Section 5: Community Forums

Purpose

A community forum is an open discussion where community residents gather in order to raise important issues affecting them, such as health problems in their neighborhood. The primary purpose of this community discussion is to obtain input from a wide range of residents and stakeholders concerning their needs and identifying resources for addressing health problems.

During the discussion participants also have the opportunity to prioritize those problems that are most important to them and develop potential solutions. Creating ownership and collectively identifying action steps in a public gathering is an important step to ensuring action and support, and enabling problem solving among community residents, decision makers, and local organizations.

The data collection method used in a community forum involves a series of discussions during which time participants discuss their needs and concerns. This method is helpful in painting a picture of community concerns.

Conduct a community forum when you want

- To quickly collect information about a pressing issue or problem from a large number of people in the community.
- To involve community residents in the community assessment process by giving them an opportunity to voice their concerns.
- To identify and partner with community residents who are able and willing to help.
- To involve residents in your priority setting and action plan.

Planning and implementing community forums

There are several key steps involved in planning and implementing community forums as a method for data collection. Review the following activities and prepare accordingly with your community partnership members.

5.1 Gather and review existing data

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Collect and review existing research data and reports before determining what additional information you need to collect from community forums, as the information you are looking for may already exist. You can piece together a great deal of information about a community or a health issue from different sources.

5.2 Determine what information you need

The first step in preparing for community forums is to identify the information you want to gather. *Step 3: Identify the Information (Data) You Need* in the "Performing a Community Assessment" curriculum (page 4-17) guides you through this process and provides direction on how to best prepare and formulate the primary questions you would like to have answered. Once you have drafted the primary questions, next determine what type of data is needed. For example, do you want to collect data on community practice, community opinions, or existing services and service utilization?

5.3 Determine who should participate

Community forums should be open to everyone in the community who wants to attend. An effort should be made to invite a range of individuals with diverse backgrounds. These individuals could be community residents, stakeholders, teachers, area business owners, or local service agency staff members. It is especially important to invite individuals who have a vested interest in the particular problem you are trying to address and allow them to voice their concerns.

5.4 Plan a community forum

It is recommended that a planning group be formed to assist in the coordination of the community forum. The purpose of the planning group is to provide support, delegate responsibilities, and work on the publicity and promotion plan. The planning group should consist of partnership members as well as community leaders and residents. The following is a checklist of tasks that are involved in planning community forums:

- *Draft forum questions and agenda.*

Determine what information to collect during the community forums. This will help in structuring the community forum questions. As a general rule you should develop questions that get to the bottom of issues/concerns and barriers. In addition, questions that identify resources for change and possible solutions are equally important.

- *Determine date and time.*
  Select a day and time that is convenient to community residents. In your decision keep in mind those individuals who have a vested interest. Evaluate your community and determine a day and time in which you are able to get the best representation and turn out. Some communities have had success with week-day evenings and Saturday mornings. However, you should informally ask some of your community residents to determine the best day and time.

- *Location.*
  Select a site in the neighborhood you are working with that is easily accessed using public transportation. The location selected should also have enough parking available to accommodate your forum guests. Suggested locations include a local church, community center, park, or school.

- *Site and room accommodations.*
  Select a location that is large enough to comfortably handle your invited guests and that is accessible for people using wheelchairs. The meeting room should also have the equipment needed for the discussion (such as a screen, podium, and microphone). Bring additional materials needed such as easels, flipcharts and markers. Finally, select a room that can be reconfigured so that if necessary you can break the big group into smaller groups for a more meaningful discussion.

- *Language/Translation Services.*
  In order to attract and facilitate the participation and input of diverse groups, language translators may need to be used. Local community agencies may be willing to provide these services and the necessary translation equipment. The planning group may play an important role in securing these services.

- *Incentives.*
  Incentives may help increase the number of participants at the community forums. Incentives may include childcare, food/refreshments, gift certificates, or raffles. However, in order to ensure wider participation, childcare and food/refreshments are essential.

5.5 Develop a publicity and promotion plan

A strategic publicity and promotion plan is needed to reach the widest number of participants. Publicity should begin four to six weeks before the community forums. Consider developing the following components of a publicity and promotion plan for your community forums:

- *Define objectives:* Determine the type of marketing you need in order to be successful. Identify specific objectives such as: How many residents do you want to attend a community forum? How many community forums do you want to have?
- *State the messages and benefits:* Be clear about the purpose of the community forums. The messages you develop should include any short-term or long-term benefits that the residents or community may receive as a result of their participation.
- *Determine publicity material and media outlets:* Discuss what type of publicity to use, such as flyers, public service announcements, newsletter/newspaper inserts, or local-access television advertising. Also discuss other resources you can use to distribute publicity materials, such as local restaurants, malls, hair salons, community centers, laundromats, or grocery stores. It is also important to utilize the media as much as possible (local newspapers and radio stations).
- *Define publicity strategies:* Use specific techniques to reach your target audience about community forums. It may be a good idea to partner with organizations in the area who can help with the publicity (churches, community centers, schools, or school organizations).
- *Create a timeline:* Creating a planning timeline allows you to see the tasks that need to be done, each of your partners' responsibilities, and the deadline for each task. This helps you stay on track with the many publicity tasks.

5.6 Recruit a moderator and note-taker

Moderator:
Following are some skills and responsibilities of a moderator. A moderator:
- Is comfortable and familiar with the community forum process.
- Has experience facilitating groups or meetings.
- Creates and maintains a comfortable environment for participants.
- Remains neutral throughout the discussion. Does not provide personal feelings or opinions on what is being discussed.
- Maintains control over the group and the topics being discussed. Is careful not to lead the discussion or appear aggressive or controlling.
- Is a good listener. Understands what is being said and knows when to ask probing questions. Probing questions get participants to expand on or clarify their comments.

- Is a good observer. Is aware when participants are ready to speak and gives them the opportunity to share their comments.
- Maintains group enthusiasm and interest.
- Respects participants and their comments.
- Is able to communicate clearly both written and orally.
- Has a good sense of humor.

Note-taker:
The main responsibility of the note-taker is to take notes, record the event happenings, and track participants' comments. The note-taker may also play a key role in making the discussion process visible for participants. Using an easel and flipchart the note-taker can legibly write the comments made by the various participants, being careful to use the exact words or descriptions given by participants so they feel they have ownership of the discussion process. Finally, the note-taker or moderator can ask the individual for clarification if the comments are unclear.

5.7 Conduct the community forum

Arrive early in order to set up the room and necessary equipment. Have the sign-in sheet prominently displayed at the meeting and make sure everyone signs in. Getting everyone's contact information is important for disseminating the meeting summary and involving participants in upcoming activities.

Before the start of the community forum a designated representative from the partnership should welcome participants, clarify the purpose, briefly go over the agenda, and review any ground rules. After this introduction and overview the moderator can start asking the questions that have been prepared in advance. The recommended time for the discussion is two hours in length.

In order to have a meaningful discussion, keep the group smaller than 30 to 40 people. If a large number of community residents attend it will be necessary to divide into smaller groups. Depending on the size of the anticipated audience there may be a need to secure more than one moderator and note-taker. The purpose of the moderator is to guide and engage participants in a meaningful discussion. The note-taker responsibilities are to record important topics covered to enable the moderator to fully engage in leading the discussion.

The following is an agenda template used by the Partnership for the Public's Health-Health Leadership Training Program in Long Beach to engage the community residents in a discussion about community health issues and concerns.

Community Forum Agenda

Materials needed for this session: Easel and flipchart, markers, masking tape and red sticker dots.

I. Welcome and Introductions (10 minutes)
   A. State purpose of community forum discussion.
   B. Introduction of sponsoring group, facilitator and note-taker.
   C. Review agenda.

II. Community Discussion Session (1 hour, 15 minutes)
   A. Provide an overview and instructions to group, including ground rules.
   B. Discussion Questions:
      The following are suggested questions to engage participants in a discussion about health issues/concerns in the community:
      1. What does health mean to you?
      2. What are the top three health issues in your community?
      3. What are some potential solutions to these problems?
      4. Identify some community assets (strengths) that may help address these issues.

III. Report Back Session (25 minutes)
   A. Summarize issues discussed, highlighting priority issues that were identified by participants.
   B. Discuss a preliminary action plan based on solutions and community assets identified.
   C. Announce next meeting to pursue next steps identified in this meeting.

IV. Closing (10 minutes)
   A. Final thoughts and acknowledgements.

<u>Community Forum Follow-Up</u>

Type up a summary of the community forum, including priority issues discussed and the list of "next steps" aimed at addressing the top health issues. Mail this summary to all participants, thanking them for their input and letting them know of upcoming opportunities for further involvement (i.e. upcoming planning meeting to address identified problems).

5.8 Compile and organize community forum data

As soon as your partnership starts the process of collecting the community forum data, you will suddenly have a lot of data to manage. It is important to think about this while in the planning phase. Specifically, you want to discuss the following with your partnership and note your decision:

A. *What will the community forum data look like once it is collected?*

- You will have notes for each forum that you conducted. The forum discussions and notes may differ among the different community forums.

B. *How will the community forum data be compiled?* (Please see *Appendix B: Computer Software to Compile and Analyze Data,* page 5-63 for more details about computer software programs and computer resources that may help you compile your survey data.)

The community forum data collected is qualitative. After finishing a community forum the note-taker should write down any additional comments or impressions. Within the next couple of days the note-taker or designated person should type up his or her own notes. All of the notes, anecdotes, and discussion points need to be typed into one word processing document. However, this has the potential of being a really long document, depending on how many community forums were conducted and how long they were. Really long documents are not very helpful, as there is no easy way to see relationships across the different community forums conducted. So the note-taker may want to consider organizing qualitative data right from the data entry stage into major categories. These categories are most commonly the community forum questions that were asked. This way, you end up with a document of all of the residents' discussion organized under each question.

- One individual or agency should take responsibility for creating the master file, developing the categories, and cutting and pasting the notes into the corresponding categories.

- One individual or agency should take responsibility for keeping track of the notes.

C. *Where will the community forum data be processed and compiled?*

- Plan ahead of time where the data is coming from and going to at all times during the data collection process. This eliminates any confusion that may arise when multiple partnership members and agencies take on the community forum collection and compilation activities. It also clarifies ahead of time what specific steps need to be undertaken to collect, enter, compile, and analyze the different data pieces.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Community Forums

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Can raise awareness and knowledge on an issue • Relatively easy and inexpensive to conduct • Allows for community and stakeholder participation in issue • Participants can identify new areas or topics not previously considered • Forums can help identify new leaders or stakeholders that may help in the planning and implementation of a project or initiative	• May be difficult to schedule a series of public meetings with the community members and other stakeholders you want to reach • Participants may not be representative of the larger population as those who attend may not reflect the entire community or target audiences • Participants come with their own expectations and agendas

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