

Conducting Aging Well Public Forums

AGING WELL IN COMMUNITIES: A TOOLKIT FOR PLANNING, ENGAGEMENT & ACTION

A public forum brings together diverse people with different points of view, provides a means for expressing and capturing that diversity, and engages citizens and community partners in the aging well planning process.



A Center of the Public Health Institute

Introduction

- A large meeting is being held at city hall to identify the needs of older adults and to discuss opportunities presented by the large number of boomers moving into the next phase of their lives. The meeting has attracted a cross-section of residents, older adult service providers, health care agencies, retailers interested in catering to a valuable clientele, housing developers, media, transportation service providers, employers, and many others who are interested in and/or anticipate being impacted by the community's growing 50+ population. After a series of small group discussions, participants are using wireless voting devices to set priorities among myriad issues, as results are displayed in real time on large screens around the room.
- A “family room dialogue” is being hosted by two residents who have invited 15 relatives and friends to talk about their visions for the next 20 years of their lives. The conversation takes place primarily in Mandarin, and no local government officials or community agency staff are present. Before the event, the city's aging well task force developed a guide containing questions and conversation prompts. To ensure a productive dialogue, the local older adult service provider trained the hosts and gave them a copy of the guide. The task force will compile and review results from this and other family room dialogues in neighborhoods throughout the community as part of its assessment of aging well priorities. All the dialogues were scheduled at times and in places that made it easy for residents to participate. They helped local government obtain input from people who generally would not attend a city council meeting or participate in large community events.
- A college briefing for parents of high school students includes a short, facilitated discussion of these parents' anticipated future housing needs and desires, as their children move on to college and careers. The county will use this information as it updates its housing element.
- A follow-up to a large public forum is being held to share results, identify and prioritize strategies, and develop a comprehensive plan for creating a healthy community for residents at all life stages. The meeting room is full of small groups of residents, business owners, physicians, educators, local government staff, human service providers, and others who are brainstorming solutions for the challenges identified in the first forum and discussing how different community sectors can contribute to those solutions. As each group presents its ideas and others offer refinements, a graphic recorder (graphic artist) creates a visual representation of the plan.

These scenarios are examples of different types of public forums that bring attention to, gather information about, and engage the community in meeting the needs of the burgeoning older adult population. In contrast to surveys, which measure the public's views on specific questions, and focus groups, which provide nuanced, in-depth information about specific issues, public forums present the best opportunity to spark interest in addressing the future needs of older adults and gain commitment from multiple community sectors. (For more information, see “Conducting Aging Well Resident Surveys” and “Conducting Aging Well Focus Groups.”) Because public forums typically engage large numbers of individuals and organizations, they can engender a sense of shared responsibility for identifying and implementing solutions that meet the community's changing needs.



In designing your public forum, it is critical to cast local government as a convener and facilitator for the discussion and as a partner in developing and implementing community solutions. (See “Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.”) Consider co-sponsoring your forum and/or the entire aging well planning process with other key organizations that you would like to see heavily involved in the implementation phase. The City of Palo Alto did this successfully by co-sponsoring its planning process with Avenidas, a major nonprofit provider of services for older adults in that community.

Before you conduct an aging well public forum, we strongly recommend that you review “Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.” It discusses key foundational elements of a successful aging well planning process, including:

- Understanding how planning for aging well in the community is different from other planning efforts
- Deciding what role local government should play
- Forming a broad-based, representative planning committee
- Choosing language that will attract boomers and engage them in your effort
- Developing cultural competence
- Gathering data from your community
- Reporting and using your results

What is a Public Forum?

Public forums go far beyond public hearings, where a governing body solicits public comment before voting on a particular issue, such as the adoption of an ordinance prohibiting smoking at public facilities, or an environmental impact report for a proposed development project. A public forum brings together diverse people with different points of view, and provides a means for expressing and capturing that diversity. Public forums help local government, nonprofit organizations, residents, and other stakeholders understand the community’s

needs, assets, and deficiencies, so the community can in turn develop responsive plans, policies, and programs. Perhaps most important, a public forum is also a method for engaging citizens and community partners and creating a sense of shared ownership for problems and solutions.

“... now is the time to understand and plan for the inevitable.”

—Impact of the Aging Baby Boom Population on Palo Alto’s Social and Community Services

Before the Forum

What do you want your public forum to accomplish? The first step in planning a public forum is to decide what you want the forum to achieve. Many cities are just beginning to tackle the issue of aging well and, therefore, are most concerned with generating community interest and gathering information on a wide range of topics related to older adults. If you have already conducted a broad-based information-gathering process (a community visioning exercise or survey, for example), you may want to use your forum to gather more detailed information on specific topics of concern. You may also want to use the forum to prioritize issues and develop a community plan that lists short-, mid-, and long-term actions and identifies key individuals or organizations willing to lead them.

Possible purposes for a public forum, many of which are not mutually exclusive, include:

- Raising awareness of older adult issues and their importance, and gaining support for addressing these issues; essentially a call to action
- Developing a vision of your community as a healthy and supportive environment for people of all ages
- Acquiring knowledge about your community’s assets and deficiencies as they relate to meeting the needs of older adults

- Reacting to and validating or modifying survey results
- Planning responsive local government and community agency policies, services, and infrastructure to meet future needs
- Building partnerships and engaging stakeholders for the long term in creating a community that supports all life stages
- Gathering information for a local planning process, such as a general plan update, pedestrian and bicyclist master plans, Area Agency on Aging county/regional plans, or state department of aging plans
- Informing resource allocations for Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) projects, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, Redevelopment Agency projects, affordable housing initiatives, and investments in transportation infrastructure

Who should come to your forum? A forum’s purpose drives the list of stakeholders who should participate in it. Is your forum the first step in an aging well planning process, where you’re aiming to get buy-in and gather initial information? Then you’ll likely want a broad cross-section of the community to attend, with representatives from many diverse groups. Or are you holding a follow-up forum to gather more detailed information on specific topics or to begin developing an action plan? Then you may want to ask specific groups or people to attend.

A good starting point is to ask yourself, “Who do I want to hear from?” Is your forum specifically focused on soliciting resident input from a particular age cohort (such as boomers) or another targeted group? If so, do you have other ways (a survey or focus group, for example) to reach other important stakeholders, such as community service providers, health care agencies, and businesses?

Public forums are often designed to involve both the groups that are interested in and the groups that are affected by the topic. The value of engaging such a wide cross-section of the community lies in the diverse input you’ll receive, which helps you form an accurate picture of your community’s issues and challenges. Engaging the community also fosters a common understanding of the issues and challenges, along with shared acceptance and responsibility for any proposed action steps. However, having more participants often requires more resources, a longer lead time for planning, structured facilitation, and other items that consume time and money.

Consider inviting these stakeholders to participate in your public forum:

- **Residents**—Representatives of neighborhood associations, senior housing complexes, and independent/assisted living facilities, especially boomers who have the most to gain
- **Housing/building**—Architects, nonprofit housing developers, real estate brokers, apartment owners/managers, housing contractors
- **Transportation**—Regional transit authority, taxi/shuttle services, senior transportation providers
- **Health care**—MDs (particularly geriatricians and internists), RNs, home health providers, clinics, hospitals, mental health practitioners, alternative health care providers
- **Community services**—Parks and recreation staff, fraternal groups, YMCA, YWCA
- **Education and lifelong learning**—Teachers, administrators, and governing board members from community colleges, universities, adult schools, and centers on aging; library representatives
- **Public safety**—Police, fire, emergency medical services (EMS), disaster-preparedness agencies

- **Business**—Chambers of commerce (including ethnic-specific chambers), retailers, restaurants, gyms/fitness centers, major employers (especially of boomer-age adults)
- **Faith communities**—Churches, mosques, temples, clergy and laypeople
- **Senior service providers**—Senior center staff, meal providers, AARP, representatives from Area Agencies on Aging and Adult & Aging Commissions
- **Volunteer organizations**—AARP, Ameri-Corp chapters, Senior Corps/RSVP (retired and senior volunteer program), SCORE (retired executives), service clubs, League of Women Voters
- **Arts and culture groups**—Local historical societies, state arts boards, and cultural councils
- **Community-based advocates and providers of services for people with disabilities**—Independent living centers, legal services agencies, health care access coalitions
- **Organizations representing diverse groups in the community**—La Raza, Southeast Asian mutual aid associations, groups representing the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual (LGBT) community, for example
- **Media outlets**—Regional broadcast and print media; daily, weekly, and monthly neighborhood newspapers; college- and community-produced television access programs

How will you draw participants to your forum? To get the most out of your forum planning process, identify the local government and community leaders you want to engage in your ongoing efforts and reach out to them as early as possible to ensure their participation at all levels—on the planning committee, as forum participants, and in workgroups implementing action steps. Think about the sectors, groups, and key individuals in your community who are not likely to participate and develop strategies to engage them.

The overall marketing strategy and the language associated with your aging well forum can literally make or break the event. Given boomers’ busy schedules, multiple priorities, and discomfort with aging issues, it is critical to use language that attracts their attention and draws them into your process, without stigmatizing or patronizing them. The name “Visioning a Healthy Community” will likely appeal to boomers’ idealism and their desire to make a difference, and it avoids the negative connotations associated with a name more specifically focused on aging, such as “Planning for Tomorrow’s Senior Citizens.” (For more on communicating with boomers, see “Choosing the Right Language” in “Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.”)

Considering what’s in it for the people you want to attract to your forum and framing your message to make those benefits clear is also an effective strategy. In a very successful community visioning meeting, the City of Palo Alto solicited the involvement of residents between the ages of 45 and 64 by emphasizing the importance of their input for the services **they** would be receiving in 10 – 15 years.

Getting the people you want to hear from to attend your forum and participate in the ongoing planning process requires extensive outreach. This is where having a planning committee that represents the diverse sectors and groups in your community really pays off. Members of the planning committee can serve as conduits to inform their constituencies about the forum and promote the opportunity for input on “their” issues. Build on the relationships of your planning committee members and extend personal invitations to key individuals. Involving the local Area Agency on Aging can be particularly helpful—the agency has extensive knowledge of and connections with the older adult community that far exceed the scope of most local governments.

There are many communication channels for attracting participants to your forum and engaging them in your aging well planning process. Some to consider are:

- Utility bill stuffers
- Neighborhood association meetings and newsletters
- Local government and stakeholders' web sites and email blasts
- Media ads (newspaper, radio, cable, web)
- Flyers posted and/or handed out in high-traffic areas (during lunch hour at popular restaurants, for example, or at a farmers' market)
- Recreation brochures or other mass mailings to all households
- Partnering with local business(es) to promote the forum

Use multiple communication channels and remember that different generations get their information from different media. Younger residents are likely to rely on the web as a primary information source, while older residents look to newspapers. Design your announcement to appeal to the target audience, and make sure they can easily see, read, or hear it. Keep the text short and simple. People are bombarded by a constant stream of messages vying for their attention. You want yours to stand out.

To ensure full participation from all your community's cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial groups, you may need to develop specific strategies and activities for reaching them. Committing to a truly inclusive and representative process is the starting point. The Institute for Local Government recommends identifying and seeking advice early in the process from community-based and intermediary organizations, like grassroots leadership groups, religious organizations, school/health services, and community-specific media. Their input will help you develop effective ways to engage important community groups. Strategies for promoting your forum to community groups include:

- Contacting community-specific media—TV, cable, radio, newspapers, web sites, newspapers, and newsletters in languages other than English

- Inviting residents through automated phone announcements in multiple languages
- Involving community leaders from target groups in your planning committee
- Making person-to-person contacts and inviting key individuals directly
- Distributing information through faith organizations, schools, local businesses, and health and human service providers

Language is another potential barrier to engaging various members of the community, particularly those who may not be proficient in English. To overcome this barrier, consider the following strategies:

- Train bilingual and bicultural community members to facilitate discussion groups as part of a large community forum.
- Hold multiple forums, some in English and some in other languages spoken by community members.
- Conduct small meetings in residents' homes in the primary language of participants ("family room dialogues").
- Provide interpreters.

For more on communicating with diverse groups, see "Developing Cultural Competence" in "Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview."

When and where should you hold your forum, and how should it be structured?

The logistics of your event—the when, where, and what time—also affect its success. Try to match the location, timing, and structure of your forum to the topics you want to cover and the groups you want to involve. Here are some suggestions:

- Choose a location that is well known and easy to reach. The location of your forum is critical for engaging specific groups. For example, not everyone has the same comfort level with government—some trust it more than others. To attract these groups, consider the following strategies:
 - Locate your forum at a trusted site, such as a school, mosque, or social service agency.



- Conduct small “family room dialogues” in residents’ homes facilitated by trained community members. Through this process, it may be possible to identify people willing to attend a larger forum. Or you can collect and analyze input from the smaller groups as part of your overall results.
- Consider leveraging an already-existing group, meeting, or event. Your forum could be part or all of the meeting agenda for a local group that involves your target community. For example, if you’re trying to reach boomers, you might piggyback your forum topic onto the agenda for a local Rotary club or PTA/PTO meeting. Or you could arrange to hold your forum at a local shopping center or community event that boomers are likely to attend. The City of Citrus Heights worked through its neighborhood associations to engage residents in evaluating the walkability of their community. This strategy of “going where the people are” can be very successful.
- Ensure adequate parking and access to public transit.
- Avoid conflicts with other activities (adult/youth sports, theater, school activities, fundraisers, and similar regular or special events).
- Serve refreshments.
- Provide a homework room or other activities for teens and children.
- Commit to starting and ending on time.

When it comes to the format of a community forum, there are many options. Some communities elect to hold a single, large public meeting with a broad cross-section of residents and community agencies at a central location. If “experts,” such as older adult agency staff and government officials, attend, it is important to make sure that residents aren’t overshadowed by the professionals. A skilled facilitator can draw out all members of the group and ensure balanced participation and input. Consider establishing separate discussion groups for residents and agency staff so residents feel comfortable sharing their ideas and do not

defer to the “experts.” Keep in mind that many agency staff and government officials are also residents of the community—they may contribute ideas while wearing their “older adult resident hat” even though they’re attending the forum in a professional capacity.

Other communities opt to conduct multiple, smaller meetings focused on specific topics or held in various community locations. In developing its senior master plan, the City of Indio held four public forums at senior apartment complexes, retirement communities, and the local senior center to encourage as many residents as possible to participate.

A series of smaller meetings may reach as many or more people than a large public forum. Even if the overall number of attendees is smaller, these meetings may still provide very accurate and reliable information if participants reflect the community. You may also find that different information, concerns, and ideas emerge depending on the demographics and conditions in different neighborhoods throughout your community.

Technology can boost involvement in your public forum, and make it more efficient and effective. For example, audience response systems (handheld wireless devices and software) quickly analyze data and display it in real time so forum participants can set priorities among multiple needs, issues, and strategies. Companies providing these systems include [Turning Technologies](#) and [Padgett Communications](#). You may want to set up online forums to augment face-to-face meetings—for many communities, these forums serve as an excellent way to solicit additional input. You can also use online surveys to gather information before or after a forum. Any web-based technology, however, may limit access for residents with limited proficiency in English and for those who aren’t familiar with the Internet or who don’t have access to it.

TIPS FOR SELECTING A FACILITATOR

When selecting a facilitator for your public forum, the Institute for Local Government recommends that you:

- Ask about the facilitator's experience and the facilitation processes used
- Ask how the facilitator would assess your situation and help you achieve your goals
- Interview multiple candidates and compare responses

We also advise you to thoroughly check references and probe to be sure the facilitator is a good fit for your community.

Who should facilitate your forum: professionals, residents, or staff? Whether to use professional facilitators, community members, or agency or local government staff to facilitate a public forum is a decision driven primarily by the culture of your community and by available resources. Professional facilitators often bring experience in civic engagement and outreach. They can also help design your forum if they are involved in the initial planning stages. Using peer leaders can effectively bring together other residents who might not feel comfortable discussing issues with someone unfamiliar to them and their neighborhood. The City of Indio used members of its Community Outreach Task Group, a subcommittee established by its Senior Master Plan Advisory Committee, to successfully facilitate its neighborhood-based forums. Another option is to have staff from partner agencies serve as facilitators—this offers the additional benefit of further engaging key agencies in planning for aging well in your community.

Another issue to consider is how involved local government staff should be in the forum. Many cities feel it is important to demonstrate staff interest in the community's input by at least having staff attend, if not directly lead, the forum. However, staff presence may also inhibit some participants. They may fear or defer to authority, or they may be concerned about disrupting existing relationships with staff members or drawing government attention to themselves.

A compromise that worked well for the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) was to have staff available at the back of the room during breakout workgroup discussions. Each staff member was assigned a color, such as purple for code enforcement or red for traffic. If a workgroup had a question that mapped to a particular staff member's expertise, the workgroup would hold up a card in that staff member's color. The staff member would then join the workgroup briefly to respond to the question. In this way, ABAG positioned staff as subject matter experts, but did not involve them in determining needs and results.

The key to successful facilitation, whether by professionals, agency/local government staff, or community members, lies in their commitment to a high-quality process, rather than to a predetermined outcome.

During the Forum

What topics should be covered? The nature and scope of the topics to be covered in a public forum vary depending on the forum's purpose, who's conducting it, the needs of your community, and any special political concerns. In its community visioning meeting, the City of Palo Alto limited the topics to "lifestyle issues" (education, recreation, health, fitness, leisure, social services) and did not tackle medical, emergency preparedness, safety, or consumer services, as the city felt these issues required separate, focused attention.

Minnesota's Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging (MAAA), in its publication *Communities for a Lifetime*, identified 13 planning domains that you may want to consider as topics for your public forum:

- Transportation
- Public safety/emergency services
- Housing
- Taxation
- Workforce
- Civic engagement/volunteering
- Health and wellness
- Nutrition
- Recreation and parks
- Libraries
- Technology
- Zoning/codes
- Aging/human services

Be sure to frame forum questions and issues in such a way that they identify the opportunities and resources that a growing older adult population presents—opportunities and resources that should be channeled and used. For example, include discussions about how to tap an experienced, skilled workforce for paid employment and community service activities, and how older adults can potentially increase investment in your local economy. Do not focus solely on needs and challenges associated with aging.

Consider whether providing educational materials in advance of your forum might help maximize its benefits. Many of the topics associated with aging well in communities, such as housing development and mobility infrastructure, are unfamiliar to residents and professionals in other community sectors. Providing basic information in the form of a web-based tutorial, CD, or printed materials can help forum participants understand key issues and terminology. This knowledge can increase their comfort level, their willingness to participate, and the overall effectiveness of your forum.

CHECKLIST—PLANNING A FORUM

- Have we fully engaged our planning committee and drawn on their knowledge, expertise, and community connections?
- Are we using the public forum planning process to further engage our planning committee members in long-term planning and solutions for aging well?
- Have we decided what we want to accomplish through our forum, i.e., what is the purpose(s)?
- Have we decided on a structure for our forum (one large meeting, multiple neighborhood-based discussions, etc.) that matches our purpose(s) and community culture?
- Do we have an effective outreach plan to engage key leaders, residents, and community groups and organizations in the forum?
- Does our plan include strategies for identifying and engaging leaders for the next phase(s) of our aging well planning process and implementation of solutions?
- Have we crafted our messages and designed our materials to attract boomers and overcome their avoidance and denial of aging issues?
- Have we developed culturally competent strategies to engage members of our community's racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups, and to ensure their voices are heard?
- Have we chosen date(s), time(s), and location(s) that make it as easy as possible for our target audiences to participate?
- Have we selected and trained (if needed) our facilitators and chosen facilitation techniques that actively involve all forum participants?

Visioning a “prime-time” friendly

community The World Resources Institute offers this outline for conducting a community visioning exercise. The outline was designed for use with students visioning a sustainable community, but the process also works for determining the future needs of older adults as they enter the prime time of their lives.

- Set the stage by asking, “What would your community be like for older adults if you had the power to make it any way you wanted?”
- Break into small groups to brainstorm what an ideal community for older adults would be like in 10 – 15 years. Ask groups to consider preselected topic areas, such as the six domains identified in the Center for Civic Partnerships’ publication [A Healthy Community Perspective on Aging Well](#):
 - Housing
 - Mobility/transportation
 - Employment
 - Lifelong learning
 - Community involvement
 - Supportive services
- Return to the large group and have individual members from each group share one statement about what the community will be like in the future.
- Write the statements down (project on screen, use flipcharts, draw the idea, use vision cards) and repeat the process around the room until time runs out or you start repeating ideas.

- Group ideas into common themes/ categories and identify areas of consensus and disagreement.
- Create a new list of ideas that have strong support—whether from the whole group or from just a few participants, if those participants are very enthusiastic about a particular idea. As your group selects the most important ideas to carry forward, pay careful attention to ideas that may be based on different cultural, racial, ethnic, or gender backgrounds.
- Format your list into a vision statement or graphic representation. Share the results with forum participants, your planning committee, and the community (see [“What should you do with forum results?”](#) below). Your list may also help you decide what additional steps are necessary for your aging well planning process—such as holding focus groups, conducting a survey, or developing an action plan.

As your group selects the most important ideas to carry forward, pay careful attention to ideas that may be based on different cultural, racial, ethnic, or gender backgrounds. The goal is not to find the majority opinion, but to arrive at a vision that reflects the thinking of diverse groups in the community.

“The goal is not to find the majority opinion, but to arrive at a vision that reflects the thinking of the diverse groups in the community.”

— World Resource Institute

RESOURCES FOR FACILITATION TECHNIQUES & TECHNOLOGY

Books

- *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, 2nd ed., by Sam Kaner, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk, and Duange Berger. Foreword by Michael Doyle. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*, 2nd ed., by Roger Schwarz. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- *The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook: Tips, Tools, and Tested Methods for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*, by Roger Schwarz, Anne Davidson, Peg Carlson, Sue McKinney, and others. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Web Sites

- **Cardstorming**
According to the **Center for Collaborative Planning**, "Cardstorming is a powerful tool for helping groups to think and make decisions together." Cardstorming is a formal and highly visual process of group brainstorming that starts with a broadly focused question, invites individual creative thinking, then allows participants to share, assess, and expand on their ideas in several rounds, starting in small groups, then in larger groups where the ideas can be clustered and assessed together according to any number of schemes. (Available at <http://www.connectccp.org/resources/13cardstorming.pdf>.)
- **Open Space Technology**
In this resource, Michael Herman, founder and principal of Michael Herman Associates, describes how Open Space Technology—formal processes and guidelines for working in nonhierarchical circular environments—proves to be "a simple, powerful way to catalyze effective working conversations" and create innovative organizations. (Available at <http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?WorkingInOpenSpace>.)
- **Reverse Brainstorming**
This resource describes an effective brainstorming technique that involves imagining how to create a worst-case scenario, then reversing and correcting all the negative conditions, paths, and actions to create a best-case scenario. (Available at <http://www.globalknowledge.com/training/generic.asp?pageid=1907&country=United+States>.)
- **Roundtable Question Process**
Designed for conference settings, but easily adaptable to public forums, this document describes a method to engage large groups in a fully participative conversation involving inquiry, appreciative listening, and a fishbowl out (roundtable) activity that allows anyone to state what is most important or compelling. Starting with a few prepared questions, the conversation is allowed to develop in directions most relevant and important to the participants. (Available at <http://www.facilitate.com>.)

Organizations

- **Center for Civic Partnerships**
The mission of the Center for Civic Partnerships is to provide leadership and management support to build healthier communities and more effective nonprofit organizations. Part of the Public Health Institute, the Center for Civic Partnerships strives for "a world where everyone can live a healthy, productive life in a clean, safe environment." (Available at <http://www.civicpartnerships.org>.)
- **Center for Collaborative Planning**
The Center for Collaborative Planning (CCP) "promotes health and social justice by providing training and technical assistance and by connecting people and resources," supporting diverse communities in such key areas as asset-based community development, leadership development, collaborative work, and community assessment and strategic planning. (Available at <http://www.connectccp.org>.)

What should you do with forum results?

Community forums may confirm existing knowledge or beliefs about the priorities of older adults. For example, participants in your forum may express concern about their ability to age in their own homes and maintain their independence and mobility. But forums usually provide new information and new ways of thinking, like an Indio resident's suggestion that bike trails be designed to accommodate golf carts and motorbikes to help older residents get around.

You may wish to present the results of your community forum to elected officials immediately. If you are also planning surveys, focus groups, a second stage to formulate action plans, or other post-forum activities, you may want to wait until all results are in and then do a more comprehensive presentation. It is

critical that you also present results to key partners involved in your aging well planning effort. This helps reinforce the message of shared responsibility and joint leadership, and can strengthen partners' commitments.

Forum results may inform immediate decisions and prompt specific actions as elected officials and staff consider Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budgets, use of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, Redevelopment Agency projects, affordable housing initiatives, investments in transportation infrastructure, and other ongoing local government actions. Forum results may also be valuable to governing boards and elected officials of partner agencies, especially as they go through their own resource allocation processes.

CHECKLIST—DURING & AFTER THE FORUM

- Have we selected the most important topics to cover in our forum?
- Do we want/need to do any advance education to ensure that forum participants have the background knowledge they need to feel comfortable participating, and to contribute effectively to the forum?
- Do we know what follow-up activities and steps will occur so we can inform forum participants?
- Have we identified the governing boards and elected officials who will receive a report of our forum's results?
- Have we formed a presentation team that includes community partners, residents, and multiple local government departments?
- Do we have a communications plan for sharing results and ongoing aging well planning efforts and actions with all forum participants and the larger community?
- Do we have a plan for keeping the momentum going with some immediate actions and short-, mid-, and long-term follow-up steps?

You may want to convene a follow-up public meeting to present the results of your forum, gain additional feedback, refine the themes, develop plans to respond to those themes, and/or secure commitments to lead various efforts. If you have engaged community residents and organizational partners from the beginning and built an expectation of shared community responsibility for aging well into your planning process, you will likely have people ready to step up and play active roles in the next phase of your effort.

Use your report to build on the momentum your forum generated by identifying a few actions that community agencies and local government departments can take immediately. If you're planning to develop a more comprehensive plan with multiple action steps and timelines, be sure to include short-, mid- and long-term goals to foster ongoing engagement in and commitment to the process.

Regardless of when you present your report, it should not come just from the community services director or another lead staff member from local government. Instead, partner agencies and residents, as well as other key local government staff (housing, planning, engineering, public works, city manager's office, etc.), should all have prominent roles in presenting the report to policymakers and governing bodies.

Circulate the results of your public forum and details of actions planned or underway throughout the community, especially to forum participants. Identifying a few next steps during the event itself and telling forum participants what to expect after the event will help keep them interested and engaged.

Use local media outlets and connections with reporters to publicize forum results. This publicity will generate more public interest and possibly lead to more input and participation. Be sure to update the community as information generated during the forum influences key decisions, and the community makes progress toward achieving forum goals. Posts on local government and community partners' web sites, mailings to residents, PSAs on your local cable station, and articles in recreation bulletins and partner newsletters are just a few ways to keep your community informed and engaged in planning for aging well.



RESOURCES

[A Guide to Organizing Community Forums](#)

Community Catalyst

This guide helps you organize more effective community forums by providing sets of questions focused on general concerns that often arise during forum planning. The guide also includes planning checklists for the various stages of organizing a forum. Appendices provide useful lists, including types of target groups for particular audiences, suggestions for low-cost meeting spaces, and ways to overcome potential barriers to successful forums. (Available at http://www.communitycatalyst.org/doc_store/publications/a_guide_to_organizing_community_forums_jul02.pdf.)

[Planning Public Forums: Questions to Guide Local Officials](#)

Institute for Local Government

This document is meant to help you design an appropriate public forum for your particular community and its unique conditions and interests when confronting a specific issue or controversy. Its questions and guidelines are designed to help you assess whether a forum is appropriate for your community and how well you are prepared for the effort involved, and to help you create a forum that will meet your community's specific needs. (Available at http://www.cacities.org/resource_files/25304.ILG_PlanPubForums.pdf.)

[Conducting Public Forums and Listening Sessions](#)

The Community Tool Box

This section of the Community Tool Box provides a useful discussion of what public forums are, why they are valuable, and how to better organize and conduct them. It provides detailed examples of actual forums, a list of related topics, and a summary checklist. (Available at http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/section_1021.htm.)

[A Viable Futures Toolkit](#)

Sustainable Communities for All Ages

This resource provides concrete guidance on “planning, policy-making, and programming to plan for an aging population in ways that benefit all generations.” The toolkit includes a video, a user guide, a workbook, a community checklist, a guide for resource development, and tips for coalition building, as well as issue briefs on health, housing, lifelong learning, land use, and transportation. (Available at http://www.viablefuturescenter.com/VFC_Site/AgeProducts.html.)

[Beyond Translation and Tolerance: Cultural Competence in Health Care Organizations](#)

Healthcare Georgia Foundation

Prejudgments or missed cues because of cultural differences often lead to misunderstandings with tragic consequences. Developing an awareness of cultural nuances and a shared cultural understanding—cultural competency—is essential to competent delivery and utilization of health care. This document defines and examines the practice of cultural competency, for both patients and practitioners, through detailed examples and case studies, and provides resources for further assistance. (Available at: http://www.healthcaregeorgia.org/uploads/publications/Beyond_Translation_and_Tolerance.pdf.)

Audience Response Devices

Audience response devices are handheld wireless keypads and software that allow audience responses to questions and issues to be analyzed and displayed in real time. These types of devices are provided by multiple companies, including [Turning Technologies](#) and [Padgett Communications](#).

REFERENCES

Center for Civic Partnerships. "A Healthy Community Perspective on Aging Well." Sacramento, CA: Public Health Institute, 2006, http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/publications/aging_brief/Aging_Brief_Final71406.pdf (accessed October 18, 2009).

City of Indio, Human Services Department. "Indio Senior Master Plan." Indio, CA: City of Indio, 2008, <http://www.indio.org> (accessed October 18, 2009).

Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging. "Communities for a Lifetime: Survey Findings." North St. Paul, MN: Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging, 2006, <http://www.tcaging.org/downloads/cflreport.pdf> (accessed October 18, 2009).

World Resources Institute. *Teacher's Guide to World Resources: Exploring Sustainable Communities*. "Visioning a Sustainable Community." Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 1997, <http://archive.wri.org/page.cfm?id=2257&z=?> (accessed June 10, 2009).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This guide is part of [Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement & Action](http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/services/CHCC/aging-well.htm). This toolkit also includes a community planning overview; guides for resident surveys and focus groups; case studies; and a list of aging-related resources. For the complete toolkit, visit <http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/services/CHCC/aging-well.htm>.

