

Tips for Hosting a Public Forum

The purpose of a public forum is to allow community members to express their views about smoke-free policy. A secondary purpose is to educate the public about the harms of secondhand smoke and effective public health solutions.

Choosing a Location

- Select a site that is easily accessible such as a civic or community center, library, or health department conference room (if large enough). Be sure free parking is available.
- Depending on the situation, you might plan for presence of security or law enforcement (public forums can become heated depending on how much opposition attends).

Choosing a Moderator

- Select a well-known local leader (i.e., media reporter or newspaper editor or elected official if appropriate) who is not opposed to your issue.
- Otherwise, choose a respected citizen with good leadership and group facilitation skills (preferably one connected with a non-partisan civic group).

Choosing a Forum Panel (optional)

- Some communities invite a panel of experts (2-4 panel members) to respond to the views expressed by community members. This can be an effective strategy for responding to misinformation.
- Depending on the topic of the forum (e.g., health effects, business/individual rights), select a balance of health experts, business owners, anti-health groups for your panel.
- Identifying local experts may be more acceptable, but sometimes inviting experts who live outside your community who can speak to experiences in other similar locales may be effective.

Planning the Format for the Event

- Have two sign-in sheets in the entryway for those wishing to speak, PRO and CON (be explicit in the labeling; for example “PRO: Those who wish to speak *in favor* of a Smoke-free Ordinance/Regulation.” (Some people get confused by the Pro/Con designation.)
- Have at least one well-versed speaker signed up at the end of the Pro list to refute any opposition tactics that have not yet been addressed.

Note. A public forum is typically hosted by a non-governmental entity such as a health coalition. A public forum is different than a public hearing which is sponsored by the city or county government or board of health.

- Display educational and branding materials, and make a sign-up sheet available to collect contact information from citizens interested in joining the smoke-free coalition or having their name and email on an action alert list.
- The Coalition Chair, Health Department Director, Tobacco Specialist, and/or a health advocate may give a brief opening statement or presentation. If there is an expert panel, they might give brief statements.
- Ask the moderator to alternate between pro-con speakers. If there is a panel, the moderator may ask the members to respond to the comment.
- Speakers should have a 3 minute time-limit, with an appointed timekeeper.
- Total forum should have a time limit.
- Suggest ground rules such as:
 - Everyone who wants to speak should get the chance before anyone speaks a second time.
 - All comments should be directed toward the moderator. Some forums have cards for anonymous questions that can be submitted to the panel or moderator.
 - Please be considerate of those persons speaking, whether you agree or disagree with them and refrain from commenting out of turn (No debates among participants).
 - Any person showing verbal disrespect to those speaking will be asked to leave the public meeting.

Inviting Advocates to Speak

- Local business owners who have been educated on the advantages of smoke-free. Do not assume that business owners who have decided to go smoke-free voluntarily will necessarily support smoke-free legislation or regulation.
- Workers (paid or volunteer such as bingo workers) who are exposed to secondhand smoke.
- A local attorney who can speak to why government has a duty to protect public health (Kentucky Supreme Court Ruling 2004) and why exemptions can be problematic (litigation)
- Doctors and other medical professionals (white coats) to talk about the health effects of secondhand smoke Prepare medical speakers with:
 - Information on the science of secondhand smoke (from medical journals).
 - A firm request to stay on message (talk about secondhand smoke, not smoking).
 - A request that they stress how workers will be protected, not how smoke-free regulations will protect children.
 - A firm request to avoid discussion of effects on children since that often devolves into the myth that the health advocates' ultimate goal is to ban smoking in home/cars (i.e, slippery slope argument).
- Representatives from local health coalitions (i.e: ASAP, MAPP coalition)

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- Representatives from Tri-agencies (Heart, Lung, and Cancer), Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, or Kentucky Center for Smoke-free Policy, if appropriate and available.

Choosing a Media Spokesperson for the Coalition

- Designate a primary and secondary person who will try to connect with reporters who attend.
- Design and practice sound bites (tailored to the community needs & opposition; i.e., “everyone in our community deserves to breathe clean air”).
- All advocates should prepare a sound bite in case they are approached by the media.
- A media training with practice prior to the event would be very helpful and can be fun! Be prepared to answer questions about what the coalition plans next (caution: do not give away the details of your next steps; this may fuel the opposition!)

Marketing the Public Forum

- Send a media advisory to print, radio, TV a few days ahead to announce the event.
- Send personal invitations to all elected officials, board of health members, and other key influentials (i.e., city/county attorney, city manager, school principal or superintendent)
- Follow up with personal phone calls to ensure the right people attend (Keep in mind that elected officials often avoid these events for many reasons).

Providing Smoke-free Information at the Meeting

- Coalition contact information (business card, flyer)
- Surgeon General Consumer Guides
- Secondhand Smoke and Smoke-free Policy books
- Local air quality data report and graphs
- Information on the need to protect workers from SHS exposure

Following Up after the Event

- Depending on media coverage during the event, follow up with letters to the editor and/or opinion editorials about the event to continue to build demand for smoke-free policy.
- Follow up with letters to all elected officials about the event (i.e., numbers who attended and key outcomes).
- Add new coalition members to your action alert email list.

For more information: UK Clean Indoor Air Partnership, 859-323-4572, www.kcsp.uky.edu

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