

Spark Community Conversations: Central Rappahannock Regional Library (CRRL) Model

CHOOSING A TOPIC OR ISSUE

Is the topic relevant locally? Will it promote dialogue? Is it conversational rather than informational? For example, the topic "Services for Seniors" is informational, but "Affordable Housing Shortage for Seniors" is conversational.

PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION: THE BASICS

Panelists: Select 4-6 panelists with varying frames of reference on the topic. Each panelist spends 10 minutes or less telling about his or her experience with the topic. Follow with questions and discussion involving all participants.

Examples of panelists from the Opioid Crisis Community Conversation: Community member in recovery, law enforcement professional, mental health professional, family member dealing with an addicted relative, an EMT, a spokesperson from the state Attorney General's office.

The Audience: Focus on promoting dialogue with the audience members, who represent a variety of experiences and expertise. Invite additional community leaders and experts to seed the audience to provide a richer discussion. Be intentional about inviting individuals and organizations that represent diverse demographics, and go the extra mile to connect with harder to reach populations. Everyone can gain a deeper understanding of the issue and leave with new knowledge, moving toward local solutions.

The Facilitator makes introductions, fields questions, intervenes if participants monopolize the dialogue or lack respect of other viewpoints and in general ensures the program runs smoothly.

Community Organizations are invited to partner by providing panelists, assisting with planning, implementation and publicity. Partners are selected based on the topic.

Examples of partner organizations: Community Services Board (The Opioid Crisis), League of Women Voters (Civic Engagement).

Volunteers are invaluable. They assist with setup and cleanup. They contribute to the dialogue. They can help publicize as well as add diversity to the audience. For example, teen volunteers will provide a younger perspective at a program that is likely to attract adult participation.

Venue: Choose a venue that is conducive and convenient for community participation. Library meeting rooms are obvious options, but consider other community locations such as recreation centers, churches and schools. The CRRL offers Community Conversations at our busiest branches.

Set Up: Low tech is preferable with no microphones or PowerPoints. This lends a more informal atmosphere and keeps the focus on dialogue. Make sure the room temperature is comfortable. Seat panelists behind tables at the front of the room, with name cards (name, position, logo) and a water bottle at each place. Set up audience chairs in curved rows, giving a semi-circle effect, which is more conducive to a dialogue. Offer simple refreshments in the back of the room next to a book display and/or resource table. Partners are invited to bring informational materials to add to the resource table.



PUBLICITY

Branding: Put the library logo on everything so the community starts thinking “library” when they see it. Have the same graphic elements for each Community Conversation poster, flyer, booklist, and blog post. Update the topic and time/date for each event. This increases program recognition.

Graphics: Posters, flyers, and bookmarks are displayed in library branches and sent to partners for display throughout the community. To promote programs in the branches, create book lists and make displays. The CRRL’s quarterly magazine, @ Your Library, is available at all branches and is widely distributed. Customers rely on the magazine to see what is happening at the library.

News media: Send out a press release with the topic, names of panelists, and a brief description of the event. Add the event to online community calendars, which may include the local newspaper, radio stations and civic organizations. Sometimes, the local newspaper will write a story on the event or there may be a letter to the editor about the topic. Check potential radio spots. Each month CRRL staff appear on a local radio show and promote upcoming programs. The CRRL also posts the event on the online library calendar and features a related blog article at the top of the home page.

Social Media is important before, during and after the event to cast the publicity net as wide as possible. Assign a volunteer or staff member to handle this task. Create a Facebook event page, and share it with partners and panelists. Have volunteers tweeting and sharing photos on Instagram during the event. Use the Nextdoor platform for grassroots publicity.

Networking is extremely important. Ask library partners, panelists and area organizations with a connection to the topic to share the event on their social media, send out email to their networks, include the event on their community calendar and/or hang up a flyer.

AFTER THE EVENT

Send thank you notes to all of the panelists for their participation. Follow up on any questions or requests that arise. If action steps emerge from the dialogue, stay involved and follow through.