Engaging Unheard Voices

Under what conditions can, and will, limited resource citizens engage in the deliberative public policy process?

Progress Report to the Kettering Foundation
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Our thanks to the rural citizens and community leaders who participated in the interviews, focus groups and forum. Without them, we would have not advanced the knowledge base about citizen engagement among rural, low-income people. We pledged to share the information and their words with policymakers and program directors, with the intent of improving the well-being of low-income, rural families. This report is one means of sharing.

Finally, special acknowledgement goes to Sarah Kaye, Department of Family Studies doctoral student, who contributed her expertise to coordination of the interviews, focus groups and forum; data analysis; and preparation of this progress report.

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Executive Summary

The Unheard Voices study was conducted through the University of Maryland Department of Family Studies Maryland Family Policy Impact Seminar, an entity established to promote a family perspective on policy development, enactment, and implementation. This project grew out of a research study, Rural Families Speak, designed to present data to policy makers about the lived experience of rural families. Unheard Voices was created to investigate the likelihood that these residents would participate in deliberative public processes.

Interviews were conducted with participants from the Maryland Rural Families Speak study. Focus groups were conducted by extending invitations to interviewees, their friends and family. Interviews and focus groups provided detailed information about the conditions under which participants would engage in deliberative forums. Findings from the preliminary investigation formed the basis for organization of a deliberative forum in one of the participating counties.

Research findings indicated that with the right issue, at the right time, in the right location, and under the right facilitation, limited resource citizens can – and will – participate in the deliberative public policy process!
Importance of People in Policymaking

This study, known as the Unheard Voices project, was based on the Kettering Foundation’s goal to answer the overarching question of: “What does it take to make a democracy function as it should?” The Foundation’s work is based on the premise that American democracy is not operating to its full potential because:

1) citizens are cynical and angry with a system of decision making that does not heed or serve them, and

2) citizens lack feelings of agency, or sense of control over their lives and futures.

In his text, Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice, Dr. David Mathews, President and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, illustrates a variety of disconnects between people and politics and describes how these disconnects interfere with the ideal democracy. Disconnects for rural, low-income Maryland citizens were the focus of this study.

America’s Unheard Voices

It is reasonable to expect negative attitudes and general feelings toward the democratic process to operate differently based upon a citizen’s place in society. Understanding these differences was the subject of research. Prior scholarship identified specific groups that face particular barriers to engagement in public policy:

- low-income individuals have lower levels of political participation, as evidenced most dramatically by voting rates;
- the voices of women are not often adequately represented in public decision making;
- geography makes a difference.

Rural families, in particular, experience unique difficulties to engaging in civic activities due to both geographic and cultural factors. Geographic factors include low population density that can restrict information sharing. Harsh climates or lack of reliable transportation create physical barriers to engagement. Additionally, rural culture generally emphasizes the importance of maintaining difficult situations as private families matters. Relationships are structured to place emphasis on the family or a group of close friends and family instead of considering oneself as part of a larger public community.

Although there are numerous other citizens who demonstrate disproportionately low levels of political and deliberative participation, this study focused primarily on low-income mothers in rural Maryland. The main goal was to give these voices a venue to articulate the conditions under which they, as limited resource citizens, could – and would – participate in deliberative public policy.
The key research question for the *Unheard Voices* study was “**Under what conditions can, and will, limited resource citizens engage in the deliberative public policy process?**” Because this was an exploratory study, the central question lent itself to qualitative methods within a community-based research model.

Community-based research empowers participants to find their voice and express themselves using their own words. Therefore, the study incorporated three major engagement efforts in an attempt to answer the question under study:

1. Interviews with an existing sample
2. Questionnaire for service providers at a conference
3. Focus groups in the community with either:
   a) a snowballed interview sample or
   b) no prior exposure to the research team

Multiple methods were chosen to determine if the method of data collection made a difference in the responses. For rural, low-income women, both interviews and focus groups were tested. The first provided privacy; the second in a public setting, provided stimulus for responses among participants.
1. Interviews

Methods: Interview participants were part of a three year study conducted under the direction of the lead investigator in Maryland entitled, *Rural Families Speak* -- a multi-state longitudinal, quantitative and qualitative study that interviews rural low-income mothers over a period of several years.

The Maryland sample was comprised of 35 participants who lived in Garrett County in western Appalachian Maryland, or Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore. Each has distinctly different histories, economics and demographics. The mountain county population is primarily Scots-English or Native-American and is dependent on the extraction industries of timber, mining, agriculture and now, tourism. The Eastern Shore county was settled by the English and was dependent on fishing and farming on plantations using African slave labor.

Economically, families in both sites are at or below the poverty level. Fifty-seven of the mothers are working—many two and three jobs. Average wage is $7.10. Ninety-one percent of partners are working for average wage of $7.90. Their jobs are primarily in the service sector--the poorest paying sector with few or no benefits.

These families have difficulties stretching their income for basic needs. Food and clothing tied for the top challenges followed by school expenses. For help, most turn to their families. When more help is needed, they turn to the community, and finally to government. Of the 15 sources of public assistance used, food assistance tops the list—school lunch, food stamps, WIC.

These families are not well. Mothers reported having 5 health problems in the past year; partners having 3 and children having 3 problems. Half of the mothers show depressive symptoms as measured by a standardized scale—well beyond that found in the general population. They faced 10 major stressors and 5 crises beyond the chronic stressor of poverty.

For the *Unheard Voices* Project, the Garrett County participants were contacted by phone and/or mail and scheduled to participate in a telephone interview beginning in June 2001. Twenty-one participants who completed interviews were mailed a $30 gift certificate to Wal-Mart as appreciation for their time. To accommodate a request for a presentation at a health-focused Garrett county conference, Garrett County participants in the Rural Families Speak study were interviewed first. Thus, Garrett County became the site for testing the focus groups and conducting the forum.

Mothers in Dorchester County were more difficult to reach. Most are still to be interviewed and included in the next phase of the study. Caroline County, on the upper Eastern Shore, became a test county with no mothers were in the research study. Mothers were contacted through a partnership between the Cooperative Extension Office and the Department of Social Services.

Based on the interviews, focus groups and forum, we've drawn some lessons to be further tested. Those are discussed lesson by lesson.
Lesson #1

Not surprisingly, many of the participants did not have an active phone number on file. This could be attributed to the tendency of this population to be relatively transitory or not being able to afford a telephone on a regular basis. Having alternate contact information – names and number of friends and family members, work contacts and home mailing addresses – for prior participants was critical to maintaining contact over the past several years.

Therefore, researchers or moderators attempting to engage low-income participants are advised not to rely on telephones and to collect additional contact information if they plan to follow a group of citizens over time.

Lesson #2

Interviewers reported the impression that these mothers were generally willing to answer questions on issues of civic engagement. Many of them thanked the interviewer at the end of the conversation or made comments like “no one ever asks me what I think” to explain why they didn't mind giving time for an interview.

Therefore, these mothers may be open to citizen engagement but need someone to contact them.

Lesson #3

Among this group of low-income women, common themes were revealed during analysis. While each mother had her own story and perspective, there was enough similarity to find commonality with barriers and particularly with issues that concerned them in their community.

Therefore, we believe that a small sample could provide sufficient information for those striving to engage low-income, rural women to make decisions about engagement.
2. Questionnaires

A community leader questionnaire was distributed during a professional conference for service providers in Garrett County. Approximately 50 attendees were asked to complete the questionnaire and mail it back to the research team. Their questionnaires were distributed in a conference packet. Only one completed form was returned.

**Lesson #1**

This method of paper-based, self-completed survey was not initially a part of the research design. But, an invitation to the research team to make a keynote address in Garrett County provided the opportunity. At the very least, we saw the announcement and distribution of the survey as a way to inform local leaders of the existence of the project.

*Therefore, we concluded that participatory action research must be flexible to take advantage of ways of obtaining information.*

**Lesson #2**

The written survey was part of a packet of materials received by the conference participants. Though told of the survey, they were not given time during the conference to complete the survey. Only one was returned to the research team.

*Therefore, we concluded that, whenever possible, participants should complete questionnaires on site and return them directly to the research team.*
3. Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted. Focus groups were chosen because of previous use of the method with food stamp-eligible, rural Maryland families. During those food-stamp family focus groups, researchers reported that the participants learned from each other. Thus, this research team wanted to experiment with a group approach to test the methodology difference. We questioned whether being in a group elicited similar, different and/or more information than private interviews. The team also wanted to see if people would give of their limited resources to participate in groups.

In Garrett County, telephone interviewees were invited to come to a focus group and encouraged to bring friends or family. Two focus groups were held, one in the morning and one in the evening. The evening session had four participants, the morning session three. Different times and days were chosen based on results from the interviews which suggested that time of day and day of week might make a difference in attendance.

Two more focus groups were held on the same day in Caroline County where there was no previous involvement by the research team with local, rural, low-income women and where no interviews were conducted. The women were invited by the Department of Social Services through a partnership with the local Cooperative Extension office.

For all groups, light meals were provided. Focus group participants were given $30 gift cards in appreciation for their time.
Lesson #1

Despite our best efforts to have an accurate count through an RSVP procedure, last minute cancellations and families who didn’t RSVP meant that our expected guest list did not reflect the people attending the meeting.

*Therefore, we concluded that moderators need to expect the unexpected and be flexible to accommodate these last minute changes.*

Lesson #2

Offering food doesn’t guarantee a good turnout, but it may help participants – many of whom our research team found to be food insecure. Not only does food help performance, but it’s a tool to make people feel welcome. Light meals – sandwiches for dinner, fruit and muffins for breakfast – were enough. Researchers or moderators using this technique are encouraged to purchase slightly more food than needed, both because of unexpected participants and because leftovers can be sent home with families. Food selection needs to take into consideration dietary challenges such as faced by diabetics, vegetarians and those with preferences, i.e. caffeinated and no caffeinated drinks. Bottles of water were helpful since people were talking.

*Therefore, we concluded that including food and drink helped the mood feel less formal and may have made participants more likely to speak their mind.*

Lesson #3

To both facilitate moderation and provide a degree of privacy, table tents with large printing of first names only were given to participants as they signed in. Many low-income women may not have extensive experience, nor positive experience, in speaking out in groups. Care was given to encourage all to speak. As with any group format, a few strong voices would have dominated the focus group conversation.

*Therefore, we concluded that moderators should be aware of this dynamic and help ensure that everyone is encouraged to speak.*

Lesson #4

Location, location, location. Transportation was identified as a barrier to civic engagement. In large counties where transportation is an issue, and public transportation is limited or not available, it is important that locations are readily accessible. We chose centrally-located meeting places for the focus groups. We were not able to provide transportation but we did encourage those without cars to attend with another mother who had transportation.

*Therefore, we concluded that moderators should be encouraged to hold forums in familiar venues that citizens may attend regularly and be aware of stereotypes and stigma associated with some locations.*
Lesson #5

Childcare is important for young families. Some people brought their children to the sessions, which was somewhat of a distraction to participants and the moderator. Others were unable to attend because they had no one to care for their children. This is an important factor for logistical and strategic reasons. In future work on this project, we intend to investigate the possibility of providing child care.

Therefore, we concluded that offering childcare breaks down another barrier and could send the message that moderators are in touch with their needs and actively reaching out to young families.

Lesson #6

Scheduling focus groups can be difficult because no time will be good for everyone. Thus, we held more than one in Garrett County. But, due to time constraints, we only held the focus groups on one day and in the same location, though multiple days, times and locations are beneficial. We think participants understood that we were striving to accommodate their needs.

Therefore, we recommend that moderators consider holding more than one group to accommodate a larger subset of the population.

Lesson #7

We also learned from the interviews and focus groups that time of the year has potential to affect participation. We concentrated our work during the summer and early fall as the mountain county of Garrett has challenging winters. We would like to continue to work in that county, but must wait until spring.

Therefore, we recommend that since weather can be a major factor in whether or not citizens are willing and able to attend events or activities, particularly in rural areas or with low-income individuals who are more likely to walk to their destination, that moderators plan accordingly.
**And the people say…**

Interviews and focus groups followed a similar line of questioning that focused on three main areas:

1. Achieving a better understanding of how involved in public policy limited resource citizens are and what are some barriers that prevent them from being more involved.

2. Suggesting ways in which those barriers could be surmounted to more actively engage citizens.

3. Identifying issues that are important to limited resource citizens and why these issues are important.

These three areas of questioning helped the *Unheard Voices* team plan for the forum that was held. Results represent a preliminary body of knowledge to build upon as moderators and decision makers strive to engage limited resource citizens in deliberative public policy. Findings on these issues are analyzed here. The full qualitative analysis can be found in Appendix A.

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**Barriers to Engagement**

A subset of participants identified barriers to engagement that prevented them from ever having been civically involved. However, contrary to popular belief and research, many of the women in our sample *have* been actively involved in policy issues in their community. A large number of them could cite problem areas and describe what action they took to address the problem with what result. Unfortunately, the vast majority of those activities had unfavorable results that may have contributed to disappointment or hostility toward the public policy process, just as the Kettering philosophy predicts. This research suggests two main contributors to limited engagement, as depicted here in the diagram that follows (Figure 1 – Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy).
Figure 1. Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy

Rural, Limited Resource Citizens

Evidence of Engagement
- Voiced option at PTA to try and get better school supplies
- Talked to the mayor about drug trafficking
- Requested something for kids to do
- Wrote letters to the editor
- Participated in Residents Against Drugs for 6 years
- Got involved in housing issues
- Considered running for county commissioner

Barriers to Engagement
- Don’t have time, or schedule during an inconvenient time
- Not having the right last name, feeling inferior or unable to make a difference
- Not knowing what to do or who to contact about a problem
- Issues being discussed are not important to citizens
- Need group organization and leadership to mobilize interested citizens
- Pride prevents citizens from wanting to ask for help
- Uninformed about issues or activities
- Unreliable transportation
- No available child care

Disappointing Results
- “It gets heard, but no action gets taken”
- “Hasn’t done much good”
- “I never heard more about it”
- “Nothing gets done”
- “Don’t have money to campaign”

Limited Levels of Engagement

Overcoming Barriers
- Bridge the class divide, empower citizens
- Publicize, make information and opportunities more available
- Show people how issues affect them
- Organize groups and encourage people to join
- Elect supportive officials
- Provide transportation
- Hold meetings at convenient times and locations
Overcoming Barriers

Tactics suggested by the women for overcoming barriers ranged from changing logistical details to changing the dynamic of the culture in which they live (see Appendix A for a list of questions and responses). Each of the suggestions are discussed in this section.

Bridge the Class Divide

When asked who gets involved when there is a problem in the community, citizens most frequently cited government departments or elected officials. These positions were considered by the women to be those with power and influence in the community. Many of the comments coming from interviews and focus groups reflected a feeling of disdain from “higher-ups”, the local terminology used to describe people in power. Citizens were highly aware of power differentials that placed them at a disadvantage in defining issues for public attention and then working to solve those issues. Several expressed feelings of powerlessness because they felt ignored or ostracized. It was evident that they didn’t feel like their needs and opinions were taken seriously. This was a barrier so strong that many people did not try to overcome it.

However, there is opportunity to empower citizens. Through previous relationships, education and advertising it was possible to get some of the limited resource citizens to the table. More will be required to keep them coming and to assure them that their voices do, in fact, matter. Inaction was one of the major negative outcomes for citizens who tried to be engaged. By offering follow up activities at every meeting and continuing to follow through, limited resource citizens may begin to feel empowered. The research team proposes to conduct follow-up activities to those held in 2004.

Publicize

Citizens mentioned that people often are unaware of current community events, or receive notice too late to attend. This was cited as one of the major reasons they are not actively involved. Participants suggested a few advertising mechanisms, including the local newspaper and radio stations, fliers should be distributed at the Department of Social Services, Laundromats, school systems and Head Start. One group suggested going door-to-door or through local community organizations – like churches and bingo halls – that people attend regularly. Asking citizens to contact families and friends made personal invitations is a useful mechanism. We used letters, fliers and personal contacts for our sessions.

Show People how Issues Affect Them

Another recurring theme throughout the interviews and focus groups was that people tend not to get involved in issues that do not directly impact them. One woman gave the example that “old people do not get involved in children’s issues except to vote against them”. It was suggested that if organizers make a point to help people identify how issues affect them, citizens with a personal stake in the problem may get involved. When people are affected by a community problem at a personal level, they will be more likely to become actively engaged. We found this to be true when we conducted a forum based on an issue identified by the citizens.
Educate

If citizens do not know how to go about having issues addressed, it will be incredibly difficult for them to get involved. Several participants noted that they were not more involved in community action because they did not know what to do or who to talk to. Clearly it is important for individuals to be educated about their options. Time permitting, additional sessions or methods of educating should be offered.

Organize Groups

A number of participants indicated that part of what was needed to increase engagement was organizations or groups of concerned citizens that are already involved in an issue. Several indicated that they would participate if someone were leading it. This may give people support, direction and confidence in their strength in numbers. Our research team would like to investigate the feasibility of developing leadership in an initiative to build capacities among limited-resource citizens through mentoring and skill development.

Elect Supportive Officials

When asked who makes important decisions in their community and who needs to be involved in solving community problems, most participants included elected officials in their answer. It is apparent that these citizens see elected officials as being both powerful and influential. Several of them recognized their responsibility to elect officials that are supportive of them and will help them achieve their goals. The research team proposes to follow up to determine the extent to which these citizens participated in the November 2004 election and future elections and reasons for voting or not to ascertain what these citizens need to get them to vote.

Citizen-Friendly Logistics

Participants gave us a variety of, and sometimes conflicting, suggestions as to how and when is best to hold forums. During focus groups, we learned that any season could work. However, almost all agreed that it is best not to have forums during the winter months when weather is harsh and transportation can be difficult.

Transportation to and from forums may also help reduce barriers. Available incentives should include food and childcare. Also, the state needs to be accessible and acceptable to encourage participation. Several people mentioned that the best and most useful incentive is an issue that strikes people, an issue that they feel is important.
Important Issues

The single most frequently cited issues identified by these low-income, rural women centered around recreation. Citizens were concerned that youth lacked locations where they could congregate for safe activities. Several were concerned that this was contributing to high-risk behavior because youth had nothing better to do with their time, so they got involved in drugs, fast cars, and other potentially dangerous activities. Participants noted that recreational activities were available but most of them are very expensive and cost prohibitive for low income citizens. Garrett County is best known for Deep Creek Lake and The Wisp Ski Resort, a frequent vacation destination in Maryland. Other recreational activities, like sports teams, required a lot of travel because of the expansive nature of the rural counties. Parents often could not afford the time and cost of transporting their children to sporting and other events.

Other issues mentioned in more than one interview or focus group included:
- Underemployment due to shortage of jobs and hours
- Drugs
- Health care issues including funding availability and inadequate providers and specialists
- Consolidation of schools
- Deterioration of family values
- Transportation and condition of the roads
- Teen pregnancy
- Several others were identified as issues for one family rather than a community problem
Participants were asked which people were affected directly or indirectly as a result of these problems. Most participants were concerned about kids, teens, or the next generation. Several were concerned about vulnerable populations like the “average Joe”, families with special needs children, single parents, individuals being laid-off, low-income families and the elderly. A few noted that the entire community, or the whole town, is affected by problems. One person thought that elected officials are directly affected.

When asked who needed to be involved to address these problems and issues, the most frequently cited response was that the entire community needed to be involved, or that it would take some kind of collaborative effort. Business, churches, officials were identified as necessary partners. Governmental departments and elected officials were heavily relied on to institute changes for citizens. Participants recognized the need to involve “higher-ups” but only one individual mentioned citizens in need who had a direct stake in finding an amicable solution to the problem.
Turning Research Into Action

This study used a community-based research strategy and philosophy. The four main principles of best practices in community-based research are:

- Solicit and value involvement of community member to encourage “buy in” to the research process
- Empower community members at every stage of research
- Encourage participants to take ownership instead of imposing a pre-determined “expert-driven” structure
- Identify and utilize pre-existing community networks

Unheard Voices exemplifies best practice by turning results of this research into action. In Garrett County, Project Directors converted the feasibility findings into a forum for deliberation. The forum focused on recreation – the issue most frequently cited by limited resource citizens during focus groups and interviews. Because an issue guide was not available from the National Issues Forum, the lead investigator framed the issue using three approaches from the interviews and focus groups (see Appendix B). The forum was moderated using NIF moderator guidelines.

A written invitation to participate, and to invite family and friends, was mailed to participants three weeks before the forum. Invitations were also mailed to 30 elected or appointed local officials. Fourteen citizens and the town mayor were in attendance on August 31, 2004.

A local human services collaboration obtained use of a local church and provided unexpected supervision for three children brought by the mothers. One also brought her teenage daughter who was included in the deliberations.

The reporter, a member of the research team, made notes and created a sociogram to document the extent of involvement as evidenced by the number of times a participant spoke and the directionality of the speech - to the moderator or the group in general or another participant in particular.

The mayor unexpectedly informed the group of the opportunity for the town to take over the local armory for potential recreational use. He acknowledged his concern that a wide range of community citizens attend a forthcoming town hall meeting on the topic and invited participants to come.

At the end of the forum, participants were given feedback forms to indicate next steps. Four signed up to be involved and granted the moderator the right to send their names and addresses to the mayor, which was done. Several mothers indicated an interest in future meetings and signed commitment cards to take action, proving that with the right issues, at the right time, in the right location, under the right facilitation, limited resource citizens can -- and will -- participate in the deliberative public policy process.
Next Steps…

As with any exploratory research study, particularly ones with relatively small sample sizes, replication is necessary to examine generalizability of results. This study should be repeated with low-income citizens residing in other rural areas in order to determine whether similar supports are needed, or if moderators must consider additional methods for soliciting the engagement of other segments of the population. It should also be tested in urban areas.

Further testing of the same basic question could be addressed comparing different approaches to eliciting limited resource citizen engagement in forums. The research team could hold several forums some using topics not identified by the citizens; some citizen-identified strategies for increasing involvement. The two groups could then be compared in terms of turnout and engagement in the deliberative process.

Another interesting question that arose through feedback obtained during the study relates to the voting behavior of these limited-resource citizens. The research team would like to explore the voter turnout among rural low income citizens. A study of this nature would provide valuable qualitative information what influenced citizens’ decision whether or not to vote, and what additional factors may be necessary to encourage this form of civic engagement.

Dissemination of results is another critical component in the research process. The project process and preliminary results have already begun with a Community Based Research conference in Hartford, Connecticut in June 2004, the University of Maryland College of Health and Human Performance Research Interaction Day in October 2004, and the Food Stamp and Nutrition Education Program annual conference in November of 2004. Proposals are in process for the Children Youth and Families conference for Extension workers in Boston in May of 2005, and the joint policy conference of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences and the National Council on Family Relations in April 2005. A miniature of the poster is included in Appendix C.

Reports from *Unheard Voices* will be disseminated to the Kettering Foundation; the Rural Families Speak multi-state team; to state and county elected officials; to Cooperative Extension personnel, the University of Maryland Democracy Collaborative, and others. The Maryland Family Policy Impact Seminar and Rural Families Speak websites will be one other method of dissemination.
Appendices

Appendix A – Qualitative Analysis

Appendix B – Garrett County Recreation Issue Guide

Appendix C – Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy miniature poster presentation
Appendix A

Qualitative Analysis

Responses for each of the questions asked during interviews and focus groups conducted between June and August, 2004 are included here. Similar responses have been grouped under an inclusive paraphrase. The most frequently offered responses are listed first and followed with others in decreasing frequency.

If there's a problem in your town/community, one that requires the broader community to become involved, how do decisions get made and who gets to participate?

- Participants don’t know or haven’t thought about it
- Mayor or other elected officials (county and state commissioners, town council)
- Governmental departments (sheriff, police, fire, National Guard, emergency management)
- The whole community gets involved in town meetings
- People who are affected by issues get involved
- A lot of people don’t know what is going on
- Affected individuals are excluded (referencing to welfare benefit distribution)
- Most people let the county government take care of things, you don’t get a lot of opinions from citizens
- Letters to the editors

In your town/community, who gets to say what the problem or issue is and how it should be addressed?

- Citizens let elected officials know when there is a problem and rely on them for change
- Media help to define problems and increase attention
- Higher-ups, mayor and town council (elected)
- Goes by last name – those with the right last name have input
- Family of elected officials, treat low or medium low class people as ostracized
- Social services agencies
- Open discussion at the town meeting
- Governmental departments (police)

In this town/community, what kinds of problems or issues get limited resource citizens involved?

- Nobody gets involved – either they can’t do it or they see no problems
- Resources are available to help problems if people were aware of them
- Drugs
- Social services cuts (afterschool, housing, CHIP, health programs, cash assistance)
- Transportation problems
- Things that affect them personally
- Senior services
- Employment issues (bringing in jobs, wages)
- Fatherhood
- Being in jail
What helps to get limited resource citizens involved? Makes it easier?

- More publicity and information available
- Transportation
- New president or other elected decision-making officials
- If affected directly they might get involved
- Talking to someone closer to your level (as opposed to “higher-up”)
- Desire, motivation
- Education; teaching how to find information
- Community meetings
- Feeling empowered and valued
- Activities scheduled around work hours
- Childcare

Barriers

- Not the right last name, feeling inferior or unable to make a difference
- If its something they’re not really concerned about, they won’t get involved. Older people don’t get involved with children’s issues
- Not knowing what to do or who to go to
- No time
- Don’t know what they are eligible for, have pride and don’t want to ask for help
- Transportation
- No leadership
- They need a support group
- People don’t have the facts
- The cost: what will this do to me, will I be threatened with violence, etc… And are they going to raise my taxes to address this issue?

How could those barriers be reduced or eliminated? What would it take?

- Eliminate class divide, intimidation
- People have to want to get involved, have something in it for them
- Hold meetings at more convenient times
- Support the general public (transit program, job training, hygiene, counseling)
- Publicize (radio and Oakland train)
- Someone with liberty and self-confidence enough to start a rally.
- Get the right officials voted in
- Encourage people to join groups
Have you personally gotten involved in a problem or issue? Why? What happened when you did? If not, why not?

- No - don’t fit in, nothing going on, too shy
- School issues – trying to get better school supplies – voiced opinions at PTA
- I went to town hall once about the cars racing up and down any road and now we have an officer that patrols
- A teacher didn’t like me or my kids--through social services & principal we resolved problem
- Considered running for county commissioner but don’t have money to campaign.
- Wrote letters to the editor but don’t think it’s done much good.
- Residents Against Drugs for 6 years but I wasn’t doing the town any good
- Once I got involved in housing and I never heard more about it
- Needed help handling foster children but got her license revoked
- Actively involved in school, got ineffective teacher fired
- Assistant to Head Start Fatherhood
- President of the Parent Council in their Head Start program
- Employed with wheels to work program
- Take care of other people’s kids
- Talked to the mayor about the drug trafficking that goes on in the neighborhood, but nothing gets done
- Requested something for the kids to do, and it gets heard, but no action gets taken.

What are some problems or issues that concern your community right now? They may be local issues, state, national or international.

- Lack of youth areas and recreation activities
- Drugs
- Shortage of hours and jobs
- Health care funding availability and inadequate providers and specialists
- Family values – morals, manners, parenting skills
- Transportation (specifically after-hours)
- Teen pregnancy
- Condition of the roads
- Consolidating school and keeping local school
- Services for the elderly
- Services for families
- Community issues with children (foster care, nutrition, health, school)
- Housing
- Bullying in schools
- Segregating rich and poor
- School clothes without sales tax, clothing vouchers
- Childcare
- In-home services – parenting, food nutrition, discipline
- Taxes
- Domestic violence
- Land development
- Education
- Racial issues
When you think about this problem or issue, what worries you? What bothers you about it?
- Youth need supervision
- If there is a lack of things to do, they get into trouble
- I worry about my kids having things to do, keeping active. Plus I have to play both mother and father. Peer pressure is a lot. Sports are social but you have to travel 5 days a week and take them everywhere.
- I don’t know enough about it
- Increasing job layoffs
- What will be affecting my children as they get older
- Housing – hardly anywhere to rent
- Family might be too far gone, children aren’t taken care of

When you think about these problems or issues, which people are affected directly? Indirectly?
- Kids, teens, next generation
- Town, whole community, nearly everyone
- Average Joe – we don’t make a lot of money
- Those laid of or losing jobs
- Families with special needs children
- Schools
- Single parents
- Low-income families and the elderly.
- Elected officials

To really address these problems or issues, who needs to be involved?
- Community collaboration
- Government, elected officials
- Parents
- Publicize (announce meeting on radio, inform public of problem and its impact, flyers everywhere)
- Get big names on board
- Bring business in
- Any citizen in need
- Area churches
- Service providers
- Teachers
Are you willing and able to get involved? What barriers are there to your involvement?

- Lack of time and/or proper scheduling
- Nothing is a barrier if it's important
- No resources
- Not being “in the in group”, feeling ignored or powerless
- Don’t know who to talk to
- Maybe location
- Shyness
- Transportation,
- Childcare

What else would you like to say about citizens engaging in important public policy matters?

- My belief is that you have to have the desire and a commitment, lack of commitment is a big problem
- Having a good meeting, informing citizens about issues
- Just that parents need to get involved. My kids enjoy school more because I am involved.
- We have to touch citizens in a way that they want to get involved. And advertising helps people know about things. If they are informed, they can get involved. If they don’t, they won’t.
- Living your life in a positive way. Realizing that everything affects your kids. If everyone lives life morally (conscientious) (how it affects others) and thinks more about others than of themselves, it will trickle down. Start having families teaching their children so that his generation (baby!) will be able to fix it. It affects the community.
- People who don’t vote – don’t get involved because they’ve seen broken promises, they’re not going to listen to me

What time of the year, month, week is best for a forum, why?

- Not winter
- Right before school starts back up
- After school starts so we don’t have to worry about childcare
- Spring and summer seems the best time – it gets people all riled up
- Autumn & winter, when people really need work, in spring & summer, people can find seasonal work

What kind of location for a forum might be best and why?

- County is too big- need two locations (one near lake, one near college)
- Oakland
- Community action, Uno’s,
- We have met at the library
What should be provided in terms of incentives?

• Child care
• Food
• Talking about something really important won’t need incentives
• Some will come to see what they can get out of it, and some people would come because they interested
• Transportation, getting people there, we have 35 year olds that don’t have a driver’s license
• There has to be a real incentive that includes motivation

Who should be invited?

• The more people in power – or so called power
  o LMB Board
  o Governor
  o President
• Commissioners
• DOVE center works with a lot of people
• Jok, the mayor, the commercial side (business people), maybe social workers
• What about young people? Yes, I’m quite sure they would have ideas

How should those invitations be made--in person, via phone, in writing, in combination of two or more methods?

• School system and Head Start.
• DSS,
• Laundromats,
• radio
• Fliers and letters
• A letter of invitation
• Doesn’t matter who the invitation comes from
• Tell people it is mandatory
• Go through local / community organizations like churches, places where people go because they want to, weekly bingos

How far in advance of the forum should the invitations be made?

• Two weeks
• 30 days
• About 3 or 4 weeks ahead
• At least a few weeks, but not so long that they don’t forget

Is a reminder needed?

• A reminder the day before or day of for evening
• A week before
Background

Communities, and a democracy, are only as strong as their citizens who engage in public policy matters. For rural citizens, getting involved can be challenging due to many factors including: geographic isolation and related transportation problems; conflicts with work, school and family activities; and the culture of the community. Some communities encourage and expect the range of its citizens to be involved in public matters and for all voices to be heard.

Yet, not all are heard. Some of the voices less heard belong to women; some to children, youth or senior citizens; and some to those with limited resources.

Understanding the conditions under which limited resource citizens can, and will, engage in deliberation about public policy issues in their communities is the focus of an investigation by the Kettering Foundation and the University of Maryland known as the "Unheard Voices" project.

This investigation grew out of the "Rural Families Speak" study that began in Garrett County in 2000. The mothers who were interviewed described the most and least desirable parts of living in the county. They talked about things that could be improved; some spoke about what they had done to make life better. Others wanted someone to tackle the issues.

The "Unheard Voices" project began with the thoughts of those mothers. They were reinterviewed 3 more times--the latest round in the summer of 2004. Also, in June, 2004, two open focus group sessions were held to further learn what issues faced Garrett's limited resource citizens.

At Issue: Recreation

At the top of the list of community issues to be addressed was that of recreation--places for children, youth, and adults to get physical activity in a safe environment. For youth, supervised activity was a priority. For adults, physical activity for their health mattered. For families, space to go to be together was important.

Several mothers said they worried about their kids having things to do, to keep active and not get in trouble. They were especially concerned about summer activities for youth.

Garrett's winter weather posed problems for many who found that even walking for exercise wasn't easy on icy roads. And some mentioned the threat of black bears when outdoors.

Mothers wanted to see the public informed about the problem of lack of recreational activities and safe, affordable spaces for local folks to use. They wanted people to get together to develop recreation or after-school programs, repair or remove playgrounds, find donations of land or money for youth spaces and find solutions for other recreational problems. Most agreed that what was needed was "community collaboration."

Mothers thought that both "higher-ups", as elected officials were called, and affected individuals needed to get together to address the lack of youth areas and recreational activities. They said that calling citizens together to get them better informed and finding people with a desire and a commitment to get involved was needed but that lack of commitment is a problem. One said:

"We have to touch citizens in a way that they want to get involved"
Deliberating Possible Actions

Citizens who come together and deliberate about the costs and benefits of a variety of possible actions may discover: 1) what values they hold in common; 2) where the conflicts are; and 3) how to find what they are willing, or not willing, to do to solve the problem.

"Recreation Matters" is the focus of this forum. With a guide to help them, citizens will consider three approaches to improving recreational options in Garrett County. The goal of the forum is to see if there's a shared sense of purpose and a will to work on making improvements. The forum will unfold in three stages:

Stage One: Getting Started
1. Introduction to the topic
2. Review ground rules and goal
3. Connect the issue to people's lives
4. Clarify why the issue matters

Stage Two: Deliberating 3 Options
1. Examine three approaches
2. Talk about what's good or not so good
3. Hear experiences of people
4. Ask what might happen if the option was chosen for action
5. Think about the consequences of making this option happen
6. Propose what the option might cost
7. Make a case FOR the option least liked
8. Suggest downsides & upsides to the option
9. Identify the tensions between the options

Stage Three: Reflecting on the Deliberation
As a group:
1. Discuss what options have real appeal & are most "doable"
2. Talk about next steps--who is willing to do what

Individually: Complete questionnaire

Recreation Matters

Option One: AWARENESS

Sometimes people just don't know what recreational space and activities they have in their area. Maybe that's because there is no current inventory of what's available, where, for what ages, at what cost. If there is a current inventory, maybe it's not known to all citizens. Option one suggests that what Garrett County citizens need to do is make people aware of what's here.

Option Two: ACTIVITES

Even when people know about available recreational space and activities they may not make use of them. Sometimes, barriers like transportation; hours of operation; safety; costs; lack of supervision, skills, knowledge, interest or motivation holds people back. Option two suggests that what Garrett County citizens need to do is find ways to support families, schools, and community organizations in fully using what exists.

Option Three: ADDITIONS

If barriers to use of current space and activities are reduced, eliminated or prevented, there still may not be enough or enough different kinds of space and activities for everyone—children, youth, adults, senior citizens. Option Three suggests that what Garrett County citizens need to do is find ways to create new spaces and activities to meet diverse needs.

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Deliberative Democracy
The Kettering Foundation funds research projects that aim to answer the overarching question of “What does it take to make democracy function as it should?” Their work is based on the premise that American democracy is not operating to its full potential because:
• Citizens are cynical and angry with a system of decision making that does not heed or serve them
• Citizens lack feelings of agency, or sense of control over their lives and futures

Deliberative Forums
example democracy at its highest level of functioning where participants of all walks of life are encouraged to have equal voice at the table. Conversations involve careful consideration of competing solutions and force differing perspectives to listen to one another and consider the costs and benefits of all alternatives. However, there exist certain inequities that prevent all pertinent voices to be present during deliberation. With funding from the Kettering Foundation, researchers from the Maryland Family Policy Impact Seminar set out to understand how to better engage these unheard voices.

Unheard Voices
Prior scholarship tells us that:
• Rural families experience unique difficulties engaging in civic activities due to both geographic and cultural factors.
• Low-income individuals have lower levels of political participation.
• Women’s voices are often left unheard in policy discussions.
To better understand the barriers affecting these populations and how to overcome them, the Unheard Voices team returned to the Maryland sample of a 14 state study of low-income rural mothers.

Under what conditions will limited resource citizens engage in the deliberative public policy process?
To answer this question, researchers employed the following community-based, qualitative research methods:
• Interviews with twenty-one Rural Families Speak participants

Evidence of Engagement
• Voiced opinion at PTA to try and get better school supplies
• Talked to the mayor about drug trafficking
• Requested something for kids to do
• Written letters to the editor
• Participated in Residents Against Drugs for 6 years
• Got involved in housing issues
• Considered running for county commissioner

Barriers to Engagement
• Don’t have time, or scheduled during an inconvenient time
• Not having the right last name, feeling inferior or unable to make a difference
• Not knowing what to do or who to contact about a problem
• Issues being discussed are not important to them
• Group organization and leadership to mobilize interested citizens
• Pride prevents them from wanting to ask for help
• Uninformed about issues or activities
• Unreliable transportation
• No available child care

Disappointing Results
• “It gets heard, but no action gets taken”
• “Hasn’t done much good”
• “I never heard more about it”
• “Nothing gets done”
• “Don’t have money to campaign”

Limited levels of Engagement

Overcoming Barriers
• Bridge the class divide, empower citizens
• Publicize, make information and opportunities more available
• Show people how issues affect them
• Organize groups and encourage people to join
• Elect supportive officials
• Provide transportation
• Hold meetings at convenient times & locations

Community-Based Research
Best Practices
• Solicit, and value, involvement of community members to encourage to “buy in” to the research process.
• Empower community members at every stage of research.
• Encourage participants to take ownership instead.

Turning Research in Action
Unheard Voices exemplifies best practice by turning results of this research into action. In Garrett County, Project Directors facilitated a deliberative forum on recreation - the issue most frequently cited by limited resource citizens at focus groups and interviews. Fourteen limited resource mothers and the mayor attended. The mayor invited the mothers to participate in a town meeting regarding use of a donated facility for recreation. Four accepted the invitation. Mothers indicated an interest in future meetings and signed commitment cards to take action, proving that:
• with the right issue,
• at the right time,
• in the right location,
• under the right facilitation …
… limited resource citizens can – and will – participate in the deliberative process.

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