



## Convening Town Hall Meetings

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# Convening Town Hall Meetings

## Introduction/Overview

A key element of social change is an ongoing dialogue with community members. Town hall meetings provide an opportunity to communicate with community members and learn their concerns, needs and questions about end-of-life care and services in the community.

Town hall meetings provide opportunities for community members to discuss a topic in the presence of end-of-life care providers and others in the community. These structured conversations provide host coalitions an opportunity to listen to the community. At town hall meetings, multiple members of a coalition can converse with the audience and ask follow-up questions to clarify responses. Town hall meetings can also serve as a recruitment strategy, motivating community members to join the coalition or become supporters of your work.

The biggest challenge in conducting a successful meeting is ensuring participation in the event from non-traditional supporters – those people not directly providing or receiving end-of-life care and services. It is often easiest to attract your core audiences -- staff, volunteers and active supporters of the member organization – to attend outreach activities. The strategies below can help to attract a wider audience.

## Getting Started

Town hall meeting preparations include the following steps:

1. Identifying the target audience and vision
2. Determining the location and topic
3. Setting the agenda
4. Securing speakers
5. Publicizing the event
6. Event logistics
7. Evaluating the outcomes

## **1. Identifying the target audience and vision**

To start you need to identify your target audience – or the people you want to reach -- and outline your vision for the meeting. The following questions will help in this process:

- What segment of your population are you hoping to attract to the meeting?
- Why are you targeting this particular group?
- What do you hope to learn from the audience?
- What information do you hope to convey to your audience?
- What would your audience gain from attending? How can you sell it to them?
- Who are key stakeholders who can help you attract participants? (see below)

Once you have answered these questions you can build the structure to enhance your ability to reach your goals and meet the needs of the audience.

## **2. Determining the location and topic**

The right location and topic for your town hall meeting can help you attract the people you want to reach. You'll want to make sure that topics and titles are enhanced by the location you choose. If the topic you choose is attractive to your audience but the location is unfamiliar or difficult to access, people are less likely to attend.

Holding an event at a funeral home, hospice office, etc. might discourage people from attending the meeting if they are uncomfortable with issues related to dying. However, if the speaker and topic can attract people to the event, there can be benefits to locating it at the funeral home or hospice such as challenging pre-conceived ideas about the organization and what they do.

The location you choose can also unintentionally communicate an affiliation with a group or belief. If you hold the town hall meeting at a church, Jewish or Muslim members of the community might be uncomfortable attending. On the other hand, you can host a meeting in a very accessible location, but if the topic doesn't pique the interest of potential participants, they will not attend.

The topic and title you select can also influence which people and how many of them select to attend. Some topics, such as caregiving, are less "threatening" to people who don't want to talk about death. Think about

your target audience – those you want to attend the meeting – what are they interested in? What are their cultural values? What are their current or future needs? Your topic and title need to entice them to make the effort to attend the event. The table below illustrates how different locations and topics can be paired to effectively attract your target audience.

Audience	Location	Topic
General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Library</li> <li>• School, college or university</li> <li>• Sports arena</li> <li>• Recreation center</li> <li>• Shopping mall event room</li> <li>• Community room (hospital, hospice, etc)</li> <li>• Church, Mosque or Synagogue (To reach a specific audience – best results immediately after a service or event)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advance directives</li> <li>• Paying for end-of-life (EOL) care</li> <li>• Perceptions of EOL issues</li> <li>• Community EOL needs</li> </ul>
Family Caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break room or conference room at a large employer</li> <li>• School</li> <li>• Alzheimer association, heart association, caregiver support groups, nursing home caregiver support groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregiving issues</li> <li>• Paying for EOL care</li> <li>• Talking to adult children or parents about EOL decisions</li> </ul>
Retirees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior Center</li> <li>• Retirement community</li> <li>• Golf club</li> <li>• Health fair (in an adjoining room)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advance directives</li> <li>• Paying for EOL care</li> <li>• Understanding long-term care options</li> <li>• Talking to adult children about EOL decisions</li> </ul>
Healthcare Professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hospital auditorium</li> <li>• Long-term care facilities</li> <li>• Discipline-specific association meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advance directives</li> <li>• Paying for EOL care</li> <li>• Barriers to accessing EOL care</li> <li>• Discussing EOL issues</li> </ul>
Teenagers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High school</li> <li>• Mall/Shopping plaza</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teen perspectives on EOL issues</li> <li>• Talking to parents/grandparents about EOL issues</li> <li>• Advance directives</li> <li>• Organ donation</li> </ul>

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Topic</b>
Faith Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interfaith meeting</li> <li>• Regional denomination meetings</li> <li>• Faith leader conferences/summits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing spiritual support to those at the EOL</li> <li>• Creating meaningful rituals</li> <li>• Discussing EOL issues</li> <li>• Advance directives</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School in-service day</li> <li>• School (invite teens and parents too)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talking to children about EOL issues</li> <li>• Advance directives</li> </ul>
Attorneys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local bar association meetings</li> <li>• Courthouse meeting room</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advance directives</li> <li>• Discussing EOL issues</li> <li>• Organ donation</li> </ul>

### 3. Setting the agenda

Town hall meetings are productive when the audience has the most opportunity to participate and share their stories. As you can see on the sample agenda below, the speaker is given a very short period of time to deliver the key message, which sets the stage for the small group dialogue. By using this format, you can ensure that your guest speaker hears what is important to those in attendance by listening to several of the small group discussions. Keep in mind that some groups may benefit from time to “mingle,” and that your advertised and actual start times can vary to accommodate the situation.

#### Sample Agenda

Welcome and Introductions	5 minutes
Guest Speaker Presentation	15- 20 minutes
Small Group Discussion – Introduction	5 minutes
Small Group Discussion	35 minutes
Group Feedback	15 minutes
Closing Thoughts	10 minutes

#### **4. Securing speakers**

Having a well-known guest speaker can attract an audience to the town hall meeting. The speaker can set the tone for the meeting by providing a unique perspective to the topic, which can lead to meaningful conversations.

When selecting a speaker, keep in mind that the main purpose of the town hall meeting is to dialogue with the audience, so the talk should be a brief presentation on the town hall meeting topic.. The speaker you select can also learn from participating in the event. By hearing the concerns of citizens, the speaker can better understand the issue(s) from the perspective of community members.

#### **5. Publicizing the event**

Publicity for your event is very important and needs to be developed early in your planning stages. Often coalitions do not have the financial resources to pay for advertising; but money does not have to become a barrier to attracting a large audience.

Publicity doesn't have to be expensive – it is possible to generate a lot of publicity without buying advertisements. Successful PR campaigns use multiple methods to share the information with the target audience, increasing the potential exposure to the message.

Start by identifying the resources each coalition member brings to group. Ask each coalition member to identify their ability to provide, or ask another person/organization to provide, the following:

- Personal contacts -- coalition members with contacts among your target audience who can write letters or emails or make phone calls
- Mailing labels of member/supporter and other mailing lists
- Space for an article, advertisement or calendar notice in an organizational newsletter
- Email list of key contacts
- Time on a meeting agenda to announce the event
- A list of community calendar listings to send a press release
- Staff who have experience in and time to write a press release
- Graphic designers to create a flyer
- Time to deliver flyers to key stakeholders (large businesses, faith communities, hospitals, etc)
- Volunteers to stuff envelopes, deliver flyers or make phone calls

- A web site to post the event
- A marquee to advertise the event
- A speakers bureau to publicize the event
- Upcoming events where flyers can be distributed
- Someone connected to your target audience who can send a personal invitation (e.g. for attorneys, is there a judge who can send an invitation)

It is also important to match the marketing effort with the target audience. If you are trying to reach seniors – contact AARP and your local Area Agency on Aging. For caregivers, you may want to ask large employers to include a flyer in employees' paychecks. If you are trying to reach non-English speaking people, contact your local ethnic radio stations or newspapers. You can also get creative – remember that church bulletins, supermarkets, little league games, community bulletin boards, and hair salons all provide marketing audiences for your efforts.

## **6. Event logistics/preparations**

One of the benefits of coalition work is sharing the duties involved in event planning, building on member strengths to ensure a successful outcome. Many logistical details are dependent on decisions you make regarding location, agenda, etc. The following supply list is provided to spark ideas and assist in your preparations.

### **Supplies:**

- Coalition publicity/information materials (display booth)
- Advance directive packets
- Publicity information on upcoming events
- Grief in the Workplace packets (available from NHPCO; for local employers)
- Flipchart, markers, tape
- Facilitator instructions
- Refreshments
- Sign in sheet
- Microphone (podium and audience microphone)

See the event preparation time line in the Exercises and Samples Section for additional information about event planning.

## **7. Evaluating the outcomes**

Often the success of events such as town hall meetings is measured by the number of attendees and level of participation. While it is important to track the number of participants and hopefully meet targeted attendee numbers, the true impact is measured in other ways. Suggestion and comment boxes are a great way to ensure that participants have an opportunity to give feedback about the event. You may choose to ask attendees to complete an evaluation form to provide comments and rate their satisfaction with the event, or you might use one of the methods outlined below.

Evaluation Measure	Evaluation Method	What it Tells You*
Number of Attendees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roster/sign in sheet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effectiveness of PR efforts in reaching those who attend. If you have a significant number of a specific audience you have targeted (e.g. hospice volunteers) then you know that you succeeded in reaching that audience.</li> <li>• Interest in topic</li> </ul>
Satisfaction of Attendees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of participant satisfaction of the event.</li> <li>• Include a question about accessibility of the location.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of attendees – often this measures the difference between their expectation and the actual experience</li> <li>• Access to location – the results will be limited to those who actually attended the event.</li> </ul>
Increase in Attendee Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre and post test related to subject matter presented or discussed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whether or not there is short-term retention of information presented or discussed</li> </ul>

Evaluation Measure	Evaluation Method	What it Tells You*
Attitude Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-ended question - "Based on information shared at the event, has your perception about the issue changed?"</li> <li>• You can also administer pre- and post- event true/false questions specific to the information discussed. If the forum is on advance directives - "I believe it is important for everyone to complete advance directives"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This measures changes in perceptions of participants, (e.g. a belief that only sick or elderly people need to complete advance directives).</li> </ul>
Intent to Change Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post-event evaluations asking participants to state their intentions related to information presented (e.g. completing an advance directive)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whether participants intend to take action based on information learned at the event.</li> </ul>

Evaluation Measure	Evaluation Method	What it Tells You*
Behavior Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow up questionnaire 3-6 months after event. Since attendees might intend to do something immediately after the event and then never actually do it, the best way to measure behavior change is to survey attendees 3-6 months after the event. This way, you can ask attendees what they did or did not do after the event- a much easier question to answer accurately.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the attendee changed behavior based on information learned at the event.</li> <li>• <b>Note:</b> Self-reported behavior change is not a 100% accurate measure.</li> </ul>
Increased Knowledge About Community Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask coalition members to facilitate small group discussions and record what is said</li> <li>• Share information from small group discussions with coalition or staff of member agencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community member attitudes which could determine needed programmatic changes.</li> </ul>

*\* Note: Often there are multiple factors that impact what you are evaluating. For instance, the number of attendees might not reflect the number of people who knew about the event and wanted to attend, but were prevented by an external factor. If people who did not attend contact your coalition for information at a later date, there is still a positive outcome -- though it may be more directly correlated with your publicity than with your event.*

## **Conclusion**

Planning and hosting the event are the first steps in a community engagement process. As you plan the event, consider how you want to use the information and maintain contact with the participants. Be sure to have a way to collect participant names and contact information. People who attend your events have already demonstrated an interest in your cause -- keep them involved! You may decide to invite some or all to join the coalition.

Notes from your town hall meeting can be shared with multiple audiences as you continue your engagement efforts. Video taping the event provides a wonderful resource as you share the results with others. Be sure to find a way to capture the comments of participants. This information can be used to help plan future events, revise coalition goals, garner support from community leaders, educate public policy makers and share insights with local service providers. Personal stories about the need to improve end-of-life care and services often have the greatest impact – communicating the urgent need for the community to provide better care for patients and families at the end of life.

## **Exercises and Samples**

*This is a sample of one way to run a town hall meeting. You may change certain elements to meet the needs of your coalition.*

### **Town Hall Meeting – Small Group Dialogue Format**

Each small group should have a facilitator to ask questions, keep the participants focused on the questions and take notes (unless you have enough people to have a separate note-taker at each table). The following facilitator guidelines and sample questions provide an example of how to structure the discussions. The questions should reflect the goals for the town hall meeting as identified by the coalition.

### **Town Hall Meeting Facilitator Guidelines\***

Please introduce yourself: share your name and your affiliation with the coalition. Ask each person at your table to introduce themselves and why they are there.

Explain to your group that we want to hear their views on end-of-life issues. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions that you will be asking. We want to hear opinions, ideas and experiences. We have thirty-five minutes for small group discussion. There will be a person taking notes at each table.

*\* Note: Facilitators need to know basic facilitation skills, including: encouraging participation from everyone, redirecting the group to stay on topic, etc..*

### **Small Group Discussion Questions**

- When and how did you first learn about death?
- What role has the media (T.V., movies, newspapers, music) played in your attitudes and feelings about death and dying?
- Have you had conversations with your family or friends about death? Were these talks comfortable? If not, what would have made these talks easier?
- Does your family have any cultural or religious practices related to death, funerals, mourning? Tell us about them.
- If you had only one month to live, how would you spend that month?
- Describe a "perfect death" for yourself or a family member/loved one? What would your wishes be for yourself or this person?
- Have you talked with your family and/or physician about your wishes for end of life care? Do you have a living will?
- For those of you who have experienced the death of a loved one or are volunteers at a hospice or end-of-life organization, how have these experiences changed your views about end-of-life issues?
- In order to make our wishes known -- we all have to speak out about end-of-life issues. Is there one thing that you will take from this discussion that will make it easier for you to talk with family and friends? What messages should we hear loud and clear from you?

If time allows, open the discussion for additional comments. Collect the question/answer sheet from the note-taker. Do not be concerned if you are not able to cover all the questions. Thank the group.

After the small group discussion, the facilitator can invite the small groups to share insights with the audience. You may choose to have someone write the key thoughts on a flipchart for the group to see.

## Sample Press Release

Media contact :  
Media contact's name)

(Your coalition's name) invites public to town hall meeting on end-of-life issues, (date)

CITY, STATE -- DATE -- (Your coalition's name) invites (target audience) in the community to a town hall meeting on end-of-life issues (date, time and location of meeting.) The town meeting will focus on (topic) and feature guest speaker (speaker name).

(Guest speaker) will challenge community members to discuss (insert topic) in our community and how we can work to improve (topic)

The town hall meeting is part of an ongoing public engagement campaign by (your coalition's name), a community coalition dedicated to (your vision/mission statement) in (community name). Coalition partners include (names of coalition members).

"The upcoming town hall meeting is the latest in a series of efforts underway to generate meaningful dialogue in our community on what people want and need when it comes to end-of-life care for themselves and their loved ones," said (your coalition's spokesperson). "If we can get people talking about end-of-life issues before these circumstances arise, they will be better prepared to make critical decisions for themselves, their families and friends."

For more information on the upcoming town hall meeting, please call (your coalition's contact person and telephone number).

## Town Hall Meeting Planning Timetable

*Modify as appropriate for your situation*

Task	Months/ Weeks Out	Completion Date
Select theme/focus	6 months	
Identify target audience	6 months	
Contact potential sponsors	6 months	
Contact outside continuing education providers	6 months	
Draft budget	6 months	
Select dates/reserve rooms	6 months	
Contact & confirm speakers	5 months	
Brochure content & design	4 months	
Contact caterer	4 months	
Obtain outside mailing lists	4 months	
Request volunteers to prepare the mailing	4 months	
Mail brochure	3-4 months	
Mail faculty packets w/ brochure	3-4 months	
Set up registration database	3 months	
Finalize menu with caterer	1-2 months	
Send confirmations and travel directions to participants	2 months / ongoing	
Recruit volunteers	2 months	
Rent tables, vans, etc	1 month	
Draft room layout	1 month	
Draft detailed agenda	1 month	
Make signs	1 month	
Finalize volunteer schedule	1 month	
Review AV needs, order equipment if needed	3-4 weeks	
Print handouts, maps, final program	2-3 weeks	
Preconference meeting to go over final details	1-2 weeks	
Confirm final count with caterer	1 week	
Put together folders	1 week	
Print badges	1 week	
Print CEU certificates	1 week	
Print rosters	1 day	
Set up conference rooms	1 day	
Get parking signs, vests	1 day	
Put up signs, set up registration, etc	1 day	

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