

# *Weighing the Options:*

How Can We Encourage Healthy Weights  
Among West Virginia's Youth?

## **A Guide for Forum Convenors and Moderators**

*An initiative of the West Virginia Office of Healthy Lifestyles,  
the West Virginia Center for Civic Life,  
and partnering organizations throughout the state*

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**Table of Contents**

Page	
3	The Purpose of Community Forums
4	Convening a Community Forum
5	Tips for Creating Partnerships
6	Inviting the Public to Your Forum
7	Sample press release
8	Sample partner invitation letter
9	Sample participant invitation letter
10	Sample forum flyer
11	Stages of a Community Forum
12	Forum Guidelines
13	The Moderator's Role
14	Questions to Promote Deliberation
15	The Role of the Recorders
16	Moderator Response Sheet
17	What to Do After the Forum

*For more information on convening and moderating community forums,  
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## The Purpose of Community Forums

"Why are we doing this?" It's a good question to ask when convening or attending a community forum. People lead busy lives and want to make sure they are spending their time in worthwhile ways. They like to have a sense of "what they're getting into."

Deliberative public forums seek to accomplish many goals:

- *Help people better understand the issue.* This understanding comes not only from the information provided in the discussion guide, but also from listening to and learning from fellow community members.
- *Examine different approaches to dealing with the issue.* Forums encourage thoughtful consideration of a variety of perspectives in a respectful manner, emphasizing that there is no one right answer.
- *Weigh the benefits and trade-offs of each approach.* Forums help people identify the positive aspects of each approach, as well as the trade-offs or sacrifices that might have to be made.
- *Identify common ground and areas of disagreement.* By the end of a forum, people will have discovered where they agree, where they disagree, and why. This helps set the stage for people to work together on the issue.
- *Explore possible actions, individually and as a group.* There are no quick and easy solutions for complex public problems, but there are steps that people can begin to take to address them. Forums give people the opportunity to share their ideas and decide what they want to do next, individually and/or together.

**Deliberative forums are nonpartisan and do not advocate a particular perspective or solution to any public issue.** Rather, they enable diverse groups of citizens to determine together what direction they want policy to take, what kinds of actions they favor or oppose, and what they are able to do, individually and as a community.



# Convening a Community Forum

## Logistics to Consider

- What date and timeframe will work best?
- Where will the forum be held?
- Are facilities handicapped accessible?
- Is the meeting space large enough to accommodate all participants?
- Is it possible to arrange seats in a circle or U-shape in the meeting room?
- Will you serve refreshments?
- Will you provide childcare?

## Who will do what?

- Will there be a sign-in process? Who will handle it?
- Who is responsible for designing and distributing promotional materials?
- Who will help with outreach and invitations to the community?
- Who is responsible for securing discussion guides and other materials?
- Who will moderate the forum? Who will record?
- Who will return information from the forum to the WV Center for Civic Life?

## Equipment/Materials

- Issue booklets, starter video (your choice of DVD or VHS tape), questionnaires, moderator's guide
- Easels with flip charts, markers, tape
- Video player and monitor

- Extension cords, if necessary
- Microphones (Note: Only if group is quite large, usually not needed.)
- Pens or pencils for completing questionnaire

### **Tips for Creating Partnerships**

Building a broad base of support for local public issues forums not only ensures participation from many different segments of the community, but also serves to distribute the workload and prevent burnout of committed volunteers.

Following are some guidelines for creating positive partnerships that will ensure the success of local forums:

- Be inclusive. Look for partnerships including and beyond those organizations that already understand the importance of public deliberation. Successful forums represent a diversity of interests, resources, and perspectives.
- Invite partners to participate at the earliest stages of planning a forum. Give them ownership in the forum and the opportunity to contribute their special skills, resources, and points of view. They will be far more likely to fully participate if they are of the planning process as well as part of the forum implementation.
- Clearly define the roles for partners. What skills and resources do they bring to the table that will improve the capacity for public deliberation? Delegate tasks that best serve the partners' needs and interests, so that both parties feel rewarded for their efforts. Who is the partner's contact? What is their task? What kind of involvement in time and resources will the partner provide? What is the timetable to complete the assignment? How will their contribution be recognized?
- Make sure your partner(s) understands the mission and goals for the local public issues forum. Communicate clearly why the forum needs their participation. Ask the partner what their expectations are and how they hope to benefit. From this discussion you can build a mutually beneficial relationship that will be long-lasting.

## Inviting the Public to Your Forum

**Personalize, personalize, personalize.** The most effective way to get people to come to your forum is to ask them personally. Most people lead busy lives, and it helps to let them know how much you value their perspectives and participation. Face-to-face invitations are great, but you might also use email or a handwritten note on a postcard through the regular mail. And since you can't invite everyone yourself, ask partners to invite others personally. For example, ask a local pastor to invite his/her parishioners to the forum; ask a parent-teacher group to invite its members; ask a teacher to invite students; ask your friends to invite their friends.

**Publicize early.** When possible, send out a first round of announcements several weeks prior to the forum to allow organizations (civic groups, schools, faith groups, etc.) to include the information in their newsletters, bulletins, and mailings (email and regular mail).

**Publicize often.** Advertising experts say that it can take 5-6 tries before your message "sinks in" with the people you are trying to reach. Don't assume that one letter or flyer will make enough of an impression on people that they will actually show up for your forum.

**Used varied media.** People have many different learning and communication styles, so you need a variety of avenues to reach them. If your newspaper has a "community calendar," send in an announcement. See if you can interest a local reporter in doing an article prior to the event or write a letter to the editor. Many local stations have early morning or noontime shows where you can invite the community to your forum on the air. Some local newspapers might print the basic outline of the discussion guide in the paper, so their readers can think about the issue before attending the forum.

**Appearances matter.** Your printed materials don't need to be slick, but they should look thoughtfully prepared—correct spelling and grammar and an attractive layout.

Sample Press Release

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
[Date]

Contact: [Name]  
[Phone]  
[Email]  
[Email]

***Weighing the Options:  
How Do We Encourage Healthy Weights Among West Virginia's Youth?***

More children are overweight today than every before and the numbers are rising. We know that overweight children and teens experience more health problems, ones that worsen as they grow into adulthood. Yet parents, teachers, health care providers and policymakers struggle with what to do to address this serious problem.

The public is invited to participate in a community forum to discuss what we can do to encourage healthy weights among our children and youth. *[Your organization]*, in partnership with the West Virginia Office of Healthy Lifestyles and the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, is sponsoring "Weighing the Options: How Do We Encourage Healthy Weights Among West Virginia's Youth? *[time and place]*

The forum will bring together members of the community in a thoughtful conversation about what can be done. A neutral moderator will lead participants in a discussion of several approaches to improving our children's health in an atmosphere that encourages respectful sharing of differing perspectives. An issue guide will be available with useful information about successful programs that are improving our children's chance for a future healthy future right here in West Virginia.

The ultimate goal of the forum is to consider individual, organizational, and community responses to the rising rate of childhood obesity. We hope opportunities for community action will emerge from this discussion that will be best implemented by a partnership among the agencies and organizations in our community. If we are going to be successful in tackling the issue of childhood obesity, our first step is to listen to and learn from each other. Please call *[contact name and information]* for more information.



Sample Partner Invitation

***Weighing the Options:  
How Do We Encourage Healthy Weights Among West Virginia's Youth?***

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Dear\_\_\_\_\_

More children are overweight today than every before and the numbers are rising. We know that overweight children and teens experience more health problems, ones that worsen as they grow into adulthood. Yet parents, teachers, health care providers and policy maker struggle with what to do to address this serious problem.

You are invited to join with *[your organization]* in co-sponsoring a community forum to discuss what we can do to encourage healthy weights among our children and youth. *[Your organization]*, in partnership with the West Virginia Office of Healthy Lifestyles and the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, is sponsoring a forum "Weighing the Options" *[time and place]*

The forum will bring together members of our community in a thoughtful conversation about what can be done. A neutral moderator will lead participants in a discussion of several approaches to improving our children's health in an atmosphere that encourages respectful sharing of differing perspectives. An issue guide will be available with useful information about successful programs that are improving our children's chance for a future healthy future right here in West Virginia. We think your organization would add important insights for tackling the issue of childhood obesity in our community.

The ultimate goal of the forum is to consider individual, organizational, and community responses to the rising rate of childhood obesity. We hope opportunities for community action will emerge from this discussion that will be best implemented by a partnership among the agencies and organizations in our community. If we are going be successful in tackling the issue of childhood obesity, our first step is to listen to and learn from each other.

Please call *[contact name and information]* to join as a sponsor for the forum or for more information.

Sincerely,

*[Convenor]*

Sample Participant Invitation

***Weighing the Options:  
How Do We Encourage Healthy Weights Among West Virginia's Youth?***

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

More children are overweight today than every before and the numbers are rising. We know that overweight children and teens experience more health problems, ones that worsen as they grow into adulthood. Yet parents, teachers, health care providers and policy maker struggle with what to do to address this serious problem.

You are invited to attend a community forum to discuss what we can do to encourage health weights among our children and youth. *[Your organization]*, in partnership with the West Virginia Office of Healthy Lifestyles and the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, is sponsoring a forum on *Weighing the Options: How Can We Encourage Healthy Weights Among West Virginia's Youth?* It will be held *[time and place]*.

You will join other members of the community in a thoughtful conversation about what can be done. You'll consider several approaches to improving our children's health in an atmosphere that encourages respectful sharing of differing perspectives. You'll receive useful information about successful programs that are improving our children's chance for a future healthy future right here in West Virginia. The goal of the forum is to consider individual, organizational, and community actions.

We need your voice. Only you can share your struggles and insights on tackling this issue. Please bring others who would like to participate. If we are going be successful in tackling the issue of childhood obesity, our first step is to listen to and learn from each other.

Please call *[contact name and information]* to register for the forum or for more information.

Sincerely,

[Convenor]

Sample forum flyer

***Please join us . . .***

for an important community discussion

***Weighing the Options:***

***How Can We Encourage Healthy Weights  
among West Virginia's Youth?***

Many West Virginians are deeply concerned about the rising rate of childhood obesity in our state. In this community forum, citizens from all walks of life are invited to come together to discuss what can be done to work toward healthy futures for all of our children.

Date  
Time  
Location  
Sponsors

## Stages of a Community Forum

In a two-hour forum, most moderators allow about a half-hour for the welcome, guidelines, video, and personal stake; about an hour for the discussion of the three approaches; and about a half-hour for the reflections and questionnaire. If you have more or less than two hours, adjust your time for each section proportionately.

**Welcome** Let the participants know who is sponsoring the forum. Stress co-sponsorship if several organizations are involved. Depending on the number of people present, you may want to ask participants to introduce themselves. If you have a particularly large group, you can ask participants to identify themselves the first time they speak in the discussion.

**Guidelines** Review the suggested guidelines for the forum. (See page 12.)

**Starter Video** Play the 8-minute video, which will provide an overview of the issue and the approaches that will form the framework for your discussion.

**Personal Stake** Before you begin deliberating together, take a few minutes to connect the issue directly to people's lives and concerns. There will not be time for everyone to offer a concern at this time. You are really looking for a range of comments that reveal the breadth of the issue. Some questions you might ask:

- What concerns you most about this issue?
- When you hear people discussing this issue, what makes it so difficult?
- Have any of you had a personal experience that illustrates what's at stake here?

**Deliberation** Provide a structure for people to examine each approach as fully as possible by encouraging them to consider the costs and consequences of each. The types of questions you might ask:

- What is there about this approach that you find appealing?
- What might be the effect of that idea on others?
- What is there about this approach that you just cannot live with?
- What makes this approach difficult? If it is a good idea, what stands in the way?

**Reflections** Turn the participants' attention to the insights and directions that have emerged in the forum. The types of questions you might ask:

- How has your thinking about the issue changed during the forum?

- What new insights or information did you gain?
- What were the greatest areas of concern?
- Where did we agree? Disagree?
- What might you do personally about this issue? What might we do together?
- Are there next steps we want to take?

**Questionnaire** Ask participants to complete the post-forum questionnaire as a way to capture their final thoughts and impressions. Collect the post-forum questionnaires and return them to the West Virginia Center for Civic Life.

## **Forum Guidelines**

At the beginning of the discussion, most moderators review the following guidelines with participants. Some moderators write the guidelines on a flip chart and post them in the room. You might also ask the participants if they agree with the guidelines or if they have their own suggestions for the group to consider.

The moderator will guide the discussion yet remain neutral. The moderator will make sure that:

- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- No one or two individuals dominate the conversation.
- The discussion focuses on the issue.
- All the major approaches or positions on the issue are considered.
- An atmosphere for discussion and an analysis of the alternatives is maintained.

➤ Everyone listens to each other.

## The Moderator's Role

- Provide an overview of the process of deliberation—the rationale for the kind of work the participants are getting ready to do.
- Ask questions that probe deeply into what's at stake in the issue and in each of the approaches.
- Encourage participants to direct their responses and questions to each other, rather than to the moderator.
- Remain neutral throughout the discussion, while encouraging participants to explore all facets of their own and other's opinions
- Keep track of the time so participants can move through a discussion of each of the approaches, reserving enough time for a period of group reflections at the end.

**If this is your first moderating experience, keep these thoughts in mind:**

**You don't have to be an expert on the issue.** Reading the discussion guide thoroughly, considering questions that get to the heart of the issue, and thinking through the essence of each approach are the critical parts of preparation.

**Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.** Your natural curiosity and your interest in understanding diverse views will be your greatest assets; they're probably what got you here in the first place.

**Keep the discussion moving.** Sometimes it's hard to move on to another approach with so much more that could be said. But in order to deliberate—to really weigh what's at stake and make progress on the issue—participants need the opportunity to weigh all the major approaches.

**Reserve ample time for reflections at the end of the forum.** It's easy to find yourself with little time left at the end of the forum to

reflect on what's been said. But, in many ways, this is the most important work the group will do—IF they have time to do it.



## Questions to Promote Deliberation

As you examine this issue together with forum participants, you (and they) will undoubtedly think of questions that need to be explored. Many of these questions will arise during the course of the forum. Most moderators find it helpful, though, to consider ahead of time some of the basic, broad questions that need to be addressed about each approach. Here are some possibilities:

### ***Approach One: Take personal responsibility for fitness.***

What stands in the way of applying what we already know about good nutrition and exercise in our families? In our schools? In our communities?

What kind of help should parents expect from schools and the community in raising healthy weight children?

Your questions?

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### ***Approach Two: Focus on overall child well-being.***

What do you think are the key factors that cause children to develop unhealthy weights?

Are schools and communities capable of increasing counseling services to help children deal more effectively with problems and emotions?

Your questions?

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### ***Approach Three: Create a culture of fitness.***

Should the advertising of unhealthy foods to children be restricted?

How should a school set priorities in the school day for academic offerings and physical activity?

Your questions?

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## **The Role of the Recorder**

The role of the recorder is an extremely important one during a deliberative forum. Many moderators coordinate with the moderator ahead of time to plan effective strategies for working together during the forum. The purposes of recording are to—

- Remind forum participants of their key concerns, the areas of greatest agreement and disagreement.
- Provide a written record of the group's work that might feed into future meetings of the group or additional forums.
- Help inform other members of the community about the outcomes of the forum.
- Contribute to upcoming report on forums throughout the state.

### **Group Recorder** (works at a flip chart in front of the group)

- Use brief phrases to capture main ideas. Don't try to get down every word.
- Capture the tensions and trade-offs that surface.
- Write clearly and legibly. Use dark markers and print large enough to be seen in the back of the room.

### **At-the-seat Recorder** (takes notes at his/her seat)

- Capture direct quotes that reveal the deep concerns or emotions that surface.
- Record comments that reflect the spirit of the conversation.
- Summarize stories that are told that illustrate tensions or main ideas.
- Record specific ideas for dealing with the issue.

## Moderator Response Sheet

After the forum, please respond to these questions about the forum you moderated. Use the reverse or additional sheets, if needed.

Moderator's

Name\_\_\_\_\_

—

Phone\_\_\_\_\_ E-

mail\_\_\_\_\_

Date and location of  
forum\_\_\_\_\_

Number of participants\_\_\_\_\_ Age  
range\_\_\_\_\_

Racial  
diversity\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

1 What seemed to be the participants' main concerns about the issue?

2 Which approaches and actions had the most support within the group?

3 Which approaches and actions had the least support within the group?

4 What next steps, if any, did the group discuss?

## What To Do After the Forum

### A Checklist

It is important to capture the ideas of your forum(s) for use as your community plans how they would like to address the problem of prescription drug abuse locally.

To build a foundation for future work, do the following after your forum:

- Gather completed participant questionnaires.** These questionnaires provide very useful insights from individual participants that will reveal themes, trends, and areas of broad concern when they are analyzed with questionnaires from other forums.
- Complete the attached moderator's response sheet.** Try to do this soon after the forum, while ideas are still fresh in you mind. During the reflections period of your forum, the group will work through most of the questions on the moderator's response sheet. (See page 16.)
- Prepare recorder notes from the forum.** Better yet, ask the recorder to do this for you. If you can have the "at the seat" notes typed up, that would be very helpful.

- ❑ **Prepare contact list** (name and email) for participants who gave you this information in order for us to **stay in touch with them for follow-up action planning sessions.**

## **Questions?**

**Contact West Virginia Center for Civic Life  
304-344-3430  
mail@wvcivicliflife.org**

**Thank you** for your leadership in bringing West Virginians together to consider ways to improve the quality of life of children throughout our state.