

Family Caregivers Town Hall/Community Meeting



What is a Town Hall Meeting?

Town Hall meetings are an opportunity for citizens to voice their concerns and opinions on a given topic so as to raise awareness and press for action. A Town Hall meeting provides an organized opportunity for family caregivers in a given community or state to be heard by their local leaders and others in decision-making positions.

Why Have a Town Hall Meeting?

Community leaders are often unaware of the real needs of family caregivers and their loved ones. A Town Hall meeting is a terrific way to bring them together with caregivers and care recipients who want to voice their concerns. The knowledge they gather at a Town Hall meeting can provide valuable information and broaden their understanding of what it really means to be a caregiving family, information and understanding that just may affect their thinking as they review existing programs and consider legislation to meet the future needs of family caregivers and their loved ones. In addition, Town Hall meetings are an opportunity for would-be champions to proclaim their intent and for caregiver advocates to network.

Checklist for Town Hall meetings

- Step 1:**
Decision to hold Town Hall meeting
- Step 2:**
Identify Project Coordinator
- Step 3:**
Identify Planning Committee
- Step 4:**
Topic, Format, and Scope
- Step 5:**
Budget and Fundraising
- Step 6:**
Date, Time and Meeting Site
- Step 7:**
Schedule, and Attendance

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How to Plan A Town Hall Meeting on Family Caregiving Issues

The following is a step-by step-guide to organizing and hosting a Town Hall meeting around issues of importance to family caregivers in your community. It is meant to serve as a guide, a checklist if you will, and to help you

think through the various aspects of planning the meeting. Ultimately your own good sense, your knowledge of your community, and the amount of time you have to plan will play a key role in making your meeting a success.

Step 1: Make the Decision to Hold a Town Hall Meeting

It is important to note that hosting a Town Hall meeting is a group activity. A small meeting, with a limited agenda to take place in your church perhaps, or at an adult day center can be planned and carried out by a handful of dedicated individuals, but if you are trying to draw caregivers and their advocates from a wider area, and to attract a sizable crowd and notable

panel, your best bet is to form a coalition of organizations (the core group) or work with an existing one, that can bring expertise, energy, resources, and contacts to the table. Having a Town Hall meeting requires planning and a committed group of workers, regardless of its size, so it does require forethought and a real decision before beginning.

Step 2: Identify a Project Coordinator

This may be either a staff person or a volunteer, but it is essential that the coordinator is familiar with the issues of caregiving and the workings of your community. Although a family caregiver might seem to be an ideal coordinator,

the demands of caregiving may be difficult to work around. The project coordinator should plan to devote at least a day a week to coordinating the planning process, and all available time in the final week prior to the meeting.

Step 3: Identify planning committee participants

A committee working under the direction of the project coordinator is necessary to ensure the people power that planning a meeting takes. It will need to meet once in person to get the project underway and again just before the meeting. However, most other communication can and should be done by phone, fax, or E-mail. A committee of four—six representatives in addition to the project coordinator is a good size for this working group.

One of the key roles of the planning committee is to broaden community awareness of the event, increase participation, and ensure that adequate resources are available. The breadth of the committee, its contacts, and it's political savvy can make a big difference in the success of your project and the ease with which you can pull all the pieces together. Don't forget to include at least one past or present family caregiver on the planning committee.

Possible Topics for your Town Hall meeting:

- The availability and affordability of Respite Care
- The lack of respect, support, and training for family caregivers from the medical establishment
- Financial consequences of caregiving
- The need for care coordination of medical and non-medical services
- The work force shortage of nurses, nursing assistants and homecare aids

Step 4: Decide on the Topic, the Format, and Scope of your Meeting.

Your meeting should address a particular topic of critical concern to family caregivers in your community. The planning committee should solicit input from a variety of sources. Some possible topics include:

- Availability and affordability of respite care
- The lack of respect, support, and training for family caregivers from the medical establishment
- The shortage of qualified and reliable home care and other healthcare workers
- Financial consequences of caregiving
- The need for care coordination of medical and non-medical services

Determining the preferred format and scope for your meeting are important parts of the process because they will affect all of your other decisions and the number of resources, monetary and otherwise, that will be required.

Key elements will include:

- A panel of distinguished community and political leaders (state legislators, a senior executive of a health system, a newspaper editor, a representative from the mayor's office, a leading religious leader, etc.) to listen, ask questions, comment, and offer suggestions on how the problems discussed might best be addressed.

Remember that the people on your panel deserve an opportunity to respond to the caregivers and present their own views. Therefore you must keep the number of panelists in proportion to the time you have for the program.

- One or two speakers to set the stage for the discussion by educating all in attendance on the issue and how it fits into the larger context of caregiving concerns. This will help ensure that the discussion and all participants start from a common base of knowledge. These should be short presentations of approximately 10 minutes.
- Citizens providing testimony will be family caregivers of course, but also possibly care recipients and professionals that see firsthand the impact of the concerns being addressed. The four to six individuals should be selected for their ability to present a message that is on point for the focus of your meeting. They should be representative of the breadth of the community to the extent possible. The number of presentations and the format you choose for your program will determine the amount of time allotted for each caregiver presentation. A reasonable length is four to five minutes.

- The initial planning committee meeting should be done in person. Communication afterward can and should be done by phone and e-mail.
- Determining the format and scope for your meeting are important parts of the process because they will affect all of your other decisions and the number of resources, monetary and otherwise, that will be required.

- In addition a moderator will be required to host the meeting, keep it moving and encourage dialogue. The moderator should be an individual knowledgeable on the issues and able to manage the discussion, keeping it on topic and moving forward. During the Q&A portion the moderator will field and direct the questions. An open mike will encourage Q&A. A local media person, particularly from radio or television, may be a good choice for the moderator and has the added advantage of getting increased coverage of the event.

Contact participants early to determine their interest and availability. Have the names of some backups, just in case. When dealing with politicians they

Step 5: Develop a Budget and Begin Fundraising as Early as Possible

It is critical that you get a handle on the costs of your program early on. Understanding how much you will need may well cause you to scale back your original ideas. It can also alert you to what types of goods and services you will want to get donated. Typical costs can include:

- Facility rental
- Use of AV materials
- Printing and postage for invitations
- Printing of programs and other event materials
- Refreshments
- Staff time and overhead

may not be able to give you a firm commitment until just before the meeting. Also there may be certain protocols you'll need to follow so be sure to ask about any do's and don'ts that might apply.

It is not insulting to ask people to let you see their formal remarks ahead of time. Lawyers are taught to never ask a witness a question they don't know the answer to. Meeting planners should be equally cautious and make sure that all participants are well prepared, and that you have a clear idea of what they are going to say. Don't forget to get short bios and possibly even a picture of key participants. You will need this information for the program and for media contacts prior to, and on, the day of the meeting.

Given the fact that this is a meeting for family caregivers there are other costs that may apply including:

- Respite care
- Transportation

A Town Hall meeting will:

- Provide an opportunity for citizens to set a community agenda on family caregiving issues.
- Spark new dialogues on caregiving issues among policy makers, political and corporate leaders, healthcare providers and other professionals, family caregivers and caregiver advocates.
- Bring together various organizations to collaborate as an ongoing family caregiver education and advocacy coalition.
- Identify and engage influential "champions" who will continue to work with this coalition to bring about positive change for family caregivers.

Step 6: Select the Date, Time, and Meeting Site

Weekday evenings or Saturdays are often easier times for working caregivers to get away, but if you have the opportunity, do an informal survey of your target audience to make sure if this holds true for them.

November is of course National Family Caregivers Month, but a Town Hall meeting is appropriate any time of year, and depending upon your topic, your ultimate aim, or the part of the country you live in another month may be more practical.

In selecting a site consider the projected size of your audience, accessibility, availability of AV equipment, distance from major roadways or public transportation, downtown vs suburban location, etc. Some possible sites are:

- Schools
- Libraries

- Community Centers
- Churches or Synagogues
- Community Colleges
- Radio or Television Studios
- Hospitals
- Retirement Communities

Don't assume that just because someone says your preferred site is handicap accessible that it really is. Given the nature of your meeting, you need to make sure your self. Other site considerations include understanding whether there are any code or operating policy limitations that would be restrictive, the availability of facility staff to help with the logistics, adequacy of parking, and obviously the layout. The week before your program, conduct a final site visit to ensure that everything is as ordered and to make final logistical decisions.

Step 7: The Devil is in the Details

• Tracking Activities

Make sure you have a written schedule that you update/share regularly so that problems can be caught early on. The more detailed it is the fewer items that will fall through the cracks, and the fewer people who can say they didn't know what was expected of them and when it was due.

• Meeting Day

On the day of the meeting assign someone to be the onsite coordinator, to verify set up arrangements and make last minute decisions. It is

important to obtain contact information for attendees so that you can keep them up to date on this and future caregiver issues and events. Have someone assigned to greet any reporters who attend. Prepare special packets for them. Be sure that this person is familiar with the issue and resources that are available and can provide assistance as needed.

• After the Meeting

Make sure all clean-up activities are taken care of and that you have all the information you need to finalize invoices and payments.

List of Possible Committees:

- Planning Committee
- Panelists and Moderator Committee
- Testimony Committee
- Fund Raising Committee
- Meeting Day Logistical Committee
- Public Relations Committee
- Invitation Committee
- Reception Committee

Prepare a final report about your town hall meeting and send the report along with a thank you note to everyone involved in the meeting as soon as possible following the event.

Finally, please share your experience with NFCA.

Outreach Activities

• Public Relations

Put together a public relations plan to cover all the various ways that you can bring attention to your event, encourage participation, and possibly even get media coverage. Reach out to as many organizations and media outlets as possible. Determine whether the benefits of getting some professional PR assistance will offset the costs. See the Media Action Guide on the website for more specific information on getting publicity and raising awareness.

Send out a final news release including information and action items that have been generated by the meeting. Don't forget to follow-up with reporters who have attended to offer any additional information they may need to write their story.

• Getting People to Attend

One way to get the word out about your meeting is to ask area organizations to include an announcement in an already scheduled mailing. Many newspapers have sections that cover community activities so inserting a meeting announcement in the calendar of events will be important.

Another technique for ensuring attendance is to ask members of the coalition and other organizations with a stake in the issue being discussed to bring a specified number of members or representatives with them. In using this approach, personal contact with the organization is often more successful than a mailed invitation. Sending the invitation or a "hold the date" notice and following it with contact from a person the invitee knows or will respect adds to the likelihood of a positive response. Place a follow-up call approximately a week before the meeting.

When creating your invitations make sure that the RSVP date, if you plan to use one, is realistic and gives you enough time to coordinate all last minute details and also arrives soon enough so that your intended audience still has room on their calendars.

Extras that add a nice touch

A program is necessary of course. What you put in it beyond the basics is optional. Here are some suggestions: pictures of the speakers; an insert listing local resources that pertain to the topic of the meeting and a brief description of the host agency. Don't forget to include credits for all individuals, organizations, and businesses that provided funds or pro bono services.

A reception following the meeting is a good way to allow participants from all parts of the community to meet each other and form connections that may fuse into a network for continued

Goals for the Town Hall meeting:

- The creation of a coalition of community partners who will continue working together on the issues and actions surfaced during the meeting.
- Increased energy for existing coalitions that generates more involvement at the local, state, and national level.
- More local and state programs that meet the needs of family caregivers in your community.

work on family caregiving issues. A reception also provides a convenient time for media to speak with participants and attendees. A breakfast meeting prior to a morning meeting is also appropriate.

Music can add a special quality to the meeting. The right song can lend an inspirational note or create a sense of bonding at the end of the meeting, especially if it is a participatory event. A single guitarist is all that would be needed in that case.

• **Special Considerations**

Think about how you might be able to provide respite care for family caregivers that can't leave their loved one alone. Local home care agencies may be willing to provide some assistance for free in exchange for publicity. The county or even a private taxi service might be willing to offer some accessible transportation.

Last but not least, relax and enjoy the meeting.

More Ideas:

- Thank you gifts for panelists
- Door prizes
- Name tags for all attendees
- Name plates for each panelist
- Sign-up sheets for future activities
- Letter from the Mayor or County Executive (if not at the meeting)
- Take-home bags filled with literature, information and ideas for family caregivers