



# forum

ORGANIZER'S  
GUIDE

*An easy-to-use reference for individuals,  
organizations & congregations seeking  
to build the conversation commons.*

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*[www.ForumOrganizing.org](http://www.ForumOrganizing.org)*

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## INTRODUCTION: Why a Community Forum?

### \* Strengthen Community

#### \* Build Your Organization

#### \* Change the World

*"The Needham Lyceum was most important thing we did to expand our congregation."* –Rev. John Buehrens, First Church of Needham, Mass.

*"I've been [to my local community forum] several times and it has taken on a new importance for me. Maybe it was the intimacy or connectedness that I felt. This may be providing the first sense of community I've felt since buying my condo in this area 5 years ago."* -Liz, participant, local forum

*"My sincere gratitude to you and your vision for opening up a dialogue. What the Forum did for me was immeasurable! A million thanks from the bottom of my heart."* -Bo, speaker at a Community Forum

## The Forum Organizer's Manual

This manual is a user-friendly tool to help you bring people together to talk, watch great films, listen to speakers, and learn from one another. The good news is you may already know how to do this. Hopefully this manual will offer some tips and lessons to make it easier to organize events, and stimulate your imagination of what might be possible.

The Forum Organizing Project exists to serve a growing network of community-based forums. See more about our resources at the end of this manual or visit [www.ForumOrganizing.org](http://www.ForumOrganizing.org)

Please give us feedback so that we can periodically update and improve this tool. (Email us at [forumorganizing@gmail.com](mailto:forumorganizing@gmail.com))

## What are the benefits of a Community Forum?

### Community Forums...

- Gather people together for face-to-face conversation in a world dominated by cellular phones, internet information overload, and instant messaging.
- Bring people together from diverse backgrounds and experience.
- Promote an understanding of different viewpoints.
- Strengthen the local commons of community institutions and organizations and deepen our understanding of the need to protect and expand the commons.
- Support local resources (places & spaces, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, etc.).
- Draw on community expertise and personal experiences.
- Provide a space to talk about things that “matter the most”.
- Inspire social action.
- Convert private pain into public action.

### Benefits to your organization

#### Community Forums...

- Grow the membership of your organization and congregation.
- Connect deeply held values with your work or actions.
- Strengthen the internal community of your congregation or organization.
- Make good use underutilized assets such as buildings, retirees, and youth.

## Bringing People Together to Talk Again

“We know that direct conversations with trusted people are, far and away, the number one most powerful way to affect attitudes and political decisions. It is the most powerful way to reach out to one another and find common good. Nothing else comes anywhere close to the power of direct conversations. We see it born out over 100 years of organizing, in the power of faith communities, and from most recent social research.... Furthermore, it is only direct conversations that have the ability to engage people in action when the action feels risky and when the action involves overcoming victimization.”

- Liberty & Justice for All, Conversation Project Guide and Toolkit

On a Sunday night in March, more than 200 people huddled together in a two-century-old stone church in Boston. Canadian activist Maude Barlow spoke about the global water crisis and the audience listened intently.

“Water is a commons,” Barlow said. “We must reclaim this commons from those who would treat it as a commodity.” Barlow offered a sobering profile of the world’s water crisis and an inspiring call for citizen engagement.

This program, hosted by the Jamaica Plain Forum, was one of over 30 lectures, films and discussion it convened over a year. The effort was started by a local church as both a way to strengthen the church and to serve as a crossroads for important “community conversations about the great issues of our day, locally and globally.” Their program topics have included: community agriculture, great local vacation spots, the Iraq war, effective parenting, and preserving the neighborhood’s thriving independent business sector. Speakers have included national experts and authors, but also “local heroes,” residents doing interesting work in the world. One forum was a “report back” by six local building-trades workers who spent two weeks volunteering in post-Katrina New Orleans.

The Jamaica Plain Forum shows regular films and has become a community-viewing site for PBS’s Independent Lens documentary series.

“There are so many remarkable documentary films that never see the light of day,” said Sarah Schwartz Sax, the coordinator of the Jamaica Plain Forum. “You either see them during the four days they are in a theater—or rent them and watch them alone in your house. We bring people together to watch and discuss these films; it is much more powerful.”

On Friday nights, the Jamaica Plain Forum instituted “Cheap Date Jamaica Plain,” with timely speakers or movies, \$5 childcare, and free popcorn. Compared to an expensive night out at the Cineplex, including babysitter, the local forum is an affordable and joyful alternative.

The Forum in Jamaica Plain was inspired by the Cambridge Forum, one of the country’s oldest public affairs programs that describes its mission as “Bringing people together to talk again.” Across the country, community centers, student organizations and religious congregations have created vibrant discussion forums. Some date their origins back to early lyceums and Chautauquas beginning in the 1840s.

It is not surprising in the age of the instant messaging that there is a hunger for face-to-face discussion. The internet age has given us an explosion of news and information at our fingertips. Yet we are losing our capacity to come together to discuss this information, learn from one another, and lift up local stories and heroes.

Our society and planet are facing enormous challenges. We cannot address these challenges by sitting at our home computers or watching videos in our living rooms. We need to come together, talk, and learn. We need to argue a bit more, but not with the acrimony of talk radio. We need to learn how to respectfully disagree and find common ground.

The people who have started Community Forums recognize that we need to evolve as a species, enlarge our hearts, and exercise citizenship in ways that go beyond voting. The climate crisis calls upon us to “re-localize”—to alter our lifestyles and energy consumption, and find sources of food, entertainment and information closer to home. The emergence of Community Forums is part of this process.

## Building A National Network of Community Forums

The Forum Organizing Project was started to support the emergence of a vibrant network of film and public affairs programs as an important component to healthy local communities, democracy and civic life.

There are authors, speakers and campaigners looking for audiences of thoughtful people. There are fabulous and moving documentary films being released each week, documenting the challenges facing our planet in compelling and powerful ways. They have the ability to link us to the farthest reaches of the globe. Yet they rarely make into commercial theaters or onto television. Most of them languish, watched only by a small handful of people.

With the easy availability of DVD films and projection equipment, there are new opportunities to link together “bricks” –local religious congregations and community centers--and “clicks” –email contact technologies -- to create new venues for topical films. And like reformers from an earlier age, authors and campaigners can plug into these emerging networks of organized forums to engage audiences and stimulate citizen participation.

### A Rich History

Some of the existing forums have roots dating back to the early 1830s when “lyceum” and “Chautauqua” movements led to the formation of hundreds of cultural and discussion forums, primarily in rural and small towns. Lyceum refers to the garden of the Temple of Apollo Lyceus where Aristotle taught young Athenians. The U.S. version was established in New England, but quickly spread west in the 1840s with the expansion of the railroads. Going to the forum was a form of local entertainment and intellectual stimulation in communities that didn’t have universities or cineplexes.

Community Forums have historically been independent and non-political. But their history is woven together with social reform movements including the abolition of slavery and women’s suffrage. Famous speakers who traveled the lyceum circuit included Susan B. Anthony, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Julia Ward Howe, William Lloyd Garrison, Mark Twain and Emma Willard.

# 1. GETTING STARTED

## 7 Steps to Creating a Community Forum

Starting a Community Forum is like learning to ride a bike. Just as we begin with smaller bikes and training wheels, we begin by planning smaller events and programs at the beginning. By starting slowly and earnestly, we can gather our resources and learn fast from our first few events.

The following are seven basic steps, and some tips for starting up.

### Tip 1

#### Use media as assets and allies

Local media will have all kinds of useful advice for a start-up forum and are great additions to your team! They may have contacts with local, regional and national speakers, authors and filmmakers. One of the best ways to get the word out about your Community Forum is through local newspapers, radio shows, and online venues.

- ❖ Invite someone from the local media to be on your committee
- ❖ Invite media leaders to moderate a Forum.
- ❖ Invite local radio and television producers to record and broadcast your programming.
- ❖ Occasionally buy ads in a local newspaper to promote your upcoming schedule.
- ❖ Ask media to co-sponsor programs.
- ❖ Ask editors to pass on ideas for “local-hero” speakers.

### ***#1. Form a Community Forum Organizing Committee***

Many Community Forums are guided and advised by a diverse group of individuals from the local community who are invested in furthering public conversations. Ideally, this group of people represents a variety of personal experiences, as well as political and professional perspectives. Committee members can publicize the Forum, and can initially be available to facilitate specific Forum events.

We have found it helpful to have folks on the Community Forum Committee who are connected to a variety of different social and professional worlds. For example, one of our committee members works in a large environmental non-profit and has a professional relationship with some of the big names in the Climate Change issue. Another committee member is highly involved with her church, and knew about local community members who had recently returned from volunteering in New Orleans.

Questions to consider:



- What are the functions/uses of this committee?
- How many members from host institution (church, community center), how many from community?
- What kind of authority does the Committee have? Does the Committee have a say in the final programming decisions of the Forum?
- Are the members of the Community Forum Committee representative of the larger community in terms of race, class, gender, education and sexual orientation? Do they hold a variety of perspectives?
- How often will the committee meet?

## **#2: Find a lead coordinator**

A lead coordinator for your Community Forum will give it a “face” while it starts up. This person can attend meetings with local stakeholders, test out the pitch to the community, be the main contact for speakers and programming, and coordinate details.

In our experience, it’s best to have a lead coordinator who can work on Community Forum-related programming and organizing 10-20 hours per week. It’s also helpful for the lead coordinator to have at least one other person to bounce ideas off of.

Questions to consider:

- Will this be a volunteer position, or is compensation available for the coordinator?
- Who will supervise this person? An individual, a committee?
- Who many hours per-week can this person commit to organizing the Forum?
- Will this person have a say in the final programming decisions for the Forum?

## **Tip 2**

### **Don’t “over-professionalize” events**

If the definition of an “expert” is “someone from out of town with a slideshow” (or PowerPoint), then not every speaker should be an author or an “expert”. Draw on local talent. One of the best events at the Jamaica Plain Forum was a report back from six building-trade workers who volunteered to help rebuild homes in New Orleans post-Katrina. They created their own slideshow and spoke about the personal meaning of the experience for them. Ninety people came out to hear their stories.

### **#3. Find a Space**

#### **Tip 3**

##### **Keep track of membership lists**

Do your best to record the names and emails (at least) of your audiences. This will enable you to keep a master list and send out announcements to an ever-expanding circle of people. Back up your data regularly.

The Jamaica Plain Forum maintains memberships lists on an Excel spreadsheet and in an online database. These are easy to export into email-alert programs such as Constant Contact.

Having one space where you regularly hold your Forums helps it to be seen as reliable and consistent. Churches, synagogues and other faith-based buildings are often willing to support community conversations, particularly if it helps them to raise the profile of their congregation. Sometimes the coordinators of faith-based buildings are willing to provide the space for little or no charge if the events have potential to grow the numbers of their congregation. Ideally the space will have the capacity to comfortably accommodate small and large audiences for speakers and films. Considerations include:

- Regularity of availability
- Wheelchair accessibility
- Public Transportation accessibility
- Cost of space
- Heating and cooling
- Access to technology/resources
- Partnership with venue

### **#4. Look to the community for visions and resources**

The strength of all Community Forums has to do with interest from the actual community in which it is located. A great lineup of speakers, films or presentations would be in vain if no one ever showed up to see it! Therefore, it is critical to ask members of the community what kinds of topics and programming they would like to see. What kinds of formal and informal conversations are already happening? Whose voice isn't being heard? Your advisory committee can be very helpful in polling different networks that they are connected to.

Look into your community to see what resources it already has that you can draw upon. What/Who are resources in the community?

- ◆ Libraries
- ◆ Schools
- ◆ Civic institutions
- ◆ Historical societies
- ◆ Family resources (teams, after-school programs)

- ◆ Cultural institutions
- ◆ Non-profit organizations
- ◆ Businesses
- ◆ Government offices
- ◆ Community celebrations
- ◆ Neighborhood and main-street associations

A one-sentence vision statement can define your Community Forum's programming agenda, and also stand as a slogan or catch-phrase for publicity purposes. Vision statements should be specific to your community and their specificity depends on the depth and scope of your vision.

The Cambridge Forum, one of the oldest and most successful community forums in the country, has "Bringing People Together to Talk Again." The

Jamaica Plain Forum's vision statement is "Community Conversations on the great issues shaping our neighborhood and our planet." This tells newcomers that our forum is a place to come together and explore a wide range of topics. However, the vision statement "Families Exploring Global Warming" would indicate that the Community Forum is focusing more specifically on the topic of climate change, and in a manner that will be appropriate for children.

## Tip 4

### Build community

Successful community building is founded on strong personal relationships and respectful networking. You want your Forum to represent its goals and vision through all of your actions and interactions.

Remember to:

- ❖ Listen attentively and respond thoughtfully.
- ❖ Follow-up promptly on commitments.
- ❖ When possible, prioritize phone or in-person communication over email communication.
- ❖ Spell-check your communications and double check dates and times.
- ❖ Be open to constructive criticism and feedback.
- ❖ Celebrate your accomplishments and credit all the players.
- ❖ Thank people!

What would you like your Community Forum to look like in 5 years?

What are three adjectives that you use to describe a vision of your Forum?

Thinking about what kinds of events you DON'T want to hold may help to determine the kinds of events that you do.

### ***#5. Define realistic goals, expectations and resources***

When beginning a Community Forum, it can be helpful to dream big and create an inspiring vision, and then evaluate that dream in terms of what your organization is capable of in terms of

resources. Balancing the vision with the available resources will base the expectations and goals in reality.

Questions related to goals, expectations and resources include:

- What kind of Forums will you have? (Lectures, films, discussions, workshops, etc.)
- How frequently would you like to hold Forums?
- What kinds of funding are available for this work?
- What kind of resources are available in your community (free films, projectors, screens, microphones, copy capacity, IT-assistance)

## **#6 Balance Your Programming**

From the beginning, set the tone with your programming with a variety of themes and topics. Don't allow yourself to be easily pigeonholed. Lift up "local heroes." Recognize beloved community members—like the postmaster who is retiring after 35 years and has some great stories and reflections about the community.

With so many challenging issues in our world today, it's tempting to fill your Community Forum's schedule with programs about the war, global warming, famine, and the over-commercialization of childhood. Balance these important topics with other programming and include local history presentations, joke sharing, potluck dinners, and sing-alongs.

Balance your programming by making sure that speakers represent a broad range in terms of race, gender, age and political perspective.

- Aim for your programming to represent a balance between:
- Local speakers, regional speakers and national speakers
- Format (includes lectures, workshops, films, potlucks, etc).
- Socio-political oriented events
- Personal & Celebratory events

## **Tip 5**

### **Partner with other organizations from the start**

Seek local organizations with large membership and email lists to co-sponsor forum events that align with their missions. Co-sponsorship can be as simple as asking relevant organizations to publicize your event to their lists, and in return offering to put their names on your announcements and allow them to disseminate their literature at your event. In the first stages of building a Community Forum, co-sponsorship is critical to ensure growth and expanded name recognition.

- Events for children and parents
- Serious events about the threats of our age
- Light, joyful events that include music, spoken word poetry, humor

## **#7. Gather Equipment**

Contemporary Forums will use a variety of modes of communication including films and speakers who use slides or power point presentations. Publicize your needs for borrowed or donated equipment through your congregation and community.

- ◆ Screen or White Wall
- ◆ LCD Projector
- ◆ DVD player or computer
- ◆ Microphone and amplification system

Some speakers can bring along their own projector and computer. If your Community Forum does not have access to a projector, check to see if the local library or public school has one to rent out. Also, make sure to check that the format of the speaker's presentation is compatible with your computer.

### **Tip 6**

#### **Continuously solicit ideas from community members**

Use a variety of ways to elicit suggestions for programs, topics, speakers and films. Seek partnerships with groups and help produce events they want to do. Once people see that their ideas are being heard and that their perspectives are shared, your Forum will be seen as a true community resource. Keep a list of suggestions, including the name and contact information of the person who made the suggestion. You can ask for suggestions on your website, with announcements at the beginning of events, and in email communications.

You will soon have so many suggestions that you can't accommodate them all. Create guidelines with your Forum Organizing Committee for what events are appropriate. Some criteria might include:

- ❖ Is this a new topic that the Forum has not yet explored?
- ❖ Is this a new angle?
- ❖ Will this add to the range of topics?
- ❖ Will there be a critical mass of interest? Will people want to attend?
- ❖ Are there groups to partner with that will help turn out people for this topic?

## 2. WORKING WITHIN A COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION OR CHURCH

You may already be wondering: “how are we going to pull this off? We’re all volunteers and our organization is already stretched.”

The most important advice we have is: take it step by step. *Organizing a forum will bring people out of the woodwork—and many of them will bring volunteer energy.*

Most forums are started by existing organizations—a religious congregation, a community center, a student group, or a senior center. These are organizations that may bring several assets to the table, including a meeting space and an initial base of people who will attend. If this is not true for you, your first step might be to find such an organization and build a partnership.

The first step in either case will be to make the case to the organization that starting a forum is a good idea. Perhaps the organization has already had films, speakers, candidate forums, etc., in which case what you are proposing is to systematize the process and organize a regular schedule of programs.

This organizing manual will be helpful to you in preparing for that discussion. You might also want to have a discussion with one of the staffers at the Forum Organizing Project (see information at the back).

Things to think through:

- How is organizing a forum in the organization’s self-interest?
- What costs might be involved?
- What are there building uses issues?

**A. Meet with key stakeholders:**

- Organizational leader (minister, religious education)
- Chairs of any relevant committees (in a church these might be in charge of the building, social-justice, religious education, fellowship, and would include the board of directors).

**B. Develop a “start-up” plan:**

- Who will be responsible?
- Initial proposed events with a broad mix of topics.

**C. Meet with Decision-makers:**

- Tell stories of other forums.
- Talk about your vision for your community forum.

**D. Coordination and Staffing:**

- Are there resources to pay a part-time coordinator?
- Is there a director of religious education at your congregation who could devote 5 hours a week to coordinating the committee of volunteers?
- Can part of a community outreach worker’s time affiliated with a community center be dedicated to this task?

## 3. CHOOSING YOUR FORMAT

There are a number of ways to present a public dialogue, and each Community Forum will eventually determine what type of programming best fits their needs. Here are a few suggestions:

**Lectures:** A speaker presents information and analysis on a particular topic. Usually the speaker will leave time at the end for audience members to ask questions. Depending on the speaker's preference, questions can be moderated by a member of the Community Forum team.

**Presentations:** A speaker delivers a speech and uses multi-media such as handouts, music, PowerPoint presentations or film to support their talk. Sometimes questions are welcomed throughout the presentation, and at other times speakers prefer to hold Q&A afterwards.

**Report-backs:** A person, or a group of people, shares information, personal stories and group reflections about community-service oriented trips or travel to interesting places. Report-backs are a wonderful way to highlight local people. Audience members are encouraged to share ideas and similar experiences, and ask questions.

**Documentaries:** Screenings of films on current issues, or generally unexamined topics. Documentaries work wonderfully for Community Forums when they last about an hour, and are followed by a reflection period for audience members and a facilitated conversation.

**Debates:** A presentation of two sides of an issue, including statements and rebuttals between differing opinions. Some debates work best with scripted questions presented by a moderator, and others look to the audience for impromptu questions. Debates can be challenging to moderate since they are usually highlighting opposing positions on an issue.

### Tip

For Community Forum groups that are just starting out, we suggest experimenting with lectures or presentations with a question and answer period, or showing a documentary film with time for discussion at the end. These tend to be the most straightforward events to produce, and will prepare the organizers for more complex formats.

Unlike a speaker, a DVD is never offended by low-turnout. Films and documentaries are efficient ways to collect names and build up your publicity list. You will be surprised at how many people a current and popular documentary will attract!



## Tip

When first beginning your forum, we recommend having modest expectations for turnout. It usually takes between 6 months to a year to develop a core group of committed attendees, and your job is to be supportive of the folks who do come. Most people have very busy lives and it takes a lot of effort to begin a new routine or attend a new event!

Word of mouth is the best form of publicity. Encourage the people that do come out to your first events to let their networks know about you. One convenient way to do this is to provide a flier for upcoming events on the back of the program, and also to hand out upcoming events fliers as the door as people leave.

Don't feel bashful about inviting friends, family, co-workers, and new people that you meet. Encourage your volunteers and committee members to carry event fliers and distribute them to friends and strangers.

## Community Dialogues or “Speak Outs”:

An opportunity for people to come together and share ideas, put personal conclusions aside, and search for common ground. A facilitator is charged with the responsibility of keeping the conversation moving forward on a selected topic or issue.

**Candidate Forums:** During the lead-up to an election, candidate forums are an opportunity for folks on the ballot to come together and share how their campaign platforms are similar, and how they differ. As opposed to an antagonistic debate, candidate forums are intended to provide a space for congenial conversation between candidates and constituents.

**Potlucks:** With each attendee bringing one dish to share, everyone participates in a community meal. Since the experience of eating is one that we all share, potlucks tend to get people talking to each other. Including a documentary or music-based programming can make a potluck a dynamic, and themes of food-security and The Commons work well.

**“World Cafes”:** World Cafes refers to a model of participatory education that is used in a variety of settings (See section on “Resources for Forums”). It is a way to get

people who don't know each other to talk about issues that affect them on a personal level, as well as a societal level. This model requires a number of “café” size tables that comfortably fit about 4 or 5 people. Large sheets of butcher paper are laid out over the table and multi-colored pens, pencils, and crayons are provided. The moderator asks a question on a particular theme, and participants spend 15-25 minutes discussing the question, writing on the paper and drawing out thoughts and feelings. Before the moderator asks the second question, participants change tables, meet the new people sitting there, and reflect on the

comments and drawing left be the previous group at their new table. This format can be combined with speakers or workshop presentations to increase audience participation.

**Sing-along:** Sing-along's (or songfests) are an opportunity for people to gather and connect through song. Some sing-along's may have themes and include a short presentation or movie clip, while others may be solely for the purpose of communing through voice.

### **Author readings and book tours:**

Many times authors of newly published books are looking for venues to share their work in, and some even have travel budgets. Author readings can be a wonderful way to bring both fiction and non-fiction works to your community, and directly support the author. With the growing number of self-published authors, it is likely that most communities will have a few members that would like to share some of the work they have done. Selling the books and the event and having the author sign some of them is a nice gesture. Consider buying a book for the local public library and having the author inscribe it to the community.

### **Tip**

You will likely receive many suggestions to feature local authors and their new books. While it may not be possible to feature each author individually, keep a list of these suggestions and consider holding a "local authors event" once or twice a year. Choose two or three of the suggested authors to hold an event together, and have them read from their work.

## **Dealing with controversial topics:**

Some topics that you choose to address at your Community Forum will be controversial. In general, if there are strong public opinions, people with divergent perspectives may show up at your Forum.

The Forum should set a tone of tolerance and respect for difference, and welcome dissent.

**If you know an event will be controversial, there are several things you can do:**

Inform members of the advisory committee, volunteers, the parent organization, and the owner of the space that you would like extra bodies at the event to act as peacekeepers. Coordinate with these folks to make sure that there is a respectful way to deal with disruptions.

Before the event begins, choose someone who will act as a liaison between the Community Forum and potential protestors. Identify a “protest zone” outside of the venue where people are allowed to voice opposition.

During the beginning announcements, take a serious moment to recognize that this is a controversial topic. Remind guests that the Community Forum is a place for respectful discussion where multiple perspectives are valued, and where respectful dissent is tolerated.

Ask participants to make a “covenant” around the conversation: Ask the audience to agree to listen respectfully, not interrupt and not dominate the discussion.

If there is a member of the audience who is acting inappropriately, have an organizer go and sit down next to them. This may calm them down.

If a member of the audience continues to be disrespectful and interrupts the event, encourage them to leave or escort them out.

Keep a light and compassionate attitude about the disturbances. Reacting in a strong manner, or in a way that is any way disrespectful may only encourage the behavior.

When the event is over, thank the audience for supporting this challenging topic and for following the covenant of respect established at the beginning.

## 4. PUBLICIZING YOUR EVENTS

Publicity is the key to turnout for your Community Forum. There are many explicit and directed ways to publicize your Community Forum. Here are some suggestions:

### \*Print Publicity:

#### A. Community Newspapers and

**Magazines:** Submit articles or event listings to your local and/or regional daily, weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines. Don't forget to submit listings to publications that cater to specific communities (ex. Latino, Black, LGBT, Parent, Women's, etc.) (See Appendix A for a Media Release template)

**B. Local Message boards:** These can be found in libraries, community centers, parks and other public institutions. Also, cafes and laundromats tend to have community message boards.

**C. Fliers and Posters:** If the local law allows it, consider posting fliers on telephone poles and around public transportation stops. Some local businesses will be interested in advertising fliers for your Forum, especially if they can clearly see how it would strengthen their image in the community.

**D. Organizational Newsletters:** If your Community Forum is affiliated with an organization (church, community center, etc), it is likely that they will have a regular newsletter that goes out to its constituents. Try to include your Community Forum's upcoming schedule, announcements, or articles in these publications.

#### Tip

When submitting events, information or media alerts, be vigilant about deadlines.

Spell-check and fact-check your media releases! It seems like an obvious detail, but it can easily slip your mind if you are under a deadline to get material to publishers.

### \*Web-based Publicity:

In our current digital age, many people use the internet to get all of their information. Establishing an on-line presence for your Community Forum is a

critical step for web-based publicity, and as a supplement for your print- and community-based publicity.

**A. Website for your Community Forum:** The most essential element of web-based publicity is a website dedicated to your own Community Forum. Beyond providing information about upcoming events, it will act as a singular location for essential information such as directions, updates, scheduling changes and announcements. Even if your Community Forum has only limited funds, there are a variety of low-cost services that can provide basic website construction such as WordPress, FastWebCreation, AvaHost, East-to-Build, and others. Also, make sure that you like your Community Forums' website with that of your primary sponsoring organization.

**B. Web 2.0:** The most recent innovation has been the proliferation of internet-based social networking sites. These types of sites are particularly popular with younger people, and using this technology for your Community Forum will greatly extend your reach into the active online community.

**1. Friendster, MySpace and Facebook:** Social-networking sites that require the user to create a profile, and facilitates easy communicate with friends and contacts.

**2. Going.com:** A new and rapidly growing network that lists "things-to-do" and allows users to create a profile and easily RSVP to events.

**3. On-line independent media** (indymedia, etc.)

**4. Community Listserves:** Many on-line communities will have different email listservs that compile announcements and send out periodic emails of upcoming events and programs. Listserves tend to be geared towards specific groups; city or countywide listserves for parents, military families, or the LGBT community are examples.

**5. Craigslist:** A free and extremely popular version of the want ads, Craigslist allows people to post items to sell, trade, swap or barter. They also have a place to post upcoming community events. (Since Craigslist is organized around different cities, there may not be a list that is specific to smaller or more rural communities.)

**C. Bulk Email:** Email communications and publicity is one of the most important and affordable tools you will have – with the click of a button you can send an announcement about the latest upcoming events to thousands of people! Some Community Forums have found that paying for an email service can help to create sharp, HTML-rich communications. Email and list-management services ConstantContact, Vertical Response, iContact, StreamSend, ContactPro, and Democracy in Action can all send nice-looking emails, keep your email lists private, and place a “sign-up” link onto your website.

If people are not interested in receiving your emails, make sure to respect their requests. “Unsubscribe” options within HTML emails are a useful feature; they allow email recipients to take themselves off of an email list, and do not require an administrator to manually do so.

When spreading the word about your Community Forum through email, think creatively about whom you can send information to. Consider adding the following groups of people to your Community Forum email list:

- Friends
- Family
- Neighbors
- Co-workers
- Other parents from your children’s school
- People from your religious community
- Clubs
- Sports teams
- Social Circles
- Friends of friends
- Co-Sponsoring Organizations

## \*In-person Publicity and Community Connectivity

One of the most important reasons to have a lead coordinator for your Forum is so that they can represent the program at different community events, and build relationships with other local organizations and individuals.

The lead coordinator should be aware of community events, fairs, parades and seasonal celebrations at which to host a table and dispense information about the Community Forum. Volunteers can staff a table and hand out information to community members. Also, these kinds of events are always a good opportunity for the lead organizer to listen for topics of interest from the community, and also for individuals to ask questions and learn more details about upcoming programs.

## 5. PRODUCING AN EVENT

Producing an event for a Community Forum can be an exhilarating experience. After weeks of coordinating publicity, volunteers, turnout and program details, there is nothing more satisfying than sitting back and watching people enjoy the fruits of your hard work.

This section explores the basic details for a successful program. After producing several basic events, your Forum might be ready to try a more advanced type such as a potluck, debate, or World Cafe.

**Speakers.** As discussed in the “Choosing Formats for your Community Forum Events” section, there are many different ways for speakers to deliver their message to an audience. The visions, goals and format of your particular Community Forum will determine what kind of speakers you will have. Remember that the Forum Organizing Project has a speaker’s bureau that can provide you with suggestions for speakers in your area or those who are coming through on tour.

**Honorarium.** It may be surprising to you that there are many successful Forums around the country that do not provide an honorarium to their speakers. The Commonwealth Club in San Francisco has hosted prominent national speakers without paying honoraria for almost a century. Many are authors with books to promote –and so partnering with a local bookstore will increase their willingness to speak for free.

**Speaker Hospitality.** While you may not be able to pay a fee to speakers, your Forum should develop a way to offer hospitality. This could include accommodations in a member’s home and a celebratory dinner prior to the Forum.

**Technology Needs.** Determine in advance if the speaker will need technology for their presentation in order to show photos or a PowerPoint presentation.

### Tip

When possible, begin your Community Forums at the same time. The availability of speakers may dictate what day of the week your program occurs. Consistency of start-time will increase turnout.

**Finding Speakers.** The Forum Organizing Project is serving as a clearinghouse for speakers and presenters on a variety of topics. Contact them to brainstorm options. Consider people from these constituencies as potential speakers:

- Community Members
- Authors
- Business people
- Community Organizations
- Political
- Scholars
- Local experts
- Elders
- Teachers
- Suggestions from the National Speaker's Bureau
- Suggestions from the Forum Organizing Project

**Moderating the Forum.** Someone from the Forum organizing group should be in charge of monitoring the time and energy of the Forum. Their responsibility is to ensure the flow and timing of the forum works for all involved. They should moderate the question and answer section of the program, and be prepared to wrap up the event before it loses its energy.

Moderator duties include:

- Welcome, Announcements, Upcoming events
- Thanking co-sponsors
- Introducing speaker (or introducing the person who will introduce the speaker)
- Monitoring time
- Moderating discussion, keeping questions and comments focused
- Wrapping up the meeting, thanking speaker and everyone involved.



## Speaker Event Format:

7:00 pm – Event is scheduled to begin

7:05 pm – Gathering, Announcements of upcoming events, and Introduction

7:15 pm – Speaker begins presentation (communicate with your speaker about time and signals for wrapping up a program).

8:00 pm – Audience conversation. It's a useful device to invite the audience to talk to a neighbor, right after the speaker finishes, and reflect on what they heard.

8:10 pm –Begin Question and Answer

8:40 pm – As Question & Answer ends, people are encouraged to mingle and talk as things are being cleaned up.

## Film

With a modest investment, your organization can become a community theater!

Showing films or documentaries can strengthen your Community Forum by creating another type of community gathering. Some folks are more willing to take an evening to see a film than attend a lecture.

Even if you don't have a readily accessible screen to use, a large white wall can suffice until you raise enough money to purchase one.

Make sure that the lead coordinator knows how to set up all of the equipment before the day of the event. Keep an equipment checklist and a few extra cables around.

We recommend showing films and documentaries that are less than 70 minutes long. This allows enough time for an audience discussion. Bring popcorn.

Preview the film to make sure there are no glitches. There is nothing worse than organizing a lot of people to come and see a film, only for it to not work properly. Have a back-up copy of the film on hand.

Special guest/facilitator. Invite an expert, professor, or representative from an organization that deals with the theme of the film as a facilitator and resource person.

See the Speakers & Films section at [www.ForumOrganizing.org](http://www.ForumOrganizing.org) for ways to access current films and documentaries.

## Basic Film Event Format:

7:00 pm – Event is scheduled to begin

7:05 pm – Introduction

7:10 pm – Show film

8:10 pm – Have audience members talk in pairs or triads about their reactions to the film

8:15 pm – Question & Answer, or Community Discussion about the themes of the film, lead by the resource person.

8:45 pm - Question & Answer ends, people are encouraged to mingle and talk as things are being cleaned up.

## Advance Work

In addition to implementing your publicity plan, here are several other advance tasks involved in producing your forum event.

### **1. Schedule your event**

Scheduling your program may involve several moving pieces, including the availability of speaker and the space. You may have interactions with the person responsible for scheduling building use before you confirm an event.

Create a calendar that is exclusively for scheduling events, and setting deadlines for publicity and promotion. Mark off times when you know the venue is unavailable.

### **2. Choosing a Space**

Early on, you will need to gauge the potential turnout for your event, and book an appropriate space.

Your local Forum might want to have several size options in terms of space. Many religious congregations have both a meeting hall and a worship space that might be available for programs. You might also know the capacity of local school auditoriums and other venues for events that might exceed the capacity of your primary space. The cost of heating and cooling will be a consideration in choosing a space.

### **3. Co-Sponsorship**

One of the keys to successful turnout, especially when first beginning a Community Forum, is finding local, regional or national co-sponsors for your programs.

#### **Tip**

Since the publicity for an event can begin up to a month beforehand, it is best to confirm your speakers between two months and six-weeks before the date of the event.

While some Community Forums have a few co-sponsors for the entire programming season, others ask different organizations to co-sponsor individual events that are in alignment with their mission. Local organizations are easiest to develop relationships with, however particularly popular films or speakers may have larger organizations that would be interested in co-sponsorship.

One forum showed a film about the experience of Sikh-Americans in the United States after 9/11. The national Sikh-American Legal Defense and Education Fund was a co-sponsor and their local chapter provided a resource person at the event and publicized it to their local networks.

## Tip

Once you begin asking local organizations to co-sponsor your events, be aware that they might eventually ask your Community Forum to co-sponsor *their* events. Be clear from the beginning how you want to handle these requests.

Approach a potential partner with a mutually beneficial proposition. In exchange for help in publicizing the event, offer cosponsors free publicity on your website, fliers and in the program booklet. Give them display space or a table to distribute literature and, if appropriate, ask a member of one of the co-sponsoring organizations to introduce the speaker or comment on the film. Make sure to thank them publicly at the forum.

## 4. Recruit a Pool of Volunteers

Volunteers are an essential part of a Community Forum running smoothly. All sign-up sheets for information about your Community Forum should have a place where individuals can indicate their willingness to volunteer. Also, Advisory Committee members can be asked to help out with particular events. People are much more likely to agree to volunteer if they understand that they are under no obligation to volunteer more than once, and if duties and expected time frames are clearly communicated. Make sure to request volunteer assistance between one and two weeks ahead of your event – this ensures that people will have enough time to change their calendars if they are interested in participating.

On the day of your event it can be very useful to have some extra hands to help out. It is ideal if the lead coordinator can be in charge of general logistics, crisis management, and time management. Volunteers can help to set up chairs and information tables, put out signs, welcome people at the door, accept donations, hand out programs, set up refreshments and other miscellaneous tasks.

## Checklist for the Day of the Event

Develop an event “checklist” for your forum, and keep adding to it and improving it. Some common components of set-up include:

### The Room

- Set up the space*  
Figure out how much set-up time you need, based on the type of event it is. Organize your volunteers to come at least an hour in advance and have everything set-up to handle early arrivals for your event.
- Equipment Check*  
Test out any sound, projection, or technological systems that you will have to use during the event before anyone arrives.
- Welcome Table*  
Set up a welcome table at the front-entrance that features: a pile of programs listing upcoming events, sign-in sheets to capture names and email addresses of attendees, pens, and nametags.
- Atmosphere!*  
Subtle touches can add to the inviting atmosphere your Community Forum. Tablecloths, flowers, natural lighting, and pleasing music as people gather are all ways to set a welcoming mood. Light refreshments are appreciated.
- Speaker Hospitality*  
Have a place where they can sit quietly before the program. Have water available there, and at the podium where they will be speaking.
- Signs*  
Place large, conspicuous signs on the entrance door of your venue. If possible, also place a sign or a banner at a busy intersection on the day of the event so that people who are unfamiliar with the location can easily spot it. Create a sidewalk sandwich board that can go up on the days of your events.
- Display Tables*  
Don't forget the tables for information from co-sponsors and allied groups to display their information!

## Donations

Ask and you shall receive. Most forums don't want to charge an entrance fee, but it is totally appropriate to ask for voluntary donations to offset costs of energy and programming.

- Place collection baskets on your welcome table  
Suggest a donation amount—most ask for \$2-3. Our experience is that you end up with \$1.50 donation per participant. Let people know your donations will go directly into offsetting the cost of the current program, and towards funding future programming.

## Introductions

At the beginning, the lead coordinator or a member of the Advisory Committee should introduce the evening's program.

A nice way to involve more people and organizations is to ask people who know the speaker or topic to give a substantive introduction of the speaker. This helps broaden ownership of the Forum, as people see many faces involved.

Develop your "introduction check-list" so to remind moderators of all the details.

Items include:

- Welcome new attendees
- Thank the volunteers and co-sponsors
- Mention the resource table
- Highlight upcoming events
- Explain any ground rules for the evening
- Point out the bathroom
- Remind everyone to turn off cell phones, pagers and noise-makers
- Genuinely and respectfully introduce the speaker or film.

### Tip

Managing the Podium: It's critical that the event organizers keep a firm grip on the podium. This includes sticking closely to your start time, not allowing co-sponsors to take excessive time presenting their organizations, respecting the stated end-time of the event, and facilitating Q&A effectively so that zealots do not monopolize the microphone. Facilitation is a learned skill. Look for experienced professionals or volunteers to learn how to do it well.

## Other important considerations when producing a forum:

### Q&A and Facilitating a Dialog:

Often times the most significant part of a Community Forum is the conversation part at the end of a presentation, lecture or film. This is the time where we actually take a moment to look around at the people sitting near us and ask, “well, what did you think of all that?!”

Facilitation of dialogue, reactions and questions and answers is a subject that deserves a toolkit all on its own. Many speakers have a reference for what kind of Q&A they would like to do, so make sure to check with them. We offer some basic models for responses, as well as a few tips for facilitating.

**Respondents** are people who are pre-selected to deliver short reactions and reflections on a speaker’s presentation or lecture, or on a topic within a film. Although this does not directly engage the audience, it means that the topic will be examined from a different lens.

**A Question and Answer** period is when members of the audience are invited to ask open questions to the speakers. Usually the speaker or an official moderator (usually the lead coordinator) will call on people. Questions are either asked from one’s seat, or at the front of the house in a microphone. It is helpful to remind audience members to refrain from making statements and focus on asking an actual question. Be aware if someone is likely to abuse the position of asking a question by dominating, interrogating or engaging in a long conversation with the speaker.

At times the speaker might prefer for these questions to be moderated, and in this case people can write questions on an index card and pass them to the front of the house. It is helpful for the lead organizer to have a set of questions to ask in order to get the ball rolling, and in the case the audience members are shy. Also, if there are a lot of people who want to ask questions, have three people ask questions back-to-back and then have the speaker respond (don’t forget to give the speaker a pen and paper to write notes about the questions so that they can remember them!).

**Community Dialogs** are opportunities for members of the audience to not only ask questions, but also to share responses and reactions, as well as ask and answer questions from other audience members. Films are wonderful to follow up with a community dialog.

### **The role of a facilitator is to:**

- Be an active listener
- Remind people to use I-statements
- Setting ground rules
- Determine the level of formality by the way you lead
- Define vocabulary
- Take notes (if necessary)
- Keep track of time
- Ask questions if necessary

## **Events with Authors and Prominent People**

At events where you are hosting a more prominent speaker and author, there are special considerations.

**“Green Room.”** Prior to the event, you might offer them a “green room,” a space in the building where they can sit alone or with one or two members of the host committee prior to their speaking.

**Book Signing.** If they are willing to do a book signing, set up an orderly system for book sales and a table for signing. A Forum member should remain with the author to keep the flow of people moving and protect them from people who want to engage them in lengthy conversations. Place the book-signing table so there is a clear place for people to line up. Don’t put the book table near a door or where people might already be congregating.

**Accompaniment/Buffer.** Part of your hospitality responsibility is buffering your guest from annoying or antagonistic people. Assign someone to accompany the speaker to be helper/bouncer.



## Follow-up after the Event

The day of your event can feel like a wonderful culmination of your work, especially if you have been planning it for a long time. There are, however, a few more steps to take after the event to tie it up.

### ***1. Send thank-you notes***

Speakers should always receive a thank-you card in the mail, ideally no more than one week after the event. Co-sponsors should be thanked individually by phone or email. Make sure to say how their outreach work and presence at the event contributed. Thank volunteers through an email to all who came to help.

### ***2. Gather feedback from participants and attendees***

Ask everyone for feedback, whether he or she was a speaker, respondent, volunteer, advisor, co-sponsor, or audience member. Being asked for feedback makes them feel a part of the process and that they can contribute to the growth. While it is not always essential to respond to every piece of feedback, it is good to thank people for their ideas. Receive suggestions and criticism in a constructive way. If you are unclear about something that has been brought up, make sure to ask enough questions so that you can be sure you fully understand the concern.

### ***3. Reflect on and evaluate event***

Take some time to reflect on the event. Write down your reflections and keep them together so that you can look back to see how both you and your Community Forum have grown. Also, ask volunteers, co-sponsors about their experience and what could be improved for the future.

Ask yourself some questions:

- What was the best part of the event and why?
- How did the logistics play out?
- How was the timing?
- Was the audience well engaged?
- What could you have done differently?
- Where do you need help?
- Were the volunteers used well?

#### ***4. Keep records***

Make sure to keep a record of all of the print materials that you have produced for the event, including fliers, media hits, and event programs. Include in these records the number of people who attended the event, and how much money you collected from donations.

#### ***5. Upload new email addresses***

You will have undoubtedly have received new email addresses of attendees to your Community Forum. Make sure to upload those names and email addresses into your chosen method of record-keeping, and now regularly include them in future email communication about your events.

## 6. ADVANCED EVENT PRODUCTION

### Fundraisers

Occasionally you will host a speaker who is in high-demand because they are a leader in popular field, or with particularly current expertise. If you believe that philanthropically minded members of your community would be interested in spending time talking with this speaker, it would be an opportune time to consider holding a pre-Forum fundraising event. Here are some things to consider:

1. *Is the speaker willing to attend your fundraiser?*
  - Are they a fan of your work, or your parent organization's work?
  - Does the event work with the speaker's schedule?
  
2. *Where will it be held?*
  - Is there space and availability to hold the fundraiser at the same location as the Community Forum?
  - Within comfortable walking distance, is there a location you can rent to host the fundraiser?
  - Within comfortable walking distance, is there a colleague or supporter who would be interested in hosting the event at their home?

### 3. *Create a budget*

Sometimes it takes money to make money, so create a plan for how best to use your funds. Also, creativity can go a long way – for example, try hiring a new caterer who is charging less for his/her services. Below is a sample budget for a fundraiser for 50 people.

#### Expenses

Renting Space: \$200 for three hours  
 Decorations/Ambiance: \$50  
 Catered Food and Drink: \$300  
 Cups, plates, utensils: \$50  
 Signed copies of speaker's book: \$300  
 Invitations: \$150  
 Expenses Total: \$1150

#### Income

Average donation: \$100  
 No. Attendees: 50  
 Income total: \$5,000

*Net Income: \$ 3850.00*

#### **4. Food and drink**

Having food and drink at your fundraiser helps to create a nice ambiance, and also helps people to socialize. We recommend serving finger-foods. If the guest-speaker at your fundraiser purports a particular stance on food in their work, make sure to take this into account when choosing your food. For example, if you have a speaker whose work draws attention to the perils of genetically modified foods, offer food that is locally grown and made of non-GMO ingredients. Make sure to have juice, water, seltzer and other refreshing drinks on hand. Serving beer or wine at fundraisers is typical, but check to see if the space that you are renting has any restrictions regarding alcohol.

#### **5. Host Committee**

A host committee is a group of people who are asked to not only be supporters of an event, but also encourage other people that they know to attend and donate. This group creates turnout by providing the organizers with personal contacts to whom invitations can be sent, and by following up with those contacts by phone or email. Beyond being responsible for turnout, host committee members can also help with set-up and clean-up. Consider members of your Advisory Committee to be on the host committee, as well as local financial supporters of your Forum and directors of the venue where you hold your Forums. Also, members of the host committee may want to share testimonials about your Community Forum or your guest speaker as a means of encouraging others to give generously.

#### **Tip**

Remember, fundraisers tend to be classy events where the utmost attention is given to making donors feel comfortable and nurtured. The extra details go a long way, so make sure to brush your teeth, sweep the floor, put on nice music, and be welcoming and gracious!

#### **6. Invitations and RSVPs**

Send out invitations to your event three to four weeks in advance of your fundraiser. Make sure to indicate that this event is a fundraiser, and give a short description of how the funds will be used. Include an email address and return envelope for RSVPs. A general rule of thumb is to expect 20% more people to attend who did not respond, but 10% of those who responded to not attend.

#### **7. Materials to hand out, and gifts**

Bring materials about the speaker and your Community Forum, to hand out to guests. If you are offering a gift, such as a signed book by the speaker, don't forget to bring them along!

### **8. *Gathering contact info***

Just as with larger Community Forum events, make sure to gather as much contact information from guests as possible. All of the people who attend your fundraiser can be added to your donor lists, and solicited for future fundraising.

### **9. *Thank yous***

Make sure to send thank-you notes to all involved with your fundraiser, including the speaker, donors, volunteers, host committee members, and the venue in which it was held.

### **10. *Schedule***

The following is a model schedule for a fundraiser that is being held before a Community Forum.

4:15-4:30 pm – Hosts and helpers arrive to set up space, food, drinks, music, sign-in and information, book signing-area, ambiance

5:15-5:30 pm – Guest arrive, mingle, eat food and talk with special guest

6:00-6:10 pm – Appeal to donate generously by member of Host Committee

6:10-6:20 pm – Speaker gives short formal talk

6:20-6:30 pm – Speaker opens floor for Q&A facilitated by member of Host Committee

6:30-6:45 pm – Q&A, guests continue to mingle and talk, and write checks

6:45-7:00 pm – Guests leave fundraiser and walk to the Community Forum; clean-up begins

7:00-7:30 pm – Community Forum begins

7:30 – Clean-up ends

### **11. *Ambiance***

Creating a pleasant ambiance at your event can help people to feel at ease and therefore more generous in their donations. Subtle music in the background, soft lighting, and moderate temperatures can all support a relaxed environment.

### **12. *Co-sponsors***

There may be times when a local organization, or the organization that the guest speaker represents, would like to co-sponsor or co-host a Community Forum. Although it makes it can make the logistics more complicated, it also exposes your community organization to the co-sponsor's donor list. Make sure to be clear from the beginning how the work will be shared between the organizations, and how the resulting funds will be split.

### **13. *Appeal***

The entire point of your fundraiser is to ask people for money by making a public appeal. Use humor to relax people, and speak from your heart about the value and excitement of your programming. Make sure to mention a few suggested donation amounts, and aim higher than you might think people would be willing to donate. For example, if you think it is manageable contribution is \$100, ask for \$200 or \$250 – people will give what they can, but it doesn't hurt to ask. Also, don't feel that you have to go on for a long time – you can be concise and pointed in this "ask." Rehearse what you plan to say, and make sure to thank the guest speaker for their time.

### **14. *Volunteers***

You will need a few extra volunteers to help out with the set-up, management, and takedown of this event, especially when critical staff head to the Community Forum. Ask both the Host and Advisory Committees for volunteers.

## Food at Events

As already referenced a few times, sometimes it is a wonderful addition to a Community Forum to have food. Eating together can be a wonderful way to build community. Regardless of race, class, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, religion, or personal history, everyone eats. Doing so in the context of community-building can go a long way. There are even some Community Forums where a dinner is always shared before or after a presentation. Here are a few suggestions for bringing food to your Community Forum.

### Tip

Consider asking participants to bring their own plate, bowl, cup, and/or utensils to use. This will decrease the amount of clean-up at the end, and also reduces the amount of waste generated.

Make sure it is clear in your marketing and promotion of the event if the food will be served in a potluck style, as a catered event, or some other style.

### **1. Potlucks**

Potlucks are events where all guests are asked to bring one large dish to share with the rest of the group. Organizers of potlucks usually provide plates, cups, bowls and utensils, and some beverages. Also, organizers sometimes make a large main course to compensate for those who forget to bring a dish. One thing that makes potlucks so fun is that variety of food that ends up on the table – the spread may range from epicurean delights to corn chips bought on the way over! It is a great way to try new foods, and gives guests a topic of discussion (“What did you bring?”).

### **2. Catered Events**

You may have instances where you would like to have food at an event, but do not have the time or ability to make it all yourself. Hiring a local caterer can take that pressure off, and ensure a high-quality outcome. Fundraisers, for example, are a wonderful opportunity to use a caterer. Remember to budget in the catering expenses for your event!

### **3. Snacks and Tea**

There may be times when it is not appropriate to have a full meal, but when you would like to provide some snacks for guests to enjoy. Consider buying some foods that are easy to eat with fingers. Also, tea and coffee can be a nice addition

to a snack offering. Snacks tend to be a nice treat to offer before an event officially begins, and gives guests an excuse to stay and mingle afterwards. Remember to provide small plates or napkins, and cups for guests to use.

#### **4. *Movie-style Popcorn:***

When showing a movie, it can be fun to offer popcorn. Large boxes of microwave popcorn are easy to purchase, and even easier to prepare. Including popcorn at your event can even help to make it feel like a cinema. Don't forget to provide napkins and plates/bowls/cups.

We suggest that if you are hosting a Community Forum where eating together is a component of the schedule, take into consideration the style of the programming. For example, if you are having an event that talks about the growing local food movement, consider having a potluck beforehand where guests try their hand at creating dishes from local ingredients. Or, if your event goes more than two hours, consider having a break for a snack or some catered food – it will help people to clear their heads, and come back to the table with renewed energy. This is very important at World Café event, which can be lengthy.

Finally, know that although food at events can induce great social cohesion, it is not necessary. For example, at the Jamaica Plain Forum we do not offer food when we have speakers. Three or four times a year we will host a potluck when a speaker or film specifically has to do with food issues. We tend to always serve popcorn when showing a movie.

### **Tip**

Make sure to have labels available for food, especially for dishes that may contain allergenic ingredients (nuts, dairy, gluten, etc.). Also, labeling if a dish is vegetarian, vegan, kosher, or organic is helpful.

Always make sure that the venue is comfortable with you serving food, and have a clean-up plan for the end.



## Books at events

When a speaker comes to your Community Forum to promote a new book, it is best to have copies of the book available for purchase. Many times speakers are willing to sign books after their talk. Also, if the speaker has other books, it is worthwhile to have a few extra copies of those to sell as well.

Although selling books oneself means that any profit goes directly back to the Community Forum, it can be a relief to offer this opportunity to a local independent bookstore. Such a partnership can be mutually beneficial: the Community Forum does not have to find extra people to staff the book-selling area, or worry about how to take credit card transactions, and the bookstore can sell books and promote their store. In this time when small independent bookstores are struggling to make it, it is a blessing to be asked to be the exclusive book purveyor at an event.

### Tip

Make sure to have at least one copy of a guest author's book signed and donate it to your local public library as a gift from the Community Forum

## Recordings

Many Community Forums find it beneficial to make video or audio recordings of their events. Not only does recording events mean that there is a permanent record of the program, but also recordings can be used to share the experience with those who could not attend. Many of the well-established Forums have some system of recording and then disseminating their programs. Be advised that recorded programs work best in form of a talk, lecture or debate. Slideshows, films, and community dialogs do not translate as well.

To get high-quality audio and video recordings of programs, it is helpful to enlist the assistance of a professional or enthusiast. Depending on the size of your budget, you could hire someone to record select events. There are, however, many people who are knowledgeable about audio and video recordings, and might be interested in contributing their skills to the Community Forum. If so, keep up a good relationship with them and work out an arrangement of compensation and/or recognition that they feel comfortable with. Folks from community radio and community television might be interested, as well as students in professional Audio/Video or Communications programs. Recording

your Forums might be an interesting semester- or year-long project for a local student.

With programs such as iTunes and YouTube, audio and video recordings can now easily be uploaded onto the internet. Adding links to your Community Forum's website to download the audio and video files is a smart move. It helps to spread the word about your Community Forum, and also keeps a public archive of your community conversations.

Recordings can also be used for publicity purposes. For example, the Needham Lyceum records all of its Community Forums, and plays them over the local community access channel. This has helped raise the profile of the parent organization, the First Parish in Needham Unitarian Universalist, throughout the community. The Cambridge Forum records each one of its weekly lectures, and provides them to Public Radio stations for a fee. As of 2007 the recordings were syndicated on more than 30 Public Radio stations nation-wide. Finally, recordings can be copied and sold along with other merchandise.

As always, you will want to make sure that the speaker is comfortable with being recorded. Make sure to explain to the speaker exactly how the recording will be used, and ask them to sign an agreement of understanding so that in case there is any discrepancy, you can refer to the document. Finally, make sure to offer your speaker a complementary copy of the recording.

## 7. RAISING FUNDS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY FORUM

Although it is possible to produce Community Forum events on a small budget, you will incur expenses. From copying fliers, to advertisements, occasionally taking an out-of-town speaker out to dinner, it is helpful to have a fund of money to dip into from time to time. Incorporating your Community Forum as a 501c(3) organization (non-profit) with the IRS will allow you to open a checking account, and also to provide funders with a tax-exempt receipt for their records.

There are various ways to solicit money for Community Forum work, all of which have costs and benefits. We recommend a hybrid of fundraising approaches.

**A. Voluntary donations:** Asking for voluntary donations at the door can be an effective way to raise money without excluding members of the community who cannot afford a regular ticket price. If you suggest an amount for voluntary donations, some people will pay more than what you suggest, while others will not contribute anything. For example, The Jamaica Plain Forum suggests a donation of \$3 per person, but doesn't require one. In general, out total income from donations evens out to about \$1 per person. One challenge of this method is that your income from events depends on the generosity of your attendees. However, we have found that if attendees feel that their ideas are taken seriously, and that the topics you present are relevant, they will be inspired to contribute.

### Tip

Use a shallow basket or open container on the sign-in table to collect money, along with a sign explaining what is required (voluntary donation, ticket price, etc)

Make sure that the person who is welcoming folks regularly removes cash sitting in the basket and puts it in a safe place. Keep a few dollars in the basket to subtly remind attendees to contribute.

**B. Income from ticket sales:** Depending on the particulars of your Community Forum, you may find that charging a standard fee at the door will make your program financially sustainable. The benefit of this method is that you will be ensured a consistent stream of income. If your program is tech-savvy, you can even sell tickets online through a PayPal account before the event, and keep a guest list at the door (see below). Challenges include potentially excluding community members who do not have the means to pay the entrance

fee, and the extra administrative tasks of coordinating ticket sales. Requiring cash or checks may be beneficial so that you don't have to deal with the hassle of setting up a credit card account.

The Emerson Center at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach is an example of a Community Forum that charges for tickets. They host one program called the "Celebrated Speakers Series" with big-name journalists, humanitarians, and public figures. For \$220, guests have tickets to four events. Recently the Emerson Center established a "Humanities Series" in recognition of the barrier of ticket price for many members of the community. In conjunction with the Florida Humanities Council, they now offer events that explore history and issues particular to Florida. They do not charge for entry into the Humanities Series.

In the case of the Jamaica Plain Forum, we have only charged for ticket sales for an event with a big-name speaker. We charged \$5 and explained that this charge was going directly to the purchase of a larger screen to show movies on. By charging a small, yet mandatory, fee for a speaker that regularly fetches \$35 per ticket, we were able to provide community members with a deal and gather enough funds to increase our infrastructure.

**C. Annual appeals:** Appealing for money from your Community Forum attendees on an annual or bi-annual basis can give people the opportunity to thoughtfully contribute more than they necessarily would when coming to a single event. By reminding constituents of highlights from recent programming, you can inspire people to think in total about what they have gained from all of the Community Forum events that they have attended, and contribute accordingly. Email appeals work well for Community Forums that primarily communicate with their constituents through the internet, however some people may be more comfortable being asked for money in a letter.

**D. PayPal:** Using the internet to fundraise can be a very helpful tool, and a PayPal account is becoming a standard method for secure online payments. PayPal buttons can be incorporated into websites and on-line applications, as well as many HTML-based emails. The benefit of PayPal is that funds are directly deposited into your checking account.

**E. Membership:** Many community-based organizations are also membership organizations. By charging annual fees, members help to support the organization. While sometimes membership fees are a flat rate, other times membership levels are determined by the amount of money an individual contributes (e.g. member, supporter, sustainer, etc). Some membership organizations include member benefits such as mention in Community Forum outreach materials, free recording of events, bumper stickers, or merchandise,

**F. Sponsorship:** There may be individual lectures, films, or events that specific community members would like to sponsor if they are dealing with subject matter that is near and dear to the sponsor's heart. While it is important to make sure that Community Forums are not forwarding one particular agenda, sponsorship can be a helpful tool when looking to delve into innovative or re-framed versions of older issues.

**G. Endowed Series:** An endowment is a donation of money or property to an institution's banking account, with the stipulation that the principal of the donation remains intact into the future. The institution then uses assets gained from interest earned by the principal. Although we are generally accustomed to thinking about endowments in the context of a university or cultural institutions, smaller endowments exist, and some of them even support programming at Community Forums. For example, some of the older and established Community Forums have one or two endowed speakers each year where a prominent speaker is invited to give an address. There are even a few Community Forums who operate solely from the funds generated by an endowment. Most endowed Forums have paid staff and a long history of involvement and support within the local community.

**H. Merchandise Sales:** By marketing your Community Forum, you can spread the word and make money at the same time. Since "it takes money to make money," this is a consideration that a Forum might take on once you have made enough to pay for the initial printing investment and also cover the basic operational costs. Consider branding that includes an image or slogan that represents the mission of your Community Forum. Suggestions for merchandise include bumper stickers, kid and adult t-shirts, reusable bags, or water bottles.

**I. Fundraisers:** Fundraisers are an opportunity for people to gather and celebrate the success of your Community Forum, and to show their support and appreciation by donating money. By offering people the opportunity to financially contribute to the Community Forum, you are also providing them with the experience of “being a part of something important.” (See more about fundraisers in the section “Advanced Event Production”.)

**J. Grant funding:** A grant is money given by a foundation or other grant-making institution to an organization that meets specific criteria. Typically, organizations apply to a fund in writing, and may have to provide financial and programmatic materials to support their proposal. Interviews, site visits, or further details may be requested from the funder, and grant awards are made behind closed doors by the funding panel. Grant funding can be very important for Community Forums, especially those that are just starting off, or those who are taking their programming to the next level. Community Forums could be eligible to apply for funds that support community development, dialoging, public conversations, the arts, documentary films, youth programming or faith-based programming. Community Forums that are associated with a Unitarian Universalist congregation are advised to apply for funding from the Unitarian Universalist Funding Program.

**WHEN IT HURTS TO ASK:** Make sure that you are not asking your Community Forum donors to contribute too much or too often. Annual Appeals and Membership dues should be solicited once a year, and one or two fundraisers a year is prudent.

### Tip

Keep good records about how much money came from each kind of fundraising. If you do apply to grant-making institutions, they will want to see the multiple ways that you are working to generate income.

## 8. ABOUT THE FORUM ORGANIZING PROJECT

### *The Forum Organizing Project*

The Forum Organizing Project has been formed to help start and sustain Community Forums. We use the Jamaica Plain Forum (in Boston, Massachusetts) as our “lab”, testing different types of events, and accumulating firsthand knowledge of best practices. After a year of experimentation, and many excellent events, the JP Forum is now regularly drawing audiences in the hundreds. Turning our attention outward, we have contacted numerous Forums around the country, of all shapes and sizes, to learn more about what others have found successful.

Our mission now is to promote the Forum model of community programming, seeing us as part of a larger effort to re-localize our lives, revitalize community life, and educate and organize around progressive issues. We work in conjunction with several organizations and funders, including On the Commons, the Institute for Policy Studies, and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Here’s how we can help you, as a Forum organizer:

### Organizing Tools and Extension Services

**Tools.** We will continue to update this organizing manual based on lessons and best practices emerging from around the country.

**Extension Work.** We’re available to help you start a Forum in your community. Our staff can talk you through different stages of your programming. Our primary focus is to help forums in communities without film and lecture programs.

**Internet outreach and networking.** Visit [www.ForumOrganizing.org](http://www.ForumOrganizing.org) to take advantage of Community Forum organizing resources, toolkits, speaker, film and book ideas for your forum and community building tools.

[www.ForumOrganizing.org](http://www.ForumOrganizing.org)

**Directory.** We maintain a list of existing Forums, and are developing tools to assist in improving their reach and impact. This list is on our website [www.ForumOrganizing.org](http://www.ForumOrganizing.org).

**Email List.** You can join our email list to get monthly updates on new curriculum, ideas for events, speakers currently on tour, reviews of new documentaries, etc. Join on the website, or send us your contact information at [forumorganizing@gmail.com](mailto:forumorganizing@gmail.com)

**Program Resources.** We interface with film distributors, publishers, campaign organizations and others to identify low cost and free programming materials. We publicize these through the website and Email List.

**Curriculum Packages.** We develop tools for Forums interested in pursuing particular themes, and bundling together specific films, speakers, and learning tools. These are updated monthly, and can be found on the website.

The hub of all Forum Organizing Project work is our website at [www.ForumOrganizing.org](http://www.ForumOrganizing.org).

For further information, feel free to call, write or email our staff in Boston:

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