



# Town Hall Meetings: A RWHAP Needs Assessment Tool

Town hall meetings provide a valuable forum for information as part of Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program (RWHAP) Part A needs assessment activities that aim to better understand the service needs of people with HIV within an EMA or TGA. This overview describes town hall meetings, their goals, advantages, limitations, composition and logistics, and key elements to pay attention to in planning and conducting them – including tips for conducting remote or virtual town hall meetings.

## What is a Town Hall Meeting?

In the context of a Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program (RWHAP), a town hall meeting – sometimes called a “community forum” – is a gathering designed to obtain community input on topics related to HIV services. These are public meetings, but they typically hope to engage people with HIV and other key stakeholders in the care and service system for people with HIV. Usually the main focus is to obtain diverse input about service needs, barriers, and gaps; satisfaction with current services; and trends and concerns. Ideally, these are more than input sessions where the topics are determined solely by each person who makes a presentation. If appropriately planned, they can provide opportunities for the Planning Council to request input on specific issues and organize discussion among community members and with the sponsoring organization. Often the facilitators are Planning Council or committee leaders from the PC/PB committee responsible for the meeting.

Typically, town hall meetings have more participants than focus groups. Town halls generally aim for at least 15 participants and up to 40 or more, and are normally held in a community facility. However, in the event of a public health emergency, such as COVID-19, they can also be held online, ideally using an easily accessed electronic platform so people can connect via smartphone, tablet, or computer. If your Planning Council has learned to successfully run meetings remotely, including Consumer Committee meetings, many of the same sound practices and strategies apply, as well as the connectivity challenges that may limit or prevent participation by some consumers.<sup>1</sup>





## Use of Town Hall Meetings in RWHAP Needs Assessment

Planning councils/planning bodies (PC/PB) can use town hall meetings to:

- Obtain information about current service needs and barriers for people with HIV (PWH), in any year when the PC/PB is not conducting a PWH survey or other in-depth PWH-focused needs assessment effort
- Ask people with HIV to indicate their most important service needs, as input to the PC/PB's priority-setting process
- Learn about geographic similarities and differences in needs, barriers, and priorities by holding several town halls in different parts of the jurisdiction and then comparing/contrasting the results
- Learn about subpopulation differences by bringing together diverse people with HIV or holding several town halls focusing on particular groups
- Supplement needs assessment findings by obtaining updated information just before the priority setting and resource allocation (PSRA) process begins
- Gather information to strengthen the Part A application, particularly to understand recent trends or emerging issues
- Better understand the impact of COVID-19 on people with HIV, especially Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program clients (for this purpose the town hall meeting would be implemented remotely).<sup>2</sup>

Town hall meetings can also be used to hear from service providers instead of, or in addition to, people with HIV.

## Relation to Legislative Requirements

Town hall meetings address the legislative requirement for planning councils to obtain "input on community needs and priorities" [Section 2602(b)(4)(C)(iii) and (G)].

For a RWHAP Part A TGA with no planning council, town hall meetings help to meet the legislative requirement "to obtain community input (particularly from those with HIV) in the transitional area for formulating the overall plan for priority setting and allocating funds" [Section 2609(d)(1)(A)].

### BENEFITS/ADVANTAGES OF TOWN HALL MEETINGS:

- Can be arranged relatively quickly
- Can be adjusted to work for groups of varying size
- Are relatively low-cost: Often a provider facility can be used for the meeting at no cost. The main costs are a simple meal or refreshments and sometimes transportation
- Can be adapted for remote implementation using an electronic platform



## Keys to a Successful Town Hall

- 1. Effective recruitment**, to ensure good turnout and diverse participation. The goal is to bring together a diverse group of 15 or more people – in most cases people with HIV – to provide their views on services and needs. The focus should be on engaging people whose voices would not otherwise be heard, such as individuals who are not PC/PB members or regular participants in consumer committees or caucuses. This begins with choosing a location that is both accessible and comfortable for the population of focus – or an online platform accessible through a smart phone as well as tablet or computer – and then doing systematic outreach. For recruitment, you can partner with community-based HIV and other human service providers, faith-based institutions, and community leaders to inform people with HIV of the importance of participation in such events. Let people know that they do not need to share their names or HIV status to attend. If you include providers or have a separate town hall for providers, encourage participation by frontline staff who work with people with HIV including RWHAP consumers, and by service providers that are not RWHAP-funded.



### REMOTE MEETING TIPS:

- Recruit pre-existing groups that have been meeting remotely, and therefore are likely to have connectivity – for example, a support group that is meeting remotely during the COVID-19 epidemic, a people with HIV group, or a service provider’s Community Advisory Board (CAB)
- Use an electronic platform that can be accessed even by people with limited connectivity – via telephone, smartphone, tablet, or computer

- 2. A plan for gathering needed information.** A successful town hall meeting needs to be well planned, publicized, and facilitated. Rather than providing only an open forum, it uses a carefully developed set of topics or questions to obtain information the Planning Council needs for decision-making. It also gives participants time to raise their own issues of concern. A presentation period gives participants a voice in planning by providing time for them to offer input about services and needs and share their ideas or concerns. Ground rules may require people to sign up before speaking and keep to a time limit such as 3-5 minutes. Often the meeting includes several different components, such as presentations from community members, facilitated discussion about topics important to the Planning Council, and community input on service priorities.



### REMOTE MEETING TIPS:

- If you are good with technology and have a powerful platform, consider creating virtual small groups – divide participants into separate “rooms” for discussion of different topics, and have them “report out” to the full group.
- Be prepared to inform participants at the start of the town hall that you will be recording the session, and give anyone uncomfortable with that time to disconnect.



**3. A well-defined agenda and process** for gathering information, managing discussion, keeping everyone engaged, and doing it all in a reasonable time period. The appropriate length depends on many factors; evening and online meetings may need to be shorter than sessions held during the day. A typical length is 1½ to 2 hours (up to 3 hours if you use “topic tables,” described below). This is based on the expectation that the meeting is likely to start 15 minutes late, and you will probably include a 15-minute break, so the actual presentation and discussion time is 1 to 1½ hours. Planning a town hall meeting is similar to developing the questions or “script” for a focus group, but implementing it can be more challenging. The group is larger and more diverse and the process is more complicated, so the role of facilitators is more demanding. You may have several PC members – often committee co-chairs – share facilitation. It is important to set and enforce ground rules. Be sure to use plain language and avoid jargon and unfamiliar terminology. Doing a “dry run” with facilitators and staff can be very helpful. Planning Council Support staff can play a key role in logistics and time management as well as taking notes and managing technology.



#### REMOTE MEETING TIPS:

- Send out the agenda when you recruit; an interesting multi-part agenda with identified focus issues can increase participation. It also gives participants at-a-glance information about when topics that may be important to them will be covered.
- Use a brief PowerPoint or share the agenda on-screen during the town hall, to help keep the meeting on track and participants engaged.
- Post and discuss ground rules that address how to be called upon or recognized to speak, the importance of hearing from everyone, how to avoid domination of discussion by a few people, and use of the chat room.



## Steps in Planning and Conducting a Town Hall Meeting

Here is a step-by-step process for planning and implementing a town hall meeting or series of meetings. These steps were developed primarily for a face-to-face meeting, but can be refined to implement a virtual meeting, without a physical location.

### 1. Decide how you want to structure and focus your meeting(s). For example:

- **Number of meetings:** Do you need separate sessions in each of several geographic locations/jurisdictions, or meetings focusing on different key target populations? Should there be a session conducted in a language other than English?
- **Activities:** What activities do you want to include? For example:
  - Individual presentations by consumers and/or providers or other interested residents
  - A group discussion of key issues (with main topics usually pre-determined)
  - Topic tables or small groups to allow for discussion of multiple topics, with someone from each group presenting a summary of the discussion after returning to the full group
  - Community assessment of needs, where participants identify their top 3-5 service needs
- **Content focus:** What kinds of information does your Planning Council most need to inform decision-making? You will probably want to choose a small number of key issues or topics to address (e.g., key barriers to care, service gaps for particular populations, promising service strategies) – topics on which the Planning Council needs additional or more current information. You should also allow some time for participants to raise and discuss other concerns or issues.
- **Food and transportation:** For in-person town halls, consider what refreshments are appropriate. You will probably need to provide some refreshments or a boxed lunch for participants, depending on the timing of the town hall. To get people to attend, you may need to provide bus passes or other transportation assistance.
- **Recruitment:** Once you have identified key focus populations and meeting location(s), decide how best to recruit participants. Planning Council and consumer committee members might play a key role, using their personal and organizational contacts. The recipient can often help by asking subrecipients to recruit some of their clients.



**2. Agree on meeting components and procedures, lay out your plans, and develop a time-phased agenda.** Include a brief description of each town hall component on your recruitment flyer, email, or social media post, and post it on your website. Plan each component; for example:

- **Presentations:** Identify a set of issues important to the Planning Council, agreeing on them early so they are included in invitations and all outreach/recruitment efforts. Encourage (but do not require) presentations on those topics. Let presenters know they have 3-5 minutes to speak.
- **Open Discussion:** Set aside about 30-45 minutes after the presentations for open discussion and reaction to the presentations. If meeting remotely, use technology that allows people to raise their hands, and keep a running list. If time is short, allow or encourage discussion in the chat room, with someone monitoring it and sharing key points. Focus discussion on your key issues or questions, but let facilitators use their judgment in adding topics that arise during the presentations.
- **Small Groups (Topic Tables):** Topic tables can be used instead of full-group discussion if the group is large and/or you have many topics to cover. Identify those topics – for example, if the meeting focus is barriers to care and how to overcome them, small groups might focus on barriers for specific subpopulations of people with HIV. In a town hall meeting held remotely, put participants in different “rooms” for discussion. Always have someone facilitate each small group and someone else take notes, and ask each group to provide a 2-3 minute report back to the full group.
- **Service Needs:** Consider asking participants to identify their top service needs. Explain that the Planning Council prioritizes services for funding each year, and provide or show a prioritized list of Part A-fundable service categories from the prior year. Have available a handout briefly describing each service category.<sup>3</sup> Ask participants to identify and explain their top service needs.

**3. Set the date and time and choose your location.** Identify bus lines and other public transportation access points, and include that in your outreach communications. Indicate whether parking is available, the availability of bus passes or reimbursement for transportation. If the meeting is remote, choose an appropriate platform and provide specific instructions for connecting.



**4. Recruit participants.** Be sure the invitation lists each component of the town hall meeting. Ask people to RSVP, but be prepared for people to arrive without letting you know ahead of time. Encourage RSVPs by announcing those who RSVP ahead of time will speak first, so they are assured a spot on the agenda; those who sign up at the door are not. Ask presenters for a name (or nickname), contact information, affiliation and role (i.e., staff, volunteer, Board, person with HIV, or RWHAP client) and the topic they want to focus on.

**5. Use the RSVP and topic information to make a preliminary list of presenters.** Either assign time slots in order of the RSVP or prepare a logical order of presentations – for example, put all the speakers focusing on barriers facing a particular subpopulation together.

**6. Welcome participants.**

- **Ask participants to register as they arrive**, providing contact information if they want to receive a summary of the meeting. You may want to allow people to attend without giving their full name or contact information. If the meeting is remote, ask everyone to give at least a first name in the Chat Room.
- **Have a sign-up sheet at the door or direct online participants to the chat room to add last-minute presenters** – ask for name, affiliation, and topic. Let people speak in the order in which they sign up. If only a few people sign up at the last minute, fit them into the schedule based on the topics they want to address.
- **Be sure the Planning Council is well represented.** Often the Chair or a Co-Chair welcomes participants, and Consumer and/or Needs Assessment Committee Chairs share facilitation responsibilities.

**7. Run the meeting.**

- **Set the stage.** Welcome participants, describe the way the meeting will inform decision-making by the Planning Council, present ground rules, and review the agenda. Remind presenters of the amount of time they have, and explain that you will be using a timer and will let them know when their time is ending. Thank people for their time.
- **Receive presentations.** Explain the process and indicate your plans for handling questions from non-presenters – whether they can be asked after the presentation or must wait for general discussion. Enforce presentation time limits as planned – be firm but polite. Give not more than 30 seconds additional time beyond the time limit, being sure to treat everyone equally. Thank each presenter and invite them to leave any desired written materials with a specified person. Allow other participants to speak or ask questions if there is time.



- **Provide time for open discussion if possible.** You may want a different facilitator for this section of the meeting. The facilitator should be prepared to raise questions if the audience is initially quiet. Be sure to direct questions to presenters and encourage them to respond and to ask their own questions of other participants and the PC/PB committee managing the meeting.
- **If you are planning small group discussions, explain how they work and summarize guidelines.** “Count off” the group or let participants pick a table based on their interests, announce starting and ending times, and monitor the process.
- **If asking participants about their most important service needs is part of the schedule, leave at least 20 minutes for this discussion.**
- **When the meeting time is up, thank the group and promise to share a summary and the service priorities.**

**8. After the meeting ends, hold a quick debrief.** Include facilitators, the responsible committee, and planning council support staff, and be sure to clarify follow-up assignments and time deadlines for aggregating priorities and summarizing presentations and discussion. If you are planning additional town halls, be sure to refine processes for improving upcoming meetings, based on your experience with the first one.

**9. Have the appropriate committee review the findings from the town hall, and determine how best to share them with the full Planning Council.** You may want to report first to the Consumer Committee and Executive Committee, then at a Planning Council meeting, and/or make this information a part of your PSRA data presentation. Be sure you share findings with participants and the community as promised.

## References

- 1 See JSI Planning CHATT’s “Remote Meetings: Tips for PC/PBs,” on the Planning CHATT website.
- 2 For more ideas on Rapid Needs Assessment, see EGMC’s new “Quick Guide to Rapid Needs Assessment at a Time of Social Distancing: Ideas for Planning Councils,” on the EGMC website, [www.egmc-dc.com](http://www.egmc-dc.com).
- 3 Quick Reference Handout #3 in Module 2 of the PC/PB Training Guide briefly describes all service categories; it is available online on the Planning CHATT webpage, at <https://targethiv.org/sites/default/files/supporting-files/PlanningCHATT-Module2-QRH2.3.pdf>.

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