



Bridging Divides, Building Community.



All-America Conversations Toolkit

Bridging Divides, Building Community.

Since 1949, the National Civic League's All-America City Award has recognized cities and towns committed to using cross-sector collaboration and inclusive resident engagement to work across dividing lines and to create more equitable communities.

After last year's divisive election cycle, there's never been a more important time for communities across America to stand up for the values that make cities and towns strong: civility, humanity, trust, compassion, innovation and inclusion. The National Civic League is challenging communities across the U.S. to hold "All-America Conversations" that will identify the small, specific actions that remind people how we CAN work together across dividing lines and help our communities reflect the best of what America can be.

These conversations are aimed at bringing together residents in small, conversational settings to exchange ideas about their communities. Some communities also may choose to hold larger gatherings in which people break up into small groups or to conduct the conversation as part of another forum. Regardless of format, the conversations are meant to address three main questions: 1) how can our community reflect the best of what we see in America, 2) what are the divisions in our community and how do they impact our ability to live in the kind of community we want, and 3) how can we bridge these divisions?

About the All-America Conversations Toolkit

The All-America Conversations Toolkit contains everything you need to hold a productive and meaningful conversation – just add residents.

The toolkit helps you accomplish the following goals:

- Identify what you want to learn and whom to engage
- Develop strategies for reaching beyond the usual suspects
- Decide where to hold the conversations and how to set up the room
- Select and prepare facilitators and note takers
- Understand what questions to ask
- Adapt the conversation guide to different types of meetings
- Determine how to review and theme your notes to find action steps

The kit also includes: tips for facilitators and note takers; a note taking tool; ground rules; a sign-in sheet; sample recruitment letter; sample email to engage the media around these conversations.

In addition to this toolkit, NCL is providing free coaching to communities through conference calls so local leaders can think about how to use these conversations to meet local challenges and fit with existing programs and staff resources.

**For the most up-to-date information and resources visit:
www.nationalcivicleague.org/all-america-conversations**

Table of Contents

Selecting an engagement approach

Determining what you're trying to learn	3
Whom to engage	4
Strategies for engaging beyond the "usual suspects"	5
Selecting a conversation structure	8

Conversation Logistics

Recruiting for the conversations	10
Sample recruitment letter	11
Selecting a good location	12

Facilitation and Note Taking

Facilitating All-America Conversations	13
Tips for Facilitators	14
Note Taking.....	15
What to listen for as note taker	16
Note taking tool.....	17

Conversation Materials

Conversation Checklist	20
Introduction to the conversation.....	21
Conversation Guide – questions	22
Ground Rules for community conversations.....	23
Sign-in Sheet.....	24
Instructions for leading a town hall-style conversation.....	25
Questions to ask as part of an existing meeting.....	28

Making Sense of What You Heard

Making sense of what you heard	29
All-America Conversations "Madlib"	32

Additional Resources

Tips for engaging media	33
Letter to local media	34
Letter to local partners	35

Determining what you're trying to learn

All-America Conversations are incredibly versatile. It is critical to consider what you're interested in learning as you plan the conversations; this makes it easier to know whom to invite (page 4) and which engagement approach to use (page 8).

Key Tip: Focus on learning not confirming

Meaningful community conversations start with a desire to learn from others. They can be incredibly powerful, if, and only if, you are willing to be surprised and to learn new things. Holding community conversations to justify existing efforts or gather quotes bolstering your position wastes time and erodes trust.

All-America Conversations can help you learn:

- These conversations can be a great way to engage underrepresented groups or perspectives. You could decide to hold a series of conversations with people of color, with those experiencing homelessness, with recent immigrants or religious minorities. These conversations may reveal that the key challenges facing those we rarely engage are different from what we expected.
- Some communities will use these conversations to identify shared values between groups on different sides of key issues, or those we perceive to hold little in common. A few conversations with each "side" and then a few conversations that bring together both sides of an issue can often reveal that we have more in common than that which divides us. We can learn how, together, we can take several small actions to make progress despite our differences.
- These conversations can help to uncover the differences and similarities between different parts of town. It can be surprising and exciting to see just how much people share in common across seemingly different neighborhoods or to learn how place seems to shape their perspective on the dividing lines facing the community.
- Other groups will use several of these questions within existing meetings or conversations to build their understanding of the community; and to reinforce, in multiple settings, the idea that the city is committed to learning about residents' experience and working across dividing lines.
- These conversations can help identify previously unknown trusted local leaders or groups in the community that can help move things forward.

What do you want to learn from these conversations? _____

How might community conversations help you understand those you serve? _____

What approach (small group, large meeting, part of existing meeting) fits what you want to learn?

Whom to Engage

Bridging local divides to build a stronger community means striving to learn from the full diversity of resident perspectives. Including typically underrepresented groups is important to creating a clear picture of the community and its challenges.

The idea of “going beyond the usual suspects” is easy to talk about, but for many communities it is a real challenge. This toolkit will help you think about whom you might want to engage and how to leverage partners and other relationships to go beyond those you already know.

You want to do your best to include as many perspectives as feasible – depending on your resources and what you want to learn. But, it takes time to build the relationships necessary to ensure the full diversity of your community can engage in these conversations and future processes.

**Key Tip: Diverse opinions doesn't mean you must
make each conversation demographically representative**

Seeking a diversity of perspectives does NOT mean that every conversation has to reflect your community's demographics. Ultimately, the goal is to hold enough conversations to better understand the community and learn from people you might not usually engage.

You want to engage diverse perspectives through these conversations. That does not mean that each conversation must include people representing the full diversity of the community.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, engaging different groups often requires the use of different recruitment strategies. Talking to partners and others who work directly with the group in question is a great way to learn how to best recruit or engage a population. For instance, it is often more effective to organize a conversation of young people and their peers rather than inviting them to a conversation with adults. Other underrepresented groups may also find it easier to share their perspective in a peer group setting. Having a more homogenous group can create a safe place for residents to fully disclose how they feel about issues. For example, to learn if Muslim immigrants feel less safe or are receiving more verbal attacks, engaging Muslim residents among their peers may create a more comfortable environment. Then after learning about other perspectives you could work to bring together some of the participants from the initial Muslim-focused conversation to engage with others. In the end, different groups and different learning objectives will require different recruitment and engagement strategies.

Demographics are an important piece of understanding the diversity of your community, but it is also important to think about the different perspectives that are not often considered or captured in demographics. For example, renters may have different perspective on issues than homeowners. New residents may bring different perspectives and insights from long-term residents.

Strategies for Engaging Beyond the “Usual Suspects”

Most communities have developed effective recruitment and engagement approaches to reach what we might call “the usual suspects.” In our experience, most communities find it easier to engage middle to upper-income, white homeowners compared to residents of color, low-income residents or religious or ethnic minorities. The following suggestions provide insights into potential partners and engagement strategies for going beyond the usual suspects and reaching groups that are often underrepresented in community decision-making. This is far from a comprehensive list.

People of Color

Potential engagement partners for targeting people of color include: Networks, associations or membership/advocacy groups such as Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, African-American sororities or fraternities, the NAACP, Urban League chapters. Partnering with congregations, such as churches offering services in Spanish or AME congregations, can also be effective. Small, local minority-owned businesses, like barber shops, restaurants, bodegas, or grocery stores may be able to help you connect with residents or leaders you don’t already know.

Other Perspectives to Consider

Some additional underrepresented perspectives in community decision-making efforts include:

- Those experiencing homelessness
- People with mental health issues
- Foster-youth
- Formerly incarcerated
- People of different abilities

Different Religious Perspectives

Look to form partnerships with local faith leaders, or congregations when trying to specifically engage Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and other faith communities. Local halal or kosher groceries and restaurants are another avenue for engaging these residents. In some places, religious diversity tracks closely with nationality or ethnic identity. For instance, a Somali Community Center might be an effective way to reach Muslim residents, or an Indian restaurant might help connect you with Sikhs or Hindus.

Youth/younger residents

Most young people will feel more comfortable among their peers, so when recruiting young people encourage them to invite their friends to attend as well. Potential partners or avenues for reaching young people include: Boys and Girls Clubs, student government groups, local colleges or community colleges, youth advisory boards or high school civics teachers.

LGBTQI

Potential partners or avenues for engaging LGBTQI residents: local PFLAG chapters or similar advocacy organizations, inclusive and welcoming churches or local bars/clubs catering to LGBTQI residents.

Low-income residents

It often takes more digging – for an outsider - to find out the key community gathering places, trusted partners and important connectors in lower-income areas. This could include working with small local businesses such as beauty shops, corner stores or thrift shop, or service agencies like a church with a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter or a Head Start center. Be mindful of the barriers to engagement for low-income residents: time, resources, language, child care and feeling uncomfortable to engage in settings where they have been excluded historically. Providing child care, as well as ensuring that the conversation (if possible) is accessible by public transportation can make it much easier for some low-income residents to participate.

Recent Immigrants and/or residents whose primary language is not English

When engaging recent immigrants (particularly those who may not have legal residency), working with a trusted local partner is absolutely essential. Potential partners include: local resettlement agencies, local nonprofits (particularly those offering services in multiple languages), immigration advocates, or ESL teachers who can help pass information along to students and families.

Locally-owned restaurants, groceries or other small businesses can be helpful partners in engaging residents.

Renters

Reaching low- to moderate-income renters relies on many of the same strategies used to reach other groups listed above. Several specific strategies include: partnering with affordable housing groups, local management companies (asking to post flyers or invitations in common spaces), renter advocacy groups or nonprofits focused on fair and affordable housing.

Key Tip: Keep asking who else do we need to include

Throughout the process, you should ask yourself, what other perspectives do we need to fully understand things? Who else can/should we engage?

Mapping and Engaging the Different Perspectives in your Community

After reviewing the list above, pull together two or three people from your community or organization to answer the questions below.

- 1) What are the different interests, views and perspectives of the community?
- 2) What perspectives do we need to understand to create a more equitable community?
- 3) Are there groups that are not often consulted or considered?

After you have created a thorough list, begin adding individuals or organizations who could help you reach different groups. If you do not have a connection to certain groups, begin brainstorming connector individuals. For example, if you listed residents who do not speak English, you could reach out to an adult ESL teacher as the connector to that group.

Other perspectives important to consider in our community:	
Perspective	Potential Partners

Conversation Structures

The resources in this toolkit can be used to support three different conversation structures. The focus of each is better understanding the community and people's sense of how we can work together across dividing lines. Conversations do not need to be demographically representative. The goal is not to create something that stands up to academic rigor. The goal is to gain more information and help improve future decisions.

After identifying what you are trying to learn and the groups you want to engage, the next major decision is selecting a structure for the conversation. For most communities, small group conversations will be most helpful. However, any of the three structures listed below can be effective in engaging residents, and they can be used in combination as well. It is helpful to think of these conversations as an ongoing learning process rather than simply a specific event or project. Thinking about these as part of a learning process gives you permission to adjust or refocus efforts as you go.

Small Group Conversations (Best for most situations)

For most communities, National Civic League recommends hosting at least three 90-minute small group (8-15 people) conversations. Conversations do not need to be demographically representative. Conversations can focus on learning more about a specific population's (particularly underrepresented groups) perspective or on learning how people from different backgrounds or parts of town see issues. These conversations are most effective with 15 or fewer participants, so it is smart to invite residents specifically. If you end up with more than 15 participants, it's a good idea to break into two or more 8-person conversations, if possible.

This approach is best for reaching hard-to-engage populations. It also allows the greatest flexibility as lessons learned from the first conversation can shape recruitment, timing, facilitation and other factors for future conversations.

Start with three to four conversations and capture learning and insights as you go. After the fourth conversation, pull together staff and partners to discuss next steps. Do you want to delve deeper into a specific topic, or learn more about a specific group's perspectives? Would it be best to bring different groups together in a common conversation, now? Should you broaden the focus of the learning? These questions are best answered after you have three to four conversations under your belt.

Large Open Meeting (Best for a big public event)

The resources in this toolkit can support a large public meeting – like a town hall – where participants break up into multiple tables for simultaneous small group discussions. This enables a community or organization to engage many people in one evening.

This approach spreads facilitator and note taking resources thin and runs the risk of engaging only the usual suspects who attend every meeting. It is also a less comfortable setting for many marginalized groups.

For more information on this approach go to page 25. Holding these conversations as part of a large town hall structure will leverage resources throughout this toolkit – but to get a sense of how to use these as part of a town hall you can skip ahead to page 25. After that, take some time to review the rest of the toolkit.

Within an Existing Meeting (Best if you have limited time)

On page 28 of this toolkit are three key questions we recommend asking in any meeting where you want to better understand the community. This might include during board and commission meetings, when city council members hold meetings in their district, as part of staff meetings or in one-on-one conversations at a local fair or gathering.

This approach requires the least preparation but also is least likely to produce deep engagement. It can be helpful for seeding these questions into different settings or helping to spark interest in more robust engagement.

For more information on this approach go to page 28.

Conversation Logistics

After identifying what you want to learn, the people and perspectives you need to include and the best engagement approach for your situation, turn your attention to logistics.

Recruiting for All-America Conversations

The best way to recruit participants is with a personal invitation from a trusted source. Clearly spell out the purpose of the conversation, why it is worthwhile to participate and offer specific details about the time, location and duration.

Keys to effective recruitment:

- Personal invitation from a trusted source – Like any other invitation or request, conversation invitations are most effective coming from a source that recipients know, trust and respect. This is a key place to leverage partners. Personal invitations are better than blast emails, flyers or notices on a website, which are far harder to track than personal invitations. Using a general invitation makes it very difficult to estimate how many people will attend the conversation, which could result in no one showing up or a huge crowd, neither of which is ideal.
- Clearly explain the purpose of the conversation and why it is worth participating - When asking someone to give up their time to participate, let them know the benefit and purpose of the conversation. Let them know that the conversation is not a typical town hall – there won't be any speeches or presentations, just a chance for them to share their opinions and talk with other residents.
- Set realistic expectations about the outcome of the conversation – People are more willing to participate if you're realistic about the purpose and potential outcomes. Trying to sell the conversation will lead many to ignore it as just another overhyped effort. It's better to be upfront and explain that you cannot promise you'll create a new program or solve all the problems addressed, but you will pledge to capture what you learned, follow up with them and share those insights with others in the city moving forward. Better to be honest and limited than overhyped and misleading.
- Specific details about the time, location and duration of the conversation – All too often people include too little detail in the invitation. Include the date (day of the week, date, month and year), the location (with address), the time the conversation starts and ends. If you are providing child care, food, language or hearing accommodations, be sure to include this information in the invitation.

After you've sent invitations to recruit people for the conversations, follow up with those you invited. Ask them to RSVP so you have a sense of how many people to expect and can provide refreshments for everyone.

Key Tip: Think about partners from the outset

All-America Conversations provide a great opportunity to solidify existing partnerships and forge new ones. Partnering with groups and organizations trusted by those we want to engage makes it easier to reach beyond the "usual suspects."

As you develop partnerships around these conversations, involve partners in making early decisions. Don't finalize the plans and then ask them to sign on. This approach is ineffective and signals that their input or involvement is just for show. Engage them on choosing the date, time and location.

Participant recruitment template

The (city of /nonprofit) and (partners) would like to invite you to participate in a community conversation about strengthening (our community) and how we can work across dividing lines to make progress. The conversation will be on (date) from (XX:XX p.m. to YY:YY p.m.) at (location).

We are hosting a series of conversations to better understand the kind of community residents want to live in, to identify the issues that matter to them and how we can work across dividing lines. Many have said that the United States is more divided than ever before and that people don't often talk to those with whom they disagree. This conversation is a chance for residents and neighbors to talk about how we can make (city) a more inclusive community and work across dividing lines to get things done.

We'll take what we learn from these conversations and use it to help make our work in the community more effective. We can't promise the conversation will lead to a new program or policy. We pledge to get back to you with what we learned and how we'll use what we heard.

Hopefully you'll be able to join us. If so, please RSVP to (person) at (contact info) so we have enough refreshments on hand.

Location: (location) (address)

Date: _____ Time _____

The (location) is wheelchair accessible and serviced by public transportation (PROVIDE DETAILS).

NOTE: Child care will be provided

P.S. For more information don't hesitate to contact (person) at (contact info)

Selecting a Good Location

You want to find a location that is comfortable and welcoming for all participants. There's no perfect location. The key is to consider what message the location sends to participants and how the location affects people's ability to comfortably engage.

Some locations might be perfectly suited for one conversation but not for another. A corporate board room or the meeting room of an upscale hotel might be a great location for a midday conversation with Chamber of Commerce members, but such a setting would likely be less comfortable for a conversation among migrant farm workers.

This is another example of how working with local partners is critical, as they will often have a sense of the natural gathering places. It is always easiest to engage residents in places where they feel most comfortable. Put their comfort and familiarity ahead of your own.

Key Tip: Consider Accessibility

If possible, you want locations that are accessible by public transportation (particularly if you want to engage low-income residents or youth) and to those in wheelchairs.

Don't Default to City Offices

Many cities default to hosting conversations in city buildings. Some government buildings may be familiar to conversation hosts and some participants, but they are not always welcoming or perceived as neutral spaces by others.

More desirable	Less desirable
Community center	Expensive hotels or restaurants
Places of worship (if seen as welcoming to participants)	City hall or other government offices
Community organizations like the YMCA, or Boys and Girls Club	Executive Board rooms (unless you're targeting executives for your conversation)
Public libraries	Country clubs

Setting up the room

- Create clear signs on the outside of the building directing people to the room for the conversation.
- Single table with chairs all around.
- It is nice to have refreshments or some snacks for participants. Make sure you have coffee, tea, water available for participants.

Facilitating All-America Conversations

The best facilitators help participants have a productive conversation. Facilitating a conversation is not the same as leading a meeting. Simply getting through the questions or keeping everyone on task is not enough. Good facilitators recognize that it is not their role to share their opinion or steer the conversation toward any specific conclusion. Facilitators must approach the conversation with genuine curiosity, a desire to learn more and a commitment to providing people with the chance to share their thoughts.

Good facilitators are:

- **Curious.** They are genuinely interested in the opinions of others.
- **Prepared to approach the meeting with a learning mindset.** Strong facilitators want to understand what people are saying and what they mean.
- **Rarely subject matter experts.** It is usually best to avoid experts in a given topic area as facilitators. They are so familiar with the topic that they may not probe people to go deeper as they have heard so much about the issue already. It is also hard for many experts to neutrally facilitate a conversation on a topic about which they care so deeply and which they know so well.
- **Able to stay neutral.** A good facilitator is neutral, allowing people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives to freely participate, be heard and feel valued.
- **Comfortable with disagreement and tension.** Conversations can become emotional. When people are talking about what really matters, they are emotional. This is a sign that you've hit a key point or idea. Emotion, frustration and passion are valuable signs about what people care about. A good facilitator doesn't shut down those emotions unless they prevent others from feeling safe in sharing their views.
- **Willing to play devil's advocate.** A good facilitator can help draw out deeper insights by gently challenging assumptions or assertions. This helps people to clarify their thoughts, consider different perspectives and talk through the choices, trade-offs and competing values at the heart of the topic.

Resources for Finding Local Facilitators

- National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (ncdd.org/map).
- Local universities.
- Some nonprofits will have experienced facilitators.
- Regional Councils of Governments may have people with facilitation experience.
- Trained mediators are often skilled facilitators.
- National Civic League may also be able to help with facilitation, in some cases.

Tips for Facilitators

It's not about you. As a facilitator, your role is to help others share their insights, learn from one another and bring forward their ideas. It can be incredibly difficult to avoid sharing your perspective, but it's an essential part of being a good facilitator.

Engage people early on. Try to include each of the participants within the first two questions or so. If someone hasn't spoken, you can bring them in by asking whether they agree with someone else's assertion. "(Name), what do you think about what (other person) just said? Is that how you see things?"

Don't allow one person to dominate. If one person is doing most of the speaking or jumps in to answer every question, ask him or her to hold off and use that as a moment to bring in a quieter participant. "(Name), I'd like to make sure we hear from everyone. Ellen, how do you see things?"

Don't take anything at face value. Probe to really understand what people are talking about. Ask them to clarify or help you understand. "When you say (idea), what do you mean? What would that look like?" or "I want to make sure I understand what you mean by (idea)?"

Ask people to square contradictions and help them see points of connection. Explore seemingly contradictory ideas. The goal is not to "catch" or embarrass people but to give them a chance to talk through competing values. "I'm curious how what you just said fits with what you said earlier about ____"

The flip side of squaring contradictions is helping the group see points of connection. "In different ways, you've come back to (key value or idea that seems to resonate) what is it about that idea that is so important?" or "Much of this conversation is about divisions, but it sounds like we believe that there are some key shared values in this community like (shared values that have emerged). Do I have that right?"

Help keep the conversation focused. Be willing to return the conversation back to the topic at hand. "Since we only have 90 minutes, I want to make sure we're able to go deeper on (issue). We can come back to that if there's time at the end." Or if someone is taking the conversation off topic you can say, "I can understand where you are coming from, but we need to move on."

Be aware of your own preconceived notions. Everyone brings preconceptions or biases to these conversations. Be aware of your own. Do you have expectations about what a specific group is going to think? Be mindful of these expectations or preconceptions. Work to stay neutral, curious and open to being surprised in the conversation.

Don't be afraid of conflict, tension or emotion. These are evidence that people are engaged in a real conversation about something they value. Talking about our children, the fears we have, the pain we feel – these are emotional topics. As a facilitator, you need to be able to allow the conversation to be emotional. Don't make jokes to cut the tension or try to avoid emotion UNLESS people are being disrespectful to one another or people don't feel safe sharing their perspective. "I know these conversations can be emotional – that's OK, in fact it's a sign that we're talking about things that really matter. It's my job to make sure that everyone feels safe to participate. We don't have to agree, but we are going to be respectful of one another."

Key Tip: Four great questions to dig deeper

- "Help me understand...."
- "What would it look like if..."
- "When you say __, are there some examples that come to mind."
- "What makes you say that?"

Note Taking

Good, detailed notes allow you to move from a pleasant conversation to really learning from the community and taking action. Good note takers are worth their weight in gold to this kind of effort. At a community conversation, residents are taking time to share their thoughts, their concerns and their hopes with us. We owe it to them to take good notes so that they have not wasted their time. You likely have a sense of which colleagues or partners take really good notes. These are the people who are detail oriented, who have a knack for both recognizing and recording key points from a meeting or conversation. Below are some additional characteristics to look for in a note taker.

An effective note taker:

- Is curious about how others think and talk about the world.
- Is observant.
- Pays attention to and records the specific words and phrases that people use. They don't try to impose their own terms or words when recording notes.
- Listens for both specific examples and the general pattern/themes.

Key Tip: Take notes, don't try to write a transcript

Don't try to write down everything that is said; it's not a transcript. The main responsibility of a note taker is to capture key insights, ideas, themes, turning points and representative quotes from the community conversation.

Supporting Note Takers

- Share this page and the following page with note takers before the conversation so they know what to be listening for.
- If at all possible, take notes on a computer. Handwritten notes are hard to read and make it very difficult to quickly reorganize ideas and comments into different categories.
- To enable note takers to type their notes be sure to email them the note taking tool before the conversation. You can download a Word version of the Note Taking Tool from the National Civic League website: www.nationalcivicleague.org/all-america-conversations
- Share a copy of the conversation questions with the note takers and ask them to review it so they're familiar with the flow of the conversation.
- Discuss with note takers the overall goal of the conversation(s) and what you need to get from their notes – namely enough detail to recognize patterns and themes.

What to listen for as note taker

Language: What words, terms or ideas do people return to throughout the conversation. How do the words that people use to describe their community and its challenges differ from what you expected or what you might hear from experts?

Themes: What ideas, concepts, words or concerns keep coming up? Don't try to listen for the most interesting story or the perfect quote. It's tempting to listen for the unique, but what we really want is the common. What are the themes, ideas, concepts or examples that people return to over and again? What are the most common—not the most special—ways that people approach the conversation.

Emotions: What topics, ideas or discussions trigger emotional responses? What are those emotions?

Turning points: What ideas or comments seem to shift the conversation? Are there questions from the facilitator or comments from participants that seem to shift how people talk about or think about key issues? When do people say "I hadn't thought of that," or "that's a good point." Are there stories or insights that prompt people to rethink their positions or see new possibilities?

Tension: Where do participants disagree? When people disagree, what seems to be at issue? Are there words, ideas or examples about whose meaning they disagree?

Common ground: Amid the disagreement are there places where people find common ground? What are the shared values that people hold? What ideas seem to connect people across dividing lines?

Clusters: Are there ideas or topics that people seem to connect to one another. People rarely talk about issues in isolation – they may connect "education" to "economic opportunity" and "racism." Look for what ideas, words and topics seem to cluster in people's minds.

Note Taking Tool

Date of Conversation:	Location:
Facilitator:	Note taker:
# of participants:	Group engaged:

What do people want their community to be?	Words people use to describe their ideal community

How is the community that people want different from what they see today? What challenges does the community face?	
	Listen for: The words people use to label their concerns/challenges

What division/divide most impacts the community?	
	Listen for: How does this impact the community? How does it impact the participants?

What role, if any, do people see the city/nonprofit playing in this divide?

Where can we get started?	
	Listen for: What seems to give people confidence that we can move forward together? What are signs of progress?

What role do people see for themselves individually and the city in taking action?	Trusted Actors

Immediately after the meeting, take 10 minutes to discuss the following questions with the facilitator:

- 1) What were the key things you learned about the kind of community people want and the challenges they see in getting there?
- 2) What ideas or comments really seemed to resonate and move the conversation forward? What helped people to think about ways to work across dividing lines?
- 3) Where did people think we could get started to take action together? Are there some key factors that seemed important to people in thinking about where to get started?
- 4) What was the mood of the conversation?
- 5) What surprised you?

Conversation Materials - Checklist

Use this worksheet/checklist after you've reviewed the full toolkit to pull together all the key details for the conversation.

Focus of the Conversation	
What are we hoping to learn from this conversation?	
What group or groups are we engaging? What perspectives do we need to include based on what we want to learn?	
Location and Logistics	
Location: (address and room)	Ask yourself • Is this location accessible to those with limited mobility or those without a car? • Will all participants feel welcome here? Is this a comfortable, familiar location for them?
What time is the conversation?	
Staffing	
Facilitator:	
Note taker:	
Follow Up	
What follow-up can we promise?	For every conversation you should pledge to share: • What we learned. • How we are going to use it.

Materials Checklist

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Conversation questions | ☐ Paper to make signs directing participants from the building entrance to the conversation room |
| ☐ Note taking tool | ☐ Pens and markers |
| ☐ Ground rules | ☐ Tape for affixing signs |
| ☐ Sign-up sheet(s) | ☐ Name tags |

Conversation Materials - Introduction to the Conversation

Before we get started, I want to tell you a little bit about this conversation, what you can expect and how we're going to use what we learn. I also want to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your thoughts with us.

First off, these conversations usually run about 90 minutes. Feel free to get up and get refreshments or go to the bathroom (let them know where the nearest bathroom is). This is going to be an informal conversation.

Intro if your community is an All-America City Award winner

Across the country, communities like (our city), that have won the All-America City Award are holding conversations like this one to talk about the kind of community they want, the challenges they face, how to become more inclusive and work together across dividing lines. (City) won the award in (year) for our efforts around (issue), and our ability to work collaboratively.

Intro for all communities

Across the country, cities and towns are having conversations like the one we're about ready to have. These All-America Conversations are a chance to talk about the kind of community we want, the challenges we face, and how we can become more inclusive and work together across dividing lines.

- One of the big dividing lines tends to be between different political parties. For our conversation, I'd ask that we focus on the local challenges here and look for places where we can come together to get things done. National politics is important but having that conversation here will likely keep us from finding ways to work across divides. Can we agree to stay focused locally for tonight's conversation?
- My job tonight is to help you have a productive conversation. Sometimes I may ask you to clarify your comments to better understand your point. I may also play devil's advocate. And if you're not saying much I might invite you to share your thoughts, and if you're talking a lot I might ask you to make room for others. If I do any of those things, it's just to help make sure this conversation is productive and we get the full benefit of your experience and perspectives.
- I want to introduce my partner (notetaker) who will be taking notes during this conversation. Since the focus is on learning, it's helpful to have notes so we can make sure we get it right. You should know that what you say will be kept confidential, and nothing you share will be tied to you.
- We find that some basic ground rules can be helpful – share the ground rules, or reference them.
- In the interest of setting realistic expectations, I want to let you know what we'll be doing with what we learn and what to expect moving forward. These conversations are first and foremost about learning. At this point, we cannot promise any new policies or programs – but we want to use what we learn moving forward. I can pledge to you that:
 - o We will follow up with you to share with you what we learned from this conversation.
 - o And we'll tell you how we're using what we learned moving forward.
- This is an informal conversation you don't have to raise your hand and we'll be using first names. Let's go around the table and please introduce yourself.

Conversation Guide - Questions

1. What would it look like if our community reflected what you want to see in America?



- A. What differences do you see between the community you want and our community today?
- What will it take to get to the community we want to become?

2. When people talk about things in the US today they say how divided we are – by race, religion, immigration, etc. What are the divisions we face here?



- A. How do these divisions impact our community and our ability to create the community we want?

- B. What is preventing us from bridging this divide and creating a more inclusive community?
- What role, if any, has CITY/NONPROFIT played creating or deepening these divides?

If they say there aren't divisions:
Can you think of people in the community who might see it differently?

3. Thinking about what we've talked about, what would it take to bridge these divides?



- A. Where could we get started?
- What common ground can we build upon?
- B. What specific, small steps do you think could make a difference?
- What role, if any, could the city or nonprofits play in helping us work together?
- C. If things were getting better – and we were more effectively working across dividing lines– what would you see, how would you know things were improving?
- What would give you confidence that, as a community, we were making progress?
- D. What people or groups, would you trust to take action or address the kinds of challenges we've been talking about tonight?

Next steps

1. Thinking about the topics we've covered, who else should we should talk to?
2. Do you have any questions for us? Anything else would you want to make sure we understand?
3. After this, we'll pull together our notes and let you know what we learned. Please sign-in so we have your email and can share this with you. We will not use it for anything unrelated to this conversation.
4. In that email we'll also let you know how we're going to use what we learned.



Ground Rules for Community Conversations

People are better able to engage and participate if they understand the “rules” of the space and of the conversation. Before the meeting write these ground rules on a sheet of chart paper so everyone can see – or you can print a copy for each participant. At the start of the conversation, go over these rules and ask if people have any rules to add.

Have a “kitchen table” conversation

Everyone participates; no one dominates.

There are no “right answers”

We want to understand your experience and perspective. You don’t need to be an expert on any given issue; you are already an expert on your experiences with these issues.

Listen with an open mind

Listen to others and try to understand their perspective. Don’t jump to conclusions.

It is okay to disagree, but don’t be disagreeable

Be polite, kind and respectful of others.

We are going to have one conversation, together

Avoid side conversations. Help the conversation stay on track.

Step up/Step back

If you find yourself jumping in first to answer every question, take a step back and make room for others. If you’re more introverted, challenge yourself to step forward and speak up.

Have fun

This conversation is a chance to share your thoughts with, and learn from, other people from your community. Enjoy it.

Are there other ground rules that we should add for our conversation?

Sign-in Sheet

Conversation date_____ Conversation location_____

First Name	Last Name	Zipcode	Email Address

How to Use This Guide at a Town Hall

All-America Conversations can work in a town hall setting. These conversations and the topics don't lend themselves to town hall meetings built around speeches, panels or expert presentations. Instead the goal is to hold multiple small group conversations simultaneously –at separate tables, or in different rooms if the location allows.

Pre-meeting Preparation

- If possible, recruit volunteers before the conversation to serve as facilitators and note takers.
- Set up a call with your volunteer facilitators and note takers before the conversation to review the guide, to answer questions they might have and to share last-minute details.
- Print off copies of the conversation questions, ground rules, sign-up sheets and note taking tool for each of your volunteers. Assemble these into a folder or packet with the facilitator's name on it. Print more copies than you expect, as it's better to be over prepared in this regard.

If you have an unexpectedly large crowd

- First off – congratulations.
- If you are unable to recruit volunteers before the meeting, or if turnout exceeds the number of facilitators, you will need to ask for help from those in the audience. If possible, as soon as you realize the crowd is going to be larger than expected, ask people whom you trust or know already if they would serve as facilitators. A personal request is best.
- Make sure to have extra copies of the conversation questions to provide to anyone who agrees to lead the conversation at their table. Similarly, print extra copies of the note taking tool.

Running the Town Hall Meeting

1) Thank everyone for attending. Recognize partners.

2) Share the purpose of the conversation with the group

- *Intro for previous All-America City Winning communities:* Across the country, communities like (our city), that have won the All-America City Award are holding conversations to talk about the kind of community we want, the challenges we face and how to work together across dividing lines.
- *Intro for all communities:* Across the country, cities and towns are having conversations like the one we're about to have. These All-America Conversations are a chance to talk about the kind of community we want, the challenges we face and how to work together across dividing lines.

3) Set expectations

- The goal of these conversations is to learn from residents.
- We cannot promise any new policies or programs. Right now we're working to learn more and to use that to shape our decisions and efforts moving forward. We can pledge to you that:
 - o We will follow up with you to share with you what we learned from this conversation.
 - o And we'll tell you how we're using what we learned moving forward.

4) Explain the process

- To ensure everyone has a chance to share their perspectives, we will break into small groups to hold the conversations.
- When we break up into groups, I'm going to ask you to be brave and go to a table with some people you don't already know.
- For each table we have/need a facilitator and a note taker. The facilitator's role is to help keep the conversation on track and ensure we hear from everyone. The note taker will capture the key ideas or insights from the conversation so that we're able to learn from all of you.
- We'll come back together as a full group at (10 minutes before the end of meeting) to wrap up and talk about next steps.

5) Emphasize the need for civility

- One of the big dividing lines tends to be between different political parties. For our conversation, I'd ask that we focus on the local challenges here and look for places where we can come together to get things done. National politics is important, but having that conversation here will likely keep us from finding ways to work across divides. Can we agree to stay focused locally for tonight's conversation?

6) Break into groups

- Break into groups and facilitators begin with Conversation Guide Questions (page 22) after everyone introduces themselves.

7) Wrap up - pull the group together with 10 minutes to go

- What did you hear that surprised you? You only need about 3-4 quick answers just to get a sample. Remind people that you will review the detailed notes so that everyone gets heard.
- What did you hear that left you more optimistic about this community? Get another 4-5 answers.
- Explain how you will follow up with them. Encourage them to sign up so that you can share what you learned and any potential next steps.

8) Thank them for their time and their perspective.

Questions to Ask as Part of an Existing Meeting

You can easily hold a mini-version of this conversation as part of an existing meeting rather than as a stand-alone. Obviously, you won't gain the depth of understanding in 30 minutes that you can in a full 90-minute conversation. But, using these 3 questions in meetings across the community helps to engage more residents and build a strong engagement culture across the community.

If you only have 30 minutes:

Set up the conversation as you would for the longer conversation – explain what they can expect, review ground rules, etc. Then ask these questions. Try to spend no more than 10 minutes on each question.

1. What would our community look like if it reflected what you want to see in America?

Potential Follow ups

- What differences do you see between the community you want and our community today?
- What will it take to get to the community we want to become?

2. When people talk about things in the U.S. today, they say how divided we are – by race, religion, immigration, etc. What are the divisions we face here?

Potential Follow ups

- How do these divisions impact our community and our ability to create the community we want?
- What is preventing us from bridging this divide and creating a more inclusive community?

3. Thinking about what we've talked about, what would it take to bridge these divides?

Potential Follow ups

- What specific, small steps do you think could make a difference?
- If things were getting better – and we were more effectively working across dividing lines– what would you see, how would you know things were improving?
- Thinking of people or groups, who would you trust to act or address the kinds of challenges we've been talking about tonight?

Making Sense of What You Heard

Having a productive conversation is important. The next step is to make sense of what you heard, identify key themes and determine how to use what you learned.

Organize your notes by category

Create a Word document with each of the six categories listed below. The questions in parenthesis are where you are most likely to find answers related to the category. But a good conversation will touch on these ideas throughout the session. Look at the entire conversation for themes related to the various categories not just one or two questions.

- Kind of community people want (q1)
- Challenges facing the community (q1a)
- Divisions/dividing lines within the community and their impact (q2)
- Barriers to working across dividing lines (q2b)
- Specific actions and actors (q3)
- Common ground and confidence – what do we hold in common and what would give people confidence things were improving (q3c and q3d)

Copy relevant parts from the notes into the category they represent. Some quotes or notes will fit into multiple categories. That's perfectly fine. The key is to be able to look at all the relevant quotes, ideas and comments on a given category (topic) at once.

Identify initial themes

If possible, ask a few colleagues to join you in reading through the notes. After reviewing the notes a few times, stand back and ask yourself: What are people trying to tell us? What is going on here? Identifying the key themes from a conversation is an art, not a science. You are looking for patterns and points of commonality. Start to loosely identify some key themes in each of the categories. Don't look for the most exciting, interesting or memorable opinion – you want to think about what's most common, what are the ideas or sentiments that people hold in common. It's best to keep your themes relatively loose at first. Identify some basic ideas and move to another category. You'll drill down later.

What are people telling us?

Looking through your initial themes, try to identify a story that helps connect the various themes. Play with the various themes, try different ways of fitting them together into different stories. Don't waste time looking for a perfect story – the story you tell yourself is useful if it helps you better understand people's reality. No one story is going to explain everything or accommodate every single comment. That's fine. If something is important but doesn't fit, make a note of it but keep moving.

This can be a frustrating process. It is fairly common to review notes and start to criticize people for being inconsistent or illogical. When you start to think – “this doesn't make sense” ask yourself – How do these statements make sense? Take a step back and remember residents speak in different terms

than local government professionals. Look for the connection pieces, even if the language is different. Curiosity and a willingness to see the world from others' perspective are critical to this process. As you work to refine the story, you'll naturally begin to narrow and clarify the themes.

Test your story

Testing your story will help you further recognize the themes and strengthen your understanding. As you start to pull together a story, say it out loud, test it with colleagues. You can also use the narrative template below (page 32). It works like a Madlib – just insert your themes into the structure. Don't be overly concerned about forcing things into this format – use it to the extent that it helps you make sense of what you're hearing.

What did we learn?

Based on the themes identified, what are the implications for your work and the community? To help you capture insights, implications and opportunities from the conversations, ask yourself:

- What are the key takeaways from the conversation(s)?
- What does this suggest about future conversations – whom to engage, what perspectives do we still need to reach? Are there areas where we want/need to go deeper?
- How is what we heard different from what we'd expected? What does that mean for us moving forward?

Using what you learned

After identifying insights from the conversations, it is important to transition to considering how to use what you have learned. This can be as simple as sharing what you learned with colleagues at a staff meeting, meeting with a partner to talk about how the insights might fit with their work or deciding to hold additional conversations all the way up to something as involved as restructuring an existing effort or creating a new initiative. Do not leap to large, involved efforts based on a few select conversations.

One of the most valuable roles a city or nonprofit can play is to convene other groups and share information. After one or two conversations, you should ask yourself:

1. Who else would benefit from hearing what we learned?
2. Who should we talk with within the city or other partner groups to ensure that we're sharing this information with the right people?
3. How does what we learned shape our thinking in terms of existing programs – does it suggest we need to learn more to better align with residents? Do we need to recognize and engage with more diverse partners?

Following up with participants

After identifying themes and how you will use that information, you need to follow up with participants. The follow-up email should: 1) thank them for their participation, 2) summarize what you heard from the group and 3) let them know how you will use what you learned moving forward and 4) ask if they have anything to add or other thoughts to share. Again, do not overpromise – it is the surest way to erode any trust or good-faith engendered through the listening/engagement process.

As part of the follow up, you can also ask if they would like to remain involved with this work. You might ask if people are interested in any of the following options:

- I would like more information about local groups working on these issues.
- I will help recruit others to participate in future conversations.
- I pledge to do what I can to create a more inclusive and respectful community.
- I want to learn more about hosting a conversation like this in my neighborhood, congregation or other group.
- Please send me information on becoming involved with city boards and commissions.
- Please keep me informed about ongoing efforts on these issues.

All-America Conversations MadLib

The people we spoke with say they want to live in a community that is Kind of community people want (q1) but that to get there, we need to address Challenges facing the community (q1a).

One of the barriers to reaching the community they want is tension/division around Divisions/dividing lines within the community (q2). To bridge that divide, we have to face/address Barriers to working across dividing lines (q2b).

People recognize that bridging these divides will be difficult, but they believe that we have some key shared values that we can build on, like (what we have in common q3). Furthermore, they also see small, specific actions like Specific actions (q3a, 3b) as ways to get started.

People would welcome involvement from (q3d), and see role of city (q3a, q3b) as a critical role for the city moving forward.

People say that if they see What gives people confidence that things are improving (q3c) it will give them confidence that we are actually working together across dividing lines.

Additional resources

Tips for Engaging Local Media Around All-America Conversations

To engage your local media outlet to get involved with the All-America Conversations, decide what role you would like media to play. Media outlets not only provide coverage, in most communities they also play a role as an institutional leader.

If you simply want coverage of the effort, specify the depth of coverage desired. Coverage might mean publishing an announcement that invites residents to participate in the community discussion that includes the appropriate contact information (date, time, location, phone and/or email). More extensive coverage might entail the process – invitation, coverage of various discussions, coverage of outcomes.

To gain the media outlet's support as an institutional leader, begin by asking to meet with a general manager at the television or radio station or the publisher and editor at a newspaper (in smaller cities, one person may hold both positions). At a newspaper, this discussion might result in an editorial piece supporting the effort, especially if you ask them to consider this option as a way to express the outlet's support to move the community forward. It also might mean co-hosting a conversation with the city as a sponsor that provides refreshments as well as coverage.

For sustained news coverage, begin the discussion with the top newsroom editor at a newspaper or a news director at a television or radio station and include the reporter who routinely covers city government. Explain to the editor how the community might benefit from knowing about and participating in these conversations, and ask the newsroom to assign someone to this process and provide coverage for their audience. Another important discussion to have is with the person who covers city government. Sharing the scope of the project, including the goal of inviting unheard voices into the conversation, the dates and times of various conversations, and the outcomes expected from the conversation, will help the reporter pitch the stories to the editor or news director who supervises city government coverage.

Engaging local media as partners – email template

As the new year unfolds, we (*the name of city*) are joining the National Civic League in a national initiative that challenges All-America City Award winning communities and others to hold All-America Conversations (www.nationalcivicleague.org/all-america-conversations). The new year is always an excellent time to discuss and decide what matters in not only our individual lives but also in the life of a community.

All-America Conversations will explore the kind of community residents want to create, the challenges we face as a community in reaching those goals and, critically, how we – as a community – can work together across dividing lines. The presidential election presented, the divisions within and between our communities. These conversations are a way to begin to understand the key divisions within our own community and identify ways to work together across dividing lines.

We want to invite (insert name of local newspaper/ radio/tv /media outlet) to join the city by playing a leadership role in these conversations.

How you can be involved

- Your news organization may decide to share information and materials about All-America Conversations online with your audience.
- You could commit to cover the efforts of government officials or community groups that decide to host these conversations.

As a community leader in your own right, we would welcome you as co-sponsor with the city. These conversations will explore people's hopes for the community, the challenges they see and how we can work together to bridge the divides within our community.

Since 1949, the National Civic League has honored, with the All-America City Award, hundreds of communities that have demonstrated the capacity and desire to address challenges collectively by using the expertise of local government officials and the insight of community residents. We are proud to have won the award in (year). We believe that it is critical that we continue to engage residents, particularly those often left out of decision-making arenas, and these conversations are a way to do just that.

The National Civic League has developed a meeting-in-the box template, which includes a letter to the community, a facilitator's guide, a list of topics and questions, a recommended invitation list and advice on sustaining the conversation. NCL encourages communities to talk, listen and act collectively and courageously for the equitable benefit of their residents. We would love the involvement and support of your media organization to move our community forward.

Signed by the mayor

NOTE – this letter could be in lieu of or combined with an in-person meeting

Engaging local partners – email template

As the new year unfolds, we (*the name of city*) are joining the National Civic League in a national initiative that challenges All-America City Award winning communities and others to hold “All-America Conversations” (www.nationalcivicleague.org/all-america-conversations). The beginning of a new year is always an excellent time to discuss and decide what matters in not only our individual lives but also in the life of a community.

All-America Conversations will explore the kind of community residents want to create, the challenges we face as a community in reaching those goals and, critically, how we – as a community – can work together across dividing lines. The presidential election presented, in stark relief, the divisions within and between our communities. These conversations are a way to begin to understand the key divisions within our own community and identify ways to work together across dividing lines.

We want to invite (*your organization*) to partner with and help play a leadership role in these conversations.

These conversations will explore people’s hopes for the community, the challenges they see and how we can work together to bridge the divides within our community. We believe that your participation and partnership in the effort will make it considerably stronger and more impactful.

How you can be involved

- We would love to partner with you to consider groups and parts of the community to engage and discuss strategies for ensuring that these conversations reach beyond the usual suspects.
- You could support these efforts by encouraging your constituents/clients/members to participate in these conversations.
- We would welcome your help in identifying facilitators and note-takers.
- As the conversations progress, we want to ensure those who want to remain active have ways to do so. This could involve connecting interested residents to your group among others.
- Moving forward if there is interest it may make sense for several groups and individuals to take these topics and run with convening a community task force focused on action steps.

Background on the National Civic League

Since 1949, the National Civic League has honored, with the All-America City Award, hundreds of communities that demonstrated the capacity and desire to address challenges collectively by using the expertise of local government officials and the insight of community residents. We are proud to have won the award in (*year*). We believe it’s critical that we continue to engage residents, particularly those often left out of decision-making arenas. These conversations are a great way to do that.

The National Civic League has developed a meeting-in-the box template, which includes a letter to the community, a facilitator’s guide, a list of topics and questions, a recommended invitation list and advice on sustaining the conversation. NCL encourages communities to talk, listen and act collectively and courageously for the equitable benefit of their residents. We would love your organization’s involvement and support to move our community forward.

Signed by the mayor

NOTE – this letter could be in lieu of or combined with an in-person meeting