Engaging Unheard Voices

Under what conditions can, and will, limited resource citizens engage in the deliberative public policy process?

Final Report to the Kettering Foundation
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My mouth is my weapon

The town don't want any input

Nobody wants to get out and do anything

It's all what your name is and how much money you have

If there is one small voice and then there is two and you keep going eventually you will be heard
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Our thanks to the rural citizens and community leaders who participated in the interviews, focus groups and forum. Without them, we would have not advanced the knowledge base about citizen engagement among rural, low-income people. We pledged to share the information and their words with policymakers and program directors, with the intent of improving the well-being of low-income, rural families. This report is one means of sharing.

Finally, special acknowledgement goes to Sarah Kaye, Department of Family Studies Doctoral Research Assistant, and Joanna Waldman, Department of Family Studies Undergraduate Research Assistant, who contributed their expertise to coordination of the interviews, focus groups and forum; data analysis; and preparation of the first or final progress reports.

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Foreword

When this research study began with a conversation during the American Association of Family Consumer Sciences Annual meeting in 2003, little did the I know what a journey it would become nor who would go with me on the journey. I was fortunate that several undergraduate and graduate students and another faculty member, listed on the cover, joined me. Their ideas, energy and creativity made the investigation and our report what it is today.

When an issue was identified by those we interviewed, for which there was no standardized National Issues Forum, I created a deliberative guide using the data from interviews and focus groups to frame three approaches that could be considered by the mothers and mayor who came one hot night to explore the issue in a forum—as a new format and setting for them. The response of the mayor was surprising and encouraging to the mothers and our research team.

Now, with the second year of the study at a close, we’re encouraged by the desire of these limited resource citizens to learn how to address issues…to find a way for their voices to be heard. And so we are exploring ways to make that happen.

Knowing what I do of the "Kettering Way", I realize there’s an integrity to the investigation that produced the research for the forum and evidence to answer the research question. From the forum and the research, action is occurring…an intent of deliberative work.

I know now that these women, on the margins of their community, can, and will, engage in deliberative public policy processes. I know they have some barriers and I’m determined to test what it takes to neutralize or remove those barriers.

Thank you, Doctor Mathews, for offering a contract to test the researchable question and for challenging me to do what I said I wanted to do as a result of our multi-state, longitudinal study, Rural Families Speak. I wanted to find a way that we researchers would not be the only ones voicing conditions, needs and ways to address the well-being of those families to public policy makers. It appears that the way is opening for the mothers in this study to do just that. Once again, in a small way, in an isolated county of Appalachia, the strength of a democracy—engaged citizens—is becoming a reality.

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Executive Summary

The Unheard Voices study was conducted through the University of Maryland Department of Family Studies Maryland Family Policy Impact Seminar, an entity established to promote a family perspective on policy development, enactment, and implementation. This project grew out of a research study, Rural Families Speak, designed to present data to policy makers about the lived experience of rural families. Unheard Voices was created to investigate the likelihood that these residents would participate in deliberative public processes.

Interviews were conducted with participants from the Maryland Rural Families Speak study. Focus groups were conducted by extending invitations to interviewees, their friends and family. Interviews and focus groups provided detailed information about the conditions under which participants would engage in deliberative forums. Findings from the preliminary investigation formed the basis for organization of a deliberative forum in one of the participating counties.

Research findings indicated that with the right issue, at the right time, in the right location, and under the right facilitation, limited resource citizens can – and will – participate in the deliberative public policy process!
Importance of People in Policymaking

This study, known as the *Unheard Voices* project, was based on the Kettering Foundation's goal to answer the overarching question of: “What does it take to make a democracy function as it should?” The Foundation's work is based on the premise that American democracy is not operating to its full potential because:

1) citizens are cynical and angry with a system of decision making that does not heed or serve them, and

2) citizens lack feelings of agency, or sense of control over their lives and futures.

In his text, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, Dr. David Mathews, President and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, illustrates a variety of disconnects between people and politics and describes how these disconnects interfere with the ideal democracy. Disconnects for rural, low-income Maryland citizens were the focus of this study.

America’s Unheard Voices

It is reasonable to expect negative attitudes and general feelings toward the democratic process to operate differently based upon a citizen’s place in society. Understanding these differences was the subject of this research. Prior scholarship identified specific groups that face particular barriers to engagement in public policy:

- low-income individuals have lower levels of political participation, as evidenced most dramatically by voting rates;
- the voices of women are not often adequately represented in public decision making;
- geography makes a difference.

Rural families, in particular, experience unique difficulties to engaging in civic activities due to both geographic and cultural factors. Geographic factors include low population density that can restrict information sharing. Harsh climates or lack of reliable transportation create physical barriers to engagement. Additionally, rural culture generally emphasizes the importance of maintaining difficult situations as private families matters. Relationships are structured to place emphasis on the family or a group of close friends and family instead of considering oneself as part of a larger public community.

Although there are numerous other citizens who demonstrate disproportionately low levels of political and deliberative participation, this study focused primarily on low-income mothers in rural Maryland. The main goal was to give these voices a venue to articulate the conditions under which they, as limited resource citizens, could – and would – participate in deliberative public policy.
The key research question for the *Unheard Voices* study was “*Under what conditions can, and will, limited resource citizens engage in the deliberative public policy process?*” Because this was an exploratory study, the central question lent itself to qualitative methods within a community-based research model.

Community-based research empowers participants to find their voice and express themselves using their own words. Therefore, the study incorporated three major engagement efforts in an attempt to answer the question under study:

1. Interviews with an existing sample
2. Questionnaire for service providers at a conference
3. Focus groups in the community with either:
   a) a snowballed interview sample or
   b) no prior exposure to the research team
4. Repeat interviews

Multiple methods were chosen to determine if the method of data collection made a difference in the responses. For rural, low-income women, both interviews and focus groups were tested. The first provided privacy; the second in a public setting, provided stimulus for responses among participants.
1. Interviews

Methods: Interview participants were part of a three year study conducted under the direction of the lead investigator in Maryland entitled, Rural Families Speak -- a multi-state longitudinal, quantitative and qualitative study that interviews rural low-income mothers over a period of several years.

The Maryland sample was comprised of 35 participants who lived in Garrett County in western Appalachian Maryland, or Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore. Each has distinctly different histories, economics and demographics. The mountain county population is primarily Scots-English or Native-American and is dependent on the extraction industries of timber, mining, agriculture and now, tourism. The Eastern Shore county was settled by the English and was dependent on fishing and farming on plantations using African slave labor.

Economically, families in both sites are at or below the poverty level. Fifty-seven of the mothers are working—many two and three jobs. Average wage is $7.10. Ninety-one percent of partners are working for average wage of $7.90. Their jobs are primarily in the service sector—the poorest paying sector with few or no benefits.

These families have difficulties stretching their income for basic needs. Food and clothing tied for the top challenges followed by school expenses. For help, most turn to their families. When more help is needed, they turn to the community, and finally to government. Of the 15 sources of public assistance used, food assistance tops the list—school lunch, food stamps, WIC.

These families are not well. Mothers reported having 5 health problems in the past year; partners having 3 and children having 3 problems. Half of the mothers show depressive symptoms as measured by a standardized scale—well beyond that found in the general population. They faced 10 major stressors and 5 crises beyond the chronic stressor of poverty.

For the Unheard Voices Project, the Garrett County participants were contacted by phone and/or mail and scheduled to participate in a telephone interview beginning in June 2001. Twenty-one participants who completed interviews were mailed a $30 gift certificate to Wal-Mart as appreciation for their time. To accommodate a request for a presentation at a health-focused Garrett county conference, Garrett County participants in the Rural Families Speak study were interviewed first. Thus, Garrett County became the site for testing the focus groups and conducting the forum.

Mothers in Dorchester County were more difficult to reach. Most are still to be interviewed and included in the next phase of the study. Caroline County, on the upper Eastern Shore, became a test county with no mothers were in the research study. Mothers were contacted through a partnership between the Cooperative Extension Office and the Department of Social Services.

Based on the interviews, focus groups and forum, we've drawn some lessons to be further tested. Those are discussed lesson by lesson.
**Lesson #1**

Not surprisingly, many of the participants did not have an active phone number on file. This could be attributed to the tendency of this population to be relatively transitory or not being able to afford a telephone on a regular basis. Having alternate contact information – names and number of friends and family members, work contacts and home mailing addresses – for prior participants was critical to maintaining contact over the past several years.

*Therefore, researchers or moderators attempting to engage low-income participants are advised not to rely on telephones and to collect additional contact information if they plan to follow a group of citizens over time.*

**Lesson #2**

Interviewers reported the impression that these mothers were generally willing to answer questions on issues of civic engagement. Many of them thanked the interviewer at the end of the conversation or made comments like “no one ever asks me what I think” to explain why they didn't mind giving time for an interview.

*Therefore, these mothers may be open to citizen engagement but need someone to contact them.*

**Lesson #3**

Among this group of low-income women, common themes were revealed during analysis. While each mother had her own story and perspective, there was enough similarity to find commonality with barriers and particularly with issues that concerned them in their community.

*Therefore, we believe that a small sample could provide sufficient information for those striving to engage low-income, rural women to make decisions about engagement.*
2. Questionnaires

A community leader questionnaire was distributed during a professional conference for service providers in Garrett County. Approximately 50 attendees were asked to complete the questionnaire and mail it back to the research team. Their questionnaires were distributed in a conference packet. Only one completed form was returned.

Lesson #1

This method of paper-based, self-completed survey was not initially a part of the research design. But, an invitation to the research team to make a keynote address in Garrett County provided the opportunity. At the very least, we saw the announcement and distribution of the survey as a way to inform local leaders of the existence of the project.

*Therefore, we concluded that participatory action research must be flexible to take advantage of ways of obtaining information.*

Lesson #2

The written survey was part of a packet of materials received by the conference participants. Though told of the survey, they were not given time during the conference to complete the survey. Only one was returned to the research team.

*Therefore, we concluded that, whenever possible, participants should complete questionnaires on site and return them directly to the research team.*
3. Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted. Focus groups were chosen because of previous use of the method with food stamp-eligible, rural Maryland families. During those food-stamp family focus groups, researchers reported that the participants learned from each other. Thus, this research team wanted to experiment with a group approach to test the methodology difference. We questioned whether being in a group elicited similar, different and/or more information than private interviews. The team also wanted to see if people would give of their limited resources to participate in groups.

In Garrett County, telephone interviewees were invited to come to a focus group and encouraged to bring friends or family. Two focus groups were held, one in the morning and one in the evening. The evening session had four participants, the morning session three. Different times and days were chosen based on results from the interviews which suggested that time of day and day of week might make a difference in attendance.

Two more focus groups were held on the same day in Caroline County where there was no previous involvement by the research team with local, rural, low-income women and where no interviews were conducted. The women were invited by the Department of Social Services through a partnership with the local Cooperative Extension office.

For all groups, light meals were provided. Focus group participants were given $30 gift cards in appreciation for their time.
Lesson #1

Despite our best efforts to have an accurate count through an RSVP procedure, last minute cancellations and families who didn’t RSVP meant that our expected guest list did not reflect the people attending the meeting.

Therefore, we concluded that moderators need to expect the unexpected and be flexible to accommodate these last minute changes.

Lesson #2

Offering food doesn’t guarantee a good turnout, but it may help participants – many of whom our research team found to be food insecure. Not only does food help performance, but it’s a tool to make people feel welcome. Light meals – sandwiches for dinner, fruit and muffins for breakfast – were enough. Researchers or moderators using this technique are encouraged to purchase slightly more food than needed, both because of unexpected participants and because leftovers can be sent home with families. Food selection needs to take into consideration dietary challenges such as faced by diabetics, vegetarians and those with preferences, i.e. caffeinated and no caffeinated drinks. Bottles of water were helpful since people were talking.

Therefore, we concluded that including food and drink helped the mood feel less formal and may have made participants more likely to speak their mind.

Lesson #3

To both facilitate moderation and provide a degree of privacy, table tents with large printing of first names only were given to participants as they signed in. Many low-income women may not have extensive experience, nor positive experience, in speaking out in groups. Care was given to encourage all to speak. As with any group format, a few strong voices would have dominated the focus group conversation.

Therefore, we concluded that moderators should be aware of this dynamic and help ensure that everyone is encouraged to speak.

Lesson #4

Location, location, location. Transportation was identified as a barrier to civic engagement. In large counties where transportation is an issue, and public transportation is limited or not available, it is important that locations are readily accessible. We chose centrally-located meeting places for the focus groups. We were not able to provide transportation but we did encourage those without cars to attend with another mother who had transportation.

Therefore, we concluded that moderators should be encouraged to hold forums in familiar venues that citizens may attend regularly and be aware of stereotypes and stigma associated with some locations.
Lesson #5

Childcare is important for young families. Some people brought their children to the sessions, which was somewhat of a distraction to participants and the moderator. Others were unable to attend because they had no one to care for their children. This is an important factor for logistical and strategic reasons. In future work on this project, we intend to investigate the possibility of providing child care.

Therefore, we concluded that offering childcare breaks down another barrier and could sends the message that moderators are in touch with their needs and actively reaching out to young families.

Lesson #6

Scheduling focus groups can be difficult because no time will be good for everyone. Thus, we held more than one in Garrett County. But, due to time constraints, we only held the focus groups on one day and in the same location, though multiple days, times and locations are beneficial. We think participants understood that we were striving to accommodate their needs.

Therefore, we recommend that moderators consider holding more than one group to accommodate a larger subset of the population.

Lesson #7

We also learned from the interviews and focus groups that time of the year has potential to affect participation. We concentrated our work during the summer and early fall as the mountain county of Garrett has challenging winters. We would like to continue to work in that county, but must wait until spring.

Therefore, we recommend that since weather can be a major factor in whether or not citizens are willing and able to attend events or activities, particularly in rural areas or with low-income individuals who are more likely to walk to their destination, that moderators plan accordingly.
And the people say…

Interviews and focus groups followed a similar line of questioning that focused on three main areas:

1. Achieving a better understanding of how involved in public policy limited resource citizens are and what are some barriers that prevent them from being more involved.

2. Suggesting ways in which those barriers could be surmounted to more actively engage citizens.

3. Identifying issues that are important to limited resource citizens and why these issues are important.

These three areas of questioning helped the Unheard Voices team plan for the forum that was held. Results represent a preliminary body of knowledge to build upon as moderators and decision makers strive to engage limited resource citizens in deliberative public policy. Findings on these issues are analyzed here. The full qualitative analysis can be found in Appendix A.

Are Citizens Satisfied?

In 2005, using a standardized citizen satisfaction scale, participants were asked to rate how satisfied they were with the direction things were going in the United States, Maryland, and their community. The majority of participants responded that they were satisfied with how things were going.

However, opinions grew more diverse as people discussed how satisfied they were with the direction things were going in Garrett County, with only half of the participants expressing satisfaction with their community. These participants seemed to be more aware of what was going on in their community compared to the state and the nation. Perhaps the proximity of the policy arena to their residence makes a difference in their views. Maybe they were more likely to have stronger opinions about what was going on in their community because they viewed the community environment as having a direct effect on their daily living.
What are the Issues?

The single most frequently cited issue identified by these low-income, rural women in the summer of 2004 centered on recreation. Citizens were concerned that youth lacked locations where they could congregate for safe activities. Several were concerned that this was contributing to high-risk behavior because youth had nothing better to do with their time, so they got involved in drugs, fast cars, and other potentially dangerous activities. Participants noted that recreational activities were available but most of them were very expensive and cost prohibitive for low income citizens. Garrett County is best known for Deep Creek Lake and The Wisp Ski Resort, a frequent vacation destination in Maryland. Other recreational activities, like sports teams, required a lot of travel because of the expansive nature of the rural counties. Parents often could not afford the time and cost of transporting their children to sporting and other events.

Using recreation and other issues identified in interviews and focus groups in the summer of 2004, the research team generated a list of problems and issues affecting Garrett County and its citizens. Participants were asked their opinions about the issues in the summer of 2005 to determine if the issues had changed, as well as the extent of their personal involvement in addressing issues and potential ways to affect engagement in the future.

Recreation

Recreation remained an issue with implications for all ages of citizens. It was the issue most talked about. Not only did they speak about it as an issue, several participants gave solutions. They explained that there are buildings that could be used for recreation if the town was willing to help them and take action. These citizens showed a desire to go out and work on recreation.

“There is a building here. If I knew the right direction to go, which I need to get a hold of the senator and the governor both and try and get grant money there is a building down here. They want to sell it but they are asking an outrageous price for it. And to get somebody ya know higher up to work with you and say we are gonna rent this from you. It's sat there for five years now and nobody has bought it cause it’s so expensive. It would make an excellent spot to put, not really a restaurant, but have like hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, chips junk food and stuff and do like a little game room for the kids and on the other side where you can do bingo for the seniors or crafts. But nobody wants to let go of it to do anything.”

This same mother expressed anger at the community and its officials for nothing being done with the building.

“It's here. The buildings are here. It's when something moves out of the building they’re letting the building go till it falls down and they aint doing nothing with them”
Another mother described how convenient it would be if the town used an empty building to create place for kids to go.

“There’s a big empty building…and there is nothing for kids to go somewhere to ice skate or roller skate. And that would be the perfect place. And it’s like there just letting this property go…I’ve talked to [elected official], but that’s what it is, just talk. No feedback. You have to go to Cumberland to go to the mall…and it’s and hour away. And here it’s 20 minutes away where that building is. And it would be nice, to be honest with you, to have something like that for the kids. It would keep them out of trouble.”

Mothers voiced that there is no safe place for children to spend time under the supervision of adults. Several participants said that the lack of recreation opportunities for youth is directly related to a variety of other problems in the community. Several were concerned that without a safe place for youth to congregate, they would turn to the streets, giving them the opportunity to experiment with drugs and engage in other high risk behavior.

“As far as things to do that’s a problem in small towns. There is nothing for the kids here to do. And that’s when trouble starts.”

Mothers thought that participating in high-risk activities led to other distressing issues, such as teen pregnancy.

“Yea, there’s not a lot for them to do. Gives them more of a chance to go out and get into drugs, and get pregnant, and get into trouble. I think they could have more things for the children to do.”

One mother also stated that recreation is not just a problem for children in the community but adults as well.

“I mean, I’m 33 and there is nothing here to do unless you want to sit in a bar and that’s not something I do…”

She went on to explain that when going to a bar is the only recreation opportunity for adults, it sets a bad example for the children, showing them that it is an acceptable way to spend your time. She later talked about senior citizens:

“And maybe a couple days of the week to do the same thing for the seniors? And kind of coordinate something along that line, ya know. Cause that’s the main thing.”

These mothers are willing to, and are trying to, become actively engaged as citizens, especially on the issue of recreation. They are developing their own ideas and envisioning creative ways to make a difference in their community.
Family Values

One mother voiced her concern over the community becoming desensitized to many of the issues and problems facing low-income rural families in Garrett County. In her opinion, as family values continue to deteriorate, children and adults alike begin to voice less and less concern about issues like teen pregnancy. The participant explained “It has just become more accepted now.” She went on to explain that as parents begin to accept these negative behaviors and values, their children internalize those ideals and adopt them as their own.

Internalization that certain negative behaviors or values are acceptable was not seen as the only cause of deterioration of family values. As one mother explained, when children see that there are no repercussions for these negative behaviors, it will appear even more evident that these behaviors are okay to engage in.

“The bailiff got caught (DUI) and he didn’t get anything. And he was actually in charge of dare at the time. So that doesn’t really teach young kids…”

She went on to speak about how children start to think there are no negative consequences for their misbehavior because they see adults get away with it. She also spoke about the bad example the situation described above set by teaching children that those in power can escape the law.

Underemployment

For low-income citizens, a shortage of jobs can be one of the biggest problems they face. The majority of the mothers identified underemployment due to a shortage of jobs and hours as being an ongoing problem in Garrett County. One mother voiced that those most affected by employment issues are teens.

“I think there could be more job opportunities, especially for the teenagers, who want to go out and get jobs. They can't because they either don't have a high school diploma or they can't get a job because they've never had a job and without a job I mean.

If they go and apply for a job well the employer doesn't want to hire them because they don't have experience, without getting the job they ain't gonna have any experience, so it's a catch 22. Either way they can't get a job.

So I think there should be more programs to help teens, ya know, get employment when they get out of school.”

The following issues were also on the list generated from the interviews and focus groups in 2004 and were affirmed in this year’s interviews; however, little was said about them.

- Health care issues, including funding, availability, and inadequate number of providers and specialists
- Transportation and condition of the roads
- Childcare
Additionally, the following issues were identified as having become a problem over the past year:

- Housing costs
- Driving concerns, including speeding and drunk driving

**Are These Citizens Engaging?**

A community is more likely to solve issues, like recreation, jobs and drugs, when its citizens become actively engaged and work on the problems facing the community. Therefore, this study investigated the extent of involvement among the study participants in the year between when we talked with them in the summer of 2004 and the following summer, 2005.

When asked which issues they have tried to work on as a citizen in the past year, half of the mothers who participated answered that they have not worked on any of the issues. Some did state that they had worked on some of the issues as a citizen, but upon further prompting the research team learned that to these mothers the word “citizen” was not clearly defined. While they did work on some of the issues discussed, they were working within the realm of the family, not the public arena. Mothers were working to solve these issues within their home rather than doing public work to help their community. They tackled issues and found solutions directly related to their own families but did not move beyond this step. One mother discussed how she worked on teen pregnancy, “I got my daughter on birth control. I can’t really help anyone else’s kids.” While this clearly tackled the issue of teen pregnancy within her own family, her work did not take on the issue at the community level.

Although participants who worked on the issues did think their efforts made a difference, effects on the entire community would need to be examined to truly know if anything changed—a measurement beyond the scope of this investigation. Although these mothers may have made a difference in their own homes, we couldn't measure effects within their community. For future studies, the question should be reworded and divided into personal and family efforts and community efforts, so that the effects of their work can be more easily deciphered.
What Barriers Keep Low-Income, Rural Women from Engaging?

In the summer of 2004, a subset of participants identified barriers to engagement that prevented them from ever having been civically involved. However, contrary to popular belief and research, many of the women in our sample have been actively involved in policy issues in their community. A large number of them could cite problem areas and describe what action they took to address the problem with what result. Unfortunately, the vast majority of those activities had unfavorable results that may have contributed to disappointment or hostility toward the public policy process, just as the Kettering philosophy predicts.

Participants interviewed in the summer of 2005 were asked to identify reasons why they still have not gotten involved on issues or problems in their community.

The Class Divide

The mothers frequently cited the community’s lack of desire for citizens’ input as a barrier to engagement. One participant explained that the town pays little attention to citizen’s ideas and opinions. She repeatedly stated, “The town pretty much don’t want any input.” She perceived those who are in power as not wanting to hear what citizens had to say.

The vast majority of citizens also responded that they are not civically engaged due to personal feelings of inferiority. Participants described feelings of helplessness and of being ostracized in the community, which many attributed to not having the right last name. One woman described it as, “Here it’s all what your name is and how much money you have depending on if they’ll listen to you.” Another participant voiced concern over why certain officials get elected. “A lot of it here is that it’s not what they stand for who gets elected, it’s who they are, which is sad.”

Not being part of the right social group creates an enormous barrier, as explained by one mother. She perceived that the community followed the standard that if you are not part of one of the “high-up” social groups, your opinion and voice does not matter.

“If you’re not in a clique, you’re not getting in…
I think that would be a good change for this town.
Because it’s into cliques and it goes right on around…
everybody should have a say so…”

Several mothers also stated that they were apprehensive about getting involved because they did not want to “make waves” in the community. Mothers feared overstepping their boundaries so they do not get involved. One described it best when she said:

Everybody’s afraid they are going to step on somebody’s toes and they don’t want to do anything to make anybody look at them. They are afraid to talk out.
One mother discussed a fear of failure as a barrier to citizen engagement. She explained that citizens are not involved because they are afraid if they fail it will only reinforce why there is nothing in the community.

“They don’t want to try or I don’t know if they are afraid if they fail and people looking at them and saying, ya know ‘that’s why there’s nothing here’.”

Preconceived notions held by people about themselves and their ability to achieve desired goals greatly affects their willingness to engage in the public policy process. If people foster a learned helplessness—the belief that they are going to fail no matter what—they will see no need to even try. Such a perspective will keep them from becoming involved. Learned helplessness often develops as a result of people’s preconceived notions that the marginalized group to which they belong cannot succeed (Matusak, 1997).

Knowledge and Education

The majority of mothers cited a lack of knowledge as a barrier to engagement. If citizens are unaware or lack information about issues in their community they are not going to become involved. Citizens also stated that they did not get involved because they were unaware of activities surround the issues or how to get involved in them. These mothers will not be able to move to a higher level of individual power unless they are informed about what is going on in the community and what they can do to help (Hagberg, 1994).

Group Organization and Leadership

When a community lacks citizen group organization that’s inclusive of all citizens, then representative citizens will not likely engage in issues in affecting their community. When asked if organizing groups of citizens similar to themselves would help them get involved, mothers responded "yes", it would be extremely influential in their decision to become involved. By getting people together and organizing groups, citizens feel more empowered, believing that they can make a difference. Organizing citizen groups would give people support and strength, knowing that there are others who are also concerned and willing to work for a better community.

Along with organization, participants responded that there is a need for leadership. When there is no one to lead a group and direct them in how to take action, people are less likely to participate. Organizing citizens and helping them develop leadership skills will increase the likelihood of them becoming civically engaged.

Other Barriers

Other barriers to engagement identified by mothers in the study included:

- Issues being discussed are not important to citizens
- Pride prevents citizens from asking for help
- No available childcare
Barriers in Context

The barriers to engagement associated with the class divide are not unique to Garrett County. In her 1999 book, *World's Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America*, Cynthia Duncan found many of the same barriers in Appalachia's coalfields. In looking at rural families who are highly dependent on government assistance and social support, Duncan found that the poor, considered to be inferior by those in power, were referred to as “bad poor people” and were segregated from the rest of the community based on this distinction. One teen interviewed by Duncan went on to explain that this distinction is often made based on a person’s last name. People are immediately placed into a social class based on their last name; those with a “bad” last name are then discriminated against on the sole fact that they are in the poorer class. Duncan's findings are related to the finding in this study that people often do not participate in the public policy process because they feel inferior because they do not have the right last name.

Also related to our findings, is Duncan’s that limited resource citizens of Appalachia do not stand up and make their voices heard out of fear that in doing so they will make enemies. Just like the mother’s we quoted above, the citizens of Appalachia fear that if they speak out against those in power in their community, they will suffer negative repercussions. Appalachian citizens who are not part of “power group” fear speaking out against them, just like the mothers in Garrett County.

Can Barriers be Overcome?

If citizens are not willing to speak out about the issues that concern them there is little chance they will ever become involved civically engaged. Mothers in this study stated that citizens need to learn how to speak out about their community concerns so that they feel comfortable taking a firm stand on the issues. If citizens feel that their voices and efforts can, in fact, make a difference they will begin to feel empowered. With empowerment comes an increased likelihood of active engagement that could make a difference.

The barriers identified are key to understanding the central research question of this study regarding the conditions under which limited resource citizens can, and will, engage in the deliberative public policy process. If citizens like these mothers are disempowered through lack of knowledge and leadership, in addition to social standing, a logical strategy to stimulate engagement is to provide education and leadership development through a respected entity in the community.

If citizens do not know how to address the issues that concern them, it will be extremely difficult for them to take action. Several participants explained that they did not get involved in their community because they did not know how to go about doing so. The most useful strategy, as described by participants, is likely that of educating citizens on what they can do and how to get involved. Mothers must learn what they can do and gain the confidence that they can, in fact, achieve their goals before they can become involved in the public policy process (Hagberg, 1994).

When citizens lack the knowledge of who to contact about issues or problems, they are barred from becoming involved. Citizens must be made aware of the resources and people available to them to remove the barrier of lack of knowledge. [Whether or not the resources were actually available within the community was beyond the scope of this study.] By teaching citizens what
resources are available and who to contact, they will be better suited for engagement and more likely to take action in their community.

Power by association is a second stage of empowerment according to Hagberg (1994). It is a resource that Cooperative Extension has for citizens whose voices are unheard. Cooperative Extension can empower through association by eliciting ideas and getting citizens to think about the issues and problems in their community. Cooperative Extension can help citizens develop and/or locate the resources they need to enact change.

The involvement of these citizens over the past five years with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension, through the Rural Maryland Families Speak research study and this Unheard Voices study, was one kind of intervention—an intervention that made the citizens aware of the value of their opinions. But intervention by research is not enough.

Cooperative Extension, alone and, more likely with partners, can provide learning experiences that can increase confidence among these and similar citizens that they can have a voice. They can learn how to find policy solutions to policy issues affecting them and their families (Hagberg, 1994).

To determine what these mothers might find useful, a list of possibilities was generated from the 2004 interviews and forums. The mothers interviewed in 2005 identified the following as being helpful strategies the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension could employ to increase involvement:

- Teaching people what to do
- Teaching people who to contact
- Organizing groups
- Helping with leadership
- Teaching people about the issues
- Getting people together
- Helping citizens learn to speak out and work with others
- Providing information

To be effective, Cooperative Extension, other helping professionals and public officials must respect the potential limited-resource citizens have to become civically engaged. Empowerment not only applies to citizen self-empowerment but also to how professionals in the community treat citizens. Greder (2004) developed a list of techniques professionals need to be aware of in order to empower those they work with. Professionals must take the time to learn about the citizens they help and what they feel are important issues that need to be discussed. By showing citizens that they are interested in their needs, professionals will show that they are invested in helping citizens make a difference.

As Matusak (1997) writes, public officials must be willing to work with a diverse population in order to meet the needs of all citizens. Those in a power position in the community must understand the culture of poverty, as well as the feelings of powerlessness that are often associated with poverty and low levels of income. If, and only if, they understand and reach out, can citizens and officials begin to work collaboratively toward a mutual vision of change.
While many of the mothers in our study did show that they have a vision for change in their community, they lack the resources to turn that vision into action. Citizens need a leader in the community that can organize and teach them how to turn their vision into reality.

**Will They Take Action?**

These mothers were most inclined to get involved when the issue became personalized. When citizens do not feel a personal stake in a problem or issue they are less likely to get involved. Helping citizens identify how the issues directly impact them and their families will increase the likelihood that they will take part in some form of civic engagement. This is a role that Cooperative Extension and partners could play.

Childcare was both an issue and a barrier to the mothers in this study. Citizens are barred from being involved in policy issues in their community because there is no one to watch their children. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research reports that women are 50% less likely to be civically engaged when they have children under the age of five than those with older children (Caiazza, 2001). Without someone to watch their children, women are unable to attend town meetings and activities and have their voices heard.

For those seeking to engage low-income mothers, childcare may be vital. Holding town meetings in a child-friendly environment or providing a chaperone to watch children while meetings take place would allow citizens to become more actively involved in the community.

People need leaders to guide and inspire them and encourage them to be involved in public issues. Therefore, this study asked participants if they would be willing, given training and a small amount of money, to become a local coordinator in order to make something happen. The research revealed that among these mothers, they are willing to get involved in the community to make a difference! Nearly every participant said, "Yes, they would be willing to get involved."

However, participants also stated that their willingness to become a coordinator was situation dependent. The overriding response was based on whether or not the issue was directly relevant to them and their families or about which they had very strong feelings and related needs. Participants also had a number of questions they would want answered before taking on a leadership role such as:

- What is involved?
- How many hours would they have to put in?
- Would they have to travel to be involved?

Beyond a role for educating citizens and building their leadership capacity, Cooperative Extension has another to play. Cooperative Extension has status and respect within the community. That social capital can help limited income citizens get heard. Cooperative Extension can span boundaries and bring diverse elements of the community together to deliberate about approaches to issues in come, to find a public voice representative of the whole of the community, and to catalyze action around the common ground that emerges.
Recommendations

As described in Hagberg’s model of personal power, these women may be in a state of powerlessness--they are helpless but not hopeless. These mothers do seem to have desire and ideas to elicit change. However, they do not know how to convert their desire and ideas into action. They are limited in having the ability to go out and act upon their ideas. If there were ways to expand their knowledge, convert that knowledge into ability and skill, and build their confidence while addressing other factors that intervene (i.e. childcare), then it is likely that mothers such as those we interviewed will go another step toward civic engagement. However, the question for another study remains:

If an entity, like Cooperative Extension, expanded the knowledge and skills, of rural, low-income mothers like those in this study, would they actually participate?

Based on this study, the research team proposes the following strategies for engaging limited resource citizens in the public policy matters of their communities:

1) Continue to hold periodic forums on issues that are continually verified as important to limited resource citizens. Hold these under the sponsorship of a respected community group like Cooperative Extension. Continue to invite elected officials and other community members with a stake in the issue.

2) Conduct some group learning and leadership sessions that could provide a safe space for limited resource citizens to raise questions, find answers; learn what can be done and how so that community issues are effectively addressed and a wide variety of voices are heard.

3) Share findings from this investigation with the media and officials of the community to identify additional ways that these citizens can be encouraged to speak up effectively.

4) Recruit one of the citizens who represents other limited-resource citizens, to become a citizen coordinator. This citizen should be someone who already has the trust of people in their community. Through this trust they will be able to better mobilize citizens to work on the issues (Greder, 2004). This person would enlist others to participate, do some leader training to educate others and coordinate citizens’ efforts. By placing someone who is trained in mobilizing citizen groups in the community, the likelihood is increased that the barriers to engagement will be overcome and citizens will become involved. This community coordinator would work collaboratively with researchers and Extension Educators to implement programs and training.

5) Be aware of barriers to engagement and find ways to prevent or neutralize those barriers such as providing child care for mothers.
Limitations

The research team was limited by the number of citizens they could interview due to distance and difficulty in accessing former participants in the initial research study. This may be due to the fact that they are “limited resource citizens.” It may be because phone numbers had been disconnected and/or because these mothers were generally working while their children were in school and taking care of their children in the evening. If participants could be reached, many did not have time to spare to conduct an interview.

Another limitation in the research was the distance between the research team and participants. Because there was no way to physically be on-site, the research team was limited to phone interviews. [Garrett County is 225 miles from the University of Maryland, College Park campus.] While the phones interviews were conducive to our research, there was an element lost in the lack of face-to-face contact established with the forum groups in 2004.

Given these limitations, two key questions remain for future investigation:

If, given a different time and place, and a different sample of rural, low-income mothers, will the same or other barriers be identified?

And

If a sample included other types of people, including older adults, men, people from different ethnicities and a different culture, will the same or other barriers be identified?
Figure 1. Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy

Rural, Limited Resource Citizens

Evidence of Engagement
- Voiced option at PTA to try and get better school supplies
- Talked to the mayor about drug trafficking
- Requested something for kids to do
- Wrote letters to the editor
- Participated in Residents Against Drugs for
- Got involved in housing issues
- Considered running for county commissioner
- Majority of citizens interviewed voted in the 2004 presidential election

Barriers to Engagement
- Don’t have time, or schedule during an inconvenient time
- Not having the right last name, feeling inferior or unable to make a difference
- Not knowing what to do or who to contact about a problem
- Issues being discussed are not important to citizens
- Need group organization and leadership to mobilize interested citizens
- Pride prevents citizens from wanting to ask for help
- Uninformed about issues or activities
- Unreliable transportation
- No available child care

Disappointing Results
- “It gets heard, but no action gets taken”
- “Hasn’t done much good”
- “I never heard more about it”
- “Nothing gets done”
- “Don’t have money to campaign”
- “Town don’t want any input”
- “Elected officials don’t get involved”

Limited Levels of Engagement

Getting Involved
- Teach people what to do and who to contact
- Organize groups
- Develop leadership skills
- Teach people about the issues
- Provide information
- Help people get together
- Teach citizens how to speak out and work with others

Overcoming Barriers
- Bridge the class divide, empower citizens
- Publicize, make information and opportunities more available
- Show people how issues affect them
- Organize groups and encourage people to join
- Elect supportive officials
- Provide transportation
- Hold meetings at convenient times and locations
Turning Research Into Action … Next Steps

This study used a community-based research strategy and philosophy. The four main principles of best practices in community-based research are:

- Solicit and value involvement of community members to encourage “buy in” to the research process
- Empower community members at every stage of research
- Encourage participants to take ownership instead of imposing a pre-determined “expert-driven” structure
- Identify and utilize pre-existing community networks

_Uneared Voices_ exemplifies best practice by turning results of this research into action. In Garrett County, Project Directors converted the feasibility findings into a forum for deliberation. The forum focused on recreation – the issue most frequently cited by limited resource citizens during focus groups and interviews. Because an issue guide was not available from the National Issues Forum, the lead investigator framed the issue using three approaches from the interviews and focus groups. The forum was moderation using NIF moderator guidelines.

A written invitation to participate and to invite family and friends was mailed to participants three weeks before the forum. Invitations were also mailed to 30 elected or appointed local officials. Fourteen citizens and the town mayor were in attendance.

A local human services collaboration obtained use of a local church and provided unexpected supervision for three children brought by the mothers. One also brought her teenage daughter who was included in the deliberations.

The reporter made notes and created a sociogram to document the extent of involvement as evidenced by the number of times a participant spoke and the directionality of the speech -- to the moderator or the group in general or another participant in particular.

The mayor unexpectedly informed the group of the opportunity for the town to take over the local armory for potential recreational use. He acknowledged his concern that a wide range of community citizens attend a forthcoming town hall meeting on the topic and invited participants to come. The mayor invited the mothers to participate in a town meeting regarding use of a donated facility for recreation. Four accepted the invitation and granted the moderator the right to send their names and addresses to the mayor, which was done.

At the end of the forum, participants were given feedback forms to indicate next steps. Mothers indicated an interest in future meetings and signed commitment cards to take action, proving that with the right issues, at the right time, in the right location, under the right facilitation, limited resource citizens can – and will – participate in the deliberative public policy process.

In 2005, these same mothers were re-interviewed to determine if they had acted upon the issue after participating in the forum; what issues continued or had arisen since summer of 2004; what barriers continued and their interest in learning how to become more involved. They also indicated a willingness to serve as a peer coordinator should further work occur in their county.
As with any exploratory research study, particularly ones with relatively small sample sizes, replication is necessary to examine generalizability of results. This study should be repeated with low-income citizens residing in other rural areas and in urban areas in order to determine whether similar barriers exist and supports are needed.

To better understand the extent to which similarly disenfranchised citizens would engage in forums on topics of interest, additional forums should be conducted to learn more about what works.

Two questions arising from the study should be explored with additional studies.

If, given a different time and place, and a different sample of rural, low-income mothers, will the same or other barriers be identified?

And

If a sample included other types of people, including older adults, men, people from different ethnicities and a different culture, will the same or other barriers be identified?

An undergraduate student, who participated in all aspects of the study in 2005, began using the findings in the winter of 2006 to work with Cooperative Extension faculty and others in two Western Maryland Counties as the basis for funding of a nutrition and physical activity program.1

Dissemination of results is another critical component in the research process. The final report and a brief are posted on the University of Maryland Family Policy Impact Seminar website as was done with the interim report in 2004: http://www.hhp.umd.edu/FMST/fis/mdresources.html

The project process and preliminary results were presented in 2004 at: a Community Based Research conference in Hartford, Connecticut; the University of Maryland College of Health and Human Performance Research Interaction Day; the Food Stamp and Nutrition Education Program annual conference. In 2005, presentations were made at: the Washington, D.C. National Council on Family Relations and American Association of Family Consumer Sciences Public Policy Conference and the Children Youth and Families conference for Extension workers in Boston.

Future dissemination includes: A proposal was submitted to the National Council on Family Relations for their November, 2006 annual conference. A poster will be created and displayed at the fall, 2006 Rural Maryland Summit to bring the findings to the attention of the expected 200 attendees including state and local elected officials. A manuscript is in development for submission to a professional journal.

The experience of conducting this study and findings will be used a part of the justification for a grant from the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation aimed at improving the physical activity of

1 Joanna Waldman will receive credit for her internship as part of her 2006 graduation requirements. When interviewed during her application process for graduate school, she cited involvement in the study as key to her future career goals.
children, youths and adults in rural areas. The Kettering-funded study will also be cited in the capacity section of a grant to be submitted to the National Institutes on Health intended to reduce health disparities among rural residents.

The 2005 results will become the basis for a proposed leadership and citizenship program in 2006. The research team will seek to conduct a test of teaching these disenfranchised citizens fundamentals of leadership and citizenship in the summer of 2006 by working with the local Cooperative Extension faculty. The tentative title comes from the words of the mothers in *Unheard Voices*.

**Getting Heard--From One Small Voice to Many**
References


Appendices

Appendix A – Qualitative Analysis

Appendix B – Garrett County Recreation Issue Deliberative Guide

Appendix C – Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy miniature poster presentation 2004

Appendix D – Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy miniature poster presentation 2005
Appendix A

Qualitative Analysis

Responses for each of the questions asked during interviews and focus groups conducted between June and August, 2004 and June and August, 2005 are included here. Similar responses have been grouped under an inclusive paraphrase. The most frequently offered responses are listed first and followed with others in decreasing frequency.

If there's a problem in your town/community, one that requires the broader community to become involved, how do decisions get made and who gets to participate?
- Participants don't know or haven't thought about it
- Mayor or other elected officials (county and state commissioners, town council)
- Governmental departments (sheriff, police, fire, National Guard, emergency management)
- The whole community gets involved in town meetings
- People who are affected by issues get involved
- A lot of people don’t know what is going on
- Affected individuals are excluded (referencing to welfare benefit distribution)
- Most people let the county government take care of things, you don’t get a lot of opinions from citizens
- Letters to the editors

In your town/community, who gets to say what the problem or issue is and how it should be addressed?
- Citizens let elected officials know when there is a problem and rely on them for change
- Media help to define problems and increase attention
- Higher-ups, mayor and town council (elected)
- Goes by last name – those with the right last name have input
- Family of elected officials, treat low or medium low class people as ostracized
- Social services agencies
- Open discussion at the town meeting
- Governmental departments (police)

In this town/community, what kinds of problems or issues get limited resource citizens involved?
- Nobody gets involved – either they can’t do it or they see no problems
- Resources are available to help problems if people were aware of them
- Drugs
- Social services cuts (afterschool, housing, CHIP, health programs, cash assistance)
- Transportation problems
- Things that affect them personally
- Senior services
- Employment issues (bringing in jobs, wages)
- Fatherhood
- Being in jail
What helps to get limited resource citizens involved? Makes it easier?
- More publicity and information available
- Transportation
- New president or other elected decision-making officials
- If affected directly they might get involved
- Talking to someone closer to your level (as opposed to “higher-up”)
- Desire, motivation
- Education; teaching how to find information
- Community meetings
- Feeling empowered and valued
- Activities scheduled around work hours
- Childcare

Barriers
- Not the right last name, feeling inferior or unable to make a difference
- If its something they’re not really concerned about, they won’t get involved. Older people don’t get involved with children’s issues
- Not knowing what to do or who to go to
- No time
- Don’t know what they are eligible for, have pride and don’t want to ask for help
- Transportation
- No leadership
- They need a support group
- People don’t have the facts
- The cost: what will this do to me, will I be threatened with violence, etc… And are they going to raise my taxes to address this issue?
- Not being part of the clique

How could those barriers be reduced or eliminated? What would it take?
- Eliminate class divide, intimidation
- People have to want to get involved, have something in it for them
- Hold meetings at more convenient times
- Support the general public (transit program, job training, hygiene, counseling)
- Publicize (radio and Oakland train)
- Someone with liberty and self-confidence enough to start a rally.
- Get the right officials voted in
- Encourage people to join groups
Have you personally gotten involved in a problem or issue? Why? What happened when you did? If not, why not?

- No - don’t fit in, nothing going on, too shy
- School issues – trying to get better school supplies – voiced opinions at PTA
- I went to town hall once about the cars racing up and down any road and now we have an officer that patrols
- A teacher didn’t like me or my kids--through social services & principal we resolved problem
- Considered running for county commissioner but don’t have money to campaign.
- Wrote letters to the editor but don’t think it’s done much good.
- Residents Against Drugs for 6 years but I wasn’t doing the town any good
- Once I got involved in housing and I never heard more about it
- Needed help handling foster children but got her license revoked
- Actively involved in school, got ineffective teacher fired
- Assistant to Head Start Fatherhood
- President of the Parent Council in their Head Start program
- Employed with wheels to work program
- Take care of other people’s kids
- Talked to the mayor about the drug trafficking that goes on in the neighborhood, but nothing gets done
- Requested something for the kids to do, and it gets heard, but no action gets taken.
- Makes comments but it is hard to go to meetings
- Tries to slow down traffic

Are you a registered voter? Did you vote in the 2004 presidential election? Why or why not?

- Majority of citizens interviewed are registered voters
- Don’t know enough about the system to vote
What are some problems or issues that concern your community right now? They may be local issues, state, national or international.

- Lack of youth areas and recreation activities
- Drugs
- Shortage of hours and jobs
- Health care funding availability and inadequate providers and specialists
- Family values – morals, manners, parenting skills
- Transportation (specifically after-hours)
- Teen pregnancy
- Condition of the roads
- Consolidating school and keeping local school
- Services for the elderly
- Services for families
- Community issues with children (foster care, nutrition, health, school)
- Housing
- Bullying in schools
- Segregating rich and poor
- School clothes without sales tax, clothing vouchers
- Childcare
- In-home services – parenting, food nutrition, discipline
- Taxes
- Domestic violence
- Land development
- Education
- Racial issues
- Gas prices

When you think about this problem or issue, what worries you? What bothers you about it?

- Youth need supervision
- If there is a lack of things to do, they get into trouble
- I worry about my kids having things to do, keeping active. Plus I have to play both mother and father. Peer pressure is a lot. Sports are social but you have to travel 5 days a week and take them everywhere.
- I don’t know enough about it
- Increasing job layoffs
- What will be affecting my children as they get older
- Housing – hardly anywhere to rent
- Family might be too far gone, children aren’t taken care of
When you think about these problems or issues, which people are affected directly? Indirectly?
- Kids, teens, next generation
- Town, whole community, nearly everyone
- Average Joe – we don’t make a lot of money
- Those laid off or losing jobs
- Families with special needs children
- Schools
- Single parents
- Low-income families and the elderly.
- Elected officials

To really address these problems or issues, who needs to be involved?
- Community collaboration
- Government, elected officials
- Parents
- Publicize (announce meeting on radio, inform public of problem and its impact, flyers everywhere)
- Get big names on board
- Bring business in
- Any citizen in need
- Area churches
- Service providers
- Teachers

Are you willing and able to get involved? What barriers are there to your involvement?
- Lack of time and/or proper scheduling
- Nothing is a barrier if its important
- No resources
- Not being “in the in group”, feeling ignored or powerless
- Don’t know who to talk to
- Maybe location
- Shyness
- Transportation
- Childcare
What else would you like to say about citizens engaging in important public policy matters?

- My belief is that you have to have the desire and a commitment, lack of commitment is a big problem.
- Having a good meeting, informing citizens about issues.
- Just that parents need to get involved. My kids enjoy school more because I am involved.
- We have to touch citizens in a way that they want to get involved. And advertising helps people know about things. If they are informed, they can get involved. If they don’t, they won’t.
- Living your life in a positive way. Realizing that everything affects your kids. If everyone lives life morally (conscientious) (how it affects others) and thinks more about others than of themselves, it will trickle down. Start having families teaching their children so that his generation (baby!) will be able to fix it. It affects the community.
- People who don’t vote – don’t get involved because they’ve seen broken promises, they’re not going to listen to me.

What time of the year, month, week is best for a forum, why?

- Not winter
- Right before school starts back up
- After school starts so we don’t have to worry about childcare
- Spring and summer seems the best time – it gets people all riled up
- Autumn & winter, when people really need work, in spring & summer, people can find seasonal work

What kind of location for a forum might be best and why?

- County is too big- need two locations (one near lake, one near college)
- Oakland
- Community action, Uno’s,
- We have met at the library

What should be provided in terms of incentives?

- Child care
- Food
- Talking about something really important won’t need incentives
- Some will come to see what they can get out of it, and some people would come because they interested
- Transportation, getting people there, we have 35 year olds that don’t have a driver’s license
- There has to be a real incentive that includes motivation

Who should be invited?

- The more people in power – or so called power
  - Local Management Board
  - Governor
  - President
- Commissioners
- DOVE center works with a lot of people
- Jok, the mayor, the commercial side (business people), maybe social workers
- What about young people? Yes, I’m quite sure they would have ideas
How should those invitations be made--in person, via phone, in writing, in combination of two or more methods?
- School system and Head Start.
- Department of Social Services
- Laundromats
- Radio
- Fliers and letters
- A letter of invitation
- Doesn’t matter who the invitation comes from
- Tell people it is mandatory
- Go through local / community organizations like churches, places where people go because they want to, weekly bingos

How far in advance of the forum should the invitations be made?
- Two weeks
- 30 days
- About 3 or 4 weeks ahead
- At least a few weeks, but not so long that they don’t forget

Is a reminder needed?
- A reminder the day before or day of for evening
- A week before

If paid a small amount of money, would you be willing to become a local coordinator? Why or why not?
- Yes, money wouldn’t matter
- Depending on where I would have to go and what hours are involved. It also matters if it is something I am interested in or feel there’s a need for
- It would show leadership with the women who are not very voiceful and need to be heard
- Depending on if the issue will involve me
- Yes so I can put something back into this town
- No because I moved to West Virginia

If you were to become a local coordinator, what would you like to know about the job?
- Everything involved
- Who to contact
- How to do necessary paperwork
- How to get it started
- How to get people involved
- Everything about the subject
Background
Communities, and a democracy, are only as strong as their citizens who engage in public policy matters. For rural citizens, getting involved can be challenging due to many factors including: geographic isolation and related transportation problems; conflicts with work, school and family activities; and the culture of the community. Some communities encourage and expect the range of its citizens to be involved in public matters and for all voices to be heard.

Yet, not all are heard. Some of the voices less heard belong to women; some to children, youth or senior citizens; and some to those with limited resources.

Understanding the conditions under which limited resource citizens can, and will, engage in deliberation about public policy issues in their communities is the focus of an investigation by the Kettering Foundation and the University of Maryland known as the "Unheard Voices" project.

This investigation grew out of the "Rural Families Speak" study that began in Garrett County in 2000. The mothers who were interviewed described the most and least desirable parts of living in the county. They talked about things that could be improved; some spoke about what they had done to make life better. Others wanted someone to tackle the issues.

The "Unheard Voices" project began with the thoughts of those mothers. They were re-interviewed 3 more times--the latest round in the summer of 2004. Also, in June, 2004, two open focus group sessions were held to further learn what issues faced Garrett's limited resource citizens.

At Issue: Recreation
At the top of the list of community issues to be addressed was that of recreation--places for children, youth, and adults to get physical activity in a safe environment. For youth, supervised activity was a priority. For adults, physical activity for their health mattered. For families, space to go to be together was important.

Several mothers said they worried about their kids having things to do, to keep active and not get in trouble. They were especially concerned about summer activities for youth.

Garrett's winter weather posed problems for many who found that even walking for exercise wasn't easy on icy roads. And some mentioned the threat of black bears when outdoors.

Mothers wanted to see the public informed about the problem of lack of recreational activities and safe, affordable spaces for local folks to use. They wanted people to get together to develop recreation or after-school programs, repair or remove playgrounds, find donations of land or money for youth spaces and find solutions for other recreational problems. Most agreed that what was needed was "community collaboration."

Mothers thought that both "higher-ups", as elected officials were called, and affected individuals needed to get together to address the lack of youth areas and recreational activities. They said that calling citizens together to get them better informed and
finding people with a desire and a commitment to get involved was needed but that lack of commitment is a problem. One said:

“We have to touch citizens in a way that they want to get involved”

Deliberating Possible Actions

Citizens who come together and deliberate about the costs and benefits of a variety of possible actions may discover: 1) what values they hold in common; 2) where the conflicts are; and 3) how to find what they are willing, or not willing, to do to solve the problem.

"Recreation Matters" is the focus of this forum. With a guide to help them, citizens will consider three approaches to improving recreational options in Garrett County. The goal of the forum is to see if there's a shared sense of purpose and a will to work on making improvements. The forum will unfold in three stages:

Stage One: Getting Started
1. Introduction to the topic
2. Review ground rules and goal
3. Connect the issue to people's lives
4. Clarify why the issue matters

Stage Two: Deliberating 3 Options
1. Examine three approaches
2. Talk about what's good or not so good
3. Hear experiences of people
4. Ask what might happen if the option was chosen for action
5. Think about the consequences of making this option happen
6. Propose what the option might cost
7. Make a case FOR the option least liked
8. Suggest downsides & upsides to the option
9. Identify the tensions between the options

Stage Three: Reflecting on the Deliberation

As a group:
1. Discuss what options have real appeal & are most "doable"
2. Talk about next steps--who is willing to do what

Individually: Complete questionnaire

Recreation Matters

Option One: AWARENESS

Sometimes people just don't know what recreational space and activities they have in their area. Maybe that's because there is no current inventory of what's available, where, for what ages, at what cost. If there is a current inventory, maybe it's not known to all citizens. Option one suggests that what Garrett County citizens need to do is make people aware of what's here.

Option Two: ACTIVITES

Even when people know about available recreational space and activities they may not make use of them. Sometimes, barriers like transportation; hours of operation; safety; costs; lack of supervision, skills, knowledge, interest or motivation holds people back. Option two suggests that what Garrett County citizens need to do is find ways to support families, schools, and community organizations in fully using what exists.

Option Three: ADDITIONS

If barriers to use of current space and activities are reduced, eliminated or prevented, there still may not be enough or enough different kinds of space and activities for everyone--children, youth, adults, senior citizens. Option Three suggests that what Garrett County citizens need to do is find ways to create new spaces and activities to meet diverse needs.
Appendix C: 2004 Findings

Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy

Deliberative Democracy

The Kettering Foundation funds research projects that aim to answer the overarching question of “What does it take to make democracy function as it should?” Their work is based on the premise that American democracy is not operating to its full potential because:
- Citizens are cynical and angry with a system of decision making that does not heed or serve them
- Citizens lack feelings of agency, or sense of control over their lives and futures

Deliberative Forums

Deliberative forums exemplify democracy at its highest level of functioning where participants of all walks of life are encouraged to have equal voice at the table. Conversations involve careful consideration of competing solutions and force differing perspectives to listen to one another and consider the costs and benefits of all alternatives. However, there exist certain inequities that prevent all pertinent voices to be present during deliberation. With funding from the Kettering Foundation, researchers from the Maryland Family Policy Impact Seminar set out to understand how to better engage these unheard voices.

Evidence of Engagement

- Voiced opinion at PTA to try and get better school supplies
- Talked to the mayor about drug trafficking
- Requested something for kids to do
- Written letters to the editor
- Participated in Residents Against Drugs for 6 years
- Got involved in housing issues
- Considered running for county commissioner

Disappointing Results

- “It gets heard, but no action gets taken”
- “Hasn’t done much good”
- “I never heard more about it”
- “Nothing gets done”
- “Don’t have money to campaign”

Barriers to Engagement

- Don’t have time, or scheduled during an inconvenient time
- Not having the right last name, feeling inferior or unable to make a difference
- Not knowing what to do or who to contact about a problem
- Issues being discussed are not important to them
- Group organization and leadership to mobilize interested citizens
- Pride prevents them from wanting to ask for help
- Uninformed about issues or activities
- Unreliable transportation
- No available child care

Limited levels of Engagement

To answer this question, researchers employed the following community-based, qualitative research methods:
- Interviews with twenty-one Rural Families Speak participants

Overcoming Barriers

- Bridge the class divide, empower citizens
- Publicize, make information and opportunities more available
- Show people how issues affect them
- Organize groups and encourage people to join
- Elect supportive officials
- Provide transportation
- Hold meetings at convenient times & locations

Community-Based Research

Best Practices

- Solicit, and value, involvement of community members to encourage to “buy in” to the research process
- Empower community members at every stage of research
- Encourage participants to take ownership instead

Turning Research in Action

Unheard Voices exemplifies best practice by turning results of this research into action. In Garrett County, Project Directors facilitated a deliberative forum on recreation - the issue most frequently cited by limited resource citizens at focus groups and interviews. Fourteen limited resource mothers and the mayor attended. The mayor invited the mothers to participate in a town meeting regarding use of a donated facility for recreation. Four accepted the invitation. Mothers indicated an interest in future meetings and signed commitment cards to take action, proving that:
- *with the right issue,
- *at the right time,
- *in the right location,
- *under the right facilitation ...

... limited resource citizens can – and will – participate in the deliberative process.

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MARYLAND FAMILY POLICY IMPACT SEMINAR
Appendix D: 2004 - 2005 Findings

Engaging Unheard Voices in Public Policy

Deliberative Democracy
The Kettering Foundation funds research projects that aim to answer the overarching question of “What does it take to make democracy function as it should?” Their work is based on the premise that American democracy is not operating to its full potential because:
- Citizens are cynical and angry with a system of decision making that does not heed or serve them
- Citizens lack feelings of agency, or sense of control over their lives and futures

Under what conditions will limited resource citizens engage in the deliberative public policy process?

Rural, limited resource citizens

Engagement in the Issues
While many participants did try and work on some of the issues facing citizens of Garrett County, most worked in the realm of the family rather than the public arena.

Barriers to Engagement
- Not having the right last name, feeling inferior or unable to make a difference
- Not knowing what to do or who to contact about a problem
- Issues being discussed are not important to them
- Need for group organization and leadership to mobilize interested citizens
- Pride prevents them from wanting to ask for help
- Uninformed about issues or activities
- No available child care

Disappointing Results
- “The town pretty much don’t want any input”
- “Everybody’s afraid they are going to step on somebody’s toes”
- “It’s not what they stand for who gets elected, it’s who they are”

Limited levels of Engagement

Intervention Strategies for Engagement

Overcoming Barriers
- Empower citizens
- Teaching people what to do and who to contact
- Organizing groups and getting people together
- Helping with leadership
- Teaching people about the issues
- Helping citizens learn to speak out and work with others

Issues Facing Garrett County
- Recreation opportunities
- Underemployment due to shortage of jobs and hours
- Drugs
- Health care, including funding, availability, and inadequate # of providers and specialists
- Deterioration of family values
- Transportation and condition of the roads
- Teen pregnancy
- Childcare
- Housing costs

Taking Action
When asked if they would be willing, given training and money, to become a local coordinator to make something happen, nearly every participant said yes, they would be willing to help enact change in Garrett County. While many had questions, such as the issues they would be working on and what is involved, each showed in interest in becoming involved, proving that:
- with the right issue,
- at the right time,
- in the right location,
- under the right facilitation…

…limited resource citizens can – and will – participate in the deliberative public policy process!

Implications for Practice
Engagement is greatly affected by a citizen’s perceived ability and resources. A logical strategy to stimulate engagement would be to provide education and leadership development through a respected entity in the community, like Cooperative Extension. This, however, is not enough. Citizens must take on leadership roles to encourage and motivate other citizens to get involved.

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Unheard Voices
Prior scholarship tells us that:
- Rural families experience unique difficulties engaging in civic activities due to both geographic and cultural factors.
- Low-income individuals have lower levels of political participation
- Women’s voices are often left unheard in policy discussions

To better understand the barriers affecting these populations and how to overcome them, the Unheard Voices team interviewed the Maryland sample of a 14 state study of low-income rural mothers in 2004 and 2005.

Citizen Satisfaction
The majority of limited resource mothers interviewed responded that they are satisfied with the direction things are going in the United States and Maryland. However, only half the participants are satisfied with the direction things are going in Garrett County. As perceived by participants, this may be because as the policy arena moves closer to home, citizens become more aware and have stronger opinions about what is going on. This may be because they view activities and issues in their community as having a direct effect on their every day lives.
For citation purposes:


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