



AN OVERVIEW



WHAT IS NIF?

The National Issues Forums (NIF) is a nonpartisan, nationwide network whose participants include an array of civic, educational, and professional groups, organizations, and individuals that promote nonpartisan public deliberation in communities across the country. NIF is rooted in the simple notion that people need to come together to reason and talk—to deliberate about common problems.



HOW DOES IT WORK?

Each year, major issues of concern are identified by the NIF network. Issue books, which provide an overview of the problem and suggest alternative approaches to dealing with it, are prepared to help those attending the forums frame the deliberation.

Forums are sponsored by schools, civic groups, and other organizations in many communities. They offer citizens the opportunity to join with others to deliberate about difficult issues and consider common ground for action.



WHAT IS PUBLIC DELIBERATION?

Public deliberation is simply a way for people to come together to share views about an issue that is important to them. Participants talk with one another, face to face, exploring options, weighing others' views, and considering the benefits and consequences of public policy decisions.

Citizens have a responsibility—one that cannot be delegated—to make choices about how to solve problems because government alone cannot solve them all. Citizens' views often differ from those of office holders. Deliberation may reveal new possibilities for action that neither citizens nor officeholders saw before.

Forums enrich participants' thinking on public issues. The process, sometimes known as "choice work," helps people see issues from different points of view. At their best, forums help participants move toward shared, stable, well-informed public judgments about important issues, based on what is valuable to them.

WHO PARTICIPATES?

A wide variety of organizations and institutions provide public space for citizens to develop skills in convening and moderating National Issues Forums. NIF issue books and other materials are used by many 7th through 12th grade students in classroom discussions or forums about timely topics. Colleges and universities conduct forums for students as well as for groups of citizens who are invited to participate in the deliberations. A number of universities as well as other centers involved in deliberative democracy or public policy not only conduct forums but also train forum moderators. Finally, a great variety of civic and other community organizations bring citizens together to deliberate on important issues facing their communities, their states, or the nation.

WHY SPONSOR OR ATTEND NIF FORUMS?

Citizens cannot act together until they decide together. Through public deliberation, citizens define what they consider to be in the public interest and find common ground for action.

By offering citizens a framework for deliberative forums, the NIF network helps the public take an active role in public issues. The health of the nation's democratic enterprise depends on the energetic participation of responsible citizens who take the initiative to deliberate about public policy choices and the actions to be taken by citizens inside and outside of government.



THE NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS INSTITUTE

Based in Dayton, Ohio, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves to promote public deliberation and coordinate the activities of the National Issues Forums network. Its activities include publishing the issue guides and other materials used by local forum groups, encouraging collaboration among forum sponsors, and sharing information about current activities in the network. The institute has a distinguished group of 16 directors and officers drawn from such diverse fields like government, journalism, and secondary and higher education. Many NIFI directors also have extensive experience in neighborhood and civic organizations, libraries, and religious organizations. For a complete list of NIFI officers and directors, go to the NIFI Web site, click on “About Us,” and “Directors,” or contact:

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