



# Civic Discourse in a Crisis:

## Lessons from Katrina Toolkit

*An Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy and  
Kansas Campus Compact Project*



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# Overview of Civic Discourse in a Crisis: Lessons from Katrina Toolkit

Since August 29th 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States, many people have suggested that our American civic discourse surrounding the crisis, from our national and local leaders to our civic personalities, has reached a new low. While our nation was captivated by images, sound bites, and commentary explaining the economic, physical, and social impacts of Hurricane Katrina, our media also captured just how uncivil our civic discourse had become. Consider, for example, the wasted time and energy during the crisis devoted to assessing blame, whether to President Bush, FEMA Director Michael Brown, or among state and local politicians. Rather than focusing on discussions that could have helped hurricane victims, television and radio programs were dominated by rhetoric that was full of blaming and finger-pointing.

During the weeks of September 2005, while members of the media and government debated the faulty response to Katrina, insufficient communication was focused on planning delivery of emergency supplies, dealing with evacuees, fixing levees, or preparing for another hurricane. In the end, this blame game illustrated a clear counter-example to one important guideline of civic discourse: "Focus on what matters." It is important to analyze mistakes and lessons learned, but not at the expense of acting to address human need during a crisis or its immediate aftermath.

Now that the post-hurricane period of recovery, restitution, and planning has begun, the need is heightened for extensive civic discourse among affected populations. One of the most important lessons learned from Katrina concerns the vulnerability of citizens being left out of critical communication on public safety that should have occurred well before the crisis. There is little doubt that Americans need to improve our civic discourse, and by doing so, we can also help prepare for the next crisis.



## *How can Civic Discourse Help Prepare for the Next Crisis?*

Civic discourse is purposeful communication carried out among citizens dedicated to sharing perspectives and constructing possible actions on issues that matter. To be effective, the conduct of civic discourse, according to a large body of practical and scholarly literature, should demonstrate principles of inclusiveness, reflection, reciprocity, rationality, recognition of difference, and moderation.

### ICDD's Principles of Good Civic Discourse

- Provide framework for dialogue (establish ground rules; framework should recognize any cultural differences)
- Provide all with voice (create safe rhetorical space; manage inequalities of access and power)
- Focus on issues. Invite/encourage a variety of perspectives (inclusiveness)
- Value evidence variety – testimony, statistical evidence, narrative story telling
- Seek common ground and consensus when possible
- Avoid personal attacks
- Resist relying on ideological sloganeering
- Seek to understand rather than to persuade

Good civic discourse is an exercise in participatory democracy, engaging diverse citizens as well as elected officials in a shared exploration of policy, planning, or problem-solving issues. Representation through persistent dialog, not only through occasional election campaigns or opinion polls, enriches the set of ideals and choices by which citizens govern themselves. Good civic discourse can strengthen democracy, prevent mistakes, lead to better decisions, and engage more citizens in the democratic process. If good civic discourse can strengthen democracy, the reverse is also true: bad civic discourse can weaken the democratic process. If our examples of public discourse are primarily angry and intolerant of different opinions, the result is a loss of citizen involvement, reflection, and communication on which democracy is built.

**This toolkit serves as an aid and a guide for student groups on campuses to organize and host a public forum aimed at understanding why our civic discourse broke down during the hurricane crisis, and learn how to prevent such breakdowns from occurring again.**

## Who are ICDD and KSCC?

Understanding the need for a national inclusive dialogue on civic discourse, the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (ICDD) and the Kansas Campus Compact (KSCC) at Kansas State University worked together to create this toolkit. The toolkit serves as an aid and a guide for student groups on campuses to organize and host a public forum aimed at understanding what our public dialog reflected during the hurricane crisis, and how to create the civic discourse that can withstand and mitigate future crises. Appropriately, this event is called *Civic Discourse in a Crisis: Lessons from Katrina*.

### *About the Partners*

ICDD is a non-partisan institute dedicated to improving civic discourse on the local, state, national, and international levels. ICDD does this by focusing on improving scholarship, education, facilitation and outreach in the field of civic discourse. KSCC is a coalition of college and university presidents established to help foster and support campus engagement in the community. KSCC encourages civic discourse and debate and seeks to assist in the creation of partnerships between higher education institutions and the communities to which they belong.

### *Hosting Your Own Forum*

This toolkit is designed to serve as a guide for people who wish to hold a public forum on civic discourse. These public forums will be centered on a 20-minute video (included in this toolkit) that should serve as the centerpiece for the event. This video will introduce main concepts, provide background information on civic discourse, and give the audience information necessary to discuss the impact of Hurricane Katrina on our national civic discourse. The forum can last anywhere from 60 to 90 minutes.

Through the ICDD and KSCC partnership, there is an opportunity to receive reimbursement (up to \$100) for costs associated with hosting a *Civic Discourse in a Crisis: Lessons from Katrina* forum. In the appendix, you will find a reimbursement form. Eligible expenses include publicity materials, refreshments, room rental, etc. To receive reimbursement, send the





A public forum or deliberation can help people examine critical issues in a community and often solve them.

completed reimbursement form (including receipts) and the feedback forms (both participants and planners) to Erika Mason-Imbody, ICDD Project Coordinator. Her contact information can be found at the beginning and end of the toolkit.

While this toolkit is primarily planned to focus on the civic discourse in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, most of this material can be used in planning other public forums as well. In this toolkit, you will find information and materials to help you plan and host your own public forum. This toolkit is organized into the following three sections: the planning section, materials for the day of the event, and the appendix, which includes the funding form, example public relations material, planner and participant surveys, and more.

# PLANNING A PUBLIC FORUM

A public forum can help people examine issues that are important to a community. Although solutions are often sought, the primary focus of a forum should be to discuss and listen to various sides of an issue, not necessarily to develop a firm solution. The goal is to engage citizens and to be sure that all voices are heard before moving to the solution-finding phase.

This toolkit is directed toward holding a public forum in direct response to Hurricane Katrina; however, the following planning section is a general guide to organizing and holding your own public deliberation on any topic. This section will guide you through the process of planning a deliberation from the first day of planning to the very end. We begin this section by talking about the decision to plan such an event, the best strategy to organize it, a short list of necessary resources, a suggested time frame for planning such an event, and guidance on how to select a moderator and/or panel for the event. Since this is only a general guide, feel free to make any necessary changes when organizing your own event.

## *Deciding to Host an Event*

A deliberation forum can be organized for many reasons. Forums are useful during a time of crisis, whether it is natural, social, environmental, economic, or any other type. A forum will help people and communities discuss problems that require input from all sides of the issue. People will be brought together to deliberate and debate diverse topics and issues in a civil way. Having a public forum can often open up discussion prior to a crisis and create networks of people who are comfortable talking with one another. Ultimately, this deliberation process may help to better prepare citizens for a time of crisis.

## *Organizing a Planning Group and the Materials You Will Need*

It is necessary to have a core group of people to organize the entire event. It is possible for one person to do this, but is much easier with two or three people working together. It is the responsibility of this core group to select and invite a moderator; help choose the panel members; decide on the venue, date, and time; and take care of all logistics for the event. Every decision will go through this core group in order for the event to run smoothly.

It might also be a good idea to identify a mentor, a person the core-planning group can talk to for ideas and go to for advice. This mentor could be anyone who has experience in hosting this type of event, or a faculty member who is interested in the open forum's topic.

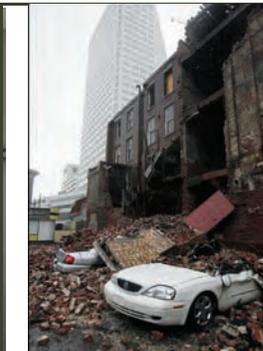
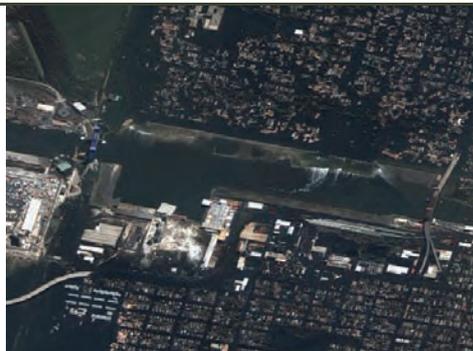
Several materials will be required for a deliberation. Equipment for the actual event such as audio/video equipment, computer, projector, screen, markers, paper, etc., will be useful. The core group should make sure all equipment is available for the event ahead of time.

### *Detailed Outline and Timeline for Planning*

The very first decision for the core group is to select a topic to discuss in your forum. For example, for this event, we use the crisis during Hurricane Katrina as the topic for our public forum. Once a topic is chosen, a date, time, and location can be selected. This should be done well in advance. Next, it is important to establish a “common experience” with which to begin your forum. This common experience can be a video, a panel discussion, or a specific article; the important thing is to give all participants a common ground from which to start the discussion. For a Katrina forum, we suggest you use the included video as your common experience. It will serve as a starting point for the moderated discussion that will follow.

Once the previously mentioned steps are accomplished, planning the actual event can begin. Ideally, the moderator should be selected two to four weeks before the event takes place. The same time frame is ideal for inviting panel members, if you choose this route for your common experience. This will give enough time for the moderator to get to know the panel and their views and feel comfortable with all participants. Additionally, this time frame gives the moderator time to prepare questions or discussion themes for the event.

Advertising can begin anytime after the date, time, and location are set. Advertise your event to your university community as well as to the local community. Having more participants leads to better discussion and collaboration of ideas.



**Ideally, four weeks will be allotted to set up a deliberation event.**

Ideally, four weeks will be allotted to organize a deliberation event, but the planning can also be done in a much shorter or longer time based on the specifics of the events. A suggested outline is listed below.

#### 4 Weeks Before

- Select an appropriate topic for the public forum
- Choose your “common experience” (video, panel, etc.)
- Select and invite a moderator  
(and panel participants, if necessary)
- Choose a date, time, and venue for the event

#### 3 Weeks Before

- Design the flyers to advertise your event  
(see example in appendix)
- Order refreshments
- Start advertising the event via email, posters, and networking
- Obtain short biography from the moderator (and panel participants, if appropriate) for the program

#### 2 Weeks Before

- Flyers should be well distributed throughout campus and community
- Design the program, including moderator biography and principles of civic discourse (see example in appendix)
- Moderator should preview the “common experience” and begin developing questions for the participants.

#### 1 Week Before

- Finalize and print programs
- Confirm refreshments
- Confirm date, time, and location with moderator
- Write a press release for coverage in your campus or local newspaper

This timeline should serve as a rough guide for your planning process. Remember, planning an event often takes longer than expected, so it is helpful to start early. This will allow plenty of time to make any necessary changes. Additionally, a checklist is included in the appendix to assist you as you plan your forum.

**It is the moderator’s duty to make sure that a peaceful and civilized deliberation takes place.**

## *Date, Time, and Location*

Selecting the appropriate day, time, and location for your event is vital in accomplishing your objectives. First, select an appropriate day and time for the event. For example, if you are targeting a community audience, choose a time when most people will be done with work, preferably in the evening. If your target audience is primarily college students, pick a weekday when most college students are on campus and a time when you would expect them to attend such an event.

Next, choose a location such as a community center or a campus room that is appropriate based on how large of an audience you expect. For example, for our initial Hurricane Katrina deliberation, approximately 40 guests were expected, so we chose a room that would hold about 50 people. Booking the location and setting the time and date should be done well in advance to avoid last-minute problems and to have sufficient time to advertise the event. Also, make sure you reserve all necessary equipment well in advance. Projectors, screens, computers, audio/video equipment, etc., should be set up and prepared the day of the event.

## *Selecting and Preparing a Moderator and/or Panel*

The moderator plays a central role in the development and successful execution of the discussion. The moderator's job includes setting the framework, running the discussion, and engaging the audience in an interactive dialogue. The moderator also creates the appropriate tone and atmosphere in order to engage all participants in a well-organized dialog where the audience feels comfortable and free to talk about sensitive issues. Lastly, the moderator synthesizes what he or she hears throughout the event so that the discussion is focused, and the main themes of the deliberation are illuminated during the wrap-up.

Having the right moderator is extremely important in organizing a successful deliberation. Conducting a well-organized and peaceful deliberation can sometimes be a challenge, so moderators have to be good leaders who are neutral, non-partisan, and open-minded. Moderators also need to be good listeners and should be able to keep a discussion flowing smoothly. People such as professors, teachers, journalists, and community leaders are typically good moderators.



**Various formats  
can be used  
for the  
deliberations.**

Although having knowledge on the discussion topic or being a trained moderator might help, these are not as important as having the earlier mentioned qualities.

If you choose to hold a panel discussion as your “common experience,” panelists must also be selected and invited to participate in the event. If a panel will be used, we suggest that the moderator get to know the panelists and their views. By doing a pre-interview with the panel, the moderator can develop a set of questions that might help bring up interesting thoughts and comments from the audience. Picking a panel with different views will help in reducing prejudice to one side of an issue. The moderator will also explain to the panelists the format of the upcoming deliberation. The deliberations should be informal and conversational, so it is not necessary for members of the panel to have a prepared speech. With the moderator bringing up questions, the panel and audience will have adequate time to structure their comments during the deliberation. Remember to remind panelists that this is a public deliberation, not a presentation. They should be sure to leave adequate time for audience members to participate in the discussion; their role is to set the stage for such a discussion.

### *Formatting Your Event*

Various formats can be utilized during the public forum. For our Hurricane Katrina forum, we chose to have a moderator run the program and used the enclosed video as our “common experience.” If you chose this format, the discussion following the video will then be based on the various clips that discuss race, poverty, and a lack of civic discourse during the crisis. After watching the video, the audience should be given a moment to reflect before discussion begins. A few select “talking points” are included at the end of this toolkit to help the moderator focus the discussion.

*Other examples of formats for public forums include:*

- The first 30 minutes can be set aside for questions and comments by the panel.
- The panel can address each question in the talking points packet, with time left after each question for audience input.
- The audience can begin by asking panel questions and then have the opportunity to hear their responses one at a time.

Based on the prepared material for the deliberation, the moderator should try to adhere to the schedule as much as possible. Most events will be between 60 to 90 minutes long to give ample time to ensure all voices are given the opportunity to be heard. It is the moderator’s duty to be sure that a peaceful and civilized discussion takes place.



## *Day of the Event*

Organizing and planning the event takes time, and with hard work and proper planning, the event can be a successful one. On the day of the event, be sure to:

- Arrive early to ensure that the room is set up properly.
- Double check that all equipment is working correctly.
- Briefly review the schedule of the event with the moderator.
- Have copies of the program available at the door as participants arrive.
- Dress appropriately and have confidence that you have worked hard to organize this event.



Organizing and planning the event takes some time, and with hard work and proper planning, the event can be a successful one.