

Online Forums

Objective

Online forums allow citizens to interact directly with policy makers with minimal time demands on all parties. The objective of this activity is to provide a new means of facilitating citizen participation that can reach a broad audience using the state or local jurisdiction's internet presence.

Summary

In states and local jurisdictions where public hearings are poorly attended, online forums have proven a successful alternative. Policy makers whose time constraints prevent their participation in traditional public meetings can take part in online discussions that provide for interaction with citizens, and the public is provided an opportunity to discuss real issues with policy makers.

State and local jurisdictions can publicize the availability of key public officials via their website, social media presence, email listservs, and traditional methods of reaching low- and moderate-income citizens. Advertising the availability of key policy makers for direct one-on-one question and answer sessions can generate enthusiasm among citizens and invigorate a citizen participation process that is suffering from low attendance. Online forums can have a single-issue focus relating to a controversial project or can be open-ended in focus.

For example, a city could highlight the opportunity for citizens to comment on a particular project and its impacts in the community, promising direct access to policy makers during a specific time window. The actual window can be relatively brief for a large number of online questions to be collected. Answers may then be provided by staff over a longer period of time, as necessary. The forum can also serve as a prelude to public hearings whereby questions raised online can be carried over to the hearings. The discussion of key issues identified online can serve to attract citizens to public hearings and other citizen participation forums.

In their simplest form, online forums usually take place in a public, text-based chat format. More sophisticated forms of online forums can also involve the use of audio and/or video to allow the display of slides or text.

Application to the Consolidated Plan

Online forums enable grantees to collect information to support the needs assessment and market analysis as well as establishing priority needs for the Strategic Plan. As part of a strategy of innovative media outreach, online forums can help grantees to both generate interest in the Consolidated Plan process and involve all of their target populations and demographics during outreach and citizen participation.

Target Audience/Usage

The target audiences for this activity are policy-makers, stakeholder groups, and citizens who are capable of participating in an online forum.

Logistics and Materials Needed

- Grantees need to be aware of the technical barriers to online forum participation and take steps to minimize the requirements on the user's end. Examples include using HTML based tools versus Java, and avoiding the necessity for users to install specialized software to participate in the online forum.
- Grantees can take advantage of a variety of analytic tools that allow for robust demographic and other data collection on who is participating and providing input.
- Online forums represent a significant opportunity to solicit input from persons with disabilities who may be discouraged from attending traditional public meetings. Efforts should be made to encourage this population to participate and to provide for specialized accessibility needs.
- Adequate advance notice of the public official's availability on the site as well as in publications and media outlets.
- Policy makers who are willing to spend brief periods of time chatting directly with citizens about matters of concern that affect the Consolidated Plan.
- Follow up by staff and key public officials on all questions and comments from the online forum to assure that citizens receive a thorough response to their concerns.
- Use of online forum content to guide and inform public hearings. For example, public hearings can be a venue for follow up to forum questions.
- Posting of all live talk, follow up, and future forums on the jurisdiction's website.

Examples of Online Forums

- In 2012, the city of Fremont, CA introduced an online, facilitated forum titled [Fremont Open City Hall](#). The website asks residents for feedback and input on planned and ongoing initiatives in the city as well as more general feedback on current city operations.
- [St. Clair County, MI](#) established an online forum to support the development of its 2040 Master Plan. On the forum, residents can submit new ideas or recommendations, vote on existing ideas, and provide general comments and input on the Plan.