
Introduction

In 1992 the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation had nearly a century of experience providing human services to people in need, and a decade of experience assisting other organizations with their management and leadership challenges. However, the Foundation didn't know much about the needs of both formal and informal leaders working in a variety of roles to strengthen neighborhoods and cities.

The authors interviewed numerous formal and informal leaders in Saint Paul to determine what role Wilder might play in strengthening leadership in the city. One of the strongest messages from those interviewed was that they worked in isolation and didn't have a way to connect with others in different neighborhoods, organizations, or cities who were working on similar issues. They wanted information and ways to better link with others for support and to improve the effectiveness of their community efforts. The Wilder Foundation started a community forums program to combat that isolation, provide needed information and resources, and connect people across organizational and neighborhood boundaries.

Since 1993, the Wilder Foundation, in partnership with nearly one hundred other organizations, has sponsored more than seventy community forums. During that time it has also assisted other groups with forum planning. This book is a result of Wilder's experience convening community forums.

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for public debate on issues. Forums can ensure that the community's voice is included in decision making and increase awareness and understanding of key issues facing communities. They can generate hope and confidence in communities that are short on both, and they can help build social capital—strong relationships and connections among people.

Community groups—neighborhood associations, community development corporations, city planning departments, foundations, faith-based organizations, schools—hold forums for a variety of reasons. They may want to raise public awareness on an issue, garner public support, inform people of new opportunities, build consensus around an issue, change public policy, create a vision for the future, or report findings from a research study. They may want stronger relationships with their constituents or visibility for their organizations.

Whatever the motivation, groups will typically convene a planning group and then realize that all the different interests and voices involved make charting a course time-consuming and difficult. They also discover that forums are very staff-intensive. Putting together a forum is not always as simple as throwing a party, where you invite people and they show up. Successful forums require careful planning, artful design, strategic communications, careful attention to detail, and the participation of many people, often with conflicting interests.

This book discusses forums with a local reach, that is, within one community or metropolitan region. It does not address forums that convene people across large geographic areas or via technology. Many of the same principles can apply to these broad-scope forums, but different logistics, communication tools, and technology are needed, and that is the subject for another book.

This book will help readers:

- Determine if a forum is the best way to achieve their goals
- Clarify the desired outcomes for a forum
- Decide who needs to be involved
- Identify resources needed to support their forum and how to obtain those resources
- Manage the logistics of event planning and execution
- Support follow-up action
- Conduct exciting, successful events that accomplish the established goals

The Wilder Nonprofit Field Guide to Conducting Community Forums: Engaging Citizens, Mobilizing Communities is intended to help community groups—whether citizens, nonprofits, government, or business—achieve their community building goals and make good use of their scarce resources. The book is organized into five sections:

Chapter 1: Planning the Forum and Obtaining Resources helps you understand three types of forums, clarify your goals, decide whether a forum is the right vehicle to achieve your goals, develop a concept paper, recruit other sponsors and partners, and obtain financial support.

Chapter 2: Preparing for the Forum covers building the forum agenda; lining up speakers, research, and other resources; launching promotions and communications campaigns; managing logistics; and designing evaluation tools.

Chapter 3: Orchestrating the Event includes suggestions on the nuts and bolts of event management—registrations, staffing, food, facilities, handouts, equipment, and troubleshooting.

Chapter 4: Sustaining the Results suggests methods for supporting follow-up action and reporting results.

Appendices include sample documents, worksheets, and a Forum Checklist to help organize your effort and save you time, as well as references to books and web sites that might be helpful.

This book is designed for quick-and-easy access to needed information and for use in many situations—holding a one-time forum or a series of forums, conducting a forum on a shoestring or with a fully funded budget, sponsoring the forum alone or with many partners and co-sponsors, having a long planning process or convening a forum in a week or two to capitalize on a recent event. Read Types of Forums in Chapter 1 first; it will be valuable to any group planning a community forum. After reading that, you can skip around in the book and look for hints and tools to help your forum achieve maximum results. At the end of each chapter, a sidebar called Forums on a Shoestring will help those readers who need to get big results with little time or money.