

Evaluating Community Forums as a Means to Inform Policy Action Planning

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PURPOSE: To evaluate the efficacy of community forums as a means to inform policy action planning

METHODS:

- In November/December 2015, the Gulf States Health Policy Center Coalition tested the relevance and importance of three policy focus areas (health literacy, financial literacy, education) to local communities through a series of community forums.
- The Coalition, largely comprised of professionals, felt strongly that the identified policy areas should be validated by community members before creating a community action plan.
- Six community forums were held in three cities in Mobile County and were facilitated by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life.



RESULTS: The community forums attracted participants from various walks of life, generated constructive discussion around community needs, strengthened collective motivation to improve the community, identified assets and action opportunities, validated the Coalition’s previous discussions, *and surfaced issues previously unknown to the Coalition.*

SUBJECTS RAISED IN COMMUNITY FORUMS IN MOBILE COUNTY, AL		
Nov. - Dec. 2015		
Health Literacy	Financial Literacy	Education
awareness of resources	awareness of resources	equity
information and communication	communication and promotion	parent engagement
public space	financial education	teacher support
elderly services	personal responsibility	curriculum
youth services	trust of financial institutions	adult literacy
urgent care	payday lenders	job readiness
access to healthy foods	economic development	diversity of approaches
recreation	equal access	holistic, creative learning
transportation	technology	tax system, funding
social support systems	jobs	tenure

DISCUSSION: The forums revealed a tangible difference between what Coalition members and community members identified as vital. Though the Coalition consists largely of service providers (who contributed valuable information to the policy process), they could not *fully* speak for the communities they serve. Community members presented – and gathered consensus around – several issues that Coalition members had not identified.

For example, Coalition members had discussed at length the need for access to fresh fruits and vegetables. However, during the health literacy forums, community members cited a public garden in the Bayou where the produce had rotted on the vines because no one knew about it. The issue, they insisted, was not a lack of resources or a lack of access, but a lack of effective communication. Likewise, during the financial literacy forums, service providers cited several free financial counseling services, but community members had no knowledge of them.

ATTENDANCE AT COMMUNITY FORUMS IN MOBILE COUNTY, AL			
Nov. - Dec. 2015			
LOCATION/TIME	TOPIC		
	Health Literacy	Financial Literacy	Education
Bayou La Batre - noon	63		
Bayou La Batre - evening	16		
Mobile - noon			20
Mobile - evening			4
Prichard - noon		20	
Prichard - evening		17	
TOTAL ATTENDEES	140		



CONCLUSION: The community forums highlighted the value of *direct* input from individuals whom policy work is intended to serve. Further, it underscored the importance of validating policy plans *in the early stages* of the planning process, as community input has the capacity to shift and shape the policy focus.