

Toolkit for Organizing Community Meetings



A community meeting is a small gathering of people discussing issues in their community. You can organize a community meeting to learn collectively, recruit new members, or to ask people to commit to take a specific action. The community setting is an ideal forum to get to know people, share information about an organization and its issue campaigns, listen to what people have to say, and encourage them to be involved.



how to organize a community meeting

1. **Identify the purpose of the meeting.** Recruit new members? Hear about issues in the community? Plan an action.
2. **Set a time, date, and location for the meeting.** Is the location accessible?
3. **Find a few people to help you run the meeting.** Ideally, you want to have a host to manage the logistics and a leader to facilitate.
4. **Invite people to your meeting.** Tip: Make sure you get yeses.
5. **Make an agenda with suggested group agreements.** Make sure your agreements are inclusive.
6. **Make a plan for food,** whether it's snacks or a potluck check on any dietary needs.
7. **Remind** the people you invited at least twice before the meeting.
8. **Hold your community meeting.** Hooray, the day is here!
9. **Follow up with the people who attended.** Thank them for coming and follow up on any commitments that they made.
10. **Evaluate the meeting** with your group or the person who helped you host.

Read further for:

Tips for Facilitation
Agenda and Ground Rules
Planning your Meeting
Accessibility Checklist

Pro-tip: Provide just enough seating. Too many empty seats take up energy in the room!

Toolkit for Organizing • Community Meetings

planning ahead

Decide on roles for the meeting. One person could play the role of a leader, host, and timekeeper, but it's helpful if you have more than one person working on it.

Host: The host is the person who coordinates the logistics of a meeting, including the space, food, time, and location.

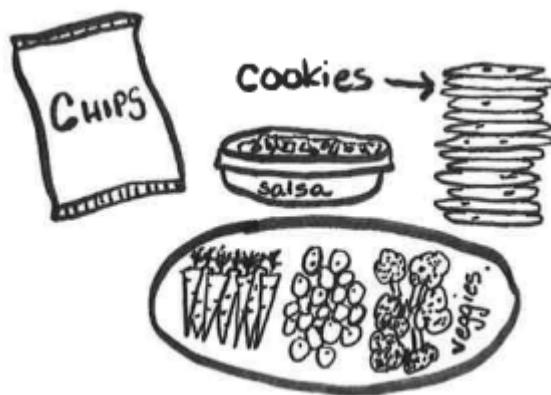
Leader: This person helps to guide the conversation. Some key roles are: listening for themes that are coming up from the group, asking questions to keep the conversation going, asking clarifying questions to see if you're understanding the sense from the group, making sure that everyone gets the opportunity to share their perspective, and keeping the group on track.

Note-Taker: If you have multiple people planning the meeting, ask someone to be a note-taker. You can always ask one of the people attending the meeting if they would be willing to take notes.

Practice your presentation and your story before the meeting.

Make a plan for food! You don't have to provide a whole meal for everyone, but snacks are a must. You can plan to bring a few things yourself, or you can ask a few of the folks coming to the meeting to bring along an item, potluck style. It could even be something simple like juice, cookies, chips, and salsa. **Be sure to take allergies and dietary restrictions into account.**

Find a location that is accessible and safe. Look over the accessibility checklist!



Toolkit for Organizing • Community Meetings

agenda and group agreements

One way to write an agenda is by using the POP model: Purpose, Outcome, and Process. If it's a first-time meeting or a group that doesn't know each other, you can create the agenda in advance. At the beginning of the meeting, state the purpose of the meeting. Share the outcome that you hope to get from the meeting. Lastly, you share your agenda, the process that meets your outcomes.

Basic Agenda

- I. Introductions and check-ins
- II. Group agreements
- III. Purpose and outcomes: what are we here today to do?
- IV. Introduce the Resident Action Project
- V. Community discussion
- VI. Final thoughts and wrap up

Suggested Group Agreements

- **Why am I talking? vs. Why am I not talking? (aka Step Up, Step Back)** If you tend to be a person that talks a lot, be mindful of how much you're contributing to make sure that others have a chance to contribute. If you are a person who generally does not contribute as much during meetings, challenge yourself to contribute a bit more.
- **Don't Yuck my Yum** All ideas are welcome here. Please be respectful of ideas as they come up.
- **Name it.** If something comes up that is problematic, name it, and be open to feedback if someone calls you in about something you said.
- **Expect and accept nonclosure.** These problems are huge. We're working on them, but we're not going to solve them today.
- **What's said here stays. What's learned here leaves.** We want to respect the confidentiality of experiences people share. Please don't share others' personal stories outside of the group unless you ask permission first. Do take the larger concepts and themes of the conversation outside of the room to share with others.
- **Speak from your own experience and listen with humility.** And don't make assumptions about the experiences of others.
- **Use the Parking Lot.** (See notes in *Tips on Facilitation* on page 26 and 27.)
- **Anything else participants in the group would like to add?**

Toolkit for Organizing • Community Meetings

presenter's notes

Introductions and Check-ins (10 mins)

Ask folks to introduce themselves to the group. If folks haven't already signed in on the sign-in sheet, ask them to do so at this point. Be sure to include an ice-breaker or community building exercise. It's important to talk about the issues, and it's also important to make space for people to get to know each other.

Suggested Ice Breaker

- Come up with a list of questions ahead of time. They could be anything from "what's your favorite food?" to "what are some things that are concerning you about the world right now?"
- Split the group in half. Have one half of the group organize into a line, and have the other group stand so the two lines are facing each other and people are paired up.
- Ask the first question, and give folks two minutes to discuss. Then, have one of the lines move to the right (with the person on the end coming around to the other side) and ask the next question. Keep doing this until you get through a few questions. This will give folks a chance to get to know each other better.

Review Group Agreements (10 mins)

It's helpful to write the ground rules up on a big sheet of paper or whiteboard. Ask folks if there are any others that they would like to add.

Ask the group if everyone agrees to the ground rules. (These ground rules can be helpful tools for you as you facilitate the meeting. Getting buy-in from the group helps to hold everyone accountable.)

Purpose and Outcomes (10 mins)

Purpose: We're here today to talk about the Resident Action Project and the issues around affordable housing and homelessness in our community.

Outcomes: Today, we hope to brainstorm a list of issues that we're seeing in our community. We will then take that list to a larger community meeting with other groups of folks who are also meeting to compare notes and come up with next steps for action. Does that sound good?

Toolkit for Organizing • Community Meetings

presenter's notes

Briefly introduce the Resident Action Project. (10 mins)

The Resident Action Project is a growing, statewide network of residents of affordable housing, folks in need of affordable housing, and nonprofit staff who are engaged in the year-round cycle of advocacy to get more affordable homes and to end homelessness. At this point, it would be helpful to pass out any brochures or information sheets that you have about the Resident Action Project.

Community Discussion (35 mins)

Go around the room and ask each person what they think about the first question:

What issues are you seeing in your community?

If people don't want to share yet, they can pass. After each person has shared, open it up for the larger group to discussion. After about 20 minutes, transition the conversation to focus on the question:

What are some potential ideas for action that you'd like to bring to the larger group?

Discuss as a group. We might not make final decisions today, but this meeting is an important step.

Appreciations (5 mins)

Do a final go around and ask folks to say one word about how they're feeling. If you're able to in the space, invite people to stay for some social time afterward.

Final Asks, Updates, and Thank You (10 mins)

Are there any events coming up that folks would like to mention? Opportunities to get involved? Try to get a commitment from attendees at this point. Let people know when you will follow up with them and how. Finally, be sure to thank everyone for coming!

tips for facilitation

Facilitating a community meeting relies on many of the same skills and instincts we use whenever we bring people together – we want to make sure that people have a positive experience! These gatherings aren't just a party though. There are clear goals and reaching them requires a special level of attention and dedication on the part of the facilitator. You have a lot of power as the facilitator, and that calls for some intentional planning to make create an equitable and anti-oppressive space.

DO

- Facilitate the discussion
- Set ground rules
- Create a safe, anti-oppressive space
- Set an example
- Make sure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute
- Keep to the agenda
- Define unfamiliar terms and acronyms
- Practice active listening
- Ask somebody to take notes

DON'T

- Dominate the discussion
- Get into debates
- Shut people down
- Get side-tracked
- Let others dominate the discussion
- Lose track of time
- Use jargon that people might not know



Toolkit for Organizing • Community Meetings

tips for facilitation

Creating an Anti-Oppressive Space

- **Keep the group agreements in a visible place and go over them together at the beginning of the meeting.** Use them to hold the group accountable throughout the meeting.
- **Ask if anybody in the group** has additional group agreements that they would like to add.
- **Create a culture of "naming it" around oppression.** Everyone shows up with different identities, experiences, and backgrounds. Systems of oppression have been normalized in our society, and we need to be intentional about addressing them in our organizing spaces. Inevitably, people will say things that are problematic. Encourage people to name those moments and to be open to feedback if something they say gets "named."
- **Use open-ended questions to address conflict in the group.** Open-ended questions can help check for understanding of another person's experience and to come to a place where people can state what they need and what behaviors they would like to see changed to feel safe.
- **Remind people to speak from their own experience** and not make assumptions about the experiences of others.
- **Use a "Parking Lot."** Issues come up that are important, but off topic. Acknowledge these issue by writing them in a "Parking Lot" on a large piece of paper so that people can follow up on that conversation after the meeting is over.
- **Make sure the space is accessible.** See our accessibility checklist on page 31.
- **Practice due diligence and hold the meeting in a location that is unlikely to be triggering for people.** Depending on who you're meeting with, people might not feel comfortable meeting in certain businesses, public spaces, neighborhoods, etc because of oppression that they could experience in those places.

Community Meeting Tips

- As guests arrive, greet them and introduce them to each other.
- Once everyone has arrived and settled in, review the day's agenda. Do another round of introductions with an icebreaker to get the conversations flowing.
- Emphasize that each member matters.
- Doing this work is often personal. Talk about personal experiences as far as you feel comfortable. Make space for other folks to talk about their experiences.
- Be sure to focus on the organization and not just on the issues. That will help you transition into action.
- Have materials ready at the end for immediate engagement and action.

Toolkit for Organizing • Community Meetings

accessibility checklist

Whether you're planning an event at somebody's home or in a public space, be sure that you take attendee's access needs into account by going through this checklist with your team ahead of time. Not all of these will apply for every meeting depending on who is attending. Just make sure that you check in.

- Ask all people who RSVP for disabilities and access needs
- Include accessibility information in emails and invitations
- Ground level or elevator access
- Ramps and/or stair railings
- Wheelchair seating
- Wide Doors
- Handicap Parking
- Materials typed in at least 14 pt font
- Room for maneuvering all types of physical disability support
(ie. wheelchairs, crutches, walkers, service animals, etc.)
- Have appropriate support for people who are deaf or blind, such as
TDD/TTY computer or phone
- Microphones for voice projection
- Close accessibility from bus stop or parking lot to meeting location
(or separate transportation from bus stop/station to meeting location)
- Gender-neutral bathrooms
- Scent-free environment, if needed
- If pets are around, ask attendees if they have allergies
- Make sure there is seating for all participants
- Translation needs

turnout and recruitment

1. Build a turnout list

A turnout list includes all of the people you want to invite to your meeting. Here's an exercise to help you and other meeting planners think about all of the networks that you're connected to. List all of the places that you regularly go, and then list a few people who you might reach out to in each place. Here's an example.

Your Apartment Building		Weekly Volunteer Activity
Neighbor 1		Volunteer 1
Neighbor 2		Volunteer 2
Neighbor 3		Volunteer 3
Exercise Class	You	Friends you brunch with
Person 1		Pal 1
Person 2		Pal 2
Person 3		Pal 3

2. Come up with a recruitment strategy

How are you going to get people to come to your meeting? You could use other tools, like Canvassing on page 41 or Social Media on page 56. Here is a list of strategies in order of effectiveness from low to high:

Flyers ---> Email ---> Text ---> Phone Call ---> In Person

3. Reach out to potential attendees!

Invite twice as many attendees as you would like to attend. When you're ready, get some help making phone calls and talking to folks for turnout. Get a commitment from each person who is invited. "Maybe" almost always means "no." Try to get "yesses!" Here's a sample script:

Hi _____! It's _____ - how are you? Great - Today I'm calling about this organization I'm a part of called the Resident Action Project. We're working on housing and homelessness issues, and it seems like something that you care about a lot. Would you be interested in attending a meeting with me next week to learn more? Great! Here's the info. Do you have any dietary needs or accessibility needs? Okay, thanks! See you then!

4. Follow up, Follow up, Follow up!

Follow up with attendees twice before the meeting: once a week ahead of time and once the day before. This will increase turnout.

Materials and Follow-Ups

Materials

Sign-In Sheet. Make sure that you find out everyone's name and the best way to contact them. Send around a sign-in sheet at the beginning of the meeting.

Agendas. Agendas don't need to be fancy and printed. You can just have it on a large piece of paper or on a computer screen.

Updates. A sheet with upcoming events, advocacy actions, etc.

Information sheets. This could be a one-pager about the Resident Action Project or information about a policy that you're working on.

Following Up

Thank yous. Follow-up with each person who attended your meeting to thank them and get feedback.

Post-meeting to-dos. If you've said that you would do something during the meeting, follow up within the timeframe that you committed to. If it takes longer than expected, let folks know. A big part of organizing is building trust within a group, and follow-through is a great way to do that.

Host and Leader meet to evaluate the meeting. What went well? What can we improve on for next time? Did we meet our goals for the meeting?

Do a write-up or debrief of the meeting the RAP organizer. Send an email or call them.

Toolkit for Organizing · Community Meetings

follow-up form

Please fill out this form and contact Resident Action Project staff to let them know how your community meeting went.

What was the date, time, and location of your community meeting?

How did you do outreach for the meeting?

How many people came to your community meeting?

What were the issues that came up during your community meeting? Where did you feel the most energy?

Overall, what went well?

What would you do differently next time?

How was your experience of the support provided by RAP staff? What did we do well, and where could we improve in the future?

Anything else you would like us to know?