

# **Planning a Community Forum**

The need for comprehensive immigration reform



The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) is the nation's oldest, largest, and most diverse civil rights coalition consisting of nearly 200 national organizations representing persons of color, women, children, labor unions, individuals with disabilities, older Americans, major religious groups, gays and lesbians, and civil liberties and human rights groups. Its sister organization, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund (LCCREF) is the communication and education arm of the civil rights coalition. LCCR/LCCREF believes that a comprehensive immigration policy is a matter of tremendous importance to the civil and human rights community. The entire history of the civil rights movement has been rooted in the principle that there must be no such thing as second-class Americans. Yet for too long, our immigration laws have created a two-tiered society, and have perpetuated racial and ethnic discrimination. This is unacceptable, as immigrants have always been essential to our success as a nation.

### **What is a Community Forum on Immigration Reform?**

A community forum on immigration reform is an opportunity for proponents of comprehensive immigration reform to get together and discuss how this issue affects their lives, communities and what steps can be taken to educate a diverse group (including, but not limited to, the faith community, civic leaders and business leaders) on this complex issue. Events could include a discussion group, community briefing, or panel presentation.

### **Why Community Forums on Immigration Reform Are Needed**

As a leading civil and human rights organization addressing immigration reform, LCCR/LCCREF is positioned to help organize events that can help to do the following:

#### **1. Generate Public Awareness/Build Civic Participation**

Community forums are opportunities to generate public awareness and discussion on issues such as immigration reform. An event around comprehensive immigration reform will provide a forum for multi-sectored key constituencies, including inter-faith and civil rights organizations, the business community, and students, to hear knowledgeable individuals talk about the issues at stake. Participants will have an opportunity to ask questions and strategize with others about next steps and/or actions to be taken.

#### **2. Develop New Leaders and Reach Out to New Individuals/Organizations**

Providing a forum such as this can help identify leaders, recruit new activists, and reach out to diverse groups in your community.

#### **3. Increase Your Organization's Visibility**

Federal priority issues impact local communities, and public policy activities are often easiest to publicize when this connection is made. Sparking a conversation in your community will gain visibility and energize key constituencies to work on priority issues such as comprehensive immigration reform. This will also serve to educate members of the media as well.

### **Do You Think Comprehensive Immigration Reform Is Too Complex To Discuss?**

A primary goal of a community forum is to draw attention to the issue. Even if every question cannot be answered, or every provision cannot be discussed, your meeting will encourage people in your community to learn more about this important issue. The forum will also serve as a barometer for understanding the prevalent attitudes in your community on the issue.

# Planning Step-by Step

## Getting Started

- ❖ **Appoint an event organizer and planning team.** Put together a team of interested key groups, such as members of the faith community, business allies, students and others, to help decide details and share workload. The event organizer will be the key motivator and strategist behind your event. Delegating pieces of the process to the planning team will keep the project manageable for everyone involved.
- ❖ **Build a broad-base coalition.** Invite multi-sectored diverse groups to co-sponsor the event. Remember, it is important to reach out to allies with whom you may not have worked with in past efforts.
- ❖ **Decide on target audience.** Everything about the forum, including the issues, co-sponsoring organizations, speakers, location, date, and time, should be designed with the audience in mind. Examples of target audiences you might consider: individuals of all ages, students, elected officials, members of the media and coalition partners and/or civil rights groups.
- ❖ **Set a budget.** While forums can be held for very little money, you may have expenses such as location or speakers' fees, handouts, refreshments, advertising and postage for visibility, and postage for follow-up letters. In-kind contributions and donations from co-sponsors and other organizations are good ways to stretch your resources.
- ❖ **Choose a location.** Choose an accessible site that will attract a wide range of attendees, preferably a well-known and wheelchair accessible site such as a school or community center. Consider sites that the media frequents for similar events.
- ❖ **Schedule the event at a convenient time.** Avoid business hours, religious or government holidays, or dates when other community events are scheduled.
- ❖ **Decide on a format.** Will your event be a briefing? Panel discussion? A moderated debate?

## SAMPLE TIMELINE

### **6 Weeks Out**

- 1: Appoint organizer and planning team
- 2: Contact coalition partners
- 3: Decide on an audience

### **5 Weeks Out**

- 1: Plan budget
- 2: Decide on location and format
- 3: Ask/invite potential moderator and speakers

### **4 Weeks Out**

- 1: Confirm date and location
- 2: Confirm moderator/panel speakers
- 3: Increase audience recruitment

### **3 Weeks Out**

- 1: Begin advertising event
- 2: Compile list of media contacts
- 3: Send invitations to coalition partners and other important guests

### **2 Weeks Out**

- 1: Re-confirm speakers
- 2: Confirm attendance and send reminder notice
- 3: Prepare on-site handouts and media packet
- 4: Choose media spokesperson(s)

### **5 Days Out**

- 1: Fax media advisory
- 2: Finalize media packets
- 3: Call coalition partners to assess attendance

### **2 Days Out**

- 1: Make reminder turn-out calls
- 2: Review speeches

### **Day of Event**

- 1: Fax news release in the early AM
- 2: Debrief: Did you meet your goals

### **After Event**

- 1: Follow up with media
- 2: Thank participants

**RELAX...its OVER!**

# **In-Depth Organizing**

As an event convener, you are a key motivator and strategist behind this event. Delegating pieces of the process will help keep the project manageable for everyone involved. The following are some steps to follow:

## **Delegate work to a planning team**

Appoint a planning team to divide and oversee the following responsibilities:

- ❖ Agenda planning and identifying speakers
- ❖ Outreach: coalition and the general public
- ❖ Community promotion and media visibility

In order to keep audience interest, forums should last not more than **One hour and thirty minutes!** Start on time; end on time.

## **Share the timeline and checklists**

Give each member of your committee a copy of the appropriate timeline and checklist.

## **Develop a budget**

Work with your planning team to develop a budget. You may have expenses such as location or speakers' fees, handouts, refreshments, advertising and postage for visibility, and postage for follow-up letters. In-kind contributions and donations from co-sponsors and other organizations are good ways to stretch your resources.

### **Strategies for saving money:**

- ❖ *Trade ads for copies.* Create relationships with local copy shops and discuss the possibility of getting free or reduced copies in return for advertising their name on the back of your brochures or flyers.
- ❖ *Ask co-sponsors to help.* Offer local businesses and coalition partners the opportunity to co-sponsor events in exchange for free meeting locations, phone line use, copy privileges, and advertising expenses.
- ❖ *Use the media for public service announcements.* Ask a local radio or TV station to facilitate a forum in exchange for free news coverage and some public service announcements regarding the event.

## **Plan your outreach strategy**

*Invite moderators or speakers.* Choose three or four nonpartisan, credible panelists who will bring media attention to the event. Pick speakers varying in age, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and occupation. A well-known, nonpartisan moderator who is respected in the community will generate interest in the event and give your work added credibility

- ❖ *Plan media outreach and spokesperson.* Outreach to the media will help and advertise your event and gain visibility.
- ❖ *Promote your event in the community.*

## **Choose a location**

Work with your planning team to determine a location that will accommodate the size crowd you are expecting and will attract a range of people from the community. Ask the site manager about the following:

Wheelchair accessibility

Tables

Refreshments (can you bring your own)

Podiums

Janitorial services

Electrical outlets for television and radio crews

Sound systems

Extra chairs

**Get immigration reform materials from LCCREF by contacting Chanda Causer at 202-263-2860.**

### **After the event, follow up on action strategies**

Work with your committee to follow up on any action strategies that result from the event.

### **Follow up with attendees**

Use the registration list as an email or U.S. postal mailing list for future meetings and to contact participants.

## **Programming Checklist**

Tailor your event to reach the following goals: generate public awareness and discussion on issues; provide a forum for people to hear key individuals talk about immigration reform; give participants an opportunity to discuss options; and enable them to strategize with others about action to be taken.

### **Decide on a target audience**

Determine the audience you would like to reach; examples include: students, general public, opinion leaders, elected officials and coalition partners. It is important for leaders of the coalition to collectively set an attainable goal for attendance. Set an internal goal and a general public goal. The primary focus of the forum should be quality, not quantity; in other words, be selective.

### **Develop an agenda/format**

Choose the most appropriate format to achieve your goals and accommodate the people you want to attract. You may want a briefing, panel presentation, or discussion groups. The community forum should last no longer than two hours. If you decide on a panel of speakers with discussion, the following is a sample agenda:

- ❖ Leader lays out purpose and introduces moderator and key coalition partners (5 minutes)
- ❖ Moderator introduces panelists (5 minutes)
- ❖ Three panelists each speak for 10 minutes (30 minutes)
- ❖ Moderator leads discussion session with audience (40 minutes)
- ❖ Leader wraps up with key messages, a call to action “task”, and thanks panelists and attendees for participating (10 minutes)

### **Select panelists or discussion leaders**

Choose bipartisan, credible individuals who will bring media attention to the event. Speakers should represent a variety of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and gender; and be affected by, or work with, immigration reform programs. This could include a coalition partner, legislators (as long as you invite one from each party), Chamber of Commerce representatives and/or someone with a personal story about the importance of immigration. **It is always best to have a run through before the actual event. However when that is not possible, have local speakers send you their intended speech, and ask national speakers to highlight specific subject matter. This step is not to edit their work, but to make sure that the message is cohesive.**

### **Invite a familiar face to be a moderator**

The moderator could be a media personality, coalition partner, or a publicly recognizable individual. A well-known, nonpartisan moderator who is respected in your community will generate interest in the event and give your work added credibility.

**Build a floor team.**

Recruit volunteers to:

- Make sure the event starts on time and ends on time; alert presenters when their allotted time has waned.
- Record the proceedings, especially action strategies and next steps.
- Serve as ushers for large events

**Provide materials.**

Work with the panelists, coalition partners, and the other participants to make available relevant materials, including:

- ❖ Sign-in list
- ❖ Position papers
- ❖ Fact sheets
- ❖ Articles
- ❖ Legal briefs
- ❖ Brochures

**Meet, brief, and escort all speakers on the day of the event.**

**After the event: Debrief with the planning team to assess if goals were met. Thank the panelists and moderator in writing.**

**Coalition Outreach Checklist**

It is in the best interest of coalition building to involve other groups as early as possible in the planning process. This may lengthen the process and could result in more negotiation, but it will build better long-term relationships among organizations.

**Make a list of existing organizations or reach out to new ones**

Following are suggested types of organizations to contact:

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Hispanic organizations                 | Asian/Pacific American organizations |
| Middle Eastern American organizations  | African-American organizations       |
| South Asian American organization      | Gay and lesbian organizations        |
| Student organizations                  | Chamber of Commerce                  |
| American Immigration Legal Association | Policy Centers                       |

**Contact local groups to co-sponsor the event**

Contact local groups through e-mail, fliers, newsletters, and phone trees, or attend their meetings. Invite them to co-sponsor the event, help plan it, and/or send participants.

**Remember: After the event, thank and debrief coalition partners**

Follow up to discuss ways to work together in the future on common issues of interest.

## Community Promotion and Media Visibility Checklist

Event promotion can be a lot of fun. Your goals are to inform the public of the event in order to increase attendance and to inform the media to heighten awareness of your organization's position and work on immigration reform.

Remember, always assess those individuals from the general public you seek to invite. You always want to have control of your crowd; this cannot be accomplished if you don't know who is in your audience.

The week before the event, call coalition partners to gauge attendance.

### **Inform the public**

Determine whose phone number to use on all public information materials

- ❖ Inform organization members and neighboring branches of your event and recruit them to attend.
- ❖ Work with the coalition outreach chair to send invitations to coalition partners and other important guests.
- ❖ Invite the public using ads, fliers, public service announcements on the radio and cable television, and meeting announcements in the newspaper.
- ❖ Encourage the moderator and other speakers to promote the forum.
- ❖ On the day of the event, place a sign outside the location.

### **Inform the media.**

Compile a list of media contacts. Learn which editors and departments cover immigration in your city.

- ❖ Designate a media spokesperson to be available to the press. Put her/his name on all news releases and mailings that go out to media.
- ❖ Fax and/or email an advisory to your media list five to seven days before your event. An advisory is a concise notice listing the event's purpose, content, location, and participants. Fax and/or email the advisory again a day or two before the event as a reminder.
- ❖ Call reporters the day after you send your advisory. Explain that you are following up on your written materials. If they haven't seen the materials, offer to send them again.
- ❖ Send a news release the day of the event and make a final round of reminder calls.
- ❖ Prepare a table with a sign-in list and media kits for all members of the media. Fill your kits with the following items:
  - ✓ Agenda
  - ✓ Statements from the speakers
  - ✓ Press release
  - ✓ Background information on your organization and other co-sponsors
  - ✓ Position paper and/or fact sheets on Immigration.
- ❖ During the event, offer reporters a quick interview before or after the program.
- ❖ Follow-up: call reporters who did not attend the event and offer additional information, including the media kit so they can publish an article on your event. Also contact reporters who attended to ask if they need additional information or quotes to complete their stories.
- ❖ Look for press clips in the newspaper and on television.