

Report on NIF Forum Activity

What Should We Do about the Opioid Epidemic?

Over the last year, we have heard from local groups in Connecticut, Florida, Mississippi, Montana, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin, and others that have gathered to deliberate using the 2018 National Issues Forums [issue guide](#) *What Should We Do about the Opioid Epidemic?*

In **Florida**, forums using the opioid issue guide were held in a number of places in conjunction with a large healthcare coalition set to receive federal funding to combat the opioid problem. Public officials in Florida, including local law enforcement and state legislators, participated in the forums, which were well covered in the [Panama City News Herald](#) and [NBC7 television](#).

In a **Wisconsin** forum, there was nearly unanimous agreement with the notion that opioid abuse should be treated more as a disease than a crime, while a moderator from a forum in **Montana** noted that their group struggled with that distinction. At the same time, the vast majority of participants from the Florida forums agreed that opioid abuse should be treated more as a disease than a crime. That said, participants still seemed wary of entirely foregoing the role to be played by courts and law enforcement. For example, in the Ohio online forums, decriminalizing illegal opioid use was one of the least popular ideas. Moderators from **Mississippi** noted that forum participants had extended discussions about the role of pharmaceutical companies, specifically the tension between individual responsibility and corporate responsibility.

This is clearly an issue of great personal relevance to many people. Convenors of the Florida forums remarked on the number of powerful personal stories that participants shared. At the same time, people saw great value in gathering with others in their community to deliberate on the issue. A forum in **Panama City, Florida**, attracted far more participants than anticipated, with many standing for the entire length of the forum. The Florida convenors also report that many people stayed long after the forum ended to continue talking in small groups.

In **Ohio**, we learned of an effort out of Ohio State University's [Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability](#) to hold online [Common Ground for Action](#) forums in all of Ohio's 88 counties.

Results from the online forums across Ohio were quite telling in terms of the value people saw in deliberating:

- More than 9 in 10 participants agreed or strongly agreed that the discussion was helpful and informative.
- More than 9 in 10 participants agreed or strongly agreed that discussions like this are important for democracy.
- More than 8 in 10 participants agreed or strongly agreed that they learned a lot in the forum.

- More than 9 in 10 participants agreed or strongly agreed that it would be useful for their state legislators to hear the results of their forums.

The participants themselves weren't the only ones who saw value in the forums. As quoted in a newspaper story on one of the forums, a Florida state representative who participated said, "It's encouraging to see us band together on something like this as a community. I don't believe there is a silver bullet. It's going to take everything. . . . We're going to have to come together to address this."

This article is based on analysis by Kettering Foundation staff of reports made available by the National Issues Forums Institute.