

# **Embedded Deliberation: Entrepreneurs, Organizations, and Public Action**

Final Report for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

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# 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

## ***Intentional Deliberation***

In this study, we contribute to a small but developing line of research that examines the character and effects of public deliberation. The lion's share of scholarship on this area has been largely normative, focusing upon justifications and criticisms of deliberative democracy as political ideal. Scholars such as Jane Mansbridge (*Beyond Adversary Democracy*), John Gastil (*Democracy in Small Groups* and *By Popular Demand*), James Fishkin (*Voice of the People*), Katherine Cramer Walsh (*Talking About Politics*) and one of the authors of this study (*Empowered Participation* and *Deepening Democracy*) have examined the properties and effects of actually-existing deliberations. In the pages below, we report on our efforts in this area.

Much empirical work on deliberation has focused upon policies, laws, and institutions that create deliberation while others focus on discourse as it occurs in natural, undesigned environments (e.g. Katherine Cramer Walsh and Melissa Harris Lacewell). This study focuses upon intentionally designed and structured public discussions that are initiated and organized largely by civic entrepreneurs who are committed to the notion that public deliberation can improve the quality of public life and public decisions. The National Issues Forums and the Studies Circles Resource Center sponsor the largest group of this kind of effort. We describe specific cases in the next section.

While previous work tends to focus upon the character of deliberation itself — about quality of communication and argument, the inclusion or exclusion of particular views or individuals, and generally about the extent of domination or equality—we focus here upon the impact of these civically initiated deliberations. At the first level, we asked questions about the direct effects of deliberation in our cases. That is, we examined (a) whether participation in public deliberation led to increased civic engagement and mobilization to address some of the

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<sup>1</sup> This report was made possible by generous funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. We wish to thank Terry Amsler for his continuing support and enthusiasm for deepening democracy through citizen deliberation. As the pages that follow make clear, we are deeply indebted to the citizens and deliberative activists in Connecticut, Hawaii, South Dakota, and West Virginia for educating us about their work.

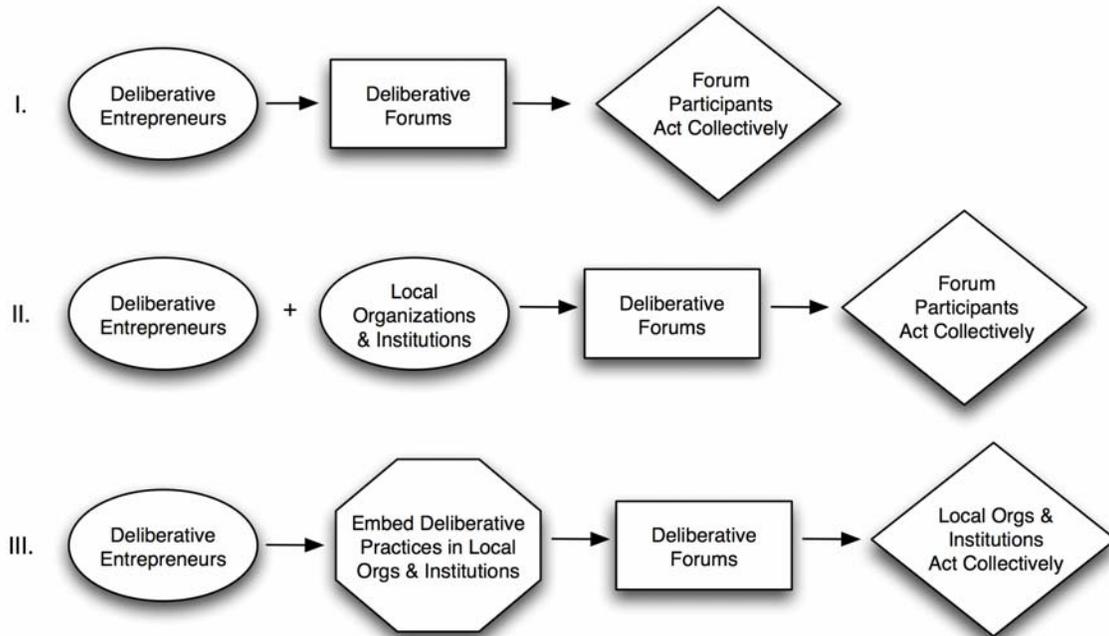
issues that were the object of deliberation; (b) the effects of such civic engagement; and (c) whether, and under what circumstances, deliberation outcomes affect public policies or improve service delivery.

The impact of public deliberation can manifest itself in multiple formats. The creation of citizen task forces, improved coordination among agencies that participate in deliberations, the provision of public input to policy-makers, and the implementation of recommendations emerging at public forums are but some of the indicators of deliberation's impact in the public sphere. Besides yielding very tangible consequences, public deliberation can also have powerful transformative effects at the individual level. Many of those who participate in deliberative forums report becoming more aware of the complexities of issues, respectful of others' opinions and open to listening and dialogue. However, since the consequences of personal transformation are more complex to gauge, we focused our analysis on impacts that could be more directly attributed to public deliberation, such as increased civic engagement, implementation of deliberative resolutions, and influence on public policy.

But it is quite possible that specific instances of deliberation produce very short-lived impacts. That is, some community may adopt deliberation to resolve a conflict but then return to its more conventional, non-deliberative, business as usual practices. We suppose that deliberative practices will yield more sustained effects when they are incorporated into—and thus when they transform—the communicative and decision-making routines of organizations, institutions, and the communities of which they are part. We call this notion of incorporation “embedded deliberation.” At the outset of this research, we did not know whether deliberative practices ever embedded themselves in this way, much less the content of the conditions under which such embedding would occur. Nevertheless, this notion of embedding is of high theoretical importance. Many deliberative democrats envision a world in which deliberation is a greater part of our everyday political and social lives; they suppose a world in which deliberation is widely, even universally, embedded. We set out to learn about such transformations and, in particular, to see whether we could identify any at all.

## Three Paths from Public Deliberation to Public Action

In our case studies, we set about examining the connections between public deliberation and public action. In a preliminary way, consider schematically three possible ways in which the sorts of intentionally structured deliberations examined in this report might come into existence and subsequently result in public action or public policy.



Model I is the most straightforward. In this model, deliberative entrepreneurs enter a community and organize one or more deliberative forums. The participants in that forum then mobilize to take action, perhaps following the conclusions of their discussions on the problem or issue that they addressed. Model II is similar to Model I with the qualification that it creates a role for local partners. In this model, deliberative entrepreneurs engage local organizations such as universities or other civic groups to co-sponsor deliberative forums in order to improve, for example, the quality of participant recruiting or issue framing. Then, on this model, participants act upon the results of these deliberations as in Model I. Model III differs in two ways. First, the main contribution of deliberative entrepreneurs is not just to organize deliberative forums, but to “embed” the deliberative practices — including the sponsoring of forums and other deliberative exercises — into the organizational and institutional repertoires of other local actors. Second,

those who act on the results of deliberation are not principally general participants to deliberation, but rather the organizations and institutions that adopt deliberative practices. These local groups utilize deliberation to gain information about the preferences and opinions of citizens or to develop solutions to various problems. In Model III, they invest their own organizational resources or political capital in those solutions and deliberated preferences.

These case studies do not test these models as alternative theories, but rather presume in some measure Model III and investigate its parts. Whereas we examined our cases to understand whether deliberation stimulated action, we focused specifically on instances where deliberation became embedded, as described in Model III, to understand if such embeddedness is more conducive to action.

## ***Case Selection and Methodology***

With limited resources and a wide open research agenda, we constructed a series of cases to explore these questions. We conducted original research and compiled four case studies:

1. West Virginia's National Issues Forums
2. Public Deliberation in South Dakota
3. Public Deliberation in Hawai'i
4. Connecticut's Community Conversations about Education

These are all cases of community-level deliberative programs initiated by civic leaders and organizations of various types. Our selection was highly opportunistic. Since the object of these case studies was to learn something about the paths and patterns that lead from deliberation to action and about whether and when deliberation becomes embedded, we searched for cases in which we had reason to believe that deliberative practices had become fairly widespread and repeated over time. The advice of national experts on community level deliberations assisted us in identifying several such cases that were, from their perspective, successful instances of community-level deliberation.

That said, our mature cases varied in several ways. First, they addressed different kinds of issues and problems. Second, they employed different models and procedures of public deliberation. Third, deliberations occurred – and in some instances became embedded – within quite different sectors, or spheres, of local communities: some deliberations occurred in the context of public agencies, others in legislatures, universities, advocacy organizations, or “civil society” broadly speaking.

The table below highlights the distribution of our cases across our selection criteria.

**Table 1: Case Distribution**

	<b>Problems Addressed by Public Deliberation</b>	<b>Model of Public Deliberation</b>	<b>Spheres of Embeddedness</b>
<b>West Virginia’s National Issues Forums</b>	Education, economy, healthcare, underage drinking, domestic violence	National Issues Forums	University of Charleston, West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Prevention Resource Center
<b>Public Deliberation in South Dakota</b>	Youth and crime, immigration, local development, Indigenous issues, Indigenous languages	National Issues Forums, stakeholder roundtables, and Indigenous Issues Forums	Limited embeddedness, personal transformation
<b>Public Deliberation in Hawai’i</b>	Local development, issues before the legislature, formulation of child and youth welfare legislation	National Issues Forums, stakeholder involvement in policy-making	Embeddedness in some legislative processes (Keiki Caucus)
<b>Connecticut’s Community Conversations about Education</b>	Public education	Conversations modeled by Public Agenda	Local communities (Bridgeport, Norwalk), State Department of Education, synergies with other programs

Most cases are mature or relatively mature. They possess anywhere from six to over ten years of experience with deliberative practices. The processes of influencing policy-making or mobilizing communities to take action do not happen instantaneously after deliberation, if they happen at all. They are slow processes that require capacity building, resources, and the creation of strategic alliances. The relative maturity of our cases enables us to observe how deliberative practices evolved through time, and track their embeddedness, as well as impact, over a period of several years.

For each case, we conducted at least one field visit of several days and observed deliberative events. Participating in the events (from National Issues Forums, to Community Conversations) enabled us to better understand the different deliberative models, the role played by moderators and note-takers, and possible dynamics among participants.

We also conducted extensive interviews with those who could help us gain a better understanding of our cases and illuminate our research questions. In general, we interviewed the main promoters of public deliberation, those who were exposed to deliberation, to register their reactions, as well as activists, policy-makers, experts and organizations that have embraced deliberation as a model to advance their objectives. We also examined all available documents, from simple lists of objectives emerged from deliberations, to more formal reports, articles and publications.

To gain a better understanding of how public deliberation is applied in each case, we attended trainings on the specific deliberative model used, including the NIF model in West Virginia and Hawai'i, and the Indigenous Issues Forums model in South Dakota.<sup>2</sup> These trainings are generally offered to individuals who are interested in using public deliberation in their professional or community environments. They explain the nuts and bolts of public deliberation, the characteristics of the model that is presented, and how to convene and moderate deliberative events by involving participants in forums, simulations, and role-playing.<sup>3</sup>

The section that follows provides a brief synopsis of the four cases, for which more extensive narratives are available later in the report.

## ***Cases in Brief***

### **West Virginia's National Issues Forums**

Established in the mid 1990s under the leadership of Betty Knighton, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life (the Center) promotes “*Nonpartisan Community Discussions of Important Public Issues.*” The Center is hosted at the University of Charleston, and has convened dozens of forums, developed important local issues, and promoted the use of public forums with some key organizations. Much of the Center’s success can be attributed to its director, Betty Knighton, a

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, at the time we were conducting our research for the Connecticut’s Community Conversations case, there were no moderator training workshops we could attend, but we obtained the relevant training materials.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Indigenous Issues Forums, participants shared their thoughts in a circle, and visual arts, music, listening to Lakota elderly, and games, enriched the learning experience.

nationally recognized expert on deliberation who collaborates closely with the Kettering Foundation and other organizations.

Besides assisting communities in framing issues for public dialogue, training moderators and convening forums, the Center also works with organizations interested in convening forums. Partnering with organizations is a strategic decision to maximize the impact of the Center's limited resources. The Center, for example, has partnered with the Prevention Resource Center (PRC) to help design and convene a series of forums on underage drinking across the state. Also the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WVCADV) convened over 20 forums to increase public awareness on domestic violence. The Center is also well established at the University of Charleston, where it trains students, faculty and staff, thus embedding deliberation in some course curricula.

The Center has played a key role in convening forums on a range of topics, including healthcare, youth opportunities in West Virginia, education, and the problems of low-income families. Below are some of the most significant initiatives undertaken by the West Virginia Center for Civic Life. After holding numerous forums on healthcare, the Center partnered with the state's public television to air a public affairs program on healthcare titled "A Prescription for Healthcare." During this one hour program, policy experts and legislators were shown clips from the public forums, and addressed some of the issues where public policy and public concerns coincided. Over 1,000 West Virginians attended 40 forums on the topic "*Our Nation's Kids*." To recognize the state's exceptional contribution, the NIF national report on the topic was not released in Washington D.C., as customary, but in West Virginia.

Besides using available NIF discussion guides, the Center also framed important local issues, such as West Virginians' relationship with public schools (titled "*What is the Public Role in Public Education*") and on the challenges facing low-income families in the state (titled "*Making Ends Meet: What Should We Do to Support Working Families*"). These forums were held across the state, bringing together hundreds of participants. Forum reports were prepared and circulated widely with policy-makers, advocates, and the community. Framing local issues was instrumental to diffusing public deliberation in West Virginia, because it presented forums as an accessible tool to address problems of local importance.

Forums were particularly successful in mobilizing college students to work on issues that emerged from deliberations, conduct additional forums, and even frame new issues. The forums on domestic violence contributed to raising awareness on the issue, and provided the convening organization with important information on the public understanding of the phenomenon. The underage drinking forums stimulated some action, especially in the city of Clarksburg, where deliberation brought together different actors and led to the creation of a coalition that implemented several of the forum's recommendations.

The important outreach work conducted by the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, the alliance with the University of Charleston and other academic institutions, together with the partnerships to develop forums with other organizations are clear signs that deliberation is well embedded in West Virginia.

## **Public Deliberation in South Dakota**

In South Dakota, we examined the work of two institutions that promote public deliberation: the South Dakota Issues Forums and the Indigenous Issues Forums. The South Dakota Issues Forums are hosted by the Chiesman Foundation, an organization that promotes awareness of democracy and research and education programs to advance democratic ideals. Besides convening forums and offering training to moderators, Chiesman sponsors other deliberative initiatives, such as the Roundtables and the Youth Congress. The first bring together local leaders (legislators, public officials, private sector leaders, community leaders) to analyze policy problems and formulate recommendations for future action, and the latter are analogous to the Roundtables, but participants are high school students from across the state.

A special initiative to address the concerns of Indigenous people, the Indigenous Issues Forums (IIF) were launched around 2000 by Ruth Yellowhawk, Lily Mendoza and Harley Eagle. The IIF *“encourages partnerships, conducts workshops and training, creates frameworks and discussion guides and forms alliances to create a safe and productive space to talk together respectfully about challenging Tribal issues.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From “The Buffalo War”, Independent Television Service, Community Connections Project.

The IIF developed an original model that draws from the indigenous tradition of deliberation, talking circles, and the National Issues Forums, among others. Since many Native cultures use the oral tradition and are accustomed to exchanging knowledge in a circle setting, the IIF tried to revitalize this format to address important local issues in a way that is safe and familiar to Indigenous people. IIF circles aim to create a setting where all are equal and have a chance to talk and be heard. In IIF circles, participants are encouraged to listen with respect and empathy to all individuals and to suspend assumptions in order to be open to what others have to say. These guiding principles and the circle setting create an environment where individuals can talk openly about important issues and bond with other participants. Organizers claim that circle dialogue is “*more efficient [than other models of deliberation] because it gets people to talk at a deeper level, it gets quiet people involved... it’s a fair process.*” The IIF also involve the elderly to share their stories and use visual arts, movies, games, and music to stimulate discussion.

More than the issues that are discussed in the circle, the IIF emphasize that their work is a process that individuals can use in many spheres –from their families to their communities and workplaces- to stimulate respectful dialogue. Consequently, the concept of communities engaging in collective action after deliberation is probably premature in the IIF context. By providing communities a safe space to be together and deliberate, however, the IIF create a process of individual transformation that may well be a precondition to increased civic engagement.

The IIF aim to embed deliberative dispositions in their environment by cultivating relations with numerous institutions to plant the seeds of deliberation. The IIF has established relationships, and in some cases collaborated, with several churches and religious institutions, tribal colleges, juvenile correction facilities, centers for restorative justice –both in South Dakota and in other states- library associations, the United National Indian Tribal Youth, as well as organizations working in Indigenous issues in Hawaii (the Pu’a Foundation), in New Zealand and other countries. At different levels, all these institutions have had some exposure to the IIF and their deliberative processes. Because the IIF’s work is quite transformative, they hope that, by planting the seeds and cultivating relationships, organizations can engage in deliberation when they are ready for “systemic change.”

## Public Deliberation in Hawai'i

In Hawai'i, several actors engage the public and stakeholders in deliberation. The Hawai'i Public Policy Forums create opportunities for citizens to participate in deliberative forums; in the state legislature, some elected officials are successfully embedding deliberation in their legislative work.

Based at the University of Hawai'i, the Public Policy Forums are directed by Professor Dolores Foley, and have been promoting deliberation for many years. Past initiatives include public forums to discuss local issues, community visioning to define the future of Hawai'i and dialogues on Hawaiian sovereignty. Around the year 2000, the Public Policy Forums became the local affiliate of the National Issues Forums network and started offering annual workshops on convening and moderating NIF-type events. In collaboration with students at the University of Hawai'i, they have also explored the tensions between development and preservation of the environment and local traditions, and produced a discussion guide titled “*Choosing a Future for Hawai'i*.” The Public Policy Forums have a special focus on how deliberation can influence policy-making, and always try to involve elected officials in their training workshops, so they can learn how to use public forums and deliberation in the legislative context. Some members of the state Capitol and their staff participated over the years, and in some cases decided to introduce deliberative practices in their work. A senator, for example, decided to run a democratic caucus retreat in a deliberative fashion.

State Senator Senator Les Ihara is the strongest proponent of public deliberation at the Hawai'i Capitol. For years, Senator Ihara has been promoting a deliberative leadership style opposed to the traditional horse-trade bargaining model, both at the state and national levels. During his legislative career, Ihara launched an innovative power-sharing experiment known as “partnering,” where each senate committee was co-chaired in order to build trust among senators and favor consensus building. Ihara favors opening the legislative process to the public for consultation and input, and would like to introduce more deliberation in policy-making.

In partnership with the Public Policy Forums, he helped convene National Issues Forums that were coordinated with legislative activities. Forums addressed important public issues on the legislative agenda with the aim of introducing citizens' perspectives and moderating partisan polarization. At the forums, legislators, the public, and stakeholders deliberated about campaign finance, gambling, death with dignity, and media and society. Although the forums did not translate into direct impact in the policy-making process, they contributed to reducing animosity, showing the complexities of some issues, and finding middle ground solutions. Currently, Ihara is involved in a long term dialogue on genetically modified crops, sponsored by Pew, to find common ground among those who favor and oppose the testing of bio-engineered seeds in the state.

The Keiki Caucus (Children Caucus) at the state legislature is a unique example of deliberation and collaborative decision-making. Launched fifteen years ago by Senator Chun Oakland and Representative Arakaki, the Keiki Caucus brings together legislators, public agencies, service providers, NGOs and other groups active in children and youth issues to exchange information and draft annual legislative packages containing bills to improve children welfare. When the legislature is not in session, the Keiki Caucus meets monthly to discuss about children issues, available programs, and needs. This learning phase culminates in an annual summit, generally held in October, where also youths are involved, to prioritize among needs and draft an agenda for the legislative package to present in the following legislature. The legislative package for 2004, for example, included 42 bills on issues spanning from substance abuse, to education, youth development, and child welfare. During the learning phase, organizations share information and sometimes establish collaborations to address problems without recurring to new legislation. Additionally, the deliberative character of the Caucus also alters the traditional dynamics of advocacy. Instead of advocating only for their individual agendas, by working together in the Caucus, organizations may promote the Caucus's shared agenda in areas that have some affinities with theirs. The Keiki Caucus has become a fully embedded practice and most of the time legislators endorse the bills emerging from it because of the legitimacy and reputation of the process.

## Connecticut's Community Conversations about Education

Since 1997, the Community Conversations about Education have involved around 6,000 citizens in deliberative forums across the state of Connecticut. Sponsored by a local foundation, the Graustein Memorial Fund, and directed by the League of Women Voters, the conversations reached over 80 Connecticut communities, some of which held multiple conversations overtime. Conversations generally gather around 100 people, start with a meal, and involve small group discussion and reporting to the entire group. Since conversations aim at bringing together a diverse group –not only racially but also by age, education, income level, gender- conveners plan outreach activities very carefully and arrange for childcare, transportation, and food to address possible obstacles to participation. Conveners receive a small grant of around \$2,000 to cover food and other logistic expenses, and can choose from a list of topics –from school safety to closing the achievement gap- made available by the League. Similar to the National Issues Forums, each topic offers different approaches, and participants are encouraged by moderators to identify areas of disagreement, common ground, and next steps, or actions, that could be taken to address the problem.

Besides focusing on deliberation as a way to illuminate the complexities of a problem and enrich the public's judgment, the Community Conversations have a significant collective action component. Their purpose is to “*help communities find common ground for public action and ways to work together to address educational issues.*”<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, several of the League's requirements are designed to create a fertile environment for action. First, in order to apply for funding to hold a conversation, a convener must find five co-sponsors, a strategy that enables some coalition building. Second, moderators help participants identify common ground and possible actions. Third, organizers compile the notes taken during conversations into a document and circulate it with participants and decision-makers to promote change and local action. Fourth, the League strongly recommends that conveners organize follow-up meetings – often announced at the beginning or at the end of a conversation- to build on the recommendations emerged during the deliberation, and give citizens a sense that deliberation is not held in a vacuum, but is rather the first step of a process to promote change.

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<sup>5</sup> *Community Planning Guide*, The Community Conversations, by the Institute for Educational Leadership and Public Agenda, page 4.

In several cases, conversations did have some impact, leading to improved service delivery, and, occasionally, increased citizen engagement. First, conversations improve communication between the school system and families, by bringing to surface needs that schools are unaware of, or available resources that families ignore. Second, they provide a valuable source of community input to improve the design and delivery of public services. Third, since they are organized by broad coalitions of public and non profit service providers, advocacy groups, funders, and the school system, they improve coordination and collaboration among different actors. By and large, conversations seem to be more successful at providing community input to the school system or other local organizations than at mobilizing citizens in a sustained way. Hiring of staff to reach out to minority parents, changing the school start time to address the problem of sleep deprivation among students, expanding options for early childcare, and making school facilities more accessible for the community are just some of the changes that were prompted by Community Conversations.

Because of sustained funding, synergies with other programs and the coordination of the League of Women Voters, conversations have become embedded in a number of communities. Bridgeport, with over 40 conversations, is the best example, but also Norwalk, Hartford and other cities held multiple forums. In several cases, groups learned how to adapt the Community Conversations model to discuss other important local issues. In Bridgeport, the local Public Education Fund fully embraced public deliberation. Over the years, they have provided training to moderators and assistance to organizations that want to convene forums, developed new topics and built a strong coalition of local organization to sustain the use of public deliberation. The success of conversations reverberated also at the state level and in 2004, the Department of Education convened 25 forums in 39 communities to test the public's pulse on the need for universal pre-kindergarten education.

## ***Actors: Entrepreneurs and Catalysts***

The success of deliberation — as gauged by its embeddedness and resulting actions— depended in these cases upon highly skilled and capable individuals. We call these individuals *deliberative entrepreneurs* because, like commercial entrepreneurs, they develop novel “products” that they hope will engage and even delight would be audiences and users. Deliberative entrepreneurs understand that there is a “market” for public deliberation: the general public favors more opportunities to participate in public discussion and provide input in policy-making, and public institutions as well as civil society organization can use deliberation as a problem-solving tool. In a certain way, the importance of these entrepreneurs is made necessary in light of the kinds of deliberative projects that we examined. We examined cases in which intentionally structured deliberative practices were introduced into communities and institutions that did not have them before. They were introduced as good ideas to be adopted voluntarily rather than requirements of law or public policies. Like other voluntary and private sector initiatives, the uptake of these novel practices inevitably depends upon the tenacity, expertise, and persuasiveness of the individuals, in this field the deliberative entrepreneurs, who introduce them. Of course, entrepreneurship is necessary but far from sufficient. As we shall see in the following two sections, deliberation also requires resources and institutions, and it must fulfill real needs, in order to take root in local communities.

In West Virginia, for example, Betty Knighton first introduced National Issues Forums to involve individuals with limited literacy skills in public dialogue. That initiative got the attention of other organizations, which collaborated to convene additional forums, leading to a growing interest in public deliberation and its applicability. Similarly, in South Dakota, Ruth Yellowhawk introduced public forums to the Chiesman Foundation, and also established the Indigenous Issues Forums with colleagues interested in creating a venue for dialogue for Indigenous people and of Indigenous questions.

In Hawai’i, the Public Policy Forums, led by Dolores Foley, have been actively promoting public deliberation for many years, and around the year 2000 entered the National Issues Forums network and started organizing annual training workshops on the NIF model. The fact that a venue to promote public deliberation already existed within the University of Hawai’i,

however, did not make the outreach effort more pervasive, as only a limited number of National Issues Forums were held in the state. At the state Capitol, some legislators are strong promoters of public deliberation. Senator Ihara would like to open the policy-making process to the public, and in that spirit convened several public forums on issues that were debated before the legislature, and several other initiatives to make the legislative process more deliberative and inclusive. Some fifteen years ago, Senator Chun Oakland and Representative Arakaki launched a caucus involving legislators and stakeholders to work on children and youth issues, learn about the needs in this field, and collaboratively draft legislature to improve children welfare.

Connecticut's Community Conversations are, with no doubt, the case where public deliberation received the greatest support, in terms of funding and organizational capacity, since they are an initiative sponsored by the Graustein Memorial Fund and managed by Sonja Ahuja and Nancy Polk of the League of Women Voters. The program directors reach out to communities to promote conversations, administer grant funding provided to conveners, and assist conveners with all aspects of organizing a deliberation and following up on it.

In all cases, public deliberation is introduced by individuals interested in opening up discussion of public policy to the general public and creating more civically engaged citizens. Either by forging alliances with other organizations, or by harnessing the capacity of the institutions they are affiliated with, these entrepreneurs often establish deliberative "catalysts," centers that work to promote and expand the use of deliberation, generally at the local level. The myriad of organizations that belong to the National Issues Forums network and hold annual training workshops and public forums are examples of such catalysts.

Depending on the alliances they establish, the number of dedicated staff and the level of financial support they receive, some catalysts have more capacity than others. In West Virginia and South Dakota, deliberative entrepreneurs forged alliances with other institutions to promote deliberation, and in some cases received support from organizations in forms such as funding and infrastructure. The West Virginia Center for Civic Life, for example, has a small office at the University of Charleston, but the Indigenous Issues Forums do not have a physical office. In both cases, deliberation enjoys limited financial support, and owes much to the energies of its promoters, who are tireless activists.

In Hawai'i and Connecticut, on the other hand, deliberative projects started within organizations that already had the capacity and resources to support or institutionalize public deliberation. Clearly, with the support of a strong organizational structure and a secure line of funding, like in the case of the Community Conversations, public deliberation is more likely to thrive than if it depends mostly on the energy of tenacious activists.

In most cases, centers that promote public deliberation are affiliated with educational institutions, such as universities, community colleges and extension schools; other times they are within grassroots organizations led by activists. In this diverse ecosystem, certain organizations are more entrepreneurial than others at promoting public deliberation: some may simply hold one or two forums a year using existing discussion guides to expose citizens to public deliberation, while others – with a stronger focus on action and engagement – may frame local issues for deliberation, or reach out to other organizations.

### ***Deliberative Embeddedness***

In our initial assay, we searched for communities that exhibited iterated, sustained practices of structured deliberation. Again, our hypothesis was that such repeated deliberations would result from initially sporadic deliberative interventions that became adopted by, and “embedded” in, a range of previously undeliberative organizations and institutions. We further hypothesized that organizational and institutional embeddedness would be a condition of sustained public action that resulted from public deliberation. In some of the cases we examined, public deliberation did become an embedded practice as it was adapted to address important issues by organizations, local governments, and communities. In our analysis, we examined under what circumstances deliberation becomes embedded and tested the hypothesis that deliberation that is embedded is more likely to conduce to sustained action.

In defining embeddedness, we focused on a) the adaptation of deliberative models to address local issues; b) the adoption of public deliberation to advance the objectives of organizations or public institutions; and c) repeated use of public deliberation over time.

Framing local issues is a first indicator of embeddedness. We have observed numerous examples where deliberation was adapted locally: from discussion guides to address development in a Native American reservation, to forums on the media produced in South Dakota, and finally the adaptation of the NIF model to moderate a legislative caucus retreat in Hawai'i. Adapting a deliberative model requires time and effort, therefore those who decide to invest in this process understand that deliberation is not issue-specific; it is rather a versatile problem solving tool that can be used to tackle any issue. Understanding that deliberation is an adaptable process is an important first step toward embedded deliberation. In many cases, however, groups frame just one issue, and their use of deliberation is not sustained over time. For that reason, we consider local framing alone a first step toward embeddedness, not an indicator of substantial embeddedness.

As explained in our section on “actors”, some deliberative catalysts actively seek to embed deliberation within other organizations, groups or local communities. The West Virginia Center for Civic Life and the Community Conversations, for example, successfully introduced deliberative practices in previously undeliberative organizations. A clear example is provided by two West Virginia organizations, one fighting domestic violence, the other substance abuse, which decided to use public forums to involve the public in deliberations on domestic violence and underage drinking, respectively. Here, organizations not only framed topics of their interest, but used deliberative forums to further their missions of raising public awareness and engaging the community. Their use of deliberation was not sporadic, but carefully planned to hold forums across the state and gather input from these events to maximize the benefits of public deliberation. Similarly, in Connecticut, groups adapted deliberative conversations to discuss problems such as school safety, budget allocation, or early child care needs, and acted upon the input emerged at the deliberations.

Finally, we consider iterated use of deliberation over time as a third indicator of embeddedness. While some organizations or institutions decide to recur to deliberation to solve a specific problem, but then go back to business as usual, others use deliberation repeatedly over time, thus embedding it fully in their *modus operandi*. Two Hawai'i state legislators, for instance, have been using a deliberative approach for crafting policies for the children for over fifteen years. Dozens of organizations serving children and youth meet with legislators several

times a year within the Keiki Caucus to exchange information on their clients' needs, prioritize needs against available resources, and collaboratively draft bills. The Keiki Caucus's accomplishments, continuous interest and support from its stakeholders, and the long life of this body are clear signs of embeddedness. The Keiki Caucus became so fully embedded with the legislature that many suggest it would very likely survive even in the absence of the legislators that started it.

The Connecticut Community Conversations also offer some examples of iterated use of deliberation. In several communities, organizations that got together to convene conversations formed strong coalitions, and held numerous conversations over the years to address issues around public education and beyond. The city of Bridgeport, with several dozens conversation, is the clearest example. There, a group of civil society organizations embraced public deliberation so fully that they became the local reference point for all those who want to convene conversations, providing training and technical assistance. Conversations proved a very useful tool to create broad coalitions- including civil society groups, the school system and parent associations- that successfully promoted community engagement and change in public education. Community Conversations' success echoed also at the state level, so much that the State Department decided to use deliberative conversations to assess its citizens' opinions around reforms in early childhood education.

We have so far examined indicators of embeddedness, but what reasons prompt organizations, institutions or communities to embed deliberation in the first place? Although several factors influence embeddedness, deliberation's *relevance* and the degree to which there is a sense of *ownership* around it seem to be the most important reasons behind embeddedness. Let's consider these in turn.

Relevance is crucial for participation and embeddedness. Inevitably, if they deem the topic of deliberation to be irrelevant, citizens will be less likely to participate in deliberations. Sometimes participants may feel disconnected from certain topics or question the way issues are framed. This obstacle may be addressed by choosing relevant topics, or by framing issues of local importance, as the topic of Hawai'i's economic development and land use, or that of preserving tribal languages, developed by the Indigenous Issues Forums. Deliberations that

address topics that are deemed urgent by the community, such as school quality, mounting crime or the building of a megastore in the neighborhood, are more likely to draw high participation and engagement. In an era where people have limited time and endless options for how to spend it, deliberation needs to be relevant if citizens are to participate, let alone engage in follow up.

Similarly, in promoting public deliberation with advocacy organizations or policy-makers, deliberative entrepreneurs present deliberation as a relevant and actionable tool. They promote deliberation as a process to deal with issues that are locally relevant -sometimes intractable problems where traditional meetings failed. These activists' energy and tenacity in creating strategic alliances with organizations and identifying relevant issues that could be addressed through deliberative forums is instrumental to embeddedness. This was the case with forums on underage drinking or domestic violence, where deliberation was presented as a process to discuss relevant topics and advance the objectives of convening organizations. One of the reasons of the success of the Community Conversations About Public Education may well be the relevance and immediacy of the topic not only to conveners, but also to the general public.

Relevance alone, however, is not enough to prompt organizations to embed deliberation. Those who decide to strategically convene deliberative events are prepared to use forums as an opportunity to gather community input, generate action and change, in other words, they have ownership of the process. In West Virginia, the organizations that convened forums on underage drinking and domestic violence decided to embark in issue framing and convening to educate citizens and gather input on public perceptions. Their use of deliberation was "deliberate" and carefully planned to advance their objectives. After being introduced to public forums by a deliberative entrepreneur, they understood how they could use a deliberative format to advance their mission and chose to devote time, resources and staff to framing issues. They trained their staff to become moderators, convened forums across the state, and gathered and used the public input collected at forums. All these actions show their level of ownership over public deliberation.

Those who "own" public deliberation, are more likely to embed it and use it strategically. In Clarksburg, WV, a city councilor utilized a forum on underage drinking to pull together different players who were working on the issue and formed a community coalition which

enacted several strategies to curb alcohol use among minors. By design, the conveners of Community Conversations are required to assemble a coalition of sponsors in order to apply for funding, to put together a large and diverse planning committee and reach out for participants, to train moderators and note-takers, to provide for logistics, to prepare a report after the deliberation, and convene follow-up meetings. The organizational effort required is so intense, that they will decide to invest time and resources in conversations only if they think they have ownership of deliberation to advance important objectives.

It is only when there is ownership that conveners will embed deliberation and enact strategies that maximize its impact, such as bringing together a diverse group of participants, reducing obstacles to participation, including common citizens, but also decision-makers, making sure that all the right players are in the room to form strategic alliances, and being prepared to act on deliberations' inputs. In some cases, we observed that, although deliberations were held around topics of local importance, such as choosing a future for Hawai'i or the preservation of tribal languages, action did not occur because no group emerged to take ownership of the process. Without an effort to find the right players, or create strong coalitions that have buy in, deliberation may provide personal enrichment and even transformation, but it will hardly become embedded and prompt follow up action. As much as deliberation can be promoted, even around relevant topics, it is not until organizations or communities have significant ownership of it that it becomes a tool for action and policy change.

Although relevance and ownership appear to be the most important factors prompting embeddedness, public deliberation's ability to promote a positive environment, more conducive to collaboration and action, is also important to embeddedness. Too often, civil society organizations and local government, as well as the general public, seem disillusioned with public meetings. Citizens see them as pointless exercises that will lead to no follow-up, and local governments as times for being bashed by the public. However, public deliberation's rules of the game, where all opinions count and are respected, their focus on diversity, and the presence of moderators, make for very unusual public meetings. Deliberation, unlike debate, promotes giving reason for complex choices, and listening to all opinions with respect. Therefore, many of those who experience public deliberation appreciate how it tones down partisan discussion, the valuable input provided by a diversity of voices, and the more positive atmosphere it creates.

Often, deliberation helps identify commonalities even on divisive issues, thus enabling different actors to work together in the middle ground. The ability to create a positive atmosphere for discussion and collaboration prompts some who participate in public deliberations to use the same process again in different contexts. In Connecticut, for example, several informants reported that their experience with deliberation was so positive, that they decided to use it again to solve other issues. In other cases, conversations were so successful in certain communities that through word of mouth other groups decided to replicate them.

We found some support for the notion that public action is more likely to result from deliberative initiatives that become embedded in local institutions or problem-solving practices. As explained above, when deliberation becomes fully embedded, groups have high levels of ownership and decide to use it as a tool to address highly relevant issues. Under these circumstances, action is more likely to happen. Community Conversations are probably the best example where embeddedness led to policy changes and increased community engagement around education. In Bridgeport, where conversations are extremely embedded, they prompted policy change and improved service delivery, and they are currently being used to feed into a strategic plan to close the achievement gap. In Hawai'i, the Keiki Caucus fully embeds public deliberation in the legislative cycle, which in turn leads to the adoption of policies that are shaped by the input of public and non-profit service providers, advocacy organizations and beneficiaries.

## ***Public Action***

Different types of actions can be prompted by participating in public forums. Public deliberation, for example, may spur civic engagement and mobilization to address some of the issues that were the object of deliberation. Alternatively, that deliberation may influence decision-makers to change public policies or improve service delivery.

There are several caveats in this account of public action. Often the outcomes of a deliberative forum are but one factor in a larger chain of events that lead to action or changes in public policies. Additionally, our case studies rely upon interviews and sometimes scant

available literature rather than extended ethnographic observation. The limited extent of this enterprise has made it difficult to establish firm causal links between deliberation and action. Since we examined only a few cases, it is impossible to assert that the causal mechanisms that we did observe can be generalized to local deliberation more broadly. Very often, our informants refer to public deliberations as events that built momentum around a certain issue, creating an environment ripe for action, but are careful not to give credit to deliberation alone. We took a similarly cautious approach in our analysis and decided to focus only on actions that could be directly attributable to public deliberation.<sup>6</sup> We were able to detect significant action examples only in the cases of West Virginia and Connecticut. In Hawai'i and South Dakota, we could not identify prominent actions, additionally the Indigenous Issues Forums approach is geared more toward personal transformation than changing public policies.<sup>7</sup>

In our cases, public deliberation rarely mobilized participants to *collective* action. It is typically not the case that, after a deliberative event, people start organizing task forces to address the issues they deliberated on. In general, public forums are an occasion to introduce the public to a more deliberative analysis of policy issues, so they can be exposed to a variety of opinions and grasp the complexity of certain topics. Deliberative events should increase participants' civic-mindedness, but they rarely translate into collective mobilization or organizing. In some cases, deliberative forums do generate hunger for more deliberation and follow-up work, but unless someone emerges to take charge of organizing, momentum rapidly fades. As a consequence, the public forums we examined rarely serve as a recruiting tool to involve citizens in follow-up initiatives.

If follow-up actions result, they are generally taken by civic organizations or public institutions whose members were engaged in deliberative forums. In Clarksburg, WV, for example, there was significant follow-up after a forum on underage drinking because the event had been carefully planned to invite all the actors that were already working on the problem from

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<sup>6</sup> However, we also provide brief narratives of instances where deliberation contributed to building momentum for policy reform, or action.

<sup>7</sup> Although the Keiki Caucus in Hawai'i has been extremely successful at shaping the legislative agenda, it cannot be cited as a standard case where deliberation prompted action and change. By its very nature, the Caucus was intentionally set up by legislators as a channel to inform their policy-making and engage stakeholders. In all other cases, on the other hand, it is activists or other organizations that advocate for using deliberation to expand public input in policy-making.

different capacities: from the chief of police and the city council, to the judge and organizations representing victim advocates. The forum was an opportunity to bring all these actors together and form a coalition to address underage drinking in a more systematic way. In this case, public deliberation enabled *coordination* which was beneficial for planning follow-up actions.

The Connecticut Community Conversations are designed to promote coordination even prior to the deliberations, because they must be organized by a group of six organizations, which in turn need to assemble an even larger planning committee (of around 20) to ensure broad outreach and diversity of opinions. The coalitions that convene community conversations often involve from education advocacy organizations to parent groups, the church and the school system. The planning phase requires such a significant investment in terms of time and energy, that conveners have an interest in maximizing the outcomes of conversations. Therefore organizers plan on how to use conversations' feedback to further their objectives. A group of organizations analyzing early childcare options in Mansfield, CT, for example, held a conversation to test the need for full-day kindergarten and the level of support for initiatives in this field. The conversation provided valuable community input on the topic and generated significant follow-up, which eventually led to expanding kindergarten options for Mansfield's families. Conversations, given the size of participants (around 100) and the focus on diversity, are an important tool to provide *community input* that can be used to create momentum, and promote action and policy change.

We also observed that action may occur when there is sufficient *engagement of decision-makers*. Sometimes, being exposed to public deliberation can be an eye-opening experience for elected officials or other policy-makers. They may learn that there are needs they have overlooked, or get new ideas to solve old problems and improve service delivery. Since the school system is often present at Community Conversations, listening to participants provides valuable input –such as ideas to address communication gaps with families or disciplinary problems. In many cases, conveners purposely invite elected or other government officials because they have the authority to address issues discussed at public forums, so involving them is the first step to promote action and change. Additionally, if decision-makers are present in public forums, they are more likely to be held accountable by other participants, thus creating additional incentives for following up on possible recommendations.

We also observed action when public deliberations were held in *synergy* with other programs. In West Virginia, some universities provide resources for students who want to convene National Issues Forums, or support follow-up actions emerging from forums. In Connecticut, groups who receive funding to address early education issues, are encouraged to use deliberative conversations to gather community input on the topic.

Our analysis leads us to conclude that public deliberation rarely prompts common citizens to mobilize and take action around issues. However, deliberation can facilitate action by enabling coordination, providing community input, involving decision-makers and exploiting synergies with other programs.

Clearly, when groups or organizations embed public deliberation, action is more likely to occur for several reasons. First, their investment of time and organizational resources and their understanding of deliberation as an actionable tool, will lead conveners to maximize the outcome of deliberations. In other words, if they set up a relatively costly process, they will also be ready to capture the benefits of public deliberation, by, for example, being prepared to act on inputs, bringing together the “right” players to promote change, or using deliberation to promote civic engagement. Second, when deliberation is so embedded that its use is repeated over time, conveners become more sophisticated and improve their abilities, for example, to reach out to broader coalitions, or involve key partners.

## ***Conclusions: Lessons and Surprises***

These case studies, then, suggest several tentative conclusions about the elements and connections between intentional deliberation and public action in community settings.

First is the importance of conceiving local leadership in these instances as *deliberative entrepreneurship*. In the cases where deliberation was both embedded and systematically related to public action, public leaders possessed several distinctive characteristics. They bridged two very different worlds of knowledge and practice. They were conversant in the mostly national level discussion about the importance of dialogue and deliberation as articulated and expressed by groups such as the National Issues Forums and the Study Circles Resource Centers. The leaders learned the language and practices of forums from the materials and events that these national actors organized. But on the other hand, they were also deeply connected to the issues, challenges, leaders, organizations, and institutions of their local communities. Their entrepreneurial success consisted in large measure in being able to bridge these two worlds – in adapting materials, models, and practices of deliberation to address the needs of their communities and to persuade other local leaders—who for the most part had no particular commitment to deliberation—that these tools would usefully address *their* problems and needs.

Second, the experiences of these communities bear out the utility of embeddedness as a concept, a way to think about deliberation. They also show how difficult it has been to achieve deliberative embeddedness. We searched for communities in which we thought that we would find embedded deliberation and found only partial success. Despite the energy and commitment of local leaders in South Dakota and Hawai'i, many of the relevant organizations and institutions for the most part have not adopted deliberative practices and methods as their own—though of course that may yet happen. Where entrepreneurs did embed deliberation successfully, two elements made this possible. First, entrepreneurs identified relevant needs—pressing problems—that might be solved through greater public deliberation. Second, they built the machinery of public deliberation in a way that required substantial commitments of time, resources, and energy from local partners to create what we defined as “ownership” of deliberation. Through this strategy of required co-investment, those (non-deliberative) organizations gained a commitment to the deliberative forums they helped to build and even to implementing the results

of those deliberations. Presenting deliberation not as an abstract concept but as a relevant process that organizations should own to achieve their objectives, is fundamental to deliberation's embeddedness.

Finally, public action did sometimes result from intentional deliberation. That action, however, was usually undertaken not by the participants of public deliberation directly, but rather by institutions and organizations that had, through the processes of embeddedness just described, some ownership of public deliberation as part of their repertoire of decision-making and problem-solving. It is only when organizations have ownership of the deliberative process that they intentionally embed it in their decision making and are prepared to act on deliberations' outcomes. Conveners need to be prepared to capture the ideas and momentum generated by public deliberation, otherwise interest for action will rapidly vanish.

Given the nature of this investigation, these lessons should be regarded as tentative heuristics to be developed and explored through future research. Throughout, we have focused upon the more direct and easily observable kinds of public action that consist of direct policy change or organizational and collective action outside of government on the very problems and issues that were addressed through public deliberation. We did not attempt to assess whether, and when, individual engagement with intentional deliberation produced action through indirect channels. It is very plausible, for example, to suppose that individuals who participate in these intentional deliberations gain both an appreciation for the transformative power of deliberation and skills in organizing it. Those individuals may then take those skills and apply them to other problems in other organizations in ways that produce important public action. These indirect pathways present a promising arena for further research.

Nevertheless, public action of the sort examined here — action that directly addresses the issues and problems that are the focus of intentionally organized deliberation — remains an important category. We believe that the concepts developed here — deliberative entrepreneurship, local embeddedness, and organizational and institutional action — are crucial elements that connect the very under-explored connections between deliberative forms and public action. Practitioners and scholars alike should together develop a more complete and

coherent understanding of these and other links in the chains that connection public deliberation to public action.

**Table 2: Synthesis of Cases**

	West Virginia's National Issues Forums	Public Deliberation in South Dakota		Public Deliberation in Hawai'i	Connecticut's Community Conversations About Education
		Indigenous Issues Forums	South Dakota Issues Forums		
<b>1. Issues Covered</b>					
<i>Examples</i>	Education, economy, underage drinking, domestic violence	Indigenous languages, development in a reservation, immigration	Youth, Media, Immigration	Development and tourism in Hawai'i, gambling, campaign finance, death with dignity, youth/children issues	Public schools and education
<b>2. Input</b>					
<i>Deliberative Entrepreneur</i>	Betty Knighton	Ruth Yellowhawk, Lily Mendoza, Harley Eagle	Ruth Yellowhawk, John Usera	Dolores Foley and Karen Cross (University of Hawaii); Senator Les Ihara; Senator Chun Oakland, Rep. Arakaki (Keiki Caucus)	Graustein Memorial Fund, League of Women Voters
<i>Institutional support</i>	University of Charleston	NO	Chiesman Foundation for Democracy	University of Hawai'i, state legislature	Graustein Memorial Fund, LWV
<b>3. Action</b>					
<i>Examples</i>	Follow up in Clarksburg, students' initiatives	Personal transformation	Limited	Limited, some follow up activities after training /Significant (Keiki Caucus)	Follow up in several communities, synergies with other empowerment program
<i>Capacity building</i>	Built capacity of organizations, students	Dialogue to build trust among communities as precondition to action	Limited	Limited / Significant (Keiki Caucus)	Significant focus on follow up, coalition building, mini grants to alumni
<b>4. Embeddedness</b>					
<i>Local framing</i>	Issues on schools, poor families, domestic violence,	Model was revised for Indigenous issues. Development in	Media, taxation	Choosing a future for Hawaii	Conversations used for other local issues

	underage drinking	Rosebud, Indigenous language			
<i>Organizations</i>	WVCADV, PRC, University of Charleston	Limited	Limited, some academic institutions	University of Hawai'i	Significant, several local community organizations and education funds, State Dept. of Ed.
<i>Legislators</i>	NO	NO	NO	YES Sen. Ihara, Sakamoto, Chun Oakland, Rep. Arakaki	NO

## 2. West Virginia's National Issues Forums

### ***The West Virginia Center for Civic Life***

The West Virginia Center for Civic Life (WVCCL) belongs to the National Issues Forums network, and was established in Charleston, WV, in the mid 1990s with the motto “*Promoting Nonpartisan Community Discussions of Important Public Issues.*” The Center grew out of a series of NIF forums held in the early 1990s, which were sponsored by the West Virginia Humanities Council –a neutral, scholarly organization with a mission of doing community work- to involve in dialogue people with low reading skills and ensure that their voice be heard in public discourse.

These initial forums got the attention of other organizations which expressed an interest in increasing public deliberation in West Virginia, and more forums were held on a variety of topics. The interest in public forums grew so much that it was eventually decided to create a specific entity to provide an institutional space and a public face for initiatives involving dialogue and deliberation in West Virginia. The University of Charleston, WV offered space for an office and the West Virginia Center for Civic Life was created as a 501-c-3. The Center is very small and staffed with Betty Knighton, its founder, working as part-time director, and a VISTA volunteer. However, under Knighton’s leadership, the Center has been very successful at disseminating the practice of dialogue and deliberation among West Virginians and at developing forums on issues of local importance.

The Center, which describes itself as “*a nonpartisan organization of West Virginia individuals and groups working together to promote the engagement of our citizens in important public issues through the practices of deliberative democracy*”<sup>8</sup> is involved in a variety of activities. The WVCCL does outreach to promote deliberation among communities and organizations, provides moderator training, and partners with individuals and organizations that

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<sup>8</sup> West Virginia Center for Civic Life brochure.

want to create opportunities for communities to come together and deliberate. Besides educating communities on the practice of deliberation and assisting them in setting up forums, the Center works with organizations interested in convening forums or framing new issues. Partnering with organizations is a strategic decision to maximize the impact of the WVCCL limited resources. Given that the Center is small and understaffed, its director decided to partner with larger organizations to harness their capacity to promote deliberation. The WVCCL, for example, has partnered with the Prevention Resource Center (PRC), an organization interested in convening forums on underage drinking. The PRC developed its own forums on underage drinking, and many of its staffs were trained by WVCCL and moderated forums across West Virginia. Similarly, the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WVCADV) partnered with the WVCCL to use forums to increase public awareness on domestic violence. The fact that structured and well staffed organizations decided to partner with the Center to launch a series of forums allowed a very pervasive outreach effort.

In addition, the WVCCL was very successful at training college students and involving them in forums in a number of West Virginia universities. In one instance, students from eight different campuses decided to create their own issue guide to discuss about opportunities for young adults in the state. The partnership between the Center and the University of Charleston, WV is particularly fruitful, because many students were trained, several professors include elements of deliberation in their courses, and attendance to forums became part of the curriculum, making deliberation truly “embedded” in university life. The collaboration between the Center and the PRC, the WVCADV and the University of Charleston will be described in more detail in the chapters that follow.

Finally, because of her long experience with deliberation, the WVCCL’s director is engaged in a number of activities with the National Issues Forums network, like helping to set up other Public Policy Institutes, developing national issue guides, such as a guide titled “*Examining Health Care*”, and conducting research on public deliberation, to name a few.

## **The Forums**

Because of West Virginia's geography, with its panhandles, some areas in the state can be particularly isolated and disjointed. The first forums which were held across the state -on topics as varied as free speech and the economy- provided an opportunity for participants to know what other people in West Virginia thought about the same issues. The fact that they were gauging the opinion of West Virginians from across the state gave forum organizers a sense of purpose and motivated them to further engage in public deliberation.

The Center has played a key role in convening forums on a range of topics, from healthcare to opportunities for youth in West Virginia, from education to the problems of low-income families. In some cases, the Center promoted deliberation using topics and discussion guides prepared by the National Issues Forums Institute, as in the case of the forums that were held in West Virginia's Campuses in 2003 on "*Americans' Role in the World*". In other cases, they chose local issues and framed them, developing guides on West Virginians' relationship with public schools and on the challenges facing low-income families in the state. Finally, the Center also partnered with organizations to assist them in using public deliberation to advance their objectives. The Center helped the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence conduct a series of forums on domestic violence and assisted the West Virginia Prevention Resource Center to set up regional and community forums on underage drinking. Some of the issue guides developed in West Virginia inspired forums in other states, such as the forums on "*Making Ends Meet*", which was adapted in South Dakota. Some of the forums are described in more detail below.

### **A Closer Look at Some Forums**

"*What is the Public Role in Public Education*" is the title of a discussion guide developed in the state to discuss West Virginians' relationship with public schools.<sup>9</sup> This topic emerged from conversations that the Center had with Kanawha County residents, starting in 1998, on issues of public concern. Public education was a recurrent theme. However, by analyzing the issue more closely, the group of citizens found that "*the heart of people's concern was their*

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<sup>9</sup> In 1999, the National Issues Forums had sponsored similar forums, nationwide, on the topic "*Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?*"

*relationship with their schools and with public education in general.*”<sup>10</sup> A framework for discussion was prepared, offering three approaches: 1) Let professional educators set the direction for public education; 2) Give communities more say in decisions about their schools; 3) Let parents choose the schools best suited for their children.<sup>11</sup>

Nineteen forums were held across the state from April to June 2000, attracting 387 people, an average of 20 people per forum. Over 70% of participants were women, and 87% were white (96% of West Virginia’s residents are Caucasian). Most of them were adults between 18 and 49 year-old, and had some connection to public schools: some were parents, other students, educators and administrators. Overall, forum participants were unsatisfied with their relationship with public schools for a variety of reasons, including the changing roles of families and schools in society. Some also felt a growing divide between big schools and communities, and blamed increasing bureaucracy to put excessive strain on teachers. Despite the problems with public education, participants opted for measures to strengthen it, rather than choosing alternatives such as school vouchers for private schools or home schooling. Parents recognized their central role in their children’s lives and agreed that more engagement in school life was needed. Many suggested that, beyond parents, the whole community should be more involved in public schools to offer skills, resources, and hold schools accountable.

Participants’ reaction to public forums was very positive. Most of them felt they had gained a better knowledge of the issue and appreciated being exposed to different perspectives, over 72% reported gaining “*new insights as a result of participating in this forum*” and 88% agreed that forums had given them new ideas of possible actions to take to address the issue of public schools in West Virginia.

The WVCCCL also helped frame an issue book on the economic challenges facing West Virginia families in a changing economy. With jobs shifting from more traditional sectors such as mining and manufacturing to the service sector, personal income level significantly lower than the national average, growing healthcare costs, limited welfare support, and challenges in

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<sup>10</sup> *Ties that Bind: West Virginians Talk About Their Relationship with Public Schools*, West Virginia Center for Civic Life, October 2000, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ties that Bind: West Virginians Talk About Their Relationship with Public Schools*, West Virginia Center for Civic Life, October 2000, p.1

education, many West Virginia families struggled with economic hardship. The discussion guide titled “*Making Ends Meet: What Should We Do to Support Working Families*” was used at a series of thirty public forums, attended by 620 people, from August 2000 to January 2001.

As in the previous forum cycle, the majority of participants were women (2/3) and 62% of participants were adults of age 18 to 49. In terms of racial composition, 96% of participants were white –reflecting the state’s predominantly white population, and a diversity of income levels was represented.<sup>12</sup> The forum proposed three approaches to support local families: 1) Improve the state’s business climate; 2) Promote lifelong learning; and 3) Reduce economic inequality. Some central themes emerged during the discussions and from post-forum questionnaires. It was generally felt that it was unfair that numerous working families lived in poverty in the state. Many thought businesses should be given incentives to locate in West Virginia, as long as they offered decent jobs and salaries to their employees and did not take advantage of the local economic conditions to offer underpaid jobs. Many considered education and human development as key factors for workers to be successful players in the job market. Interestingly, lower income participants were more favorable to incentives to create jobs than to state measures to improve education and economic development. This cluster, together with middle income participants, was also strongly in favor of universal healthcare, even if that implied higher taxes.<sup>13</sup>

Overwhelmingly, participants “*agreed that [forums] encouraged a variety of ideas and perspectives*”<sup>14</sup> (93% of respondents). For 87% of respondents, forums were a useful way to gain new insight on the issue and around 75% expressed interest in participating in other forums. Finally, 80% of participants reported that forums were a source of new ideas on actions they could take to address the issue. Among these were increasing public awareness, focusing on volunteering, creating partnerships with local businesses and contacting local, state and federal officials to discuss about the issue.

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<sup>12</sup> Of all participants, 28% had annual household incomes below \$25,000, 32% earned \$25,000-50,000, 19% had incomes of \$50,000-75,000, and 21% earned more than \$75,000. *Making Ends Meet: What Should We Do to Support Working Families? A Report on Public Forums in West Virginia*, February 2001, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Making Ends Meet: What Should We Do to Support Working Families? A Report on Public Forums in West Virginia*, February 2001, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Making Ends Meet: What Should We Do to Support Working Families? A Report on Public Forums in West Virginia*, February 2001, p.17.

Besides framing issues locally, the WVCCL also promotes forums that use NIF issue guides. Perhaps one of the best examples of this kind of engagement is the series of forums on “*Our Nation’s Kids*.” Although the topic had been discussed at forums nationwide, West Virginia organized by far the most pervasive effort on this topic, with 40 public forums held in 1999 and over 1,100 participants, some 250 of which from high schools. To recognize the state’s special contribution, the NIF national report on the topic was not released in Washington DC, as customary, but in West Virginia. In conjunction with the release of the national report, two local newspapers offered wide coverage of the event, and the Charleston Daily Mail devoted four full pages to a special report on forum findings in West Virginia.

West Virginians felt strongly that parents play a pivotal role in raising healthy children, however, they also thought that more governmental support is needed in areas such as preventive healthcare and early childhood education. Although many believed that schools should be better utilized to support families and the community in after school hours, it was also clear that sometimes schools are overburdened with responsibilities –from academic to extracurricular activities and social services- that belong to families. Participants also blamed exposure to sex and violence messages on the media, and emphasized the role of moral messages from parents and educators.

## **Participation**

In terms of public participation, the forums are at the same time open to the general public, *and* targeted to specific stakeholders. On the one hand a forum convener needs to think strategically about “*who should be in the room*” to make progress on the issue that is being discussed. On the other hand, however, a forum is fruitful and enriching when there is diversity of opinions, including those of non-experts and of people who are not directly connected to an issue –as Knighton suggested “*you need all perspectives to make progress*”.

While open to the general public, forums participants are not precisely representative of the general population. Forum attendance varies greatly, depending on interest around the topic and several additional factors, such as the time of the day when a forum is convened, weather conditions, other events taking place at the same time, and the distance between the forum venue and people’s residences. For example, forums on underage drinking started at a “regional” scale,

and were very poorly attended because many people had to drive an hour or more to participate. Additionally, West Virginians are particularly attached to their families, communities, and areas of residence, and are generally more comfortable with small scale forums conducted at the community level.

Attendance is also a function of outreach activities carried out by organizers. Often, simply posting flyers at the local library is not enough to engage people, whereas mailings followed by telephone calls seem to be more effective. Obviously, this is a costly and time consuming method that is usually utilized to engage target populations or professionals. Generally, when people are trained in the NIF model, they concentrate more on moderating techniques while underestimating the importance of the outreach work that is necessary to involve the public in forums. However, convening a forum is often more complicated than moderating one, as it “*takes partnerships.*” Without a robust network of partners and local organizations it is hard to reach out to enough participants and ensure the diversity that is vital to forums.

## **Deliberation and the Media**

The use of local media is very important to inform the public and stimulate them to participate. West Virginia Public Television, for example, has done some programming on upcoming forums. When forums were held in campuses to discuss about opportunities for young adults in West Virginia, Public Television followed college students throughout the process, from the training phase to the time when the forums were held, and broadcast programs to inform the public about the initiative and encourage them to participate.

The WVCCL also partnered with the state’s public television to air a public affairs program on healthcare titled “*A Prescription for Healthcare.*” During this one hour program, experts and legislators were shown clips from public forums on healthcare held across the state, and addressed some of the issues where public policy and public concerns coincided. The program aired on all public television channels in the state.

Although Public Television is the WVCCL’s most long term and focused media partner, also two Charleston daily newspapers have helped engage the public in forums. On many

occasions, these papers did not merely advertise upcoming forums, but published the discussion framework, including the possible approaches to the issues, so that the public could start reflecting on the issues ahead of forums. Newspapers have also published articles on forum outcomes, as in the case of the report following a series of forums titled “*Our Nation’s Kids*.”

## ***Deliberation and Action***

In this chapter we will analyze the impact forum may have in moving from *deliberating* on issues to *addressing* them according to the concerns and recommendations emerged from public deliberations. Collective action can happen if forum participants decide to engage in the issue they deliberated by, for example, creating committees, task forces or action groups. Additionally, the recommendations emerged during forums can be gathered and disseminated with the media and elected officials to create some pressure around issues and influence policy-making.

It is generally the case that forums outcomes and questionnaires are gathered and analyzed to produce a final report on the issue that was examined. These reports, describing the public’s concerns and orientation, are then distributed to groups and individuals the WVCCL thinks would value this information, such as legislators, professional groups, stake holders, and government officials. Although no legislator ever contacted the Center to promote a forum on a certain issue –probably because it would be perceived as a self-serving move to advance her own agenda- in some cases supportive legislators did call the Center to testify on certain topics in front of committees. Some legislators have also participated in forums to listen to the public’s concerns and are supportive of the Center’s work.

It is particularly arduous to isolate the forum’s impact on public policies, because the information they produce is often but one component in a broader environment to promote change on a certain issue. However, one good example can be found in the forums on access to healthcare. As explained above, some of these forums were filmed, and were followed by a special TV program where experts such as legislators and insurance specialists responded to the public’s concerns on healthcare. After around 30 forums were held, the WVCCL assembled a

report expressing the public's concerns and opinions on healthcare and presented it to a state legislative committee. At a time where several initiatives were bubbling up around healthcare, the forums report contributed to reinforcing existing momentum, and legislators ended up enacting some reforms to the healthcare system.

Forum participants' likelihood to take collective action on some of the issues is, on the other hand, more anecdotal. Because of the brevity of forums, which generally last around two hours, it is difficult that they generate enough momentum to stimulate follow-up action. More than deciding to act on a certain topic, participants seem to value the relationship-building that happens during forums, and favor having further dialogue on other issues, either using existing NIF guides or developing new frameworks for local issues.

Additionally, the issue of action after deliberation is a delicate one for the Center which, in order to preserve its non-partisanship and integrity, cannot endorse a specific position, other than presenting forum outcomes as the public's thinking on given issue. Their role is rather to prepare an environment of awareness to stimulate people to take action *after* the forums, because "*deliberation isn't an end in itself, it's a foundation for people to move to action.*" Although the Center cannot advocate for a specific policy or action, forums are designed to build public thinking on an issue, and possibly encourage people to become more engaged. At forums, during the conclusions phase, participants discuss next steps and actions that might be prompted by deliberation. Additionally, forum reports are a means to show the public that deliberation resulted in a tangible product containing their thinking on an issue. Many reports list proposals of "actions" emerged during the forum, to give policy-makers an indication of people's preferences and to stimulate the public to mobilize by providing some examples of possible actions.

College students are a group that responded very favorably to forums and engaged in several follow up activities. In 2002, the WVCCL and Campus Compact launched a year-long initiative to recruit students from ten different campuses, expose them to forums and train them to become moderators and facilitate forums on "*Americans' Role in the World.*" This initiative was particularly successful, and was closely followed by Public Television, which filmed students during the different phases of the process and had weekly news broadcasts on the event. Prompted by the success of this initiative, the Center and West Virginia Campus Compact

launched a project to bring students from eight different campuses together to train them not only on how to moderate forums, but also on how to select an issue, frame it, and develop a discussion guide around it. In August of 2003, students decided that the problem of limited opportunities for youth who want to work and thrive in West Virginia was a good topic, and started to frame it by conducting surveys and preparing a discussion guide, which was tested on campuses in early 2004.

The forums, titled “*For Future Generations: Creating opportunities for young adults in West Virginia*” were held in several campuses, for a total of approximately 15-20 forums, and the students’ achievements were commended in a Senate resolution.

Interestingly, these forums were structured since the beginning with a built-in incentive for follow-up work. The West Virginia Campus Compact decided to provide mini-grants of up to \$1,000 for community action projects emerged during forums.<sup>15</sup> It appears that students were particularly interested to mobilize and take action because “*they feel they have a catalyst role in the community*”. The grants funded a number of voter registration drives and a project to transform the town of Sophia, WV, into a historical site. All these projects involved working with local communities, especially the one in Sophia, where students had to collect materials to document that the town is historically significant. Other students decided to take action by mentoring highschool students from eight campuses in Kanawha County on how to organize and moderate public forums. In January 2006, the highschool students will be trained in the NIF model, and in the spring of 2006 they will co-moderate with their mentors forums on opportunities for young adults. At the conclusion of the project, students will collect the information emerged during the forums and decide how to utilize it.

### ***The Collaboration between the West Virginia Center for Civic Life and the University of Charleston***

The University of Charleston has a composite educational approach which focuses on academic curriculum and student achievement, but also on co-curricular activities centered on

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<sup>15</sup> Funding for the mini-grants is provided by the Appalachian Regional Commission, National Campus Compact, and West Virginia Campus Compact, which coordinates the use of funds.

social service and engagement with the community. Their holistic approach, which focuses “*not only on good grades, but also on the ability to lead, professionally and personally*” has been a very fertile environment for public deliberation.

The collaboration between the WVCCL and the University started in the mid 1990s, when the Center was provided some office space on campus. At the beginning, some students were trained on the NIF model and test forums were held. Since forums were received with interest and helped empower students, the university decided to insert them in the curricular activities in what became an innovative approach. Under this model, all students have to be exposed to public deliberation, freshmen are required to attend one forum per semester, and many university staffs, faculty, and students attend training workshops on NIF forums.

Lately, in order to further incentivize the use of public deliberation, the student dean’s office instituted a program whereby student organizations that undergo training on the NIF model can convene forums and apply for some financial support (up to \$300). As a result, many student organizations representatives participated in a one day training event held in January 2005.

Besides staff and students, also faculty receive training in the NIF model, and many embedded deliberation in their academic programs by requiring students to participate in, or design forums, as part of their class work. An informant estimated that up to a fourth of the faculty has embedded forums in their course programs in different formats.

Exposure to forums has a profound impact on campus life. It created an environment to foster “civil” civic dialogue in which students, faculty, staff and community members can engage in deliberation without acrimonies. The practice of dialogue and deliberation is so widespread that, besides forums, students and faculty engage in philosophical discussions in dialogues denominated “Socrates Cafes.” An informant observed that over the past three years, the minority student population grew exponentially, from 3.5% to 18%, but the increased diversity has not created tensions among students maybe also thanks to the many opportunities for dialogue offered on campus.

Forums also prompted students to take action on some of the issues they deliberated. Some students who participated in a forum on struggling working families in West Virginia decided to have an alternative spring-break abroad devoted to activities for children from low income families. Students also did voter registration drives, and became more politically engaged. Finally, a student decided to develop an issue guide on the challenges facing single parents, and after graduating served at the WVCCL as a VISTA volunteer.

Through this *crescendo* of initiatives, what started as a co-curricular activity became fully embedded in the curriculum, making deliberation a widely used tool, both in student life and academic activities.

### ***The Forums on Domestic Violence***

In 2001, the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WVCADV), a non-profit organization formed by thirteen licensed domestic violence programs in the state, initiated a project to use dialogue and deliberation to advance the objective of eliminating violence against women, children and men. The idea of using deliberation came after some WVCADV staffs attended forums on the topic “*Troubled American Families.*” The WVCADV liked the facilitation style, and the way forums were structured to receive public input while respecting all voices, “*those who agree as well as those who disagree.*” The WVCADV was so enthusiastic about the process that they thought they could apply it to domestic violence because it allowed to “*talk about emotionally charged issues in a respectful way.*”

When the Coalition had sufficient staff and resources to work on public awareness, they contacted Betty Knighton to help them organize a statewide deliberation project on domestic violence. In the fall of 2001, the WVCADV partnered with the WVCCL to start the “Public Deliberation Project,” an initiative using dialogue and deliberation to “*assess the public’s current understanding, attitudes, and level of awareness regarding domestic violence [and] to increase*

*the level of awareness regarding the issue through a series of public deliberation forums to be held across the state.”<sup>16</sup>*

In West Virginia, there is a domestic-violence related homicide approximately every 14 days, and more than 1/3 of all homicides in the state are related to domestic violence. Despite the prevalence and lethality of the phenomenon, the public remains largely unaware of the magnitude and urgency of the problem. This prompted the WVCADV to use deliberative forums to assess the public’s knowledge and awareness of domestic violence in the state and raise awareness by exposing them to new information and deliberation. Additionally, this process enabled the WVCADV to assess people’s understanding of domestic violence, and use this information to improve its strategic planning. Finally, forum outcomes were gathered in a report to be circulated among professionals working in the field, policy-makers, and the media to illustrate the public’s concerns and recommendations on domestic violence.

## **Preparing the Forums**

First, staff from member programs were trained to moderate forums and taught about the forum “philosophy.” The WVCCL provided several training sessions to educate moderators across the state on the NIF model of forum facilitation by using “issue framing.” Twenty-six professionals were trained — two from each of the domestic violence programs — to moderate forums.

Second, in order to prepare the forums, WVCADV needed to assess the public’s knowledge, concerns, and awareness of the domestic violence phenomenon. Over 250 interviews were conducted with West Virginians from across the state, and the information gathered served to prepare an issue guide and a starter video to guide discussion during the forums.

Finally, in order to have forums that covered all geographic areas in the state, it was decided to convene two forums in each of the geographic areas served by WVCADV member programs. Forums took place from September 2002 to July 2003.

The discussion guide articulates three approaches to end domestic violence:

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<sup>16</sup> West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, *Public Deliberation Project Final Report*, 2004, p. 4.

Approach 1: *The community must support victims of domestic violence* –This approach suggests that by creating a more supportive system (in terms of housing, transportation, legal representation and other services) to victims and abusers, domestic violence could be reduced.

Approach 2: *Domestic violence must be treated like the crime that it is* –Stronger law enforcement can present domestic violence as a serious crime, with severe sanctions attached to it.

Approach 3: *Public attitudes about domestic violence must be changed* – In some cases, domestic violence lacks profile as a serious public problem. By raising awareness on the gravity of the phenomenon, public attitudes could change to treat domestic violence as an unacceptable behavior.

Questionnaires were distributed before or after the forums, or both to understand participants’ attitudes, and possible changes thereof.

## **Forums and Outreach**

Starting in September 2001, around 23 forums were held across the state, convened by member programs at the community level. In total, forums involved more than 200 people, of different genders, ages and backgrounds.

Forums gathered victims, perpetrators, prevention specialists and enforcement professionals, although the idea was to engage also common people, rather than having only those directly affected talk about the problem. Enforcement personnel participated in the forums, although it is not known how forum exposure echoed in their practices. The judicial community, on the other hand, participated less on the grounds of ethical reasons, because they believed that forums could taint their impartiality.

Some participants in some forums expressed frustration with the process. They felt that a two hour discussion was insufficient and more needed to be done on the topic. However, because forums were conceived as a tool to educate the public and raise awareness, the WVCADV believes that “*even just talking is something*”.

Generally, forums were advertised among the general public, but if conveners wanted some specific groups to be present, they followed up with targeted calls. How forums were publicized varied greatly according to the various domestic violence programs that convened them. The outreach could include from flyers, to interviews on radio and TV, but it appears that personal letters and phone calls stimulated the greatest response. Interestingly, attendance in the biggest cities –Huntington, Charleston and Morgantown, was lower than in smaller communities. One possible explanation is that in villages and small towns people are closer, and can deliberate easily as a community. Also, in small and isolated communities forums can be the only opportunity to vent about the problem and the lack of resources –in some areas people are so isolated that “*they call 911 and then it takes hours for them to get there.*” On the other hand, in cities people have access to more resources to cope with the problem. Finally, forums were organized locally by the domestic violence programs acting in the various regions of the state, and some programs may not have fully supported the idea of using public deliberation, hence did not make particular efforts to engage their constituents in the forums.

## **Forum Outcomes**

Forums were a useful tool to educate the public because they unmasked stereotypes to present a more realistic picture of the domestic violence phenomenon. First of all, people tend to think that domestic violence affects only poor, uneducated people, while in reality it is very widespread, with victims and perpetrators coming from “*every educational and income level, every profession, every race, creed, and nationality, and every religion*”.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, forums were an eye-opening experience because in general “*people don’t think they can have a role in reducing domestic violence*”. Very often, when confronted with information they were unaware of, participants changed their opinion on domestic violence, understood the phenomenon in all its gravity and complexity, and expressed the intention to take action against it.

Many participants, for example, were surprised to find out how little resources and support were offered to battered women. Survivors present at the forums shared their stories of being re-victimized not only by society but also by their families and friends, and pointed out that, too often, society blames the victims more than the perpetrators. Interaction with survivors

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<sup>17</sup> West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, *Public Deliberation Project Final Report*, 2004, p. 4.

and specialists working to end violence led many participants to questioning their understanding of violence and prompted them to take responsibility –as individuals and community members- to stop violence.

Besides individual change, participants understood that there was not enough public awareness of domestic violence in society, and that more should be done to raise awareness of the problem not only among the general public but also with professionals dealing with victims and perpetrators, such as doctors and court staff.<sup>18</sup>

Although many participants recognized that the law enforcement system had made some efforts to improve the treatment of victims, they expressed dissatisfaction with how the criminal and legal systems handle the phenomenon. Many believed that more should be done, especially strong pro-arrest policies were favored, to avoid intervening too late. It was also suggested that perpetrators are not held sufficiently accountable, which discourages many victims to report cases to court.

From forum comments and post-forum questionnaires it appears that participants agreed with the three proposed approaches, but were slightly more inclined toward the community and cultural approaches. Participants did not fully trust that the enforcement system, as it is, can combat violence, and suggested that the enforcement and judicial systems should receive regular education on domestic violence, demonstrating that education and raising awareness are considered by many as key strategies to stop violence. Many suggested that, given West Virginia's strong culture of faith-based organizations, these could play a key role in educating people, especially children, about domestic violence. Although many participants believed that schools should focus more on educating youth on the phenomenon, some disagreed that children should be taught about domestic violence.

By and large, forum discussions ended up focusing on the same general themes. Prominent among these were these questions:

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<sup>18</sup> An interesting indicator of the importance of raising awareness is that many forum participants knew about their local domestic violence program, but none was aware of the Lautenberg Act, a law that protects victims by prohibiting convicted offenders from having firearms or ammunitions.

- a) who is responsible to end domestic violence? What role can individuals play?
- b) are the laws stringent enough? Are they well enforced? Are perpetrators held accountable for their crimes?
- c) is the public sufficiently aware of the phenomenon, what is the impact of awareness in reducing violence, and how can people be educated?
- d) Next steps: what can the public do to make a difference?

Besides increasing public awareness and education, the forums also provided the WVCADV with a wealth of information about public perceptions of domestic violence and the stereotypes that need to be eliminated to curb this phenomenon. Even the preparation of the issue guide, when they surveyed the public on the topic, gave them useful anecdotal evidence –“*more than in the last 10 years.*” During that preparatory phase and later during forums, they gained a clearer understanding of the inaccuracies and stereotypes in public perceptions, such as that alcohol and drug abuse are the cause of violence and that only poor, uneducated people batter. The WVCADV also found misperceptions about the term domestic violence *per se*, which means not only physical but also psychological violence. All this information will be used by the WVCADV to inform their strategic plan, and could potentially help them re-frame the issue, the same way forum participants re-frame their understanding of a problem after listening to what other people think about it.

## **Deliberation and Action**

By and large, forums led to limited collective action. Generally, participants spend only two hours discussing the issue. Additionally, domestic violence is a very complex phenomenon, often considered a “private” or “family” issue. A WVCADV staff mentioned that “*it was legal to beat your wife until 1992,*” and the level of initial awareness is often so low, that it is hard to get people mobilized after forums.<sup>19</sup> Culturally, the topic is still taboo, therefore “*the tie to action is more loose.*” However, given that the WVCADV’s objective was to educate the public and raise awareness on the problem through public deliberation, the personal transformation that derives from participating in forums and being exposed to information and personal experiences on domestic violence fulfills that objective. Forums appear to have changed individual perception

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<sup>19</sup> As one informant suggested “*there is much more child abuse awareness than domestic violence awareness.*”

and awareness of domestic violence, and that alone was one of the primary objectives of conveners. As an interlocutor put it “*getting people to talk about it is action.*” However, in some areas, deliberation went beyond personal transformation and led to some concrete follow-up:

- In McDowell County, served by the Stop Abusive Family Environments program, after the first forum, people decided to continue the discussion, and are holding monthly forums on domestic violence.
- In Mineral County, a very rural area, people are working together to add another intervention program to the existing one.
- After a forum held at West Virginia Wesleyan College, some students wanted to form support groups and serve as interns in local domestic violence programs.
- In other forums people offered to volunteer in local programs against domestic violence.

In terms of influencing policy-making using forum results, in January 2005 the WVCADV completed a report on forum findings and recommendations. Their intention was to publicize the report as widely as possible, to post it on their Web site, to use it for public awareness and educational efforts, and to distribute it to each legislator. Since during forums it emerged clearly that the enforcement and judicial systems are not doing enough to curb domestic violence, the WVCADV expected some response from these groups.

## **Deliberation and Embeddedness**

The WVCADV is so enamored with the process of deliberative forums that they would like to continue using it. Additionally, member programs have visibly expanded their capacity thanks to the forums, but there are financial constraints to using this model. A possible future application could be to use forums in college campuses to educate students about domestic violence. In the future, the Coalition would also like to target specific communities, such as people with disabilities, African Americans, immigrants, and the LGBT community to hear their perspectives on domestic violence. In early 2005, the WVCADV was going to develop its strategic plan, and in that process they would decide if and how they would use the NIF model again.

## ***The Forums on Underage Drinking***

Since 2002, the West Virginia Prevention Resource Center (PRC) has been holding forums across the state to deliberate on the problem of underage drinking. Public forums are a component of a broader project denominated “Underage Drinking Prevention and Social Marketing Project” which started in 1999 in four West Virginia counties. The project aims to “*impact attitudes and behaviors concerning underage alcohol use*”<sup>20</sup> using three strategies:

- Community Public Forums
- Trainings
- Public Service Announcements

The forums’ objective is “*to gain insight and determine community norms relevant to underage alcohol use and to stimulate awareness regarding underage alcohol use.*”<sup>21</sup> The other two strategies are intended respectively to increase interaction between the parties involved in underage drinking, including youth, parents, law enforcers, and schools, and to involve youth in the development of public messages to be distributed throughout West Virginia.

Beyond gaining insight on the public’s awareness of the problem, the specific objectives of the forums are to:

1. understand the problem of underage drinking;
2. fully realize the effects of underage drinking;
3. examine approaches to tackle the problem;
4. identify common ground and resources; and
5. explore possible actions to solve the problem.<sup>22</sup>

Although the project started with a series public service announcements in 1999, the forums started at a later time, in late 2002. One of the reasons why they decided to hold forums is that youth who developed the public service messages had a vision of underage drinking based

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<sup>20</sup> Underage Drinking Prevention & Social Marketing Project leaflet.

<sup>21</sup> Underage Drinking Prevention & Social Marketing Project leaflet.

<sup>22</sup> From “Facilitator’s Guide, Preventing Underage Drinking What Can Our Community Do?”

solely on their experience and perspectives, and people at PRC thought that the use of dialogue and deliberation would add more perspective to the problem.

Knighton collaborated with PRC to help them frame the issue of underage drinking and train moderators from across the state.

## **The Forums**

Twelve PRC community development specialists were trained over a period of four months for a total of 8 days of training per person.

The discussion guide for the forums was developed by the PRC using information deriving from around 500 interviews with “*citizens, law enforcement, educators, government officials, prevention professionals, bar owners, youth, parents and church officials in West Virginia.*”<sup>23</sup> During the interviews, people were asked very simple questions to keep the conversation friendly and accessible, such as “*do you consider underage drinking a problem in your community,*” “*what worries you the most about underage drinking,*” and “*what might help kids.*”

After having gathered the needed information, Betty Knighton helped PRC to “distill” it into three approaches:

*Approach 1:* Build healthy development –i.e. create a healthy environment for youth to develop by involving faith groups, schools, parents and communities;

*Approach 2:* Enforce the laws –i.e. stronger enforcement is needed to protect youth and the rest of the public; and

*Approach 3:* Change the environment –i.e. send youth a clear message that underage drinking is unacceptable, that alcohol is not a “rite of passage” and discourage media from associating alcohol with appealing messages, such as physical attractiveness, success, romance.

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<sup>23</sup> From “Facilitator’s Guide, Preventing Underage Drinking What Can Our Community Do?”

Intentionally, the approaches and the discussion guides were kept simple to give the whole process a “home-grown” sense and not intimidate communities.

The forum discussion was assisted by a neutral moderator, who facilitates and encourages deliberation. A convener kept the time ensuring that the group remained in track with the deliberation schedule. Finally, recorders captured salient statements in a written record of the forum.

After forums, questionnaires were administered to participants to gauge their opinions on the problem, their preferences among possible actions, the trade offs they were willing to make to reduce underage drinking (e.g. *“I’m in favor of investing additional resources on educational programs even if that means increased taxes”*) and their thoughts on the forums.

In order to promote the use of forums, PRC approached city councilors or work groups that deal with underage drinking, but outreach varied in every community. Once a community decided to hold a forum, PRC and the local convener tried to target people who are involved –at different levels- in the problem: from victims and victim advocates, to enforcement officials and city councilors, as well as parents and youth. Teens’ involvement was seen as crucial, although some people resisted it because they considered the discussion inappropriate for young people. Generally, it is healthy to have teens who do and do not drink, because they are often more open than adults in sharing their experiences. Because youths’ opinions enriched the exchange in public forums, moderators made special efforts to engage them in the discussion.

Forums on underage drinking were held on weekdays, generally from 6 to 8pm to accommodate people who came from work. Although people often stayed long after the end of a forum to continue the discussion, only in few cases did deliberation generate some collective action.

## **Preliminary Findings on Underage Drinking Forums Outcomes**

For organizational purposes, PRC divides West Virginia in four regions, and decided to hold one forum in each region, except for a region which held two. According to the results of the five regional forums, a total of 75 people (30 males, 45 female), 60% of which parents,

returned the questionnaires.<sup>24</sup> Besides parents, also 14 students, 4 teachers, 10 law enforcement officers, 4 bar owners, one church official, 6 prevention professionals, 3 government officials, one college official, one retail salesperson, 7 social workers and one retired person participated. Participants' age varied greatly. Most of participants were Caucasian, 5 were African-American, one multiracial, one Asian-American (three did not answer the question).<sup>25</sup>

From these initial forums, it emerged clearly that underage drinking was considered a problem by the community (94% of respondents), and that more support to fight the problem is needed from the community and professionals working in the field (100% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that community involvement can have an impact in reducing the behavior). Additionally, over 95% of respondents expressed interest in participating in other forums, and many gained new insights about the problem and were exposed to new ideas on actions to take on the issue.

If these forums somewhat helped raising awareness on the problem, they were often scarcely attended and had only limited local impact. Because of their regional scale — in some cases participants needed to drive an hour and more to reach the forum venue — attendance was limited and so were the chances that participants would meet again for any follow-up. Therefore, the PRC decided to switch to a more local model, which seems to work better given that West Virginians are very “community-based” and more inclined to discuss and solve problems at the community level. The new philosophy of the forums was described by an informant as “*you live in your community, you know what needs to be done.*”

In switching from regional to community forums, they simplified the discussion guide, made the language in the starter video simpler to present the forums as an accessible process. In order to gain the public's trust, participants were reminded that the discussion guide emerged from hundreds of interviews with fellow West Virginians, which gave them a sense of ownership of the process. Finally, the discussion guide was kept simple and not too glossy in order to convey a sense of “home-grown” product, made with people's input, and accessible to all.

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<sup>24</sup> Preventing Underage Drinking – What Can Our Community Do? Post Forum Questionnaire Results, FY 02-03 (Regional Forums).

<sup>25</sup> Preventing Underage Drinking – What Can Our Community Do? Post Forum Questionnaire Results, FY 02-03 (Regional Forums).

Of the sixteen local forums that were scheduled for 2003-2004, only around 9 took place as of January 2005, and some PRC staff were scheduled to undergo a new training cycle to prepare enough moderators to hold forums.

Participation in community forums varied greatly, anywhere from 10 people or less to over 25. Only rarely did some follow up action occur after deliberation, because communities rarely have sufficient capacity to move from deliberation to collective action. For the forums to have a positive outcome, the community has to be ready to work on the issues, and must have some capacity, because forums are “*a resource, not a program but rather a process to have a community work together.*”<sup>26</sup>

In some forums, the effects of having law enforcement in the room with youth and parents allowed communities to see that they were all working toward improving the safety and health of youth. One police officer, who told a story about being tough on underage drinking because he didn’t want to see his 12-year-old son hurt, has since found that the community is more receptive to working with him on these issues. In most communities, however, once a forum is over, momentum rapidly fades, despite the fact that the PRC shares data from the forum with local government officials to generate some action.

### **Deliberation and Action: The Impact of Public Forums in Clarksburg**

An exception to this pattern is presented by the case of Clarksburg, where a forum on underage drinking was held in November 2003. In this community, the forum had a significant impact and led to the creation of committees to work on each of the approaches considered in the forum. A year after the forum, the committees were still meeting on a monthly basis and implemented several “actions”, from awareness campaigns to stricter rule enforcement. As an informant described “*they have no funding, but they make things happen.*”

In 2002, a regional forum was held, involving also the city of Clarksburg, but it was scarcely attended (around 10 participants) because, as explained earlier, people were not very

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<sup>26</sup> At PRC, capacity building activity is carried out by the community development specialists working across the state, and consists of building human, social and physical capital.

motivated to participate at the regional level. Successively, PRC shifted to the community forum model, which seemed to attract more participants.

Clarksburg city councilor Jo Anne McNemar played a key role in convening the 2003 forum and creating momentum around the problem of underage drinking. Before becoming city councilor, McNemar worked for over fifteen years in the field of prevention, at PRC. When the opportunity to talk about substance abuse emerged, McNemar explained the City Council that, besides tougher enforcement of the laws, prevention and education can play a key role, and held meetings with specialists working in prevention, awareness and education to build a coalition to support her idea. She later suggested that Clarksburg could host a forum on underage drinking. Liking the idea, the City Council asked the police chief to work with the PRC to implement the forum and to report back regularly to them.

An outreach team consisting of the police chief, a high school student, and three concerned parents did targeted invitations to stakeholders and gathered a diverse group of 35 for the forum—a significant improvement from the 10 participants in the regional forum. Participants included Jo Anne McNemar, the police chief, victims and victim advocates, staff from West Virginia Highway Safety, parents, children, social workers, church officials and even a bar tender. Seventy five percent of participants were parents, and male participants were predominant (63%).<sup>27</sup> The forum was held from 6 to 8pm, but at the end of it participants stayed to continue the discussion and plan possible follow up actions. *“Success depends on if people stay after the forum to talk,”* suggested one interlocutor. At the conclusion of this very productive session, participants became a cohesive group, and felt encouraged to know that they were not alone in fighting underage drinking, *“people were enthusiastic, it was overwhelming”* suggested an informant. The group agreed that there was a need in the community to do more work on underage drinking and decided to reconvene. When they met again, they decided that all the approaches discussed at the forum were crucial and divided themselves into three action teams: 1) build a healthy development; 2) enforcing the law; and 3) changing the environment.

Since the date of the forum, the action teams, comprising roughly ten people each, have met periodically to plan actions. To show the city council’s support for the initiative, Jo Anne

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<sup>27</sup> Clarksburg-11/03, Underage Alcohol Use Post Forum Questionnaire Results.

McNemar attended all committee meetings. Below are some examples of activities implemented by these groups.

In response to a common belief among students that “*if I am a juvenile nothing will happen to me*” a local judge magistrate organized two mock trials in her courtroom in collaboration with one of the local high schools. In the trials, she included students in the defense and prosecution of a hypothetical underage drinker, in order to convey the consequences of getting caught.

Before organizing the trial, the judge compiles a list of students who are interested in participating and requires their parents’ permission. From the list of interested students, some names are drawn and an officer goes to the students’ school to arrest them. Students are handcuffed and taken to the police station, where their parents are notified of the arrest and pick them up. Before the trial, two students meet with an attorney and a prosecutor to be trained on their respective roles. At the trial, students play the roles of the attorney, the prosecutor, the judge, and the jury, and they are “*not easy on their fellow students*”. In the second trial the judge made sure to involve also homeschooled students – a significant group Clarksburg- to increase awareness of the serious consequences of underage drinking among all students.

Parents and students alike have been very favorable to the mock trials, which had a good resonance among the whole student population. Youths not only learned the trouble they could go through if they were caught drinking, but also became more familiar with how courts really work –most of them admitted their only knowledge of courts came from TV. The local press participated in the trials, interviewed students and run stories on the events. The mock trials were so successful, that the coalition is planning to transform them into a recurrent event, and hold one every year in May.

Another example is that of the collaboration between two parties that generally do not communicate: a lawyer who specializes in defending offenders driving under the influence and the police who prosecute them. In the course of the forum, the lawyer shared several aspects of the law that the police were unaware of that had enabled him to minimize or negate sentences for his clients. The police then invited the lawyer to offer a seminar to police officers on how to

close these loopholes in their enforcement of alcohol-related laws. The police also sent a letter to local business to emphasize that selling alcohol to underage people is illegal, and that the police are on the watch for such unlawful behavior.

The coalition also worked on a number of initiatives related to increasing awareness. They had drunk driving awareness projects, and arranged to post a banner at the town entrance for two months every year reading “Clarksburg says: Underage drinking is not a minor problem. 21 means 21.” They organized a “community night out” where the coalition put out information about their work and some new people signed up to get involved. They have also worked with the Prevention Resource Center to produce television public service announcements on the theme. In cooperation with the Partnership for a Drug-free WV, they held a lunch for media representatives to discuss the media’s contribution to changing the environment to discourage underage drinking.

Later on, the committees decided that, rather than holding three separate meetings they should all be part of a monthly “coalition” meeting. In early 2004, the coalition even applied for grant funding, but their proposal was not funded. The group, however, did not lose momentum and is becoming more organized to apply for additional funding.<sup>28</sup> PRC also contributed to building capacity by providing some training with their Youth in Action program, which teaches youth and adults how to cooperate.

The fact that the city council was strongly supportive of the forum and even held the police chief accountable to participate and subsequently work in the committees, created an accountability mechanism which gave credibility to the process and stimulated participants to collaborate.

A combination of raising awareness and forming a coalition among those who were already working on the issue explain the success of the Clarksburg forum. This process has been successful because it brought together people from different professions who were all working toward curbing underage drinking. This created synergies and optimized the use of existing resources, as an interlocutor suggested “*there were resources in the community, but they were*

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<sup>28</sup> In October 2004, West Virginia was awarded over \$11 million over a five year period under a Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant to build prevention capacity at the state and local level.

*not pulled together.*” The forum changed the way the problem of underage drinking was addressed by creating an organized, systemic approach, where key information and resources are shared. The teamwork motivated professionals working in the field: the groups meet at night, and many city officials and other professionals are involved in this process above and beyond their regular workdays. Finally, the local scale of the coalition enabled it to meet often and collaborate at a level that could not have happened had the forum been regional.

In considering this successful example of deliberation leading to sustained action, it should be noted that the Clarksburg forum was atypical in that it was invitation specific –and not open to the general public as most other forums- to bring together people who were already working on the issue. As an informant put it “*most people were in agreement, we did not have the right of passage speech*”, referring to an observation that pops up in most forums that alcohol use is just a right of passage. Here, forum organizers used deliberation strategically to target individuals or organizations with sufficient capacity to act upon the forum’s recommendations, identify synergies, and build a coalition to work on underage drinking.

## **Deliberation and Embeddedness**

The fact that task forces on underage drinking were continuing to meet after over a year from the forum is evidence that deliberation became somewhat embedded with the community. Many of those who were involved in the forum recognize that, thanks to the forum, they were able to adopt a more collaborative approach to fighting underage drinking. In recognizing the merits of using public deliberation, many in the coalition do not exclude that this approach could be used again to tackle other problems. The success of the underage drinking coalition could play an important role in strengthening the embeddedness of deliberation in Clarksburg. Some interlocutors reported the intention to expand the use of forums to deliberate on prescription drug abuse. Another possible topic could be the growing use of methamphetamine, which is causing a number of incidents and criminal behaviors in the community.

## **Conclusions**

Public deliberation in West Virginia appears robust and well embedded. The West Virginia Center for Civic Life has actively promoted public forums for around a decade and has framed local issues that inspired national discussion guides.

Deliberation in West Virginia thrives for two reasons. First, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life's director, Betty Knighton, is a leading expert and entrepreneur of public deliberation. She collaborates extensively with the Kettering Foundation, and her valuable knowledge of public deliberation and convening are reflected in the numerous successful projects conducted in the state. In particular, the Center's focus on framing issues locally (from public education, to the challenges of working families in the state and opportunities for young adults) was instrumental to diffusing public deliberation. Deliberating on topics identified and developed *by* West Virginians made forums more accessible and created a sense of ownership over the process because "*people take pride in something they created.*"

Second, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life forged alliances with dozens institutional partners and organizations that support public deliberation. In particular, deliberation seems strongly embedded with the University of Charleston, which not only hosts forums and trainings for students, faculty and staff, but also integrated deliberation in the academic *curriculum*. Besides the University of Charleston, other West Virginia campuses have partnered with the WVCCL over the years for forums and issue framing.

In addition to academic institutions, the WVCCL successfully promoted deliberative forums with multiple statewide organizations. Among these, the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Prevention Resource Center framed the issues of domestic violence and underage drinking respectively, provided moderator training to their staff, and conducted public forums across the state. These forums helped conveners gain a clearer understanding of the public's perceptions and contributed to raising awareness. They also produced recommendations that can be used to influence public policies and to reframe the convening organizations' strategic thinking. In some cases, forums prompted participants to take action, and

in Clarksburg a forum on underage drinking sparked significant follow-up, resulting in the creation of a local coalition. By successfully reaching out to large organizations and institutions, the Center tapped into their institutional capacity to spread deliberation and increase its embeddedness. *Forging coalitions* with academic institutions and other organizations, as well as presenting public forums as a tool to frame and deliberate on *local issues* proved key strategies to advance public deliberation in West Virginia.

### **3. Public Deliberation in South Dakota: The South Dakota Issues Forums and the Indigenous Issues Forums**

#### ***Introduction***

This section describes two deliberative initiatives in South Dakota, the South Dakota Issues Forums (SDIF) and the Indigenous Issues Forums (IIF). Both SDIF and IIF use the National Issues Forums model of deliberation, but the IIF has adapted it to discuss Indigenous issues, and has significantly modified the model to include elements of dialogue that better suit the Indigenous traditions and culture. Ruth Yellowhawk launched the South Dakota Issues Forums and later created the Indigenous Issues Forums with others seeking to find ways to promote productive dialogue. She and her colleagues use this model to talk about Native issues and to facilitate systemic change in groups and organizations.

#### ***The South Dakota Issues Forums***

##### **Background**

The South Dakota Issues Forums were launched by Ruth Yellowhawk in the late 1990s. Yellowhawk has a background in radio broadcasting in Ohio, where she hosted programs where people could call in and discuss topics using the NIF framework. While working there, Yellowhawk became involved in the Miami Valley Issues Forums, a local NIF group, and embarked on numerous projects with the Kettering Foundation. After she moved to South Dakota, she started to organize a local NIF group, and worked to get a diverse group together to steer the efforts to promote NIF. They became known as the South Dakota Issues Forums (SDIF). After operating for a while as a community based initiative working with the State Library and Rapid City Library Staff, with Stand Against a Violent Environment (SAVE), with

clergy, with people from Native American news media, and others, Yellowhawk, connected with the work of the Chiesman Foundation for Democracy (CFFD). An organization promoting awareness of democracy and research and education programs to advance democratic ideals, CFFD offered to house the community-run SDIF, and provided much needed office space and organizational resources. SDIF's first moderator training was held at the CFFD offices. The trainers for the workshop included Betty Knighton of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, and John Doble of Doble Research. Yellowhawk felt that Doble and Knighton could provide real mentoring not only to moderating deliberative forums, but also to reporting on the results. Yellowhawk and John Usera, CFFD's president and CEO, also launched the South Dakota Public Policy Institute as a program of CFFD. Yellowhawk served as its director for three years, before she eventually left ties with CFFD and formed the Indigenous Issues Forums. Much as many other Public Policy Institutes, the South Dakota one offers training workshops to individuals and organizations interested in deliberative democracy and issue framing.

The South Dakota Issues Forums' mission is "*to offer South Dakota Citizens an opportunity to discuss and deliberate on local, state, and national public issues in a nonpartisan, respectful atmosphere that contributes to the advancement of a democratic community.*"<sup>29</sup> Over the years, SDIF has held dozens of forums on a variety of issues, from media, to immigration, healthcare, youth and crime, and the end of life, to name a few. By and large, SDIF uses NIF-prepared discussion guides, however, SDIF also framed locally the issues of media and taxation. After a sufficient number of forums are held, generally around ten, SDIF prepares written reports to share findings from local forums with policy-makers and the community.

One of the most recent initiatives of the SDIF is a series of five forums on the relationship between community and media.<sup>30</sup> SDIF prepared a report on these forums based on 34 returned questionnaires. Most participants were Caucasian (76%) and 9% of respondents were American Indians; half or participants were female. The report found that most (87%) of respondents favored a free flow of information through diverse media outlets, an option requiring citizens to play an active role in choosing their sources, and opposed quality control of the

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<sup>29</sup> From the Chiesman Foundation Website: <http://www.chiesman.org/projects/mission.php?ID=1>

<sup>30</sup> These forums were sponsored also by the Freedom Forum, a foundation dedicated to free press and free speech created by Al Neuharth, a South Dakota native and founder of USA Today.

media, an option that could have limited freedom of the press. Participants also emphasized personal responsibility for providing accurate and ethical information and favored creating opportunities for media and communities to discuss issues of concern.

SDIF also conducted two cycles of forums on immigration with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from Sturgis Williams Middle School. In 2002, two social studies teachers at the school decided to hold a forum titled “*Admission Decisions: Should Immigration Be Restricted?*” with their students as an introduction to the topic of immigration. 165 students returned questionnaires: 89% of respondents were Caucasian and 5.5% were American Indians. Students were administered pre and post forums questionnaires to gauge changes in their understanding of the problem after being exposed to public deliberation. Comparing responses, it appears that the numbers of those who considered immigration a very serious problem increased. After the forum, however, more students favored welcoming new immigrants, even if that imposed some short term costs. Also the number of students in favor of assimilating immigrants decreased, while more students thought that immigrants strengthen the country in the long run. In many other areas, participating in the forum clarified the topic of immigration as the number of “not sure” responses decreased.

Interestingly, because of the positive impact of the first forum, the teachers invited the SDIF to hold another forum on the topic in 2004. In 2004, the discussion guide was modified to “*The New Challenges of American Immigration: What Should We Do?*” Ten classes of 8<sup>th</sup> graders participated, for a total of 225 students (of these, 139 responded to questionnaires). At this forum, students were administered only post-forum questionnaires, so it is impossible to measure if and how their opinions were altered. However, 79% of respondents reported discussing aspects of the problem that they had not considered prior to the forum, and 37% found that they were thinking differently of the issue after the forum.

In the spring and fall of 1998, the SDIF convened nine community forums using the NIF discussion guide “*Our Nation’s Kids: Is Something Wrong?*” which attracted a diverse group of 200 people. Yellowhawk prepared a report titled “*South Dakota’s Kids: Is Something Wrong?*” that presented the forums’ findings. She found that participants agreed that better paying jobs are needed to allow parents to spend more time with their children, and that parenting classes should be part of the school curriculum to teach young people the responsibilities associated with having

children. Forum exposure caused some shifts in thinking, and after the forums some participants were more favorable to the idea that it was important for one of the parents to stay at home with the children.<sup>31</sup>

Later, the South Dakota Coalition for the Children asked the SDIF to help them set up a series of forums to listen, in a non judgmental way, to the public's concerns about kids and crime and inform their public advocacy efforts. This initiative originated from an increase in juvenile delinquency and violent behavior both nationally and locally. The South Dakota's juvenile justice system adopted a series of reforms in 1996, but the same year a girl died while in the custody of the local department of corrections. Her death sparked an intense debate over youth and crime. The NIF issue guide "*Kids Who Commit Crimes: What Should Be Done About Juvenile Violence*" was used in forums convened in South Dakota in April and May 2000. Nine open-invitation forums were convened in Aberdeen, Lead, Rapid City, Rosebud, Sioux Falls, and Spearfish, and approximately 200 people participated to discuss three approaches: moral messages; deterrence effect; and risk factors.<sup>32</sup>

Yellowhawk co-authored a report on these forums, titled "*Kids, Crime, Choices: What Can We Do?*" (October 2000) Participants were concerned about declining community cohesiveness, limited adult supervision, and eroding moral values. These trends created an environment that does not provide sufficient care and guidance to youth. Even though participants recognized the challenges of mounting crime, they overwhelmingly (90% of post forum respondents) supported rehabilitation as opposed to punitive measures and favored investing in prevention to keep youth away from criminal behaviors.

From November 1999 to June 2000, SDIF also held numerous forums with students from a youth corrections facility in Custer on the topics of alcohol, families and their challenges, and violent kids. SDIF produced a special report on this initiative to illustrate forum findings and report the students' recommendations.

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<sup>31</sup> *South Dakota's Kids: Is Something Wrong?* A South Dakota Issues Forums Report, by Ruth Yellowhawk, 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Susan M. Randall, Jeanmarie Heriba, Ruth Yellowhawk, *Kids, Crime, Choices: What Can We Do?*, South Dakota Coalition for Children and South Dakota Issues Forums, October 2000.

Although the SDIF use principally discussion guides prepared by NIF, they also conducted some local framing. In 1997, CFFD held a “Media and Community” workshop, developed and facilitated by Yellowhawk; from that workshop, the issue of media was framed, leading to a discussion guide that was used at a series of local forums. In Orange County, a similar initiative emerged in parallel, and both the South Dakota experience and well as the Orange County one contributed to the preparation of the NIF discussion guide “*News Media and Society: How to Restore the Public Trust?*”. Additionally, in the fall of 2001, nine forums were held across the state on “*South Dakota Taxation*,” an issue framed during a workshop of the South Dakota Public Policy Institute.

Beginning 2005, the SDIF collaborated with the Catholic diocese to host forums on race and ethnic tensions in 40-50 communities in west South Dakota over two years. SDIF plans to use an existing NIF guide for this topic. The local Catholic Church decided to use the NIF model after its members were impressed with the quality of deliberation at forums that they attended. Interestingly, the Church has emphasized acting on the results of deliberation. It intends to organize action committees following each forum so that interested participants can frame the issues they want to work on and become more involved in social justice questions within the community. The forums are open to the public, but it’s likely that most participants will be parishioners.

In terms of outreach preceding forums, local papers generally publish forum announcements, but targeted invitations seem to be the best tool to engage participants. Unfortunately, papers offer limited coverage of forum outcomes, unless particular controversies emerge. Overall, however, the collaboration with local media remains sporadic.

## **The Roundtables**

The “roundtables” are another deliberative initiative of the Chiesman foundation. Centered on important public policy issues, the roundtables gather local leaders (legislators, public officials, private sector leaders, and community leaders) to analyze the policy in question, understand its pros and cons, and formulate recommendations for future action on the topic. If, for example, agricultural policy is the issue to discuss, the Chiesman foundation meets with local leaders to identify the key problems that should be addressed (a way to “frame” the issue prior to

the roundtable), and drafts a list of leaders that should be involved. Roundtables generally gather 35 to 50 leaders for a two day deliberation on a topic (the days are not consecutive; generally roundtable meetings happen at a few months interval).

Unlike issue forums, roundtable discussions are open and unstructured. Generally, on the first day of a roundtable, participants analyze what is working and not working with a given issue, and on the second day they concentrate on “*what needs to be done*” and formulate recommendations on the issue. After the roundtables, Chiesman produces a report to capture the perspectives voiced during the meetings and its final recommendations. Reports are widely circulated, and — according to the Chiesman foundation — some of them had some influence on local policymakers. The initial reports were lengthy and detailed, with a rich background of data and research, the more recent trend, however, is to produce very brief reports that can be more easily utilized by policymakers.

In some cases, a connection develops between roundtables and forums. Roundtable participants may want to hear their constituencies’ views on a topic - “*we need to go to our community to discuss this,*” – so public forums are organized as a follow-up. For example, a roundtable on media and democracy was followed by forums on the same topic. Other times, forums serve as an inspiration – “*a feeder*”- to roundtables, to verify what public and private leaders have to say on issues that were already the object of public deliberation. Usera considers roundtables a very significant step toward having an impact in public policy by “*taking the issue to a higher level.*”

To understand how a roundtable works, consider “*Transportation: Moving South Dakota into the Next Millennium*”, a roundtable held in 1999 that “*brought together South Dakota transportation leaders, elected officials, and citizens to discuss how the requirements for future transportation can be met with available and potential resources.*”<sup>33</sup> During the roundtable, five

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<sup>33</sup> Institute for South Dakota Leadership and Participation, *Transportation: Moving South Dakota into the Next Millennium*, 1999 Roundtable Report, p.1. Other roundtables included “The South Dakota Vision 2010” (a roundtable of a future vision for the state, held October 1997 and January 1998), “Agriculture’s Future for South Dakota” (April and June 1998), “Governing South Dakota, Government Meeting Future Challenges Roundtable” (September and December 1998), “The Future of Health Care in South Dakota” (March and May 2000), “Connecting South Dakota to the Future” (a roundtable on telecommunications and technology, held September and November 2000), “The Future Visitor in South Dakota” (a roundtable on tourism, held May and October 2001), “The Future of Electric Energy in South Dakota” (December 2001 and January 2002).

major areas were discussed, analyzing concerns, opportunities, and possible actions: 1) transportation master plan; 2) resource allocation and management; 3) partnership through cooperation, coordination and coalitions; 4) transportation regulations; 5) economic considerations. The roundtables aim to bring together leaders who work on the same issues from different perspectives for a deliberative discussion on the problem. The format allows multiple perspectives to inform the analysis of an issue. Although roundtables do not directly generate policy or other action, they aim-at a minimum- inform public and private decision-makers. The leaders who participate in roundtables are encouraged to divulge the roundtable findings and recommendations in their workplaces and possibly implement them. The conclusion of the roundtable on transportation captures the essence of this type of events: “*The importance of the roundtable is to bring together transportation leaders and interested citizens from a diverse background to discuss how to make a difference for the state. The implementation of these suggestions rests with leaders and citizens in continuing the discussion on the development of a vision statement and a strategic and operational plan for the future of South Dakota transportation.*”<sup>34</sup>

The Chiesman Foundation generally convenes two roundtables a year, but there have been fewer roundtables in recent years, because the organization of these events is costly and time consuming.

## **The South Dakota Youth Congresses**

The Chiesman Foundation also organizes the South Dakota Youth Congresses, a program started in 1999. Youth Congresses are analogous to the roundtables, but are intended to engage young people in deliberation on public policy issues. Congresses are held every year in July, for a three day period, and gather around 35 to 40 teens from high schools across the state to deliberate on a variety of topics. Past topics include pre-college education, public policy and teen issues, preparing the future workforce, and the environment. The University of South Dakota hosted the 2005 South Dakota Youth Congress where young leaders attended and facilitated a deliberative conference on “*Rights, Freedoms, & Responsibilities in Today’s Society.*”

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<sup>34</sup> Institute for South Dakota Leadership and Participation, *Transportation: Moving South Dakota into the Next Millennium*, 1999 Roundtable Report, p.7.

Although the deliberation is not structured as in traditional forums, youth participants serve as moderators and note-takers to ensure that their recommendations are recorded to produce a final report. At the end of a Youth Congress, a group of participants goes to Pierre, SD, to present the Congress' outcomes and recommendations to state legislators. Congresses are a valuable tool to teach teens how to be more civically engaged and active, and show them channels to voice their concerns and impact public policy. Besides presenting their final reports to legislators, however, Youth Congresses don't seem to have stimulated follow-up activities, perhaps because participants come from across the state, and it would be difficult to reunite them for follow-up meetings. Students, however, "*learn certain skills and take them in their classes,*" as Usera suggested. Each year, the Youth Congress selects the topic to be discussed in the year to follow.

## **Deliberation and Action**

According to Usera, people participate in forums or roundtables to become more educated on an issue and to find out if there is any action that can be taken together (in case of roundtables). Legislators sometimes participate in these events to "*collect data [...] know what their constituencies think.*" Legislators' support and participation, however, remain sporadic and no legislator can be cited to be a "champion" for deliberation. Bureaucrats, on the other hand, tend to participate more in deliberative events.

Although the Chiesman foundation's Public Policy Institute offers numerous training events on how to moderate forums, few participants end up becoming moderators in their communities. However, "*learning the process is already enough,*" as Usera suggests, because sometimes trainees end up using some aspects of deliberation in their communities or workplaces.

Although informants offer no specific examples of actions triggered by forums, sometimes those who participate in forums became interested in the NIF model, and contact SDIF about hosting additional forums in their communities or organizations. In general, however, South Dakotans deliberate without engaging in follow-up activities because they often think "*it's not my job to do it.*" As Usera put it, "*people in South Dakota are politically engaged, but not active.*"

South Dakota's experience with NIF forums seems to corroborate Gastil's research on the topic. After investigating the impact of NIF forums on civic dispositions and political conversations, Gastil found that participation in forums did not increase the ability of individuals to coordinate and work together on issues, on the other hand "*Deliberation made some participants more skeptical about the effectiveness of group-based political decision making and action.*"<sup>35</sup> A possible explanation for this finding is that participants become more skeptical because exposure to forums produces a clearer understanding of the complexities of coordinating for political action. Rather than making citizens more engaged, or active, deliberation seems to have an impact on individual's behavior in social contexts, because NIF participants "*reported more ideologically and demographically diverse political conversation networks [and] less dominant behavior during subsequent political conversations.*"<sup>36</sup>

The Chiesman Foundation sometimes presents forum outcomes to legislative committees, and some of the issues discussed in the forums did pop up at the state and local level, but it is impossible to trace a clear causal link from forums to action.

According to Usera, roundtables, rather than forums, are the best tool to translate deliberation into action, as exposure to two days of deliberation and the roundtable reports somehow percolate into policy and business decisions.

## **Deliberation and Embeddedness**

The forums on immigration held with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at Sturgis middle school provides some evidence that public deliberation became somewhat embedded in that school. There, teachers who promoted the first forum to educate students on immigration decided to hold another forum to introduce the same topic.

As in West Virginia, SDIF developed collaborations with local campuses to introduce public deliberation in their curricula. As Usera put it "*universities came to our forums and workshops, liked the model, and institutionalized it.*"

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<sup>35</sup> John Gastil. "Adult Civic Education Through the National Issues Forums: Developing Democratic Habits and Dispositions Through Public Deliberation", *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, August 2004, p. 320.

<sup>36</sup> John Gastil. "Adult Civic Education Through the National Issues Forums: Developing Democratic Habits and Dispositions Through Public Deliberation", *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, August 2004, p. 321.

In South Dakota State University, graduate students are required to attend a workshop on NIF forums as part of a master's program. These workshops started 6 years ago, and take place every two years. Their purpose is "*to teach students how to talk differently.*" Some of the students contact SDIF during their professional career, and use deliberation as part of their skills set.

Also Black Hills State University holds forums, and SDIF was required to introduce the forum model also at the University of Minnesota.

Finally, the governor of SD has included the Chiesman Foundation among its initiatives and is a supporter of public forums. It is likely that under his auspices more deliberative forums will be held.

Other than in some academic institutions, however, forums don't seem to be an embedded practice in any community or organization in South Dakota.

## ***The Indigenous Issues Forums***

### **Background**

The Indigenous Issues Forums (IIF) create opportunities for dialogue and deliberation with a specific focus on Indigenous topics and on engaging all participants in a safe and respectful environment for dialogue. IIF formed around 2000 and its co-directors are Ruth Yellowhawk, Lily Mendoza and Harley Eagle.

Yellowhawk and Eagle met in 1999 during a workshop on restorative justice. At that time, Yellowhawk was working on a sustained dialogue project in Rapid City, involving a year-long dialogue on racism. Eagle and Mendoza participated in the dialogue as well as in other projects with Yellowhawk. Their joint activities prompted them to focus on Indigenous styles of deliberation. Since deliberation is a deeply rooted practice among Native Americans –“*Native people do it every day, they just don’t put a name on it,*” they started thinking about how to properly translate that concept into Indigenous terms: Yellowhawk reports that they aimed to “*take this concept and let’s indigenize it, refine it, look at how we did it.*” These reflections and conversations eventually led to the creation of the Indigenous Issues Forums, a safe space for Native Americans to frame their own issues and develop an original process to engage in respectful dialogue.

The Indigenous Issues Forums (IIF) is a special initiative to address the concerns of Indigenous people. The IIF “*encourages partnerships, conducts workshops and training, creates frameworks and discussion guides and forms alliances to create a safe and productive space to talk together respectfully about challenging Tribal issues.*”<sup>37</sup> As Ruth described “*Indigenous Issues Forums is an informal group of facilitators who work to create a safe and respectful space to talk about difficult issues.*”<sup>38</sup>

Deliberation is not foreign to the Native American tradition, “*Native people used to deliberate as a community*” but the deliberative process was replaced with other mechanisms and institutions when Indigenous peoples were westernized. Native people didn’t have written rules and regulations, and proper behavior was passed on by instilling values from example and

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<sup>37</sup> From “The Buffalo War”, Independent Television Service, Community Connections Project.

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Yellow Hawk, “Restorative Justice, the Journey”, *MCS Conciliation Quarterly*, Fall 2004.

dialogue. This explains the role vested in the elderly as repositories of knowledge and wisdom, and the importance of listening and talking to them. In framing the IIF process of deliberation, the IIF team resourced the early to learn how they “*used to do business, because it works!*” and the elderly are often invited to participate in IIF trainings and circles to share their knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Also the principle of considering the consequences of one’s actions “*for the seventh generation yet unborn*” has some commonalities with deliberation in that it requires to weigh the costs and benefits implied by our choices and their future impact. Being accountable to future generations is a constant focus of the IIF team. IIF encourages participants to think deeply of the impact that our actions and decisions have on the children, and children of the IIF team often play some role in trainings to remind participants that children are a part of society, and that a sense of responsibility towards new generations should always shape our decisions.

According to the IIF team, the Indigenous understanding of deliberation is captured clearly in the following quote of an address to the General Assembly of the United Nations October 25, 1985 from Tadodaho Leon Shenandoah, Haudensaunee, Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy.<sup>40</sup>

#### **Great Binding Law of the Iroquois**

*“The Chiefs of the Haudensaunee shall be mentors of the people for all time. The thickness of their skin shall be seven spans; which is to say that they shall be proof against anger, offensive action, and criticism. Their hearts shall be full of peace and good will and their minds filled with yearning for the welfare of the people. With endless patience, they shall carry out their duty. Their firmness shall be tempered with a tenderness for their people. Neither anger nor fury shall find lodging in their minds and all their words and actions shall be marked by calm deliberation.”<sup>41</sup>*

IIF founders not only saw the idea of deliberation as well suited to the Native American culture, but also contend that the principal model of deliberation used by IIF, circle dialogue, or talking circle, fits well in the Lakota cultural tradition. As Eagle suggested, many elements of the Lakota spiritual life are connected to the idea of the circle –“*our understanding of how life works*

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<sup>39</sup> In the IIF Training of May 2005, Yellow Hawk’s father in law and his wife were invited to speak to the circle.

<sup>40</sup> An IIF document titled *Sharing our Process* explains: “*Tadodaho* is an ancient title that indicates a presiding moderator or “Speaker of the House,” of the fifty co-equal “peace chiefs” comprising the Grand Council of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy in upper New York State”.

<sup>41</sup> As cited in an IIF document titled *Sharing our Process*.

*is based on the circle [...] naturally the circle is rooted in communities, and Lakotas already know how to behave in the circle.”*

## **The Circle Dialogue Model**

If the meaning of communication is ‘to make something common’, i.e. to convey information among individuals, dialogue, whose etymology is from Greek *dia* (through) and *logos* (the word, the meaning of the word) means a process where greater understanding is achieved through the meaning of words. As Bohm suggests, if communication means making something common, dialogue is rather making something “in common.”<sup>42</sup> An image that well describes what dialogue is, is that of

“a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It’s something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It’s something creative. And this shared meaning is the “glue” or “cement” that holds people and societies together.”<sup>43</sup>

Designers note that the circular configuration of the dialogue mirrors patterns in nature: the sun, the moon, the shape of the earth, planets, and a shape –the IIF Elders often point out - that mirrors the whirls of fingerprints, the shape of our eyes, mouths, nostrils and so on. The circle is a geometric arrangement chosen because it “*doesn’t favor anybody; it allows for direct communication.*”<sup>44</sup> Often a natural object is passed around while individuals wait for their turn to speak, and listen respectfully to all opinions without interrupting. Unlike National Issues Forums, where, in spite of the presence of a moderator, certain individuals may dominate the discussion, circle dialogue provides enough space for all participants and encourages listening and reflecting, rather than talking. The circle dialogue model is an alternative to “*more confrontational Western models of deliberations,*” where deliberation oftentimes turns into debate, and it ensures participation from all and listening to all voices.

It often happens that in deliberations between whites and Native Americans, whites tend to prevail, while Indigenous people end up being the “soft voice” in the group. If in other

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<sup>42</sup> David Bohm. *On Dialogue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> David Bohm. *On Dialogue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> David Bohm. *On Dialogue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 17.

deliberative settings participants must intentionally enter the discussion, in circle dialogue, everybody has a chance to talk when their turn comes. Giving space to those who would normally remain silent is an empowering strategy that aims to level the discursive playing field. In circle dialogue participants have the option to pass the talking object on without talking, but there is a strong expectation that individuals will be engaged in the process and share their thoughts.

Ideally, a circle dialogue provides an environment characterized by equality and the absence of hierarchies and power relations. As Yankelovich points out

“in dialogue all participants must be treated as equals. Outside the context of the dialogue, there may be large status differences. But in the dialogue itself, equality must reign [...] Dialogue becomes possible only after trust has been built and the higher-ranking people have, for the occasion, removed their badges of authority and are participating as true equals. There must be mutual trust before participants of unequal status can open up honestly with one another.”<sup>45</sup>

The IIF team also emphasizes the importance of equality for dialogue to work. As Mendoza explained “*we want people to be [in the circle] as themselves, as humanely as they possibly can.*” Therefore, people from different walks of life should come to the circle dialogue to share, and should leave their professional, ideological or religious affiliations outside of the circle.

IIF organizers also stress the importance of empathy in their conceptions of dialogue. As Yellowhawk describes, circle dialogue is “*more efficient because it gets people to talk at a deeper level, it gets quiet people involved... it’s a fair process.*” Scholars often characterize dialogue as a process where deep and personal communication occurs, thus building trust among participants. In order for deep communication to happen, however, empathy is required from dialogue participants. Yankelovich lists “*listening with empathy*” as an essential feature of dialogue –and one that distinguishes dialogue from discussion, where empathy is not required. In dialogue, participants must “*respond with unreserved empathy to the views of others [...] The*

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<sup>45</sup> Daniel Yankelovich. *The Magic of Dialogue* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1999), pp. 41-42.

*gift of empathy –the ability to think someone else’s thoughts and feel someone else’s feelings—is indispensable to dialogue.”*<sup>46</sup>

Participants are also expected to openly share their beliefs with the group. The objective of sharing assumptions is not to criticize them or change them, but rather to analyze them collectively. On this point, Yankelovich suggests that “*In dialogue, participants are encouraged to examine their own assumptions and those of other participants. And once those assumptions are in the open, they are not to be dismissed out of hand but considered with respect even when participants disagree with them.*”<sup>47</sup> Bohm describes this process as “*suspending assumptions,*” to be open to what other people in the group have to say.<sup>48</sup>

Yellowhawk describes the process of circle dialogue as one that “*allows for both deep feelings to surface and for respectful talk to take place.*” The circle is a space where individuals share very personal views, as Yellowhawk puts it “*in the circle people are held accountable to putting their truth in the middle of the room,*” which enables relationship-building among participants. The IIF is grateful when people come to circle dialogue to open up and share their opinions and assumptions, and provides food for participants as a way to thank them for the hard work of participating, “*we [IIF] are grateful about people’s sharing.*”

Finally, although everybody has a chance to talk when their turn comes, in circles, great emphasis is also placed on listening to what others have to say. Especially in large circles, individuals speak only a few times, but have to listen to what all other participants have to say, that’s why the IIF team often refers to their work as “*listening circles.*” Sometimes the hardest component of circle dialogue is precisely the listening part, because participants can avoid talking by passing the talking object to the next person, “*but you can’t avoid listening*” and exposing yourself to different perspectives. According to Mendoza, “*the important thing is to bring people together, talking is not necessary [...] getting people together is already progress*” because they have an opportunity to listen to one another respectfully and to learn collectively. In Eagle’s words: “*the objective of the work is to get people back to basics.*” In a fast-paced society that doesn’t teach individuals how speak and listen respectfully, there’s a great need to

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<sup>46</sup> Daniel Yankelovich. *The Magic of Dialogue* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1999), p. 43.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Yankelovich. *The Magic of Dialogue* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1999), p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> David Bohm. *On Dialogue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 30.

understand that “*there’s learning from watching [...] there is value in listening without talking, for communities and individuals.*” If enough people embraced this understanding “*communities would get better.*”

The IIF team uses a Paua (abalone) shell from New Zealand to explain the nature of their work. Half the shell has its outer crust scraped off showing the luminous beauty that lies hidden beneath the surface. The crust forms over a long time to protect what is inside. The shell is a reminder of what lies beneath someone’s exterior and circle dialogue can enable a group gain deeper understanding of the self and of specific problems by removing external layers to get to the chore of a question, like polishing the coarse external surface of a shell. Getting to deeper understanding –polishing the shell- requires a long and hard work, that’s why the IIF team often refers to their work as a collective “journey” a process requiring long term individual and group commitment. In a way, training events are but occasions for individuals to familiarize with the circle dialogue process and start “*the journey of integrity*” that deliberation is. This journey is aimed at changing individual behavior, because “*you can’t separate individual behavior from how people conduct themselves in deliberation*”, as well as in their every day family and work lives.

This process of dialogue and deliberation can have powerful transformative effects at the individual and collective level. As Bohm puts it, people tend to be enthusiastic about the group they deliberate with, but

“it’s actually the process that counts. I think that when we are able to sustain a dialogue of this sort you will find that there will be a change in the people who are taking part. They themselves would then behave differently, even outside the dialogue. Eventually they would spread it. It’s like the Biblical analogy of the seeds – some are dropped in stony ground and some of them fall in the right place and they produce tremendous fruit. The thing is that you cannot tell where or how it can start.”<sup>49</sup>

To use Bohm’s Biblical analogy, part of the IIF’s work consists of planting seeds for individuals to internalize the process and initiate the life-long “journey” of respectful behavior and deliberation.

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<sup>49</sup> David Bohm. *On Dialogue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 21.

## Dialogue and Forums

Sometimes, IIF deliberations combine circle dialogue with open forum discussion – where participants intervene without following the circle order. Integrating the circle and the forum model provides a chance for all participants to talk, and is especially empowering for individuals who may not intervene in a pure forum setting. A forum on immigration held in a juvenile corrections facility provides a good example of the integration of the circle dialogue and forum models.<sup>50</sup> The forum, which used an NIF discussion guide, was opened up with a circle dialogue, where a talking object was passed around and all participants had a chance to share their reflections on how the issue of immigration resonated with them. After the circle, the deliberation shifted to an open floor forum, to conclude with a final round of reflection, using circle dialogue again. Of the 25 youths participating in the forum, many were of Native American descent. In mixed settings, Yellowhawk observed, whites tend to participate more in the discussion, whereas Native people engage less, so additional strategies are needed to ensure that all voices are heard in the deliberation. Using circle dialogue to kick off the forum allowed all participants a chance to speak, and encouraged also Native participants to be more engaged in the forum deliberation. The circle approach especially allows many Native Americans to feel more comfortable and connected to the deliberative process, than the open forum setting where certain voices dominate from the start.

Even though the IIF is currently using certain techniques to facilitate deliberation, they do not view themselves as vested in a specific “model.” They emphasize the dynamic character of their work, and the continuous change and refining of the tools they use: *“the concept of respectful dialogue will always be there, but the process we use is organic [...] it grows and changes as we do it.”*

Both the open forum model and the circle dialogue rely upon facilitators to remind participants of the basic values and guidelines to follow, to share thought-provoking remarks, to observe group dynamics and ensure equal participation. According to Yellowhawk, skilled

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<sup>50</sup> The forum, was held on May 10, 2005, in the State Treatment and Rehabilitation (STAR) Academy of Custer, SD.

moderators are extremely important to facilitate deliberation. The IIF organizers stress that it is difficult even for experienced moderators to set aside their cultural and political preconceptions for the sake of constructive deliberation. Yellowhawk, Mendoza and Eagle often facilitate together to help each other, to add male/female balance, and to ensure many eyes, and ears to bring different perspectives to the deliberation.

At the beginning of the deliberation (both in the form of circle dialogue and forum) the IIF team reviews posted guidelines for participants, including respect for all opinions and openness. Because much of their work began in South Dakota, with Lakota participants, the IIF team asked a group of Lakota speakers to translate the rules in their Native language. The translation proved hard, and what was eventually noticed was that the guidelines did in fact correspond to the Lakota values of humility, honesty, patience, respect, courage, fortitude, and wisdom. While IIF finds the written guidelines helpful, it is the manner in which participants live their values that gives real life to the deliberations. Both the guidelines in English as well as the Lakota values are reviewed for those who participate in deliberation to show the commonalities in the framework of values and rules informing the discussion.

## **The Use of Films and Art in Forums**

The IIF utilizes film and other artwork to initiate dialogue because organizers believe that *“creative expression is crucial to building and re-building community.”*

In many cases, they hold film and forum events, where what they do is *“just get communities to talk, using films.”* One example is a PBS documentary titled “Alcatraz is not an island,” on the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz. “Alcatraz is not an island” was used to promote dialogue and deliberation on racism in Rapid City, at a time when many other initiatives were focusing on the same problem. Despite all these initiatives, however, *“it was very hard to sustain the conversation [...] meetings had a bitterness, few people were talking.”* It was often the case that Native Americans would sit in the back of the room, and many dropped out of the conversation with much frustration. Playing the film enabled IIF to embrace the issue in a de-personalized way, so that participants could reflect and talk about the film, rather than about their personal—often very troubling—stories. In many cases, watching the film, and then engaging in circle dialogue, allowed them a way to talk about their personal experiences differently—in more

constructive and connected ways. With films, people could “*take the issue home and have a safe way to talk about a hurting situation.*”

Another initiative that the IIF participated in is the community outreach surrounding a film titled “*The Buffalo War,*” created by Independent Television Service’s “Community Connections Project.”<sup>51</sup> The film is about the slaughter of bison outside Yellowstone National Park, in Montana, where the animals are killed for fear of transmission of brucellosis to the local livestock. The issue is very controversial because many aspects of the spread of brucellosis remain unclear, and killings enrage environmental activists and Native Americans alike, who consider this measure unnecessary and too harsh. After seeing the film, the public is encouraged to deliberate using a very articulate discussion framework –written by IIF, suggesting questions such as “*what was gained and lost by each group’s activities*” and “*what would you be willing to protect*”.<sup>52</sup>

The IIF used a similar methodology in Hawai’i, to promote dialogue on Indigenous issues. It appears that film and forums resonated with the Hawaiian people because they now choose their own films and hold forums about them, indicating that the dialogue instilled by the IIF became sustainable.

Besides films and documentary, the art of Native American artist Jim Yellowhawk - among others- is also used to spur dialogue. Paintings on themes such as addiction and healing, the impact of boarding schools on indigenous culture, and the Lakota people’s connection to the land were used during the May 2005 IIF training to stimulate reflection and discussion.

As Yellowhawk suggests, “*art or film to start a dialogue can help work on trauma*” because they can reach the heart of a problem more than “*the written word,*” especially for populations used to oral tradition. In the case of Native Americans, the trauma is two sided: of those who have suffered it, and of the perpetrators, as Yellowhawk explains “*European Americans have also been traumatized by history [...] there’s trauma in recognizing that one’s ancestors took part in a genocide.*” Artistic expression can facilitate dialogue and healing both for victims and perpetrators.

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<sup>51</sup> An project to encourage the use of media in community dialogue.

<sup>52</sup> *The Buffalo War* discussion guide, [www.itvs.org/buffalowar](http://www.itvs.org/buffalowar)

## Issue Framing and Other Forums

The IIF helped frame discussion guides on community development in the Rosebud Reservation and one on the use of the Tribal language.

The issue guide “*How We Live – Community Development on the Rosebud*” was developed under the leadership of Nora Antoine of the Sicangu Policy Institute, of Sinte Gleska University. It focuses on what approaches could be adopted to improve the livelihoods of Tribal people in the Rosebud Reservation, a community plagued with extremely high unemployment rates of 60% to 70% and very low per capita income. The approaches in the discussion include “*heal our bodies*”, “*feed our minds*”, “*show me the money*”, and “*nourish our souls*.”<sup>53</sup> IIF organizers felt that the process of framing the issue of economic development in the Rosebud was itself important because “*people asked questions that were really important to them*.” They used a translator as well as local facilitators to draw upon the strengths of the indigenous people of that community, and the relationships that developed during the framing phase still continue. The forums in the Rosebud were held in very small groups, sometimes it was “*talking to people in their kitchen*,” to really reach out to the whole community.

In 2003, IIF developed an issue guide titled “*Tribal Language Preservation, Our Language: Our lives, Our choices*”, proposing approaches such as “*let’s attend to our spiritual lives*,” “*let’s address and heal the effects of racism*,” “*let’s start practicing together*,” and “*let’s become better relatives*.”<sup>54</sup> A few forums utilized this guide.

IIF also uses NIF issue books, as in the case of the forum on immigration held in the juvenile corrections facility. The IIF has been bringing deliberation to the youths in the facility to stimulate discussion on issues of relevance, to visit the youths –especially Native American ones, who can be very disconnected from their families given limited resources for visits- and establish a connection between what goes on in the facility and the outside world. Youths were strongly encouraged to fill in the post forum questionnaires so that their opinions could be reflected in an upcoming NIF report.

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<sup>53</sup> *How We Live, Community Development on the Rosebud*, developed by Nora Antoine, Sicangu Policy Institute, Sinte Gleska University.

<sup>54</sup> *Tribal Language Preservation, A Framework for Discussion, 2003, Our language: Our lives, Our choices*. Produced by Indigenous Issues Forums.

## Deliberation and Action

Although we did not observe collective action emerging from the IIF training workshop held in May 2005, some participants reported that they had learned important lessons, useful for their personal and professional lives. They were appreciative of the sense of protection created by the IIF circles, where they could safely speak their mind, and of the presence of children and elderly who shared their knowledge with the group. They found the IIF process very valuable to deepen their wisdom and learn to be open to all perspectives. Some participants adapted the skills learned at the training and used them in their professions – from counseling on alcohol abuse, to circles on health education. Some remained in touch after the training, and collaborated on projects in some local reservations.

The IIF's primary objective is to help individuals understand their values and be respectful to their families and communities. Organizers view respect as manifest in the way communities talk and operate together. Once that work is initiated, the IIF steps out of a formal, facilitative relationship and into their unique, individual responsibilities to the relationship. They see themselves as “co-journeymen” and do not wish to impose their particular views. They feel that it is the responsibility of community members to continue that journey in their own ways. The concept of communities taking action after deliberation is probably premature in the IIF case. The IIF is working to establish the preconditions for that to happen by simply practicing how to be together in a respectful way. Many communities are not ready to deliberate using NIF discussion guides, and even the concept of framing their own issues may be frustrating to Indigenous people until they recuperate their traditional way of being together and deliberate.

Yellowhawk suggests that deliberation should start at the very nuclear level of the family. She wishes that families were more exposed to deliberation, especially the disenfranchised ones. She sees deliberation as “*a natural way to discuss keeping contention down*” and cares more about “*reflecting about how we talk*” than the impact of deliberation upon public policy. According to Yellowhawk, “*reshaping a relationship among people in a forum is action*” and creating “*community building and listening skills is a form of action.*”

For Eagle, much of their work is based on the relationships the IIF developed with communities, organizations and individuals. Building trust and relationship is not a direct way of

action, but something that can enable communities to work together. Rather than helping communities to take action around policy issues, the objective of IIF is to build relationships with and among community members so that they can talk about issues and take care of possible problems themselves. Instead of having an external organization or individual encouraging them to act on any specific issue “*it’s better if communities do things themselves, because they know the best way to do things.*”

Eagle suggests that the process leading from deliberation to, possibly, action, can be articulated in three steps:

1. Awareness: why a problem or a situation are so hard for the community, “*why are we here, at this stage?*”
2. Focusing on strengths: “*We need to heal,*” rather than complain about the past, focus on positive aspects to gain strength and move on
3. Creative phase: “*Once we have healthy goals, good things can happen in a community*”

The work that IIF is conducting with Native American communities is still focusing on the first and second phases, as a precondition to creating healthier communities that can eventually act together to solve local problems. Additionally, the IIF focus is not to engage communities in public policy deliberation for the sake of exploring the issues. The *issues* that are deliberated, and their solution, are less important than the *process* of deliberation *per se*.

## **Deliberation and Embeddedness**

It is difficult to determine the level of embeddedness of the IIF model with organizations as well as communities. However, understanding the reach of the IIF’s work may be a first step to tackle the broader embeddedness question.

IIF offers training to communities and organizations that have expressed some interest in their models of respectful talk that builds upon the perspectives and traditions of Native Americans. Most of the training they perform is solicited by organizations. They are currently working with the Central States region of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) – a relief, service, and peace agency of the North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches

that is active in several reservations. The MCC Central States is in the process of redefining its identity and re-framing “*what does it mean to be a Christian today, how does being Christian inform practice.*” The IIF is facilitating this reflection process, which is likely to lead to sweeping organizational changes. In May 2005 the IIF started working with the MCC Central States, in July 2005 they held a three day meeting with the organization to help it reframe its identity and mission, and it was decided that they would reconvene again in September 2005.

Although many organizations are captivated by the IIF’s model and would like to incorporate the IIF methodology in their work, the IIF team doesn’t see its work as providing any “quick fix” to organizational problems. Rather than using a cookie cutter approach, the IIF prefers to collaborate with agencies that are aware of deliberation’s transformative power and are ready to embark in a long process to achieve “*systemic change.*” The series of encounters already held with the MCC and the upcoming ones are an example of the type of collaborative process the IIF offers to organizations that want to use their model to tackle important internal issues.

The IIF employs a long relationship building process until communities or organizations are ready to deliberate and invite the IIF in to learn more about their work, or to seek help on a specific issue. As Mendoza put it “*we [IIF] don’t want to go in and tell people what to do.*” By building relationship, the IIF tries to understand what are a group’s needs, why they want to use the IIF model, and what their expectations are. By taking the time to establish a relationship, the IIF helps organizations understand that deliberation requires intense individual and collective work - “*it’s a lifetime commitment to be able to live with this every day*”- to transform the way individuals and groups talk and interact.

The Central States region of MCC is maybe the only organization the IIF is helping through a process of systemic change, but the IIF has established relationships with dozens of other organizations, either collaborating with them on specific projects, or simply exposing them to their model of deliberation. These organizations include several churches and religious institutions, tribal colleges, juvenile corrections facilities, centers for restorative justice –both in South Dakota and in other states, library associations, the United National Indian Tribal Youth, as well as organizations working in indigenous issues in Hawai’i (the Pu’a Foundation), New

Zealand and other countries. At different levels, all these institutions have had some exposure to the IIF and their deliberative processes.

Some of these organizations are more actively trying to find ways to use the IIF model in their work, such as the South Dakota Library Association, which is collaborating with the IIF to find new ways to reach out to the blind. Other groups, on the other hand, have established a relationship with the IIF but may not be ready to use their model. Part of the IIF's work, however, is to "plant the seed," to initiate relationships with a variety of groups and institutions and build relationship overtime.

Although the IIF is very active at building relationships with institutions that could use their model, it remains unclear if any organization ended up embedding deliberation in its work. The Mennonite Central Committee started using the IIF model to engage in organizational change, but it may be too early to say if deliberation became embedded with MCC's regional work in the Central States. Finally, given that the IIF proposes a model that involves profound individual and collective reflection and change, it may take time for these ways of communicating to become embedded with a group.

If the IIF has worked extensively with a number of organizations, local communities have not yet had significant exposure to the IIF model. Rather than working directly with unaffiliated community members, the IIF has concentrated on reaching organizations that are active in the community hoping that they can use deliberation with their constituencies. In May 2005, however, the IIF offered its first training workshop open to the general public and not intended for a specific organization. Participants included community leaders, staffs from social services organizations, and local activists. The workshop was yet another attempt to expose a broader community to dialogue and deliberation, and it may indicate that the IIF is expanding the scope of its outreach to engage communities more directly in its work.

Although the IIF model does not seem to be significantly embedded in local groups or communities, IIF is building a fertile ground for deliberation by initiating relationships and collaborations with a number of organizations. As members of the IIF team explained, deliberation cannot be forced upon individuals or groups. The IIF's work is rather to start the

dialogue and cultivate relationships with numerous interlocutors, so that they can slowly metabolize the concept of deliberation, and use it when it is most appropriate for them.

## **Conclusions**

In South Dakota, two organizations are actively engaged in promoting public deliberation and dialogue: the Chiesman Foundation, with its South Dakota Issues Forums and Public Policy Institute, and the Indigenous Issues Forums. The first has been holding public forums using the NIF model across the state, on a variety of topics, including education, youth crime, and the media. Besides public forums, the Chiesman Foundation also convenes roundtables with public and private leaders to deliberate on important policy issues, and youth congresses, where high school students from across the state convene to deliberate on issues such as the environment and education. In spite of all these different initiatives, deliberation does not seem to go beyond issue analysis, and it did not prompt forum participants to take collective action on specific problems. Although reports were developed after rounds of public forums on a topic, it seems that they did not have a significant direct impact in changing public policies. Public deliberation may have become moderately embedded in a middle school and in some universities that incorporated elements of deliberation in their curricula.

The Indigenous Issues Forums aim to create safe spaces in which Indigenous people can engage in deliberation on complex issues. In their work, the IIF integrate the NIF model and the principles of dialogue and talking circles. More than analyzing the pros and cons of a policy issue, however, IIF focus on public deliberation and dialogue as a process to transform individuals and communities by instilling new ways of thinking and acting together. In the Native American context, where communities are working to claim back their identity and traditional values, IIF offer a framework to address important underlying issues, such as the preservation of Indigenous languages and sovereignty. The IIF are also committed to raising awareness on Native issues and bringing the Indigenous perspective to other contexts. The IIF built relationships with several groups and organizations to expose them to their model and create future opportunities for dialogue. Although the IIF do not seem to be particularly embedded with communities or groups, they are constantly reaching out to new interlocutors,

and cultivating relationships with the old ones, in an attempt to create a fertile environment for deliberation.

## 4. Public Deliberation in Hawai'i

### *Introduction*

In Hawai'i, several initiatives create opportunities for citizen engagement in public deliberation and civic life. The University of Hawai'i hosts the Hawai'i Public Policy Forums, which promote deliberation around public policy issues using different methods, including the NIF model. In the Hawai'i congress, some elected officials use public deliberation in their work and are committed to engaging citizens and civil society in their activities. Although the state legislature — like that of other states — lacks a deep culture of public deliberation, some state senators and representatives have used deliberative models to tackle important local issues. Senator Les Ihara, in particular, is a champion of public deliberation and has been one of the leaders of a national initiative to improve citizen engagement in decision-making through public deliberation. Les Ihara also collaborates with the Kettering Foundation and has promoted several NIF forums in Hawai'i.

### *The Hawai'i Public Policy Forums*

Around the year 2000, the Kettering Foundation sponsored the creation of a local Public Policy Institute at the University of Hawai'i (UH), as part of an existing initiative called Hawai'i Public Policy Forums (HPPF). Professor Dolores Foley, of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, directs the HPPF and Kettering provided HPPF initial support to establish the NIF model locally and to hold annual moderator trainings.

Public forums and deliberation, however, were not foreign to Hawai'i. Prior to Kettering's involvement, throughout the 1990s, Foley launched several initiatives to promote dialogue and deliberation, community visioning, and citizen engagement around local issues.

In 1994, she participated in an initiative called POP 94, designed to “*elevate the 1994 political campaign*”<sup>55</sup> by asking the public to come up with questions that candidates should

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<sup>55</sup> POP '94 Final Report.

debate. Because too often political campaigns revolve around issues that alienate, rather than involve the public, POP 94 organized a series of community conferences in Honolulu and other locations in Hawai'i to identify the topics that the public cared about. The conferences drew around 500 people and, as a result, candidates spent more time talking about issues identified by the public and media coverage improved.

In the mid 1990s, the Public Administration Program at the University of Hawai'i launched the "*Hawai'i Forum: Confronting Issues in an Island Society*" project, to provide a public space where citizens could discuss complex local issues such as the role of communities in local governance, environmental protection and growth, and education. In the forums, participants were asked to analyze hypothetical scenarios in order to de-personalize controversial issues and encourage a frank discussion. The forums were recorded and televised, and served as a model for local communities that wanted to pursue public deliberation on these topics.

In 1995, Foley participated in a visioning and benchmarking project where 6,000 youths were convened to define a preferred future for Hawai'i. Subsequently, hundreds of residents of all age groups attended forums to develop a set of indicators to track progress towards the children's objectives. In the years that followed, the indicators served to measure the implementation of the children's vision, and several reports were issued highlighting success and failure.

In 1997, a local coalition started the "*He Au Papa 'olelo: A Time for Dialogue*" project. This initiative brought together groups of Hawaiians (islands natives) and non-Hawaiians to promote dialogue on Hawaiian sovereignty using the Study Circles model. The objective of the project was not to formulate policy recommendations or mobilize groups, but to create a safe space for a restorative dialogue because "*There appears to be a consensus within the Hawaiian community that past wrongs need to be addressed but not about potential courses of action.*"<sup>56</sup> By spring 2002, as many as 350 people had participated in the dialogues, many reported having gained new perspectives thanks to the process, and a few experienced a deep personal transformation.

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<sup>56</sup> Dolores Foley, *He Au Papa 'Olelo: Promoting Dialogue Between Hawaiians and Non-Hawaiians*, PRC Working Paper Series: 2002-02, Program on Conflict Resolution, Matsunaga Institute for Peace, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, p. 2.

As the initiatives mentioned above illustrate, HPPF employed several models of deliberation over the years, from the NIF model to community dialogues and Study Circles. In early 2000, they received funding from the Kettering Foundation to establish a local public policy institute and train moderators. Since then, HPPF have been holding annual training events titled “*Building Community Through Public Deliberation*” to expose participants to the NIF model and encourage them to use public forums in their communities and work places.

Another deliberative entrepreneur named Karen Cross, of the Program on Conflict Resolution at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa has been very involved in the HPPF by moderating forums and teaching at the yearly training events. If Foley comes from a public policy background, Cross brings the trainings her experience in dialogue and conflict resolution. Some informants argue that the HPPF draw on the University’s strong tradition of mediation and conflict resolution, which prepared the ground for public deliberation. In fact, many of those currently involved in the program were trained in moderation and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in the 1980s by Peter Adler, the director of the “Neighborhood Justice Center of Hawaii,” an organization working on resolving neighbor to neighbor disputes. Adler also helped create the Supreme Court’s Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution. Recurring to ADR has become such an embedded practice that many legislators issue decisions deferring contentious issues to community deliberation.

In addition to a very fertile environment and a culture of dialogue, the HPPF benefit from being hosted at the University of Hawai’i’s College of Social Sciences. Dean Richard Dubanoski there is a champion of deliberation within the university. He has visited the Kettering foundation and consistently supported the Hawai’i Public Policy Forums. Also Susan Chandler, the interim director of the University’s Public Policy Center, advocate greater public deliberation. Since the Center’s motto is “*to improve the quality of life in the community and [...] to think about how public policy issues and the community can interact,*” initiatives such as public forums are considered a contribution to advancing the Center’s mission and are strongly encouraged.

The HPPF are a bipartisan institution, trusted for their ability to tackle controversial issues without losing their neutrality. Many of the people who attend the annual trainings (elected officials, educators, NGOs, public agencies, students) do not necessarily end up

moderating forums, but learn skills that may be useful in their workplaces or communities. Those who participate in trainings are generally impressed with the NIF model, because it offers a “*positive way to talk about public issues.*” Attendance to training events has grown overtime because HPPF’s work rippled out to many people, and also thanks to targeted mailings to invite participants from the non-profit sector, education, community, and legislative branches.

During training workshops, NIF forums are used to expose participants to the model. HPPF try to choose topics that resonate with the local public, because the national connotation of the forums can alienate participants, who can view the issues as a “mainland” — rather than a Hawai’i — topic. In the 2005 “*Building Community Through Public Deliberation*” workshop, for example, HPPF used a forum on the economic challenges of working Americans titled “*Making Ends Meet,*” and several participants criticized the approaches as an expression of the mainstream capitalistic culture and favored more local approaches.

Like the Indigenous Issues Forums, activists and participants in Hawai’i have sought to adapt national models and materials to local traditions and needs. At the end of the 2005 workshop, participants asked to be trained in issue framing to tackle local problems, and the 2002 workshop resulted in the framing of the issue of development and growth in Hawai’i, summarized in the issue book “*Choosing a Future for Hawai’i,*” described later in this report.

### ***Some NIF Forums Held in Hawai’i***

The forums described below were convened to weigh the pros and cons of issues, and gather the public’s view on controversial policy problems, some of which were also being debated before the legislature. Some of these forums were conceived as an attempt to add perspective and public input to the analysis of policies that had raised considerable controversy and had repeatedly been stalled in the state capitol. The first two forums were held by the Hawai’i state legislature to reduce partisan acrimony, encourage public deliberation and strengthen democratic practices. Democratic Senator Les Ihara and HPPF were the driving forces behind the forums.

All the forums were open to the public, except the forum on death with dignity, for which they chose to have a controlled environment because of the level of controversy generated by the topic. For Ihara it is fundamental that forums be not only open to the public, but also diverse, “*it is vitally important to have diversity in order to have a robust and full deliberation.*” Ihara says that “extraordinary measures” should be taken to ensure that those who are usually absent from such processes are present in their forums.

## **Campaign Finance**

The first forum, titled “*Money and Politics,*” was held in April 2001, after several attempts to reform campaign finance had stalled, and days after the House had passed a bill to have publicly funded campaigns.

Seventy-five people — among them two state legislators —deliberated on the approaches contained in the NIF guide:

Approach 1: Reform the fundraising system;

Approach 2: Rein in lobbyists and politicians; and

Approach 3: Publicize donations instead of regulating them.

The event, which was broadcast by live cable TV and promoted with various legislators, helped participants understand the perspective of the other side. Although participants did not seem to change their positions as a result of the forum, many of them reported having a “*greater understanding of the problem and the choices about how to respond to it [and] a greater appreciation for the views held by their fellow citizens.*”<sup>57</sup>

## **Gambling**

In 2001, gambling became controversial in Hawai’i after a House bill to fund long-term care for seniors through gambling revenues. The Senate, on the other hand, was more skeptical and favored studying more carefully the economic benefits of gambling. A forum on gambling took place in December 2001, only weeks before the 2002 legislative session, during which

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<sup>57</sup> Les Ihara, Jr. “Opportunities for State Legislatures”, Kettering Foundation’s *Connections*, Vol. XIV, Issue 1, July 2003, p. 19.

many thought gambling would be legalized. The forum's sponsors hoped that, through deliberation, participants could learn to grapple with highly controversial issues in a more successful way.

The planning for this forum started four months in advance to allow the involvement of legislators. The planners presented the forum as an opportunity to the House and Senate presiding officers who supported the initiative and encouraged legislators to participate. In order to utilize the synergies between deliberation and the legislative process, the planners met with six legislators –both pro and against gambling- to understand how they could make the forum useful for their work. Legislators suggested asking the public how they would use the revenues generated by gambling and what social problems might be associated with legalizing it. Eventually, after contacting advocates from both sides, the planners adapted the NIF guide to the Hawaiian context, and proposed the following approaches:

Approach 1: Introduce gambling but regulate it;

Approach 2: Do more study on the issue because Hawai'i is not ready; and

Approach 3: Keep gambling out of Hawai'i.

The three approaches were articulated by public figures representing the different positions on the topic.<sup>58</sup> The forum contributed to reducing the animosity that was traditionally associated with the topic, because both advocates and opponents of gambling had opportunities to understand the arguments of the other side. As a result, organizers claim, many legislators became more comfortable when confronting the issue and both sides assessed each others' strengths. Eventually, initiatives to promote gambling did not pass, and opposition to gambling remains strong. Additionally, the forum was accompanied by several corollary initiatives on the same topic, such as meetings with debate teams from high-schools, and small group discussions to analyze the NIF issue book and modify it.

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<sup>58</sup> University of Hawai'i economist Lawrence Boyd presented the pro-gambling argument, University of Hawai'i Vice Chancellor Carl Kim the "need-to-study" one, and former Attorney General Margery Bronster presented the anti-gambling rationale. "Panel discussion revives debate about legalized gambling", *Pacific Business News*, Nov. 30, 2001.

## **Death with Dignity**

In October 2004, Ihara and the HPPF organized a closed doors forum on death with dignity using an NIF discussion guide. They decided to invite a group of sixteen carefully selected stakeholders and top leaders on the issue. They rejected the more conventional public deliberation model due to the polarized and controversial character of the issue in Hawai'i. The state has a large senior population, and several bills on the topic had been proposed in the years preceding the forum, triggering a heated political debate. A bill on death with dignity failed in the Senate by just one vote, and was pushed again in 2004. Nothing happened on the issue in response to the forum and, given the level of controversy associated with the issue, it is unlikely that the House or the Senate will bring it up again in 2005. However, participants gained a clearer understanding of the problem and, according to an informant, the forum did have some influence on the legislature, because *"it got people from opposite sites to continue talking."* Following the forum, some participants understood that *"more needed to be done in the middle,"* and decided to abandon extreme positions to work on finding middle ground solutions, especially around palliative care.

## **News, Media and Society**

On December 1<sup>st</sup> 2004, a coalition including the Public Policy Center at the University of Hawai'i as well as several media organizations convened a forum titled *"News Media and Society: How to Restore the Public Trust."* The forum, held at the state Capitol, exceeded organizers' expectations and attracted some 120 people. Participation was high because media reform is, in general, a highly debated issue, though it was not related to any particular legislative initiative. Although Ihara spoke to the publishers of two major papers and to other people in the media, they did not participate substantially in the forum. Seven legislators attended. Participants agreed that the media should serve the community and do more reporting in public affairs rather than on issues driven by entertainment concerns.

## **Framing Issues Locally: Choosing a Future for Hawai'i**

According to Foley, in Hawai'i there is a strong need to frame issues locally rather than using nationally-framed NIF discussion guides. This need emerged clearly after the 2002 NIF training workshop, which was followed by a seminar on issue framing, where participants

suggested that topics such as tourism, development and sustainability could be framed to prepare public forums of local importance. In 2003, several graduate students, encouraged by Foley, decided to frame a discussion guide on the topic, and, through research and interviews with citizens and experts, produced an issue guide titled “*Choosing a Future for Hawai’i.*” The issue guide analyzes the profound transformation of Hawai’i and the tensions between development, preservation of the environment and the quality of life of residents. The three proposed approaches were:

Approach 1: Encouraging economic vitality;

Approach 2: Creating a self-sufficient community; and

Approach 3: Managing growth.

Development broadly understood is a continuing concern in Hawai’I as in many other states. The issue was addressed in several forums, including one during the 2004 training on public deliberation. At the conclusion of that 2004 workshop, a group of participants decided to do some follow-up work and organize forums around the issue of Hawai’i’s future. However, because of lack of time and support, only one participant of Enterprise Honolulu, an economic development organization, convened a forum on the topic with a group of young professionals.

This group had been participating in visioning for Hawai’i for a long time, but they had reached a standstill. Enterprise Honolulu decided to expose them to a new deliberative model. On January 2005, around 12-15 people participated in the forum. According to an organizer, forums can significantly improve the quality of the deliberation because they are a well structured and moderated process. Thanks to the presence of a moderator and of a set of ground rules, the group used its time more effectively, moved from one topic to the other without getting bogged down, and all participants had a opportunities to speak without dominance from specific individuals. The forum was an opportunity to expose the group to a different way of being together and analyzing issues. Some participants were very interested in the model and said they would introduce it in their workplaces. Because the topic is so vast, however, the forum did not appear to produce specific follow-up actions.

Overall, the forums on “*Choosing a Future for Hawai’i*” identified a clear need to deliberate about development and tourism in Hawai’i. They were particularly helpful in showing how different aspects of development are inextricably related.<sup>59</sup> In the future, Foley would like stakeholders to use the discussion guide to moderate forums with their constituencies. Although there is not a timetable for these forums, Foley would like them to happen before the next gubernatorial election, to provide some public input in planning.

### ***Other Deliberative Initiatives***

The Hawaii Institute for Public Affairs (HIPA, website: [hipaonline.com](http://hipaonline.com)) is a non-partisan organization devoted to improving public policy by encouraging forums where stakeholders can discuss and deliberate on topics of public interest. The Institute organizes long term deliberations where stakeholders meet over time to analyze specific public policies and, possibly, reach a consensus and formulate recommendations on policy options that emerge from the exchange. The Institute has also a strong focus on research, and backs deliberation with research to explore the feasibility, costs and benefits of any given policy option. An example is the series of deliberations on ways to expand health coverage in the state. The “*Hawai’i Uninsured Project*” started in 2000 and was completed in 2003. It involved lengthy community planning, a convention of leaders called “Leadership Assembly”, and substantial research to identify potential strategies to make health coverage more widely accessible. Findings were presented to a forum of experts in 2002, and after that the initiative received funding to expand the research and involve communities and other stakeholders in the dialogue.

A more recent project, “*The Hawai’i Food & Biotechnology Initiative*,” (HFBI) is managed by the Institute and funded under the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology. The initiative, convened by the Hawai’i State Legislature, the Sierra Club and other local groups, involves a series of approximately ten meetings, from the end of 2004 to March-April 2006, attended by a group of key stakeholders, including the industry, and pro- and against- GE groups. This topic is of crucial importance, given that Hawai’i has the highest number of open-air tests for engineered crops, and several groups would like to challenge this practice because of the

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<sup>59</sup> Dolores Foley, *Promoting Dialogue and Deliberation in Hawaii*, 2005.

hazards it poses to local traditional crops. The objectives of the project are multiple, and include informing an educated discussion on genetically engineered crops, reaching a community consensus on the topic, and possibly enforcing any emerging consensus. The project may also serve as a model for other locations outside of Hawai'i that want to have a community-based deliberation on the topic. As the Project Proposal states clearly, using a deliberative process to evaluate the benefits and risks of GEs, may lead to the adoption of policies with better outcomes. Although this project is limited to stakeholders who have sufficient technical knowledge and authority in the field, efforts to inform the public will occur in parallel, such as community and legislative briefings and media reporting. The initiative also includes some deliberative forums open to the general public on the topic of biotechnology. This will allow citizens to provide input on the process, as well as give the HFBI a way to take the public's pulse on the topic.

The deliberative initiatives organized under the auspices of the Hawaii Institute for Public Affairs involve long term dialogue between stakeholders on a specific policy with the objective of enriching the analysis of issue through deliberation, and creating some common ground to identify solutions that are satisfactory for all sides. Only stakeholders are invited because they provide "*the best minds, the best thinking*" to analyze a policy. Stakeholders are also more knowledgeable and have the capacity to implement some of the deliberation's outcomes.

The fact that these initiatives involve a series of encounters over a period of 2-3 years, allows opposing factions to develop trust and be able to work collaboratively on an issue. Stakeholders participating in the uninsured project, for example, worked together for a three year period, and developed enough trust and cohesion to work together smoothly. These processes, however, start out as extremely polarized discussions –as is currently the case for the HFBI project. Only time and repeated interaction allow building trust and finding common ground, as HIPA's director described "*a slow burn process is needed to develop trust amongst the group.*"

Besides long term interaction among stakeholders, research is an important component of these initiatives. When a deliberating group proposes a policy recommendation, HIPA analyzes its feasibility and reports to the group. This allows setting aside unrealistic or overly expensive options and concentrating on ideas that are more likely to be implemented. Especially since the focus of these initiatives is to analyze complex policy issues and propose concrete solutions, it is

crucial that all options be tested for their feasibility and costs. The product of these stakeholder deliberations are policy recommendations that are fact-based as well as community-based. In the case of the Uninsured Project, for example, the stakeholder group recommended a substantial extension of the Medicaid program to serve Hawaiians that are uncovered, but HIPA calculated that this option would have been too expensive and other options –such as private sector involvement- were then considered.

Generally, legislators do not participate in the stakeholder dialogues. Some feel that their presence skews the dynamics of deliberation because other participants tend to gravitate around them. However, some legislators are involved in the biotechnology initiative. Legislators tend to favor processes like the ones described above because they provide thoughtful policy analysis and debate *before* an issue goes to a committee for hearings, so “*there’s not open warfare at committee hearings.*” Legislators expressed concerns about time — those who participate often do not attend the entire deliberative cycle. At the same time, they expressed appreciation for these processes for their capacity to reduce contention and provide novel sources of information.

### ***Deliberation in the State Legislature***

Democratic Senator Les Ihara is a champion of deliberative democracy and citizen engagement both in Hawai’i and nationally. He has promoted the use of public forums and other deliberative models in the Hawai’i legislature as well as in other states’ legislatures. Together with colleagues from the National Conference of State Legislatures, Ihara has identified state legislators that are interested in strengthening their connections with citizens, and is a strong advocate for engaging people in deliberation on public policy issues. Public deliberation is an opportunity for legislators to step down from their traditional roles to listen to citizens’ needs without dominating the discussion. Having legislators participate in a public forum as observers, for example, creates a safe space where the public and elected officials can come together on the same page. This gives legislators a chance to learn more about public priorities but at the same time also helps citizens analyze complex issues more deeply, and understand the trade-offs involved in policy-making. What is unique about deliberation, as opposed to other forms of consultation, is that it opens a channel to understand how people think and what issues they care

about. In a political environment where lobbyists are the strong voices, there is quality in using deliberation, because it brings out the concerns of broader constituencies.

In Hawai'i, Ihara made an effort to expose legislators to forums. He attempts to persuade his colleagues that deliberative methods can increase their understanding of the public's concerns. Besides providing citizens' input and information to legislators, deliberation can be used by policy-makers to analyze issues. A more deliberative policy-making process can be an alternative to traditional "horse-trade" politics and a novel instrument that legislators can use to tone down "*rancorous partisan discourse*"<sup>60</sup> and start more constructive conversations around the content of the public interest. Additionally, a facilitated deliberative process where legislators work in small groups may prove more time-efficient and collegial than having representatives address a group individually. Finally, working collaboratively in a facilitated setting that enables the analysis of pros and cons associated with different choices can reduce polarization on controversial issues.

Deliberative policy-making can be useful in a number of situations. In case of political gridlock, it can facilitate inter-party discussion by allowing policy-makers to learn the other side's reasons and find some common ground. Deliberation is not only useful to favor dialogue between opposing factions: at an intra-party level, it can be a good tool to establish a political platform. Clearly, deliberation as a facilitated process to hear from different perspectives in the analysis of an issue can have endless applications in policy-making.

However, being more open and accountable to the public and adopting deliberation as a policy-making tool requires a profound cultural change among legislators. Ihara sees deliberation as an aspect of a particular leadership style, the "*facilitative leadership model*", a model that is less control oriented and less manipulative, where "*you gain power by giving away power.*" Unfortunately, elected officials tend to be power "holders" rather than "sharers." According to Ihara, public deliberation creates a "*marketplace of ideas*" that is a risky proposition for politicians who may lose control of the market.

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<sup>60</sup> Les Ihara, Jr. "Opportunities for State Legislatures", Kettering Foundation's *Connections*, Vol. XIV, Issue 1, July 2003, p. 19.

Past initiatives undertaken by Ihara and colleagues illustrate his notion of “power sharing.” In 1997, Senators Ihara and McCartney launched an innovative power-sharing experiment known as “partnering.” In 1995 and 1996, the two senators often held opposing positions and the climate in the legislature was rancorous and factional. Several controversial issues in front of the legislature had contributed to further polarizing the elected body. The bitterness in the political arena caused a significant disaffection among voters, who penalized several incumbents in the 1996 elections. Re-elected senators took it as a sign, and decided to adopt a more collaborative approach to build trust among senators, and favor consensus building. It was decided that each senate committee would be co-chaired by two senators to break the old one-man rule system. As Ihara points out “*When you are the chairman or king you can do whatever you like, and you know you can get away with it because all of the other chairmen need your backing.*”<sup>61</sup> Under the new approach, however, committee chairs had to decide with their co-leaders, which enabled greater collaboration as well as a “*significant decrease in partisan feuding and personal attacks.*”<sup>62</sup> With this collaborative leadership model, fewer bills were bottled up in committees, and information sharing improved among co-chairs.<sup>63</sup>

Ihara often presents deliberation to other legislators as an “informational briefing.” The legislative cycle allows for different models of consultation according to the different phases of an initiative. Deliberation is most useful to explore the underlying issues and the complexities of a problem. Public hearings, on the other hand, may be more appropriate to consult the public when in decision making mode, but they only “*hit the tip of the iceberg*” of an issue. On the other hand, because it analyzes carefully the pros and cons associated with every approach, “*deliberation allows to solve a problem, rather than just patch over it.*”

From an instrumental point of view, deliberation can prove particularly useful to deal with complex issues that simply cannot be addressed using the traditional “horse trading” model because many interests are implicated in uncertain ways. It can also be used by legislators who like to brand themselves as innovators or open to the public to “*enhance their power temporarily.*”

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<sup>61</sup> As cited in “Consensus at the Capitol,” by Garry Boulard, *State Legislatures*, January 1998, p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> “Consensus at the Capitol,” by Garry Boulard, *State Legislatures*, January 1998, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> “Hawaii Senate Shares Power,” by Elaine Stuart, *State Government News*, August 1997, p.14.

## Legislators and the NIF Model

Senator Ihara and Dolores Foley promote public deliberation in the hope that it will improve policy-making. Therefore, legislators are always invited to attend the annual trainings offered by HPPF. They report that some legislators attend the training but tend to focus more on the issue that is discussed than on understanding deliberation as a process. Often, a good strategy to propose deliberation to busy legislators is to focus on educating their staffs; in the 2005 training no legislators were present, but two staff members from the offices of representatives attended. A limited number of legislators have tried to employ deliberative decision-making, others have used it in a more sustained way overtime.

Democratic Senator Norman Sakamoto, for example, participated in a HPPF training in 2004, and subsequently decided to use the NIF model to run a retreat with the democratic caucus. For the retreat, the senator's staff and Foley tried to frame some issues (transportation, housing, sustainability). Due to time constraints, however, the organizers were unable to frame issues very deeply. The retreat took place on January 8, 2005, with the objective of deliberating on several legislative initiatives, finding consensus, providing an indication of the level of support for legislative initiatives, and identifying issues that needed additional work.

The retreat began with a presentation on the ground rules of deliberation. Subsequently, participants broke down into small groups to deliberate on policies in the areas of transportation, affordable housing and environmental sustainability. For each area, specific policy options and their pros and cons were analyzed. After the small group discussion, each group reported to the large group on the policies that received high consensus, those with limited consensus, called "gray areas" and the no-consensus items. Small groups also presented their recommendations to the large group, trying to find consensus on the preferred policy options.

In order to operationalize consensus, participants were asked to indicate their level of support to decisions with their fingers (with a fist of five meaning full support to a decision, two, three, four fingers meaning decreasing support, all the way down to five fingers, meaning disagreement). Although this was an interesting initiative to promote a deliberative analysis of the policies supported by the democratic caucus, the process became somewhat rushed at the end. The senator wanted to reach some consensus on the various policies, but that consensus was

elusive. Sakamoto appreciated deliberation as a process to hear all different sides of an issue, but eventually, as an informant reported, he jumped in to find consensus because “*politics got in.*” It appears that transportation was an important topic in the legislative session that followed, and deliberating on transportation during the retreat may well have had some repercussions on policy decisions.

Beyond Senator Sakamoto, other legislators have also tried to apply deliberative approaches to their policy-making work. Two years ago, the education committee chairs of the Senate and House of Representatives participated in a workshop on deliberation, which used a forum on education as a model. At that time, the republican governor wanted to decentralize the state-based education system. A centralized education system may secure fairness at the price of bureaucracy while a decentralized one may be flexible at the expense of inequality. The governor’s proposal proved to lack popular support. After participating in the training, the Senate education chair proposed a deliberative consultation to build a majority proposal. This example shows how training in the NIF model can percolate into the decision-making practices of policy-makers.

## **The Keiki Caucus**

The examples above describe somewhat sporadic uses of public deliberation at the legislative level. However, two legislators have been employing deliberative practices in a very sustained way in their policy-making for more than a decade. Senator Chun Oakland and Representative Dennis Arakaki co-chair the Keiki Caucus. That Caucus, gathers not only legislators, but also public agencies, NGOs, educators, advocates, parents and other organizations that focus on children welfare to prepare legislative packages on children and youth issues. The Keiki Caucus was formed in the early 1990s to collaborate with legislators and identify “*priority areas for children and youth in Hawaii.*”<sup>64</sup> Chun Oakland and Arakaki decided to engage these agencies and organizations because hearing from a broad spectrum of stakeholders provides a more comprehensive understanding of the issues of children and their welfare.

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<sup>64</sup> “The Keiki Caucus: Safeguarding our Future”, by Senator Suzanne Chun-Oakland and Rep. Dennis Arakaki, *Hawaii Senate Majority Caucus News*, 02/05/04.

Since Hawai'i has a part time legislature that meets from January to May, the Keiki Caucus's work is particularly intense when the legislature is not in session, from May to December. During this period, the Caucus meets monthly to develop a concrete legislative package. The Caucus's annual activities are organized into a learning phase and in a policy-making phase. The learning phase takes place during the summer and the early fall, when the Caucus meets monthly, and the different stakeholders make presentations on their work and areas of need. The rationale behind this phase is that legislators as well as stakeholders need to learn about the issues and the needs of a broad spectrum of stakeholders before embarking upon legislative work. In a conventional legislative dynamic, individual stakeholders lobby legislators to advance their agendas. The Keiki Caucus by contrast, encourages a broad spectrum of actors to learn from one another. After the learning phase, in the fall, the Caucus holds a large summit where youths are present to provide input on the needs of children. Generally, at these summits, participants are asked to prioritize among different issues, to identify the crucial areas where new legislation is needed. After the learning phase and the summit, a legislative package is drafted for the legislature that follows. The legislative package for 2004, for example, included 42 bills on issues including substance abuse, education, youth development, child welfare, child safety, childcare, health, and self-sufficiency.

It is during its summit that the Caucus decides what issues will be on the agenda at the next legislative session. Interestingly, although the various stakeholders in the Caucus have a clear interest in promoting their organization's agenda, the culture at the summit is not strictly self-serving but collaborative. The lengthy learning phase prior to the summit gives stakeholders a broader understanding of children and youth's needs, and sometimes organizations decide to give up on issues on their agenda to address more urgent needs highlighted by other groups. When a legislative package is ready, many Caucus members start lobbying legislators, and it sometimes happens that organizations use their political capital to lobby for a shared agenda.<sup>65</sup> The learning phase puts each stakeholder's priorities in perspective, and enables finding collaborative solutions, rather than win-lose ones.

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<sup>65</sup> Clearly, the stakeholders represented in the caucus are so varied, that groups form around thematic areas, such as early childcare, or youth issues, and cross-advocacy occurs among organizations working on similar topics.

Besides the strict legislative activity, the Keiki Caucus is also a network where different groups share information, identify needs, find synergies and establish collaborations. Many organizations work collaboratively outside the Caucus to take action on issues that can be addressed without legislative action.

The Keiki Caucus has been active for 14 years. It is widely recognized and respected by the legislature. Fellow Democrat legislators rely on the caucus to analyze issues and propose bills, and they often support its legislative package in its entirety. The Keiki Caucus became such an embedded organization that it would probably continue to operate even absent the leadership of its chairs in the House and Senate.

In addition to the Keiki Caucus, Chun Oakland leads other initiatives where stakeholders collaborate with legislators to inform policy-making. She “*runs the legislature that way, and would like to have a roundtable about everything,*” said an informant. The 2050 task force, for example, is a similar initiative that is examining transportation and land use. Another initiative is the Elder Abuse and Neglect task force, which has been meeting quarterly for 13 years. A roundtable on the Medicaid program entailed 7 years worth of meetings, and a discussion on welfare reform that took place in 1994-1995 culminated in significant reforms that were passed in 1996.

Chun Oakland has a strong orientation toward bringing together groups and stakeholders that would not normally sit eye to eye. She is so committed to engaging stakeholders in formulating bills that she spends the months when the legislature is not in session deliberating with groups on upcoming legislative proposals.

### **Obstacles to a More Deliberative Policy-Making**

Although many agree that higher levels of deliberation would improve policy-making, several criticize deliberation not on its merit, but on its applicability.

First, adopting a more deliberative policy-making style implies renouncing to some power, which would require a profound cultural shift in the current environment of partisan “horse trade” politics. Deliberation implies a more collegial decision-making style which could

be particularly threatening to those who normally have control on the issues, such as committee chairs. As an informant suggested, a chair could well wonder “*if I let this process go ahead, how can I, the chair, control the outcome?*”

Second, deliberation requires more time and resources than traditional decision-making. Especially deliberation modeled around the NIF principles requires framing the issues, which entails significant preparatory work and time. In cases where policies are drafted as a reaction to emergency situations, applying the sort of structured deliberation described in the pages above may prove too burdensome and time consuming.

Third, deliberation is a valuable instrument to explore the complexities and tradeoffs associated with choices, but is less helpful when it comes to generating consensus and coalescing divergent opinions into a policy. Operationalizing deliberation can be challenging because it requires a transition from analyzing issues with an open mind to making political choices.

Finally, because deliberation is time-consuming and costly, elected representatives may be more prone to use it in their electoral districts, where they have a direct political return in terms of votes, than with groups that go beyond their constituencies. Deliberative democracy can be a powerful branding tool for politicians with their constituencies, but why go through a painful state-wide process if the political payoff is low?

## ***Deliberation and Action***

In Hawai’i, public deliberation does not appear to have led to increased civic engagement and activism. Although annual HPPF training events focus on moving from deliberation to action, and devote some time to forming groups to explore issues emerged during the workshop, follow up action seems to be limited. The 2002 training highlighted the need to frame issues locally, which laid the ground for a two year project that culminated in the preparation of the issue book “*Choosing a Future for Hawai’i,*” but this topic, though the expression of a local need, was presented only at few forums.

At the end of the 2005 workshop, participants were asked to propose issues that they wanted to continue working on, and three groups emerged from this process to explore a variety of topics. Participants also expressed a need for framing and deliberating local issues, and Dolores Foley proposed to teach a session on issue framing. Although many workshops contribute to creating connections among participants, and build a certain enthusiasm to pursue more work together, once the group parts, momentum starts to fade, it is harder for individuals to reconvene. Limited time, resources, and capacity present additional obstacles to action.

In terms of the passage from deliberation to action, some informants pointed out that unfortunately forums don't build sufficient capacity to mobilize communities to action. Their more important contribution is providing the public with an opportunity to grapple with the complexities of certain issues, the trade-offs associated with each option, and expose participants to an array of different opinions. The forums' objective is to enrich individuals with a variety of opinions and viewpoints, more than triggering follow-up action.

Foley, who is extremely interested in deliberation's ability to spur civic engagement, does not know if their work in Hawai'i had some impact in communities. HPPF never tracked what people do with what they learn after they are trained, many educators, for example, take issue books home with them, but there aren't sufficient resources to learn if they ever moderated forums.

The very nature of National Issues Forums limits their ability to generate action. Because NIF forums are one time events with duration of around two hours, they are more useful to educate the public than to spur citizen engagement. One of our informants reflected that NIF forums "*leave things at a fuzzy level [...] it's not clear how energy can develop [to do follow-up work].*" During forums "*you have great moments, but you have to continue [to get to] action.*" Therefore forums may be appropriate at the beginning of a facilitated process, to educate participants and create momentum, but action is more likely to happen after a *protracted* deliberation involving multiple meetings.

## ***Deliberation and Embeddedness***

Forums do not seem to be very embedded in Hawai'i at the community level, or with groups or organizations, because the main promoters and driving forces behind them remain Senator Ihara and the Hawai'i Public Policy Forums.

Legislators are always invited to attend annual HPPF trainings, and Senator Ihara plays an active role in encouraging colleagues to participate. Additionally, he promotes forums among fellow legislators and spearheads numerous initiatives to engage elected officials, stakeholders, and the public in deliberative processes. Past forums on campaign finance and gambling were structured precisely to have an impact on the legislative process, because of the issues chosen, the forums' timing, and the involvement of legislators both in the planning and implementation of the forums.

The University of Hawai'i's Public Policy Center, which hosts the HPPF, has a program, called "Legislator in Residence," which brings two legislators to the PPC every year to further collaboration between them and the academic community. The approach with the next round of legislators will be to ask them to identify some issues that could use community dialogue, with the intent of strengthening the connection between the community and policymakers through deliberation.

Some are particularly optimistic on the embeddedness of deliberation with legislators. First, in Hawai'i there is a traditional process to settle disputes or solve problems within families and communities, called "Ho'oponopono" (to make right, to rectify an error). Ho'oponopono is a healing process for individuals and communities to solve problems using prayers, certain rituals, and dialogue. The process remains a very rooted tradition in Hawai'i. Because of this traditional problem solving method, as well as the spread of moderated dialogues for alternative dispute resolution, many legislators are not only aware of deliberative practices, but also "*very responsive [because] they grew up with it.*" It is not uncommon that legislators pass resolutions calling for facilitated deliberative processes around controversial issues. For example, long term dialogues were held around an initiative to set up a state-wide long term care program. Especially seniors organized and deliberated on the topic. Even though their recommendations were not implemented because funding the program would have required increasing taxes,

*“legislators honored the process.”* According to an informant, although deliberative processes are not sufficiently empowered to have the final say on a given matter, *“they become a pretty serious community voice that is very hard to ignore, it’s like another lobbying group.”*

All these elements suggest that in Hawai’i, more than in other states, several forces are working to further a more deliberative policy-making. The fact that a number of legislators have used deliberation in their work may be evidence that exposure to deliberation not only had some impact in their decisions, but also became moderately embedded in their practices. Although in Hawai’i there is not yet a widespread culture of deliberation, bodies such as the Keiki Caucus indicate that some legislators see value in engaging stakeholders, and that some deliberative processes became fully embedded with the legislature (the Keiki Caucus has been functioning for over 14 years).

## **Conclusions**

Unlike other cases we researched, in Hawai’i public deliberation is promoted not only by a center affiliated with an academic institution, but also by a number of state legislators. This allowed us to explore the possibilities and limitations of employing deliberation in the legislative context. Senator Ihara is a strong supporter of deliberative practices and of opening the policy-making process to receive public input. He co-sponsored several National Issues Forums to analyze topics that were before the legislature to add perspective to decision-making and expose colleagues to the deliberative process. Also the Hawai’i Public Policy Forums constantly reach out for legislators to attend their annual training events. In fact, some legislators occasionally used deliberative practices in their work. Two other state legislators, Senator Chun Oakland and Representative Arakaki, favor stakeholder engagement and deliberation around several issues. Their use of deliberation did not derive from exposure to the NIF, it is rather their leadership philosophy that prompts them to seek engagement and input from the community. Around fifteen years ago, these legislators launched the Keiki Caucus, a deliberative group involving policy-makers and stakeholders, to work collaboratively around children and youth issues. The Caucus meets several times during the year, and during its sessions legislators, service providers and advocacy groups exchange information about the needs of youth and children and draft a shared

agenda to inform a legislative package. Substantial portions of their proposals are consistently enacted by the legislature.

Although participation in forums and trainings on the NIF model generates some interest in issue framing – which led to the preparation of a discussion guide on land use and development in Hawai'i – we were not able to identify significant follow-up or collective action prompted by the forums. Public deliberation appears to be extremely embedded with some legislators, especially Senators Ihara and Chun Oakland and Representative Arakaki, but, besides these exceptions, it does not seem to have spread to other members of the State Capitol.

## **5. Connecticut's Community Conversations about Education**

### ***A Brief History of the Community Conversations***

Over the last decade, thousands of citizens - from parents, to educators, experts and common people - have engaged in deliberative conversations around public education in the state of Connecticut. The Community Conversations about Education started in 1997 due to the sponsorship of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, a family foundation whose mission is to improve the quality of education for Connecticut children. Since 1997, more than 80 communities in Connecticut have held conversations on public education. Over 5,300 people (a conservative estimate) have participated in these efforts.

When Graustein started operating in Connecticut in the early 1990s, it conducted various studies to assess the status of public education in the state, including a public opinion research carried out by Public Agenda in 1994. The report, commissioned to capture public perspectives on education, used a sample of some 1,400 respondents, including educators, community leaders and the general public. This survey found that parents from different racial or ethnic backgrounds thought alike when it came to their children's education. However, there was a significant gap between what educators thought of public education vis-à-vis parents and the general public. The first thought that education had improved since they were students, whereas the public thought that the quality of schools had declined overtime. The findings were collected in a 1994 report titled "*The Broken Contract*." The report had great resonance not only in Connecticut but nationally; it prompted around 200 articles and editorials. This piece of research was a significant first step towards reforming public education in Connecticut, and prompted various organizations, including the state's association of boards of education, to take action.

After conducting that research, Public Agenda held 6-7 conversations around the state to discuss findings from "*The Broken Contract*." These conversations gathered a variety of groups, including educators, parents, seniors, and general taxpayers. Conversations tended to follow a similar pattern: participants would first discuss the methodology of the study, and then blame the other side for public schools' shortcomings — parents pointed to educators' faults and vice

versa. Participants seem to come to a common understanding from these conversations, however, that communication between schools and the general public was deficient. “*We need to do a better job at telling our story*” some would say. Others gathered new perspectives on problems from hearing from a variety of interlocutors – “*I never heard that before,*” commented some. Many found participating in these conversations very rewarding and informative, and expressed an interest in continuing the deliberations.

In response, Graustein decided to lead a new effort using “*real dialogue between educators and the public, not finger-pointing or traditional, formal public hearings.*”<sup>66</sup> They asked Public Agenda to develop a model. At that time, Public Agenda was involved in a similar endeavor with the Institute for Educational Leadership. The project involved a series of town meetings on education at the national level, and Public Agenda used the lessons learned from that initiative to craft a model for Connecticut. Since Connecticut uses town meetings in local government, Graustein and Public Agenda preferred to name the deliberative initiative “Community Conversations,” to convene the idea of a friendlier, non-contentious process and avoid confusion.

Additionally, in 1997, the Supreme Court for the State of Connecticut decided, in *Sheff v. O’Neil*, that Hartford’s public schools students were racially, ethnically and economically isolated and mandated legislators and the executive branch to find ways to desegregate schools across the state. This decision identified a need to engage Latinos and African Americans in a dialogue on public education, and created momentum to launch the Community Conversations.

Graustein started the conversations with a vision that every community in the state should have a chance to have its voice heard. In order for Graustein to support Community Conversations, however, they needed to find an organization with sufficient capacity to implement the program. They decided to support the project by partnering with the League of Women Voters (LWV). The LWV now coordinates the “Community Conversations About Education” project. Initially, Public Agenda trained the LWV and local moderators, but after an initial transitional period, Public Agenda transferred all responsibilities to the LWV. Today,

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<sup>66</sup> *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut-A Report on the Connecticut Community Conversations Project*, Updated Version, by Will Friedman, New York: Public Agenda, 2005. p. 3.

Nancy Polk and Sonja Ahuja of the LWV are the program's co-directors. They reach out to communities and organizations, train moderators, award grants and work with communities that decide to hold conversations.

Graustein has supported the Community Conversations since 1997. From 1999 to 2005, it disbursed over \$800,000 for the program, and intends to continue to fund it over the next years to reach a greater number of communities. The LWV administers funding provided by Graustein and awards conveners small grants of approximately \$2,000 to provide food for participants and cover other logistical expenses. Groups that decide to do follow up work after a conversation (so called "alumni") may also receive grants of \$1,000 to support their efforts.

If initially all Connecticut communities could apply for grants to convene conversations, in the early 2000s, Graustein decided to restrict funding to the neediest communities,<sup>67</sup> namely those eligible under the Discovery Initiative.<sup>68</sup> Also alumni, communities which previously held conversations, are eligible, even if not part of the Discovery Initiative.

Figure 1 below shows how many communities had held conversations as of 2004.

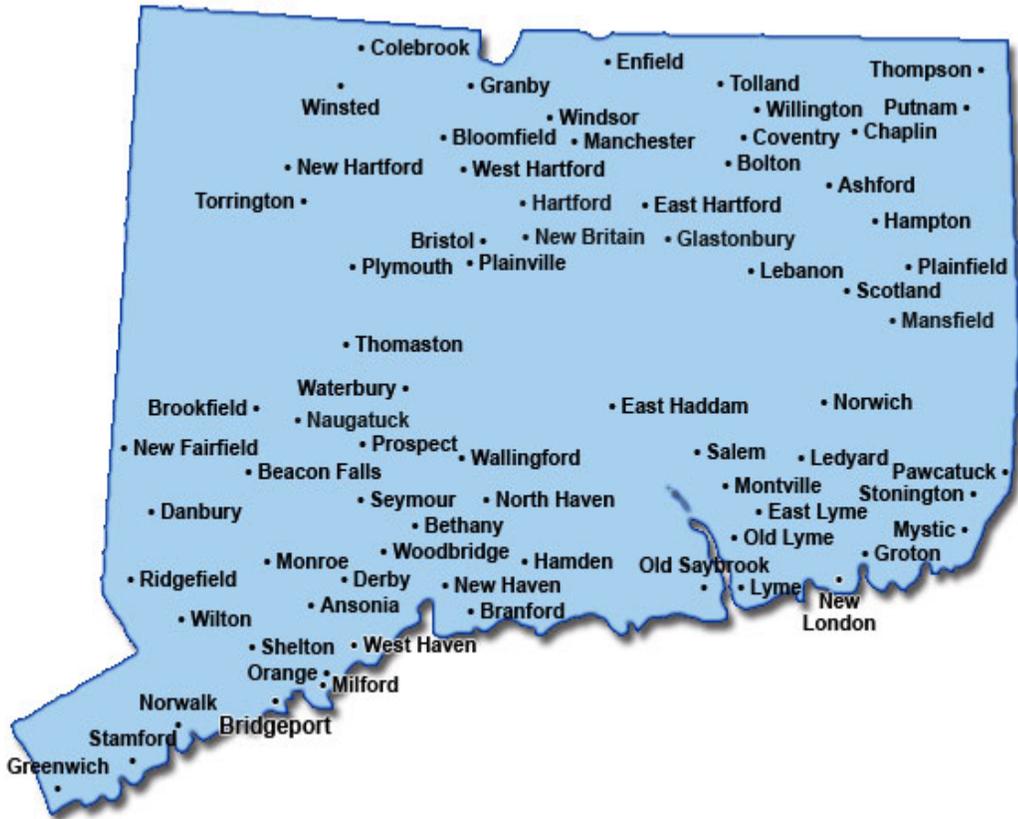
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<sup>67</sup> The Community Conversations Application Guidelines read: "*Communities involved in the Graustein Memorial Fund's Discovery Initiative, Connecticut communities designated as priority or transitional school districts, or school systems with severe-needs schools, are eligible to receive a grant.*"

<sup>68</sup> The Discovery Initiative was launched in 2001 by Graustein to work collaboratively with communities and organizations to expand and improve early childhood education.

**Figure 1: Community Conversations Map**

(source: [www.ctconversations.org](http://www.ctconversations.org))



## ***Conversation Topics***

Public Agenda developed the model of deliberation used in conversations, and provided materials to guide discussion on a variety of topics around education. Initially, some topics were similar to the ones that Public Agenda had used nationally, such as the topic “*The Purposes of Education,*” a subject that usually stirs intense deliberation and value statements. Other topics emerged as important themes in the course of conversations, and were added at a later time, such the topic of “*Helping All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society.*” Sometimes topics need to be revised, as was the case for early childhood education, to reflect changes in public opinion.

Today, communities interested in holding a conversation on education can choose a topic from the list below:<sup>69</sup>

- School Safety\*
- Leaving No Child Behind: Making Standards Work For All Students
- Teaching Methods
- School Funding
- Parental Involvement
- Purposes of Education
- The Question of School Choice
- Helping All Students Succeed in a Diverse Society \*
- Neighborhood Schools and Diversity \*
- Child Care \*
- Creating a Formula for Success in Low Performing Schools \*
- Making Standards Work for All Students
- Readiness for Elementary School Success
- Creating Family Learning
- Will the No Child Left Behind Act Do the Job or Are Adjustments Needed?

(\* for these topics conversation materials are available also in Spanish)

For each topic, Public Agenda produced a starter video and three possible choices that should be weighed during deliberation. Some communities prefer to customize existing topics and guides to their needs, or decide to use the deliberative model for other topics of their choice. In that case the LWV works with communities to adapt topics or design powerpoint presentations they can use to kickoff deliberation.

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<sup>69</sup> From the Community Conversations' website: <http://www.ctconversations.org>

## **Community Conversation's Objectives**

The Community Conversations about Education's objective is to “*help communities find common ground for public action and ways to work together to address educational issues.*”<sup>70</sup> Conversations are intended to provide a safe space where participants from diverse backgrounds come together to analyze a problem. With their special focus on diversity, conversations aim especially to groups that participate least in school meetings. By considering alternative approaches and listening to different opinions, organizers contend that participants deepen their understanding of issues. Analyzing issues, however, is not the end of conversations. Moderators are trained to encourage participants to find common ground in order to take action to improve public education.

Conversations differ from other types of meetings around education — such as school board meetings, or PTA meetings — in three ways. First, participants use a structured model to deliberate on the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches. Second, a trained moderator leads small groups throughout the deliberation. Third, conversations bring together a diverse group of people. In more traditional meetings, people attend to voice their concerns and are more prone to arguing from their individual roles (educator, parent, taxpayer) and blaming the other side than to finding solutions. In conversations, on the other hand, moderators ask participants to analyze three or more choices, to listen respectfully to all opinions and to find common ground on controversial points, rather than focusing on dividing aspects. Community Conversations' participants are encouraged to come up with concrete recommendations that can be implemented and to take action on these recommendations in follow-up meetings. Because conversations “*deal with issues at a level of complexity, at a more nuanced level,*” their thorough analysis aims to reduce polarization among choices in favor of common ground solutions. Finally, conversations, in contrast to more traditional school meetings, bring together “the usual suspects”, i.e. actors who have a direct connection to the issue that is discussed, but also some new faces that would not normally participate. The fact that the broad community is engaged enables people from different backgrounds to come together and be exposed to a diversity of opinions that they wouldn't otherwise hear —“*you hear new voices, see new faces, you add*

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<sup>70</sup> *Community Planning Guide*, The Community Conversations, by the Institute for Educational Leadership and Public Agenda, page 4.

*different viewpoints,*” described an informant. Involving those who would not normally engage in a conversation on education adds perspective to deliberation, and often enables participants to come up with innovative solutions to old problems.

### ***How Conversations Work: Preparation and Process***

In order to promote the use of public deliberation, the LWV reaches out to local groups like parent associations, community groups, teacher associations as well as schools, city officials, NGOs, libraries and YMCAs. It encourages these groups to apply for grants and hold conversations. Because one of the project’s objectives is to build broad coalitions, they require that an organization applies with the support of five co-sponsors. Applicant organizations form a large planning committee of around 20 people to ensure outreach and diversity. The LWV provides significant technical assistance to groups that are awarded grants to convene conversations, helps them adapt topics or frame new ones, and trains moderators and organizers. Because the grants administered by the LWV are small –they generally cover the costs of printing, postage, food and child care for participants- the planning committee volunteers significant time and resources to prepare conversations, and this common effort serves to build capacity among organizers.

Community Conversations are held to allow communities to deliberate and explore the complexities of education issues, but they also intend to create the preconditions for communities to take action. Therefore the planning committee, before even convening a conversation, is also encouraged to schedule a date, place, and time for a follow up meeting to further analyze deliberation topics and organize action teams to work on the ideas generated at the conversation. As an informant described “*the planning committee needs to think beyond the conversation to the next steps.*” Organizers are encouraged to announce the date and venue of the follow-up meeting at the beginning of the deliberation, so participants know that the conversation is not an isolated initiative, but the first step of a serious effort to engage the community in school reform.

The LWV trains moderators and recorders. Generally people who are perceived as neutral and unbiased such as teachers and ministers are selected for these roles. Moderators play

an important role in keeping small groups focused on the topic, ensuring that the conversation advances, and engaging all participants. Recorders play an equally important role, because they write down, organize, and post the ideas emerging during a small group deliberation. Taking notes shows participants that their ideas are taken seriously, and is a stimulus to engage because *“they [participants] want the conversation to have an impact.”*

Generally community conversations are held in the evening, and draw a diverse group of around 100 people. Alternatively, conversations can take place in the morning during weekends. Conversations start with a light dinner. Food is an important ice breaker because it creates a friendlier environment for deliberation. Especially in less advantaged communities, starting the conversation with a hot meal can also be an incentive for people to participate.

After a general introduction of the topic, the large group is broken down into small groups of 15-20 individuals who deliberate on three or more different approaches with the help of a moderator and a recorder. When small group participants introduce themselves, they are encouraged to say what their role is, rather than their profession, in order to keep deliberation free from authority or hierarchy which may alter the exchange. During introductions, some may say *“I’m a mother of two,”* others will mention their profession *“I’m a teacher.”* Each small group watches a 10 minute video on the topic and then starts to deliberate on it. Alternatively, a video or power point presentation is shown to the large group, and then individuals move to their assigned small groups to deliberate.

Small groups work together for an hour and half or two hours to analyze the choices associated with the topic. After deliberating on the approaches, moderators encourage participants to identify the areas of common ground and disagreement, questions and concerns, as well as very concrete actions steps (generally named “Next Steps”) that could be taken to work on the topic. Moving from deliberation to identifying common ground is often hard, as participants tend to complain about school malfunctioning rather than adopting a more positive attitude and focusing on positive change. Skilled moderators are crucial in helping groups identify common ground and in transitioning them from deliberation to action steps.

Finally, towards the end of the conversation, all small groups gather and present their areas of common ground, disagreement, questions and next steps to the large group. At this point, conveners remind participants that all the notes taken during the small group deliberation will be condensed in a report. Often at the conclusion of a conversation participants are invited to attend a follow up event. However, starting a conversation by emphasizing how it is not just another school meeting, but a first step to engage the community, and providing a date for a follow up encounter, seem to strongly motivate participants to engage in deliberation. The LWV guidelines emphasize the importance of a timely follow-up to generate collective action: “*Prompt follow-up fosters continuity, captures the enthusiasm and generates momentum to bring about positive change.*”<sup>71</sup> At a conversation in the coastal city of New London in November 2005, for example, more than one participant voiced frustration about attending previous meetings that did not result in any concrete steps.

## **Outreach and Diversity**

Because one of the main objectives of Community Conversations is to involve in deliberation those who wouldn’t normally participate, the LWV stresses the importance of having a large and diverse planning committee to reach out to a broad constituency and ensure participation of groups from different backgrounds. This committee recruits participants, selects moderators, convenes the conversation and commits to do follow up work after it.<sup>72</sup>

Sometimes organizers underestimate the importance of the planning phase, but, according to the LWV, good planning is crucial for a successful conversation. Under the LWV’s guidance, the planning committee compiles a list of people who should participate. The list may include the mayor and the school superintendent, parents of school children, but also students, people who do not have children, elderly and other groups who do not have an immediate connection to the issue, such as business people and the clergy. A well balanced conversation will involve “*people who have a direct connection to the issue, and people who have no connection at all.*” In order to include those who wouldn’t normally engage in deliberation, planners contact minorities,

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<sup>71</sup> *Community Planning Guide*, The Community Conversations, by the Institute for Educational Leadership and Public Agenda, p.4.

<sup>72</sup> The planning guidelines used by the League of Women Voters recommends 15 to 20 member planning committee to ensure that they reflect the diversity of the community. From *Community Planning Guide*, The Community Conversations, by the Institute for Educational Leadership and Public Agenda, page 2.

populations who live in public housing, parents of children who qualify for free school lunch, to name some examples. Planning committees are strongly encouraged to think of “*every possible obstacle to participation*” and find ways to overcome them. For example, many planning committees provide childcare to encourage parents with young children to participate, others provide free transportation for the elderly, and others organize small groups in Spanish to accommodate Hispanic participants. The town of New Britain translated their invitation to a community conversation into Polish, and in Danbury a conversation was conducted also in Portuguese. In New London, a conversation on the local education system was held in Spanish and English to ensure strong participation from the Spanish-speaking community (around 20% of the overall population). The large group session was held in English with Spanish translation, and two small groups were in Spanish and English with computer programs to translate conversations and display them on a monitor in real time.

The LWV also recommends that categories such as professional educators or experts should not exceed 20% of all participants, because the targets of the conversations are “*people who wouldn’t normally participate.*” Often, decision-makers and elected officials are invited to attend only as observers, and do not actively engage in group deliberation. Inviting the mayor, a school superintendent, or board of education representatives as observers allows them a chance to learn what the community thinks on a certain issue. The LWV encourages planning committees not to include experts or people in power position as active participants because their presence may alter the deliberation dynamics. Participants may in fact rely on them for their expertise, but the purpose of the conversations is to give voice to the public – “*real experts have their answers, but that doesn’t respond to people’s real life experiences.*” During conversations, participants are encouraged to take a role of “*active problem solvers as opposed to passively reacting to solutions offered by experts.*”<sup>73</sup> Because at conversations participants are asked to think out of the box, having too much expert opinion may indeed limit creativity.<sup>74</sup> Unlike other

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<sup>73</sup> From “Community Planning Guide,” The Community Conversations, page 6, by the Institute for Educational Leadership and Public Agenda.

<sup>74</sup> Additionally, conversations should have some data provided by experts, but not too much. Once, a conversation on school funding started with a presentation by the superintendent, who went through the school budget line by line. All that information was not beneficial for the conversation, on the other hand, it ended up being a conversation-killer, because people got the impression that there was nothing they could do about the school situation, and ended up not exploring alternative options.

settings where experts address an audience, community conversations are a gathering of *equals*—equals in the sense that everybody’s opinions and ideas are important, rather than data and expertise.

During community conversations, small group distribution is not casual either. The planning committee decides the composition of the groups to enable an exchange among participants who wouldn’t normally sit at the same table.

For certain topics, it is hard to gather a diverse group. For example, conversations on early childcare tend to attract mainly women, perhaps because the topic is perceived as a woman’s task. Because of the LWV’s strong emphasis on diversity and the need to include especially those whose voices go normally unheard, conversations tend to attract individuals from different backgrounds, although they sometimes fall short in racial diversity. Achieving diversity is particularly challenging in big cities, because residents from a certain neighborhood may not want to drive to another area to attend a conversation, or go to neighborhoods they normally avoid. It may therefore be challenging to get people from an affluent area to go to a conversation in a poor neighborhood, and vice versa. Diversity may be a difficult to achieve, but groups that have organized more than one conversation seem to be getting better and better at reaching out to the whole community.

## ***Deliberation and Action***

*“For some communities, conversations are a modest first step, for others they are a much deeper experience.”*

Since 1997, around 80 communities held conversations on public education, involving well over 5,300 people from across Connecticut. Their turnout has been exceptional, with some conversations drawing hundreds of people. Over the years, conversations have demonstrated that *“the public has a vast appetite for information and has enough sophistication to deal with complicated issues.”* Conversations have had a significant impact in many communities, where they stimulated follow-up action, and some localities started to use them as a process to deliberate on issues outside public education. Many communities applied for grants with the

LWV to support their conversations, but in some areas they now use local resources to fund them. The Graustein Memorial Fund is the only sponsor of the conversations, but in the long run they would like to fully embed conversations in the community, and possibly encourage local foundations to support them. Currently, the Connecticut Community Foundation, formerly the Waterbury Foundation, funds conversations in the Western part of the state.

Because conversations focus so strongly on bringing together a diverse group of people, “*you hear voices that had not been heard before.*” Even though participants may go to conversations expecting the usual dynamics seen at other meetings on education, the diversity of opinions, as well as the presence of trained moderators, make conversations a very different – often unpredictable- experience. An interlocutor described that “*it is so refreshing for people to engage, that it creates an appetite for more,*” which often leads to follow-up meeting to organize action task forces. In communities that held more than one conversation, local coalitions formed to work around issues, because “*iteration really helps*” in developing local capacity.

Community Conversations are grounded in public deliberation, but they also have a strong focus on translating deliberation into action items and in keeping participants engaged *after* a conversation is over. Several design elements in conversations aim to produce follow-up actions.

First, during the small group deliberations, moderators encourage participants to move from deliberating on the topic to identifying concrete “next steps” for action. Approximately half of the small group deliberation is devoted to analyzing and discussing a topic and the second half is intended to identify common ground and possible action steps.

Second, at the end of conversations a time and place to reconvene are usually announced, allowing those who are especially energized and motivated to come together again. The LWV places special emphasis on re-convening, and encourages organizers to give the time and place of the follow-up event when the conversation is introduced, to give participants a sense that their

recommendations will be acted upon, and that conversations are not sporadic meetings, but the beginning of a longer engagement process.<sup>75</sup>

Third, by requiring that conversations be sponsored by six organizations and that the planning committee include around 20 partners, the LWV contributes to creating local coalitions with the capacity to act on the deliberations' outcomes.

Finally, during a community conversation, recorders take notes and post them in the room so participants can “*see deliberation unfold before their eyes.*” All the notes are subsequently compiled in a report prepared by the local planning committee. These reports capture the public's thinking, recommendations and action items. They can be used as a documentary basis for organizations that want to do follow up work such as pressing the school system to respond to these priorities. At the local level, they are shared with government officials, teachers, superintendents, and the media as the perspectives of informed citizens on a given issue. In some cases, policy-makers can change their course of action after learning of deliberation outcomes, and often recommendations from these reports end up in schools' strategic plans. The local press is also an important vehicle to report on conversations' outcomes to the broader community.<sup>76</sup> These reports, however, were never aggregated by the LWV or other organizations to analyze conversations' outcomes in their entirety, because the intent is to stimulate grassroots action at the *local* level. As one of the project directors suggested “*we [the LWV] plant the seeds*” but it is up to the planning committees and to participants to act at the local level if they want to implement some of the ideas emerged during deliberations.

The exposure of decision-makers to deliberation can have a very significant impact. By participating as listeners, administrators and elected officials often learn about needs in the community that they had overlooked, or find that people ask for services or policies that are already in place, but they are unaware of. Frequently, for administrators listening to citizens is an eye opening experience that illuminates new perspectives and opportunities. Some interlocutors

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<sup>75</sup> The LWV's guidelines are adopted with flexibility by different communities, and some organizers do not give the date of the follow up meeting at the conversations, but contact participants who express interest in staying involved at a later time.

<sup>76</sup> In Hartford, the presence of a reporter at a conversation on the challenges facing gay students proved vital. The reporter wrote a piece pointing out the absence of a member of the Board of Education who had committed to participate. The article triggered a very heated debate on the issue, and after being publicly shamed, the Board of Education became much more responsive on the issue.

report that “*hearing from community people is the most valuable experience*” and find conversations an extremely informative process. In general, people in authority positions who participate in conversations are also likely to be more responsive to any follow-up work that may emerge from deliberations. After participating in a community conversation, a school administrator admitted that he “*never knew that people wanted an after-school program*” and responded by setting-up a program to meet the community’s need.

At the individual level, deliberation can have a very positive impact, and become “*a life-altering, life-affirming experience, especially for those who don’t speak out and are not involved.*” As an informant explained “*It’s hard to describe the process in words, but once people experience it, they understand its value at a deeper level.*” Providing individuals with “*a fuller view of what the others’ views may be*” is often recognized as an important contribution of public deliberation, and the Community Conversations seem to be particularly successful in this dimension given their focus on attracting a diverse pool of participants.

Besides exposing participants to a diversity of perspectives, conversations allow them to exchange information on programs and resources. At a conversation in Bridgeport, for example, several parents lamented the lack of programs to close the achievement gap, and another parent informed them about several resources they were unaware of. Similarly, school staff may inform parents complaining about lack of engagement in school issues of opportunities to become more involved. Finally, hearing input from citizens may prompt schools to amend existing programs or policies and make them more effective. In many cases, conversations seem to reduce communication gaps between schools and parents.

Although it may be difficult to mobilize people to participate in a community conversation, once they attend one, they enjoy the experience so much that “*it’s hard to get them to go away.*” At the end of the conversations, participants are invited to attend a follow up meeting to give those who are interested a chance to stay involved and plan possible actions together. Generally, follow up meetings take place a few weeks after the conversation, to allow the planning committee to put together a report and use it to plan actions. Often, only a fraction of those who attend the conversations reconvene in the follow-up meetings. For many,

expressing their opinions and being listened to during a conversation is enough, but those who are more active and passionate about an issue are given the opportunity to reconvene.

Often, follow up is conducted by organizations and individuals in the planning committee, sometimes participants join in. The groups that decide to do act after these deliberative conversations seem to vary: from the school system, to parents' groups, to local advocacy groups and service agencies, or a combination of the above. As an informant suggested, "*in Connecticut there is a lot of social capital around education that can be tapped into.*" Sometimes it is more a question of optimizing existing resources than creating new ones. Since the LWV provides only mini grants of \$1,000 to alumni who reconvene to do follow-up work, it is up to local groups to secure volunteer work and funding. In some cases, the data gathered at a community conversation can be used as "*grassroots community input*" when applying for grants, since funders like to see that proposals address needs expressed by the community.

More than socio-economic characteristics, it seems that the level of capacity within a community may determine the occurrence of follow-up action. Action happens more easily in communities that already have a network of organizations working together. In Bridgeport, for example, an active network of organizations led by the Bridgeport Public Education Fund sponsored dozens of meetings and facilitated some action following them. When a community doesn't follow-up after deliberation, it is often due to lack of volunteers or resources. The LWV doesn't have the means to ensure capacity building for follow-up work. They provide assistance to the organizations that convene the conversations and small follow-up grants, but it's ultimately up to the community to decide if they want to engage issues at a deeper level. In a number of communities, conversations stimulated significant follow-up.

In Beacon Falls, a conversation on school safety brought up the problem of bullying on school buses. The school superintendent informed that the school had a policy on bullying, but bus drivers were not aware of it. The conversation helped identify a problem that could be solved by simply improving communication, and since then every year the school principal meets with school bus drivers to explain the school's anti-bullying policy.

In Windsor, a superintendent found the process to be extremely useful and became a strong supporter of conversations, so much that she was invited to address the Graustein Memorial Fund's board.

In West Haven, the mayor decided to institute an early childhood commission in response to a conversation.

In Wilton, the first conversation led to the creation of "Vision 20/20," a group coordinating initiatives for youth development. At another conversation, the problems of excessive pressure on students and sleep deprivation were discussed, and it was decided to change the school start time to allow for more sleep.

Putnam, a very rural community, saw several follow up initiatives emerging from a conversation in which participants said that they felt unwelcome at the school. The superintendent decided to open the school auditorium to the public for events and free movies. He also invited 'mall walkers' to use the empty school corridors after school hours during inclement weather. Students teamed up to offer free computer training to the public. Finally, the superintendent responded to criticisms about the school budget by explaining the budget line by line to ensure that people would understand it.

Action also happened when conversations worked in synergy with other programs. In order to stimulate action, Graustein decided to use the conversations in combination with their "Discovery Initiative" a program on early childhood education. The Discovery Initiative is a five year commitment (now in its third year) to help 49 communities with urgent needs to focus on early education (birth to age 8). The rationale behind Discovery is that communities can work collaboratively on early care and education to draft local or regional action plans focused on parental and community engagement and collaboration. In the early 2000s, Graustein decided that only communities included in the Discovery Initiative and alumni could apply for grants to support conversations. Alumni are included because in most cases they can leverage some local capacity from previous Community Conversations. Ideally, Graustein would like to bring conversations to the 49 communities targeted under the Discovery Initiative to achieve some

strategic convergence among programs, as conversations can help groups in their planning activities and stimulate capacity building.

In a number of communities, conversations were used in the context of the Discovery Initiative. In West Hartford, for example, conversations elevated pre-school education to becoming a policy with the Board of Education. After two conversations on “Early Care and Education” in 2002, the West Hartford Board of Education adopted “*a four-year-plan for initiating and educational program for all four-year-olds.*”<sup>77</sup> A similar dynamic occurred in Mansfield, where conversations were used to analyze the issue of pre-school kindergarten. In May 2005 a conversation was held in Wethersfield to analyze the town’s need for pre-school education. This conversation was “*tied completely to Discovery*” and highlighted several problems with early childcare, such as high costs, and limited availability. Several actions emerged from this conversation, such as exploring opportunities to have accessible high quality childcare, educating parents on child development, and clarifying funding options for early childcare.

## ***Deliberation and Embeddedness***

Community Conversations are well embedded in a number of communities. With over forty conversations, the city of Bridgeport offers the strongest example of embeddedness in Connecticut. Also others communities held repeated conversations: Norwalk had six, Hartford five or more, Danbury held four, and New Haven and Stamford three.

In Bridgeport, the Bridgeport Public Education Fund has embraced the Community Conversations model so fully that it has trained numerous moderators in local organizations in convening conversations. The strong leadership role of the local Public Education Fund and the alliance with other partners is the main reason for the re-occurrence of conversations in Bridgeport.

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<sup>77</sup> *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut-A Report on the Connecticut Community Conversations Project*, Updated Version, by Will Friedman, New York: Public Agenda, 2005. p. 14.

In Norwalk, the community conversation model was adapted to deliberate on local topics, and the process became quite embedded, considering that six conversations were held from 1999 to 2003.<sup>78</sup> In communities like Bridgeport and Norwalk, conversations “*seem to have become an ongoing mechanism for discerning public opinion and promoting community involvement on various issues.*”<sup>79</sup>

Wilton, a very affluent community, held several community conversations, and decided to convene one to solve an episode of racist graffiti in a local school. In that instance, Wilton adapted the deliberative model to deliberate on a new issue, indicating that this deliberative process may be embedded in the community.

In Granby, a minister, worried that children were often too occupied with sports and other activities to attend church functions, organized a conversation to discuss the topic of children’s time, and how it could be distributed across activities in a balanced way.

Numerous cities and towns decided to apply the Community Conversations model to have deliberative events involving youths, the so called “youth conversations.” Conversations led and moderated by youths were held in Stamford and Brookfield. Also New Haven would like to host a similar initiative.

In some communities, the school system or city officials adapted the conversation model to engage the public in deliberation on pressing issues. In Bridgeport, for example, the city sponsored conversations on the school budget and safety and the school superintendent is currently supporting an effort to use conversations to address the achievement gap.

Some community foundations, including the Connecticut Community Foundation, support public deliberation, and sponsored the LWV to hold additional conversations.

Beyond being embedded in a number of communities, the State Department of Education (SDE) adopted the conversations model to deliberate on a proposal to introduce universal access

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<sup>78</sup> Although an informant suggested that the public in Norwalk expects to be involved in a conversation at least once a year, it should be noted that no conversations were held in 2004 or 2005.

<sup>79</sup> *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut-A Report on the Connecticut Community Conversations Project*, Updated Version, by Will Friedman, New York: Public Agenda, 2005. p. 14.

to pre-kindergarten education. In November 2003, the state's Board of Education released a report on universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) titled "Closing the Achievement Gap: Removing the Barriers to Preschool in Connecticut." The report identified the benefits of UPK and recommended expanding access to early childhood programs for three and four year old children. The Department of Education embraced the policy, and proposed to hold a series of community forums to inform the public about this new initiative, build a support base for it, and gather input from the community to design better programs.

The SDE and Graustein decided to partner and offered mini grants to communities that wanted to hold conversations on UPK; the project was contracted to the United Way. From May to December 2004, 25 forums were held in 39 towns, drawing around 1,400 people. The forums, modeled after the Community Conversations, included a general presentation of the UPK proposed policy and small group discussions so that people could reflect and deliberate on it.<sup>80</sup> In order to reach out to a broad audience, forum organizers offered childcare, meals, and materials in Spanish when needed. In every community, forum organizers gathered the outcomes of deliberation in a brief "community feedback report." Analysis of these reports revealed that, by and large, forum participants were in favor of UPK because it would make childcare more affordable and available to all families, contributing to closing the achievement gap. The forums also enabled various concerns to surface, such as possible obstacles involving funding, transportation and staffing. Forum participants also expressed recommendations for designing successful UPK programs, such as securing funding without jeopardizing existing programs and sharing information about the UPK program implementation. Finally, communities expressed a strong desire of remaining involved in the process of designing and implementing UPK programs.

Several elements suggest that community conversations are well embedded in Connecticut. First, several communities use conversations as a recurrent tool to analyze local issues and generate collaborative solutions. Second, in many cases the conversation model is adapted to address local problems, as in the case of conversations to discuss episodes of racism

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<sup>80</sup> *Moving Universal Prekindergarten from Concept to Reality: Recommendations for Creating a High-Quality Early Education System that Meets the Needs of Families*, A Report on the Results of the Universal Prekindergarten Community Forums, January 2005.

or the needs of gay students. Third, local public institutions such as the schools or city officials sometimes recur to conversations to gather input from the community or engage the public in collaborative solutions to problems. Finally, state public institutions have also embraced conversations to hear the public's opinion on certain policies. All these factors indicate that the Community Conversations's deliberative model has become well embedded in the decision-making processes of several actors, spanning from state and local government to civil society organizations.

## ***Community Case Studies***

### **Mansfield's Conversations on Early Care and Education**

In November 2003, Mansfield — a town of 20,000 in eastern Connecticut — held its first community conversation. It addressed early childcare and education. Mansfield participants in the Discovery Initiative and the local School Readiness Coordinator — a position funded under the Initiative — wanted to get a better understanding of what was important for the community when it came to education, and increase residents' awareness around early childhood care and education. At the same time, the state's Board of Education was considering introducing a full day kindergarten program and wanted to increase public awareness on the matter. Some 20 years earlier, a group working with the LWV did a study on the topic but nothing came of it. Around three years ago, the problem of early childcare emerged again in Mansfield as a consequence of the increase in two-earner households. In particular, many families with parents either working or studying at the University of Connecticut, one of whose campuses is located in Mansfield, created demand for early childcare. Early childcare and education was a ripe topic for a conversation.

Several reasons combined to favor Mansfield as a site for a community conversation. Planners wanted to educate the public on the rationale behind early childcare and full day kindergarten, but they also wanted to stimulate some action and build on the activities they were conducting under the Discovery Initiative.

The conversation enjoyed significant institutional backing from Mansfield's public administration. The conversations planning committee included from the Director of Social Services, to Town Council members and the Town Manager. The conversation drew around 85 people. A few months later, in January 2004, a follow-up conversation gathered 60 participants, of whom roughly half had already participated in the first conversation. The second meeting attracted a number of community leaders and a member of the Board of Education. Although the second conversation was meant to generate some action, the presence of new participants required the group to revisit topics already discussed and resolved by veterans. Participants chose

areas of interest that they wanted to analyze, and were divided in four small groups accordingly. The first small group explored the feasibility of full day kindergarten, the second how to best assess the families' needs and provide access to resources, the third focused on ways to finance early care and education, and the fourth analyzed how to best support parents by providing access to a variety of early care options.

Several issues emerged during the follow-up meeting, such as the importance of assessing the needs and resources available for early child education, ways to encourage more parent representation, and how to better serve families with young children. Participants in the follow-up meeting organized in sub-committees and implemented several actions. A need-assessment subcommittee designed a survey with the University of Connecticut's Center for Survey Research and Analysis. The survey was then sent out to one quarter of the households in Mansfield. The same sub-committee has carefully reviewed research on the topic, and is working with the Provost's Council at the University of Connecticut, in coordination with its special initiative to assess the childcare needs of the university community. The Provost's Council will report its findings to the sub-committees, and findings will also be posted on the town of Mansfield's website.

Another sub-committee put together an information packet on the resources and programs available for young children. The packet - intended mainly to inform families that were new in the area and for new parents - was widely circulated through a series of networks, including the library, realtors, and the town hall. This initiative was extremely successful, and the group that promoted it is still active. On the town's website, a webpage was created listing all resources for early childcare. All the research done on the topic was also posted on the website. Other actions emerged thanks to the follow-up meeting, such as research of cases of lead poisoning on children, and an attempt to create a parent committee.

The actions were implemented by professionals/activists but also by common citizens that resonated with the issue and wanted to contribute in some way. People who did not have a particular expertise to offer contributed for specific tasks, such as preparing mailings, or putting together information packets.

Probably the biggest outcome that followed the conversations was the introduction of a full and half day kindergarten program in September 2005. Since 2003, the Mansfield Department of Social Services and the Mansfield Board of Education had been exploring the topic of full day kindergarten. The community conversation, and its follow-up, contributed to raising awareness on the issue and gauging the public's interest. Additionally, issues emerged during these events informed the survey developed by the University of Connecticut's Center for Survey Research and Analysis. Of the 1,400 households that received the survey, 552 returned it, a response rate of over 39%. Survey results showed that respondents disagreed with arguments that full day kindergarten should not be introduced because it would reduce the time children spend with their families or place too much stress on children. As many as 53% of respondents supported going from a half day to a full day program and 35% opposed it. Supporters went up to 60% where respondents had children at home. Finally, 67% of respondent indicated that parents should have the option to select between half and full day kindergarten.

Although conversations conveners do not want to take credit for it, it is likely that deliberation led to increased awareness of the community's needs as well as to a fuller analysis of the pros and cons of early childhood education. Having a community conversation initiated the discussion and prepared the public on the topic. The initiative "*brought it [early childcare] to a new level, people saw how it would affect them.*" Deliberation surfaced several opposing opinions. Some participants, for example, expressed concerns about taking children away from their families at such early age and others did not want them to be exposed to too much academic work. Some argued that having subsidized early childcare is the equivalent of "*paying for babysitting for families who have both parents at work*" to the detriment of more traditional families where mothers stay at home to care for the children. Both advantages and disadvantages emerged during deliberation, in a process that became "*polarizing, but not disruptive.*" Finally, the community conversation also led to a serious effort to assess the need for early childcare through a survey. Survey results expressed unequivocally that the town of Mansfield was supportive of introducing full day kindergarten and dissipated some of the concerns expressed at

the community conversation.<sup>81</sup> All these steps laid the ground for the introduction of full day kindergarten.

Besides the more practical aspects of the actions generated by deliberation, the community conversation format provided a safe space for every person to speak her mind and be heard, it gave “*a chance for all to talk*,” described an interlocutor. Deliberation was conducted in an “*open, respectful form*” and the structure chosen “*allowed for everybody’s opinion to be heard and an opportunity for action for those who wanted to act.*” There was also an important social aspect to it, because it was an unprecedented opportunity for people to come together as a community, have dinner, and deliberate on a problem.

One of our interlocutors also suggested that having a community deliberation held administrators more accountable to what needed to be done on the topic of early childcare. Administrators and elected officials knew that the public was more prepared and informed after the deliberation, and felt particularly obliged to follow up.

The success of deliberation in Mansfield can partly be attributed to the large institutional support behind the initiative. The planning group that convened the conversation included the mayor, some town council members, and the town manager, to show the public that the city was genuinely concerned about the topic, and was soliciting the citizen’s opinions on it. Besides city officials, the planning committee included a senior association, church people, former teachers, and representatives of the LWV. The planning group was diverse to have a fairly representative group of people attend the conversation. They also invited members of the community that did not have a direct connection to early childcare, because they did not want to talk only with the “*usual suspects*”, or “*preach to the choir.*”

It is too early to tell if conversations are embedded in Mansfield. Some interlocutors suggested that the community conversation format was so successful that they feel they could use it again for any topic. They would like the process to continue, and have a conversation to

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<sup>81</sup> It seems that the critics of early childcare were not stonewalled after the survey results came in, but rather encouraged to learn more about the topic. Some parents participated in field visits to other programs in the state with members of the Board of Education. After observing other programs, many parents became more comfortable with instituting an early childhood education program in Mansfield.

report to the public on the status of early child education and what follow-up work resulted from deliberation.

## **The Impact of Community Conversations in Wilton**

Wilton, a very affluent community in South West Connecticut, applied for its first grant to the LWV in 2000 to discuss children's preparedness to live in a diverse society. Although Wilton is a predominantly white community, the organizers -led by the Wilton Education Foundation- thought it was important to bring up the topic of diversity in a very homogeneous community. After the first conversation, whose topic was chosen from the LWV subject list, Wilton started developing conversations around local issues and held two conversations on the topic "*Are Wilton's Youth Under Too Much Pressure,*" one with the adult community residents and another with high school students.<sup>82</sup> Organizers didn't produce video tapes to kick-start deliberation because they felt they could use more time to talk about issues, rather than watching a video. They also eliminated the dinner that usually precedes the conversations because participants already knew each other, so there was no need for an ice-breaker. Besides these two elements, however, the conversations' model remained unchanged.

Conversations are popular in Wilton because they are promoted by a very reputable non-partisan organization—the LWV. They also gained credibility overtime. The conversations on youth under pressure are a good example of how community members can come to use and appreciate public deliberation. In Wilton, a wealthy community with an excellent educational system, parents expect many students to attend Ivy League colleges. There is some stigma associated with entering the workforce immediately after high-school. Local organizations that had already been exposed to conversations decided to use the model to address the problem of pressure on youth. At the community conversation, high school students spoke openly of the social pressure they face. Many students participated in a follow-up meeting and formulated proposals to reduce pressure such as asking the local press not to publish the names of students in the honor rolls or who were admitted to top colleges. Even more serious, though, was the problem of sleep deprivation. Students complained that they did not get enough sleep, and the

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<sup>82</sup> *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut-A Report on the Connecticut Community Conversations Project*, Updated Version, by Will Friedman, New York: Public Agenda, 2005. p. 11.

local LWV conducted a study to analyze the effects of sleep deprivation. The community started mobilizing to delay the school start time, and a lot of convincing was required with PTAs, athletic coaches and teachers. Eventually, officials moved the the school start time for middle and high school students from 7:30am to 8:15am.

Inviting the general public to conversations adds new perspectives, but having in the room also decision-makers and advocates increases the probability of implementing policy changes as a result of deliberation. Community Conversations often lead to action precisely because they involve — rather than antagonize — decision-makers. Because decision-makers are invited to observe the conversations, they have a chance to listen to the public’s concerns and see how deliberation unfolds, and exposure to deliberation makes them more likely to be collaborative when it comes to implementing recommendations. Trying to introduce change from outside the system, on the other hand, may be more risky. In Wilton, a group of parents were against the proposal of delaying the school start time, and went to the local cable channel to “blast the school board.” They also did a petition without involving the PTA, but were eventually defeated. As an informant suggested “*it’s good to involve decision-makers from the get go [...] Community Conversations are designed so that you’re working with the system [therefore] you have a much better chance of success.*”

### Six Conversations in Norwalk

From 1999 to 2004, the city of Norwalk, in southwest Connecticut, held six community conversations. Table 3 below illustrates the conversations topics and main outcomes.

**Table 3: Norwalk, Conversation Topics and Main Outcomes**

Year	Topic	Outcome
1999	Academic standards and expectations	Unclear, did not provide a sense of direction for concrete action.
2000	School physical safety	School system listened to participants and decided against installing metal detectors in schools.
	School emotional safety (bullying)	Raised awareness around bullying, teachers more ready to detect it.
2001	School funding	Only 40 people showed up, mostly insiders, overly complicated materials resulted in an unfruitful conversation.
2002	Early childhood	Raised awareness and gathered community input on early childhood education.

	education	Strengthened support to parents with workshops on early care. More focus on transition from pre-k to school, earlier contact with parents built in registration process. School system hired experts to work on early education.
2003	No Child Left Behind <sup>83</sup>	Strengthened focus on parental involvement. Discovery group hired a Spanish-speaking parent coordinator.

The first conversation did not have a significant impact because it left the topic at a “muddy” level. The second and the third, on school safety, were more productive because the school system was working on the issue and was prepared to receive public input. At the time of the first conversation on safety, there had been some emphasis on the use of video surveillance and metal detectors. During the conversation, however, students expressed their opposition to metal detectors and suggested that it was better to have a person, rather than a mechanical device, to supervise them and hold them accountable. The school system heeded their concerns and decided not to install metal detectors at school entrances. The second conversation, on emotional safety at school, highlighted that several students were the victims of bullying, brought the problem to surface, and convinced many teachers to act more strongly on it.

The conversation on early childhood education was developed locally, to support the Discovery Initiative in Norwalk. Around 2002, Norwalk received a grant from the Discovery Initiative to work on the issue of pre-kindergarten education. During the first year of the grant, the local group working on the Discovery project held seven focus groups, to assess the needs of young children and their families. Because several of those involved in the Discovery Initiative had previous experience with the community conversations, the choice of convening one on early education was very deliberate. Organizers were well aware that conversations are a valuable tool to solicit community input, and opted for a conversation to hear what the public had to say on school readiness and pre-school opportunities. Several local experts had been working on the issue for a long time, gaining considerable knowledge, so with the LWV’s help it was relatively easy to develop a topic for deliberation.

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<sup>83</sup> This conversation involved the school, the community as well as parents. Norwalk served as a testing ground for this new topic developed by Public Agenda.

In November 2002, around 100 people gathered to deliberate on the question: “How can parents, pre-schools, schools, and the community best help all children to be ready for school and become successful students in their elementary years?” The conversation was successful because it was very diverse (one small group was conducted in Spanish) and it enabled a productive exchange among participants. Thanks to the conversation and all the preparatory work that went into it, school officials and community participants already regarded early education as a priority. From the conversation it emerged clearly that participants supported high quality early care and education for all children to succeed in school. They also suggested that a rigorous curriculum needed to be developed for pre-school, as well as a better system to transition children from pre-school to kindergarten. Finally, the group also believed that parents needed more support and information on their role in raising children to be successful in school.

This conversation resulted in significant impact because it raised awareness on the need for early childhood education, and traced the connection between early education and success at school. It also underlined the issue of access and affordability for all parents, and Norwalk’s Discovery group used the conversation’s input as “*advocacy ammunition*.” Parents started talking about creating a program with universal access for four year-old children, but their proposal did not result in any change in policy. Parents also voiced the desire for greater guidance regarding the school system’s expectations for children entering kindergarten. They prompted some action on this topic. An employee of the school system served as a transition coordinator to hold workshops with parents and a booklet on school readiness in English and Spanish was distributed. These initial activities to facilitate transition from pre-school to kindergarten are now built into the registration process, which was itself moved from a few months prior to the start of kindergarten to a full year. Finally, the overwhelming public support for quality and affordable pre-school for every child encouraged the school system to hire early childhood experts to work on this topic.

Overall, the conversation on early education developed substantial political momentum. This conversation was successful mainly because deliberation was a component of the larger Discovery project, “*it was part of something bigger*,” and the existing capacity enabled to translate the deliberation into concrete initiatives.

The last conversation, titled “How can we make sure all Norwalk students achieve high academic standards” was part of a pilot project in which Public Agenda and the MidContinent Regional Education Lab used conversations to address issues raised by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Participants placed significant emphasis on the role of parental involvement in students’ success, and lamented that they were often not respected by the school system. In particular, Spanish-speaking parents had a hard time communicating with school staff and educators. This conversation prompted some activities such as the hiring of a Spanish-speaking parent coordinator to do outreach for the local Discovery group.

In Norwalk, conversations were a useful process to gather community input. The conversation on early education, for example, was important to test the level of interest on the topic and to create momentum to support initiatives in the field. Additionally, people across the community recognized the importance of conversations as a tool to empower people to speak up about public education. As an informant commented “*we had people who had not finished high school, but they felt empowered to talk*” because they knew conversations are a safe space where they would be listened to and respected. Some consider conversations an important “*empowering model*” that can contribute to restoring communication and trust between schools and parents. Unlike traditional school meetings, where the discussion usually gets bogged down around funding issues, the conversations’ structure and the diversity of participants allow more innovative consideration of school issues.

Although some conversations did have some impact, they did not mobilize participants to take action on issues. By and large, they provided valuable input to the school system and to the organizations involved in the planning, including those participating in the Discovery Initiative, to improve certain practices and implement changes in their policies. Limited community mobilization sometimes frustrates participants, who would like to see their involvement having a more significant impact. An interlocutor suggested that there are several reasons underlying the lack of mobilization among participants. First, often, because of the breadth of the topics that are discussed, it is difficult to move from general ideas to concrete opportunities. On top of that, a deliberation of only two hours doesn’t provide sufficient time to tackle problems at a deeper level. In some cases, parents who participated in follow-up meetings had not attended the conversation or the previous meetings, so it was hard to organize them because “*it was like*

*starting all over again with different people.*” Finally, since conversations are planned by a large group of organizations, it is at times difficult to identify who takes ownership for specific items and organizes interested participants, *“nobody emerged to take charge of organizing.”* A conversation may *“give you sound bites as if you were having a large focus group, but [it is not] a way to recruit people.”*

Although Norwalk had six conversations, the last one dates back to November 2003 and it is unclear if interest in deliberation has faded, or simply there aren’t any urgent issues to discuss. Although conversations are useful to tackle big public policy questions in a structured way, bringing together a diverse crowd of people who wouldn’t normally participate, *“it is not really clear where they take you [...] expectations should be made clearer,”* commented an informant.

## **Embedded Deliberation: Conversations in Bridgeport**

With around 40 conversations, community conversations have become more embedded in Bridgeport than anywhere else in Connecticut. Located in the south of the state, Bridgeport is Connecticut’s largest city. It is also increasingly diverse, with 45% of the population white, 30% black or African American and 30% Hispanic or Latino of any race. The Bridgeport Public Education Fund (BPEF) — an organization dedicated to improving the quality of education with a strong focus on community involvement — and its executive director, Marge Hiller, are the main driving force behind public deliberation’s success in Bridgeport. In Bridgeport, Community Conversations proved very useful to engage the local community in dialogue and action around public education. Since 1995, the BPEF has facilitated around 25 conversations, and helped other organizations convene some 5-10 public deliberations. Table 4 at the end of this chapter reports the conversations topics and main outcomes.<sup>84</sup> The BPEF was involved in this process since the early 1990s, when Graustein was testing the first forums using materials developed by Public Agenda. At the beginning, Bridgeport conveners held conversations on most of the issues framed by the LWV. But as they familiarized themselves with the process, they started modifying the model and developed their own conversation topics.

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<sup>84</sup> It should be noted that Table 4 may not be complete. Since many groups and organizations used and adapted the Community Conversations’ deliberative model, it is very difficult to identify the entire spectrum of conversations that were held in Bridgeport.

There are numerous examples of topics developed in Bridgeport. After a new superintendent introduced “leadership teams” in each school, the BPEF designed a topic around it, and held numerous conversations in 2002 and 2003 that attracted hundreds of people. Organizers claim that the schools’ leadership teams function better today, perhaps due to the public deliberations. BPEF also organized a conversation on the challenges of pre-kindergarten education for children with mental health problems. The Urban Land Institute is working on a project to tackle problems of corruption in Connecticut, and BPEF is collaborating by developing a topic around this issue.

In the educational arena, some superintendents embraced deliberation and saw conversations as “*the only way to bring people around for doing things in a different way.*” One superintendent reported using conversations to bring about a profound cultural change and transform principals from mere building managers to educational leaders.

After having convened conversations for several years, today the Bridgeport Public Education Fund serves mainly as a consultant to groups that are interested in the process -“*when people have a tricky issue, they call us up to give them a hand,*” observed BPEF’s director. BPEF continues to provide moderator training as well as help in framing topics to numerous local organizations. BPEF also promoted the conversations model at the national level. It has promoted the model to the Ford Foundation and contributed to a report on parental involvement prepared by the US Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights.<sup>85</sup>

There are several reasons underpinning BPEF’s interest in deliberative conversations. First of all, because of how they are structured, conversations are unique in that they provide a “*safe place where people can speak their mind.*” Conversations are a safe environment where all participants have a chance to talk and be heard. In order to provide an opportunity for people from all walks of life to intervene and speak freely, those who are in a position of authority can participate only as observers, so they do not intimidate the rest of the group. Also the press is asked to observe without intruding or interviewing, because their presence could alter the deliberation’s dynamics. Because moderators emphasize that all participants are equal, and that

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<sup>85</sup> *Parental Involvement Toolkit*, US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights.

all opinions count, some people are very blunt when expressing their ideas, which allows important issues to surface.

Second, conversations are very successful because they are a *moderated* processes. The role of moderators is crucial because they remind the groups of the ground rules, reduce dominance from certain individuals by soliciting the opinion of more quiet ones, and ensure the accuracy of notes that capture participants' thoughts. Moderators allow the conversation to proceed in a timely fashion, and know how to handle dissent in a civil manner.

Third, because conversations are by invitation only, well structured and topic-driven they allow a group to stay focused on a topic and make progress on it.

Finally, conversations are a good tool to promote change and action because of their focus on what will happen *after* the deliberation. As an interlocutor suggested, knowing that people are not just consulted and that action will emerge from deliberation is a strong motivation for participants, "*people need to see some follow-up [...] we made it a point that there is follow up, nobody leaves thinking that's the end of it.*" The BPEF's focus on action is so strong, that at the end of a conversation, moderators consolidate the action items emerging from the various small groups, and ask participants to choose an issue and commit to work on it. Community conversations are very successful because "*they're about people identifying issues and working on issues [...] it's empowerment for grassroots decision-making.*"

Also the city of Bridgeport has adapted the conversations model to get the community's feedback on many local issues. In March 2003, for example, as federal funding for education was drying up, the city needed to allocate funds differently for after school programs, and decided to convene a conversation to hear what the community thought. The conversation was extremely successful, and it attracted around 300 parents, local business owners, council members, the mayor and the board of education. Over 30 facilitators were needed to moderate the small group discussion, and food and childcare were provided to participants. At the end of the conversations, participants used sticky dots to prioritize among options. Preserving the after school program during the school year emerged as the top priority, followed by having after school during the summer and, finally, having it on Saturdays. The city used the conversation to hear from the

public, and adhered to the priorities that were expressed by the community, maintaining the after school program during the school year and during the summer. The city also held conversations to consult with the public on what would be the ideal profile of the new school superintendent, to look for a candidate suitable to the community.

The city of Bridgeport was also involved in the “Connecting Communities That Care” project, an initiative spearheaded by Bridgeport’s mayor to educate the public on the phenomenon of urban school violence. Several conversations were held on the topic, and many participants organized committees to engage on specific issues emerged during the conversations, such as surveying youth, creating an emergency procedure manual, and learning from psychologists what causes lead to youth violence.

Community conversations have been used regularly by the city of Bridgeport since the early ‘90s. The city has held conversation on a variety of topics –from the challenges facing people with disabilities, to housing and economic development – to understand where the community stands on certain issues, as well as to educate citizens. Conversations have become a commonly used tool to engage citizens in deliberation over important local issues and balance the community’s and the city’s needs. Deliberative conversations have “*always had a great turnout*” attracting hundreds of people at times, which may be evidence that the community appreciates being involved, and that residents trust that their opinion is taken into account by policy-makers. Additionally, in a city as diverse as Bridgeport, conversations are a good process to bridge across race and ethnicity lines and bring together all residents, as an informant put it “*you’re all sitting around the same table, because you all care about an issue.*”

Conversations can at times be challenging for decision-makers, because they may bring up new problems or requests that they have to respond to. As an informant put it, conversations can be “*a double edged sword [because they bring up issues that] you don’t want to hear.*” Conversations, however, are not a way for communities to merely complain. Because of their focus on identifying common ground and actions to solve a problem, they also generate the necessary “buy-in” from the public. “*It’s all about ownership,*” suggested an interlocutor. Communities’ ownership of reform processes creates a positive environment where citizens are more willing to contribute to public life and the city can engage residents in finding innovative

ways to work on issues. In sum, community conversations allow citizens to have more buy-in in public life, and it also “*says something about the city you live in.*”

Besides the City of Bridgeport, a number of organizations have sponsored conversations, such as the Regional Youth Adult Substance Abuse Project, the Board of Education, the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, and the United Way to name a few.

The Regional Youth Adult Substance Abuse Project (RYASAP) executive director was trained as a moderator and was involved in several conversations across Bridgeport’s schools. Later, he decided that conversations were a good model to deliberate on issues that RYASAP was working on. Around 2002, RYASAP held a conversation on violence against children to raise awareness, understand public perceptions on violence, and take action against it. The conversation involved a task force that was already active to curb domestic violence, participants who received targeted invitations, and the general public. As many as 200 people participated in the conversation, which spurred significant community buy-in and follow up action, such as the development of a curriculum around peer mediation, plans to involve young people and adults, extensive press coverage, communication and awareness.

In November 2005, a coalition including the United Way, Action for Bridgeport Community Development, the Bridgeport Public Education Fund, the Bridgeport Regional Business Council, the LWV and RYASAP held a community conversation in Bridgeport. The deliberation was the first of a series of five deliberations that will culminate in a summit in the spring of 2006 to produce a strategic plan on how to close the achievement gap in Bridgeport. The initiative is supported also by the superintendent of Bridgeport Public Schools, who introduced the first event explaining that community conversations are “*a platform for people to have their concerns known and their voices heard,*” and that conversations will feed into a strategic plan to close the achievement gap and make all students college-ready.

Closing the achievement gap was the topic of the first conversation, which attracted a diverse group of around 90 participants. When the topic was introduced, the organizers made it clear that the conversation was not an isolated initiative, but the first in a series of public deliberations to engage the public in reforming the school system. Participants were reminded

that the conversation was not the end of their involvement, but rather the beginning of it, and that they would be contacted to attend a follow-up meeting to work on issues identified during the conversation.

After watching a video introducing the topic, the public joined its assigned small groups to analyze three approaches: 1. improve accountability; 2. provide needed resources and support; and 3. maximize flexibility and local control. Although the small groups were diverse, with a significant number of black participants, Hispanics and Latinos –who make up around 30% of Bridgeport’s population - seemed under-represented, and there were no small group arrangements to deliberate in Spanish. Several recommendations for action emerged from the first conversation, such as improving communication within the school system and between the school, parents and the community. Many suggested focusing on accountability, and holding not only schools, but also parents, students, and the community, responsible to close the achievement gap. Participants also recommended securing resources for education and providing high quality programs.

Participants who were interested in being involved in meeting again were invited to leave their personal information. On December 13, 2005, around fifteen people gathered for a follow-up meeting to analyze the outcomes of the first conversation and decide how to proceed from there. Five participants were from the planning committee, eight were citizens who had attended the conversation, and two had joined the group without having participated in the deliberation. The group brainstormed on the best way to have an impact and build from the recommendations formulated during the community conversation. They decided, among other things, to participate more actively in meetings involving public education and established a date to reconvene. The next conversations will focus on the nexus between education and economic development.

The fact that this serious effort on closing the achievement gap uses community conversations as its principal strategy demonstrates how embedded this deliberative model has become in Bridgeport. Many of the organizers emphasized how conversations are crucial to identify solutions, formulate a strategic plan, and bring together all components of the community –from parents to educators and business people- in a multi-faceted effort to close the achievement gap. Also the level of institutional support expressed by the schools superintendent,

who described community conversations as a feeder to a summit on education and eventually a strategic plan- shows that conversations have become a very embedded tool in the formulation of public-policies in Bridgeport.

## **Conclusions**

Undoubtedly, the backing of two solid and reputable organizations, one state-wide, the other with national reach, contributed immensely to the success of the Community Conversations. Continuous financial support from the Graustein Memorial Fund since 1997 and the LWV's capacity and credibility to reach out to communities and train moderators has allowed for the pervasive expansion of deliberative conversations across the state. Additionally, the fact that Graustein embarked in this project as a long-term effort "*allowed time and opportunity for the solid, organic growth of the initiative.*"<sup>86</sup>

In many cases, follow-up and collective action emerged from the deliberations because of conversation's specific focus on action. Conversations require organizers to form broad coalitions and planning committees, enabling coordination and coalition building. These groups put in significant time and resources to set up conversations and seek a high return on their investment, therefore, they are better prepared to capture momentum created by deliberations and use public input to generate action. Furthermore, conversations often involve the school system and local government, so there is more buy in and accountability for public institutions to follow-up on deliberations' outcomes. Also the immediacy of the topic –public education- has been crucial to engage participants at all levels.

Some communities found conversations so useful for providing public input and building action-oriented coalitions that they adapted the deliberative model to their local needs and convened several conversations though time. Public deliberation became fully embedded in some communities, especially the city of Bridgeport. Also the State Department of Education

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<sup>86</sup> *Changing the Conversation on Education in Connecticut-A Report on the Connecticut Community Conversations Project*, Updated Version, by Will Friedman, New York: Public Agenda, 2005. p. 16.

employed conversations to test a proposed policy, demonstrating that conversations' success had resonance not just at the community level, but also among larger public institutions.

**Table 4: Community Conversations in Bridgeport**

Year	Number of conversations	Topic	Participants	Sponsors	Resulting Actions
1998	1 (district-wide)	Academic Standards	Around 50	BPEF, Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, RYASAP, parent groups	School system became more responsive. Participants suggested follow-up meetings, and the sponsors, and the school superintendent launched 10 school-based conversations.
1999	10 (school-based)	Academic Standards	Around 500 (Total)	BPEF, Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, RYASAP, parent groups	Sponsors reported results to superintendent. Parents were concerned about students' suspensions, but the district responded it was necessary in case of weapons or assault. Parents demanded better information on what expected from students, and the district prepared a handbook for parents. The district liked the process and applied for federal funding to have conversations on school violence the following year.
2000	11 (school-based)	Safe Schools	50-75 each	BPEF	Participants developed action plans, which generated increased parental involvement. Actions included surveying youth, creating an emergency procedure manual, and working with psychologists to understand causes of violence.
	1	Student Violence: Why?	120	City of Bridgeport, BPEF, RYASAP	Generated follow-up and a document with recommendations on topic
2002	8 (school based)	School Leadership Teams	260 (Total)	BPEF	School leadership teams became more effective and developed more effective standards of operation.
2003	7 (school-based)	School Leadership teams	Around 50 each	BPEF	
	1 (city wide)	School Leadership teams	300	BPEF	The school leadership teams came to present their success stories.
	1	Prioritize among After School Options	300	City of Bridgeport	The city followed public's priorities and maintained after-school during school year and during summer
	1	Violence Against Children	200	Safe Start Project	Generated community buy-in, development of curriculum on peer mediation, plans for youth/adult involvement, press coverage, awareness.
2004	1	Early Care and Education	120	Discovery Council	Informed the Discovery Council planning of a blue print on early care.
2005	1	Making Standards Work for all Students (Closing the Achievement Gap)	Around 100	United Way, Action for Bridgeport Community Development, BPEF, Bridgeport Regional Business Council, LWV, RYASAP	Some participants met at follow-up meeting, brainstormed on best ways to have an impact and use conversation outcomes.
2006	1	Safe Schools	poor	City of Bridgeport	

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