

# Civics4Action Collaborative

## C4A Community Conversations

### Using the National Issues Forums Institute's Method For Public Deliberation

#### THE POWER OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION:

In a time of polarization within our communities, nation, and world, it is critical that we find ways to have civil discourse about the challenges we face. With that in mind, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) would like to introduce you to a model of civil discourse that utilizes a well-established method for deliberative dialogue. This unique deliberative and democratic approach allows people to engage in meaningful and informed discussion across lines of difference – including ideological, political, religious, social, cultural, and gender differences.

NIFI builds on this respected tradition by creating opportunities for diverse persons to engage in informed discussion about the topics of the day. NIFI has found that this approach encourages people to identify shared concerns rather than default to polarizing positions that lead to inaction and division. The objective of a forum is to demonstrate the deliberative process of examining the nature of a significant public issue and reviewing the tensions and tradeoffs of three possible options and, then, to see if “common ground” can be found by the participants.

NIFI, in partnership with the Kettering Foundation, has been involving citizens in both face-to-face and online discussions, through the Common Ground for Action platform, of major issues for over 35 years. It has found a significant positive response to the interactions. Forums create a space for participants to share experiences, offer suggestions, and to hear what others have to say before identifying common ground for action. Forums have been used across the country and internationally with young people, intergenerational groups, and senior citizens in diverse settings such as classrooms, religious communities, libraries, and community centers.

More than simply being a place for someone to speak, deliberative forums are intentional environments where people are encouraged to wrestle with complexity and step away from otherwise simplistic “either/ or” and “left/right” approaches to public issues. We believe that deliberative forums can offer another facet to your programming that encourages inquisitive discussion, deep reflection, and a sense of community.

## About National Issues Forums Institute

Located in Dayton, Ohio, The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves to promote public deliberation about difficult public issues. Its activities include publishing issue guides and other supporting material used in a forum.

## What is Deliberation?

It's not a debate. It's not a contest. It's not even about reaching agreement or seeing eye-to-eye. It's the discovery of a shared direction, guided by what we value most. It's about examining the costs and consequences of possible solutions to daunting problems, and finding out what we, as a society, would or would not accept as a solution.

## What is a forum?

Usually small gatherings where people come together for a few hours to deliberate on the serious issues they face in their communities and the country with the help of a neutral moderator and a discussion guide that presents several possible approaches to the problem.

## What is the role of the moderator?

The moderator, while remaining neutral, will help participants at the forum use an issue guide as they deliberate about possible approaches to the problem. NIFI offers in-person and online training for people interested in this role.

## Why Deliberate?

What NIF forums offers is a different way of talking about issues, and also a different way of talking to each other.

\*\*Builds relationships

\*\*Awareness of others' experiences and concerns

\*\*Identification of shared values and concerns

\*\*Empathy for others

\*\*Builds capacity to address community problems

\*\*Political tolerance

\*\*Awareness of common ground

\*\*It supports sound public decision-making

## Forum Design

Deliberating is most likely to occur when participants have the chance to do all of the following:

**\*\*THINK** about the distinctive goal of deliberative forums and consider the ground rules for the conversation

**\*\*SHARE** their personal stakes and experiences and **LISTEN** to those of the other participants.

**\*\*WEIGH** the options and proposals in the issue framework and wrestle with the costs and trade-offs.

**\*\*REFLECT** on their work, considering where they've moved toward common ground and where work remains. This may include identifying points of agreement, areas of tension or ambivalence, remaining questions, and trade-offs people are willing to make.