacy Toolkit; How to Organize A Town Hall Meeting
Black Box Voting; Citizen's Tool Kit, Mobilization: Organize a Town Meeting
Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA), Faces & Voices of Recovery and Join
Together; Maximizing Outreach Through Town Hall Meetings: A Planning Guide.*