

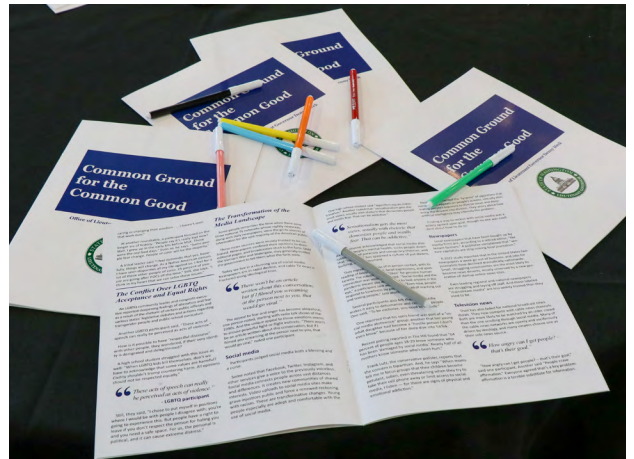
Project for Civic Health Summit Proceedings



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

THE
WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



Introduction

In a 2018 poll, 93% of Americans said incivility is a problem in the U. S. Sixty-nine percent said it’s a “serious” problem. “Incivility” is a mild word to describe the toxicity that has divided political parties, school boards, and many families in the past few years. Too much of our public discourse has devolved into a verbal cage match with no rules.

This heartening super-majority of concern is a call to action. Our current level of incivility is not normal. It is not inevitable. And it is not incurable.

In our Washington, we are less profoundly affected than in Washington, D. C. Our 2023 state legislative session was remarkably bipartisan in both behavior and productive policy outcomes. Even the final Senate vote on the state operating budget – typically divided – was strongly bipartisan. Many of our local governments are also centers of civility.

All this gives us a stronger starting point for combating the poison in the body politic than many other states. But here, too, there have been shouting matches at local meetings, death threats aimed at school board members, and the need for heightened security at our state capitol.

In response to the growing crisis of division and incivility, Washington State Lieutenant Governor Denny Heck invited the Henry M. Jackson Foundation, the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy & Governance, and The William D. Ruckelshaus Center, a joint center of Washington State University and the University of Washington, to collaborate on the Project for Civic Health.

Six roundtable discussions helped define the problem and identify possible solutions. These discussions, convened and moderated by Washington State Lieutenant Governor Denny Heck, included diverse community, business, union and non-profit leaders, current and former state and local elected officials, and young people. They were held in Spo-

kane, Wenatchee, Vancouver, Tacoma, and Sequim. A discussion with high-school students was held in Olympia.

The roundtable discussions were not recorded and participants were promised they would not be quoted by name. This led to candid, searching, and insightful conversations, and a wealth of ideas for potential solutions.

A summary of those meetings, called “Common Ground for the Common Good,” included a menu of proposed remedies, and contributed to the design of the Summit on Civic Health, held on October 19, 2023.

All the partners were deeply involved in the design and implementation of the Summit, and all will continue to nurture and encourage the actions it has inspired. Small group discussions at the Summit allowed diverse stakeholders to workshop solutions.

Three rounds of small group discussions covered a wide range of topics, but produced consistent themes:

Disagreement is necessary in a democracy because people who are free to think and believe differently will inevitably disagree. The challenge is to disagree with the intention to achieve compromise and progress, not immediate victory.

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Factual, objective information is essential, across every media platform. We navigate through forests of mis- and disinformation, and lack credible sources of information in a growing number of local news deserts.

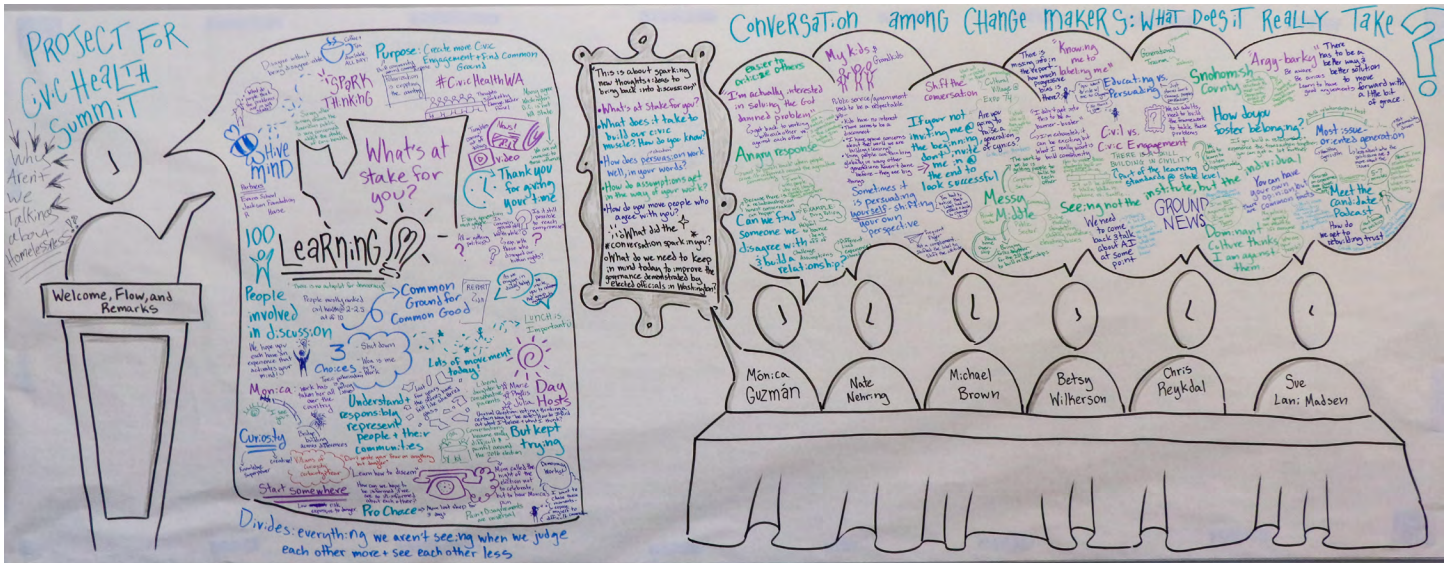
Inclusion of people of color, indigenous people, and immigrants is essential. But it is insufficient if they are constrained from full participation by being treated as tokens, or if their candid opinions are not solicited, listened to, and respected.



Knowledge of how our democratic system works and the skills to be effective participants are essential. These skills and knowledge must be taught throughout K-12 schools, in post-secondary education, and to the generations of adults who received little or no civic education.

The foundation of civility is trusting human-to-human relationships, which precede successful transactions and compromises. Building or rebuilding them requires change in our institutions, and in the personal skills and behavior of citizens.

Results from the group discussions include a creative array of proposed actions to address these issues. This document provides a comprehensive review of the ideas, insights and proposals that emerged from the Summit. Its intention is to broaden and deepen the reach of work to detoxify our differences and divisions and restore a higher standard of civility.

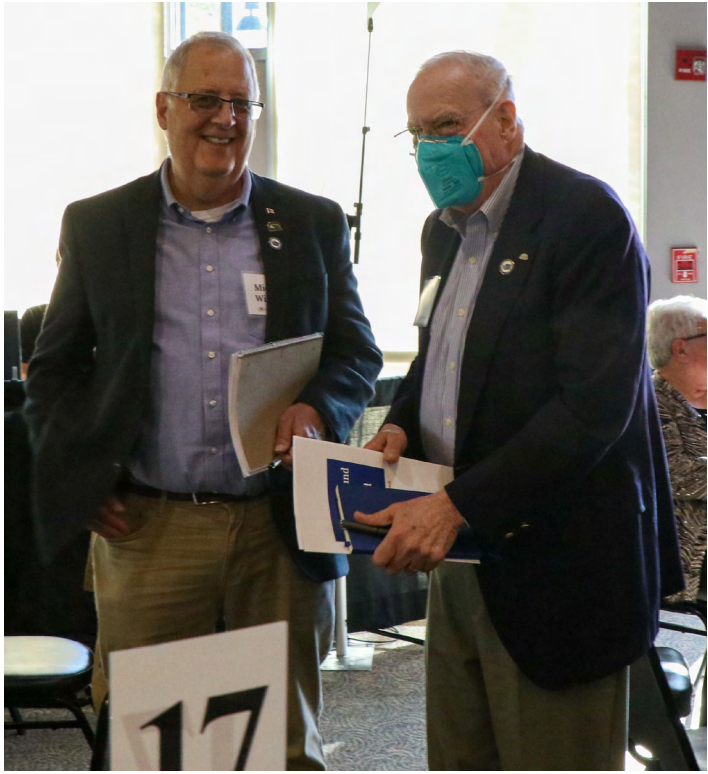


A democratic process

The Civic Health Summit was hosted by the Washington State Lieutenant Governor, the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance, the Jackson Foundation, and The William D. Ruckelshaus Center using participatory design-based practices that are simple yet impactful. This methodology allows for stakeholders to engage in meaningful conversations and share collective wisdom in order to better navigate the complexity of our work and find new solutions.

The design of the Civic Health Summit and facilitation process was based on the need to convene this group of people at this particular time around a purpose that the hosting team defined at the outset of the project: To bring together people who are concerned about civic health, creating hope and reducing isolation, to improve the governance demonstrated by elected officials in Washington, develop practical and transformative ideas, and create public accountability. Practicing in this methodology calls for designing our conversations around the harvest, or the results, that we want to emerge from the engagement.

The event itself was designed to ensure that each activity supported the purpose of the engagement so that conversation yielded something. Throughout the event, graphic recording was utilized to document the expertise and knowledge of participants. Documents such as these use visuals to help participants remember



the conversation and connect to it later. Participants were invited to document in each small group conversation on template sheets, an action that connects their conversation to writing and drawing, enabling them to internalize and reflect on the information being shared.

Following the meeting, the hosting team reviewed the documents and the table hosts responded to identify underlying patterns that may shape future actions.

The following pages detail the ideas and action plans developed by participants through small-group discussion.



Topic Summaries by Page

- 6 - 7:** *Learnings from Efforts Promoting Civic Dialogue on the Ground*
- 8:** *Building Capacity of Democratic Dialogue: Training for Candidates and Elected Leaders*
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Learning from Efforts Promoting Civic Dialogue on the Ground

Table Host Name: Justin Eckstein

Participants:
Kelli Curtis, Jeff Carter,
Jessica Hernandez



Summary: While these groups do exist, they do not have a broad appeal. Certain areas or communities lack representation, there is often a difficulty in balancing “red” and “blue,” and there is a consistent challenge in striking a balance between these ideological camps. There also is an underrepresentation of Indigenous voices and communities across the existing organizations. Understanding and acknowledging the historical context and current challenges faced by historically under-represented communities are crucial for these efforts to continue to thrive.

Synthesis of Ideas: The group’s discussion focused on the operations and challenges of “Youth & Government/Mock Trial,” a non-profit working to foster civic participation and understanding among young people. These programs rely heavily on vol-



unteers. While that brings some strength, it also draws attention to the need for staff who can commit long-term and cultivate lasting relationships. Additionally, the majority of individuals who partake in these programs tend to self-select, which might limit the diversity of perspectives.

These programs rely heavily on volunteers. While that brings some strength, it also draws attention to the need for staff who can commit long-term and cultivate lasting relationships. Additionally, the majority of individuals who partake in these programs tend to self-select, which might limit the diversity of perspectives.

Action Plan:

Continue to inventory existing organizations:

- Many organizations exist in the space, ranging from local to federal levels.
- Engage a diversity of organizations, from brand new groups to well-established ones.
- Try to maintain a balance within organizations across a number of dimensions: Ideological im-



balance (perceived biases, e.g., being too “blue” or too “red,”); Identity diversity (struggles in adequately representing marginalized groups); ensuring accessibility to diverse groups and avoid tokenizing those historically under-represented.

- Assess recruitment challenges and ways of engaging those not already committed to the mission.

Proposed Solutions & Steps Forward:

- *Gamification: Use fun challenges to collaboratively address complex “wicked problems.”*
- *Benefits: Allow practicing and building skills in managing value conflicts in a less intense environment. Fun serves as an attraction point.*
- *Shift in organizational mentality: Transition from a transactional mindset and avoid using mere membership as evidence of diversity.*
- *Prevent feelings of tokenization among members.*
- *Promote a transformative experience for members, enhancing genuine inclusion.*
- *Deepening Conversations: Transition from “smoothie” (surface-level, easy) conversations to those which go deeper.*
- *Emphasize and foster an environment for more profound, challenging disagreements to promote growth.*



Building Capacity of Democratic Dialogue: Training for Candidates and Elected Leaders

Table Host Name: *Jesika Westbrook*

Participants:

Elizabeth Doll, Annette Cleveland, Marissa Rathbone, Lauren Simonds, Kate Kruller, Liza Rankin, Leatta Dahlhoff, Kate Dexter, Siri Bliesner, Benita Horn, Kelli Curtis, Natalee Singleton



Summary: The roundtable discussion identified a number of issues that contribute to incivility when electeds and candidates talk to one another including lack of accountability for incivility, lack of training opportunities to build relevant skills, lack of accessibility, and a focus on personality politics rather than the issues.

Synthesis of Ideas: The majority of ideas centered around the need for trainings and learning opportunities for both incoming candidates and elected officials. Ideas would need to be wide-spread,



non-partisan, and accessible to all groups. Central underlying issues that were brought up were the parity of pay and training requirements between different types of elected officials, and the different ways male- and female-presenting electeds are treated and how that affects how seriously different people take this issue.

Action Plan:

- *Create signed codes of conduct in government with related consequences and incentives.*
- *Employ mandates to implement trainings.*
- *Highlight our common ground rather than our differences.*
- *Create continuous learning opportunities (akin to what doctors and other professionals have to do to maintain licenses).*
- *Create and mandate trainings for candidates so they are fully knowledgeable about the scope and responsibility of the role they are running for.*
- *Study the effectiveness of mandated vs. voluntary trainings.*
- *Combine the dignity index with Braver Angels trainings for voters and electeds.*



Learning from “Disagree Better”

Table Host Name: Jodi Sandfort

Participants: Penny Sweet,
Brad Douglass, Mike Rosen,
Jonathan Chen, Erin Beck
Mike Winkler, Gary Baker,
Maharshi Roy, Morgan Hickel, Rhonda Lewis,
Amen Tsegai, Michael Swindler,
Josiah Devine Johnson, Shelly Farnham,
Sue Lain Madsen, Charlotte Shannon,
Sean O’Brien, Davyn Waters, Loni Greninger,
Diane Douglas, Neal Black



- 2) Express respect for one’s fundamental humanity, while acknowledging differences;
- 3) Lean into curiosity and create some resilience through that relationship;
- 4) Start with an understanding that debates should focus upon public problems and policy;
- 5) Have an opportunity for those involved to learn and gain new experiences. While often shaped by differences in values, a good argument doesn’t try to change those values. Instead, a good argument sometimes resolves by “agreeing to disagree” about underlying values and focusing attention on what might be resolved about the topic at hand.

While elected officials need to be able to have good arguments, in this democracy we all benefit with more of this practice. To disagree better, we need new skill building, such as new mental, “personal tricks” to allow us to overcome assumptions that disagreement is disagreeable. Some ideas were:

- Start by clarifying the topic or problem you want to solve (and confirm again and again you are talking about the same thing, as many people tend to lose focus when faced with contradictory points of view).
- Learn about the person rather than evoking stereotypes or reducing them to merely contrary.
- Come in with an expectation that both sides will likely need to compromise to move forward.
- Learn how to state the other sides’ perspectives and synthesize different points of view.
- Use humor to both diffuse tension and remind yourself of your shared humanity.
- Create awareness of the context for disagreements. Disagreements are easier in settings where time is invested to build relationships and respect, where participants are reminded in things that they share (for example, a commitment to public service).
- Lean into disagreement with curiosity, recognizing both points of alignment and areas where you need to agree to disagree for now.

Summary: This topic is framed in the language from the National Governors Association initiative (www.nga.org/disagree-better). Twenty-four people at the Summit engaged in this discussion across multiple sessions and felt that the language - “Disagree Better”- is helpful. We agreed that in the last few decades, citizens and elected officials have fallen out of practice of disagreeing with each other effectively although disagreement is essential for democratic processes that create better results.

What seems clear is that people in Washington would benefit from more intentionality in developing personal and professional skills – and from using clear language – that we need to “disagree better” in public. This topic highlights how we engage with each other to develop more effective public policy and implementation strategies.



Synthesis of Ideas: The groups talked about defining a “good argument” – ones that allow people to:

- 1) State their distinct points of view, summarizing the other perspectives while articulating why they believe theirs is superior;



In the discussions themselves, we recognized and experienced that people have different physical, emotional, and psychological experiences of disagreement. Some of us lean in. Some of us immediately feel the need to flee or shut down. This reality is influenced by experience, identity, and cultural backgrounds.

Yet, it is essential to overcome the discomfort, recognizing that disagreement isn't always dangerous and that it is often essential to the fundamentals of democracy.

In the conversations, we uncovered that there are some sticky issues in trying to learn how to disagree better across the political divide. These felt fundamental and based on different values and worldviews. In particular:

What is the role of personal identity in shaping the terms of debate? What is one's responsibility for addressing impact on another, or focusing only on intent during heated discussions? What are legitimate assertions of harm during public discussions?

In the discussion, we acknowledged that our different values on these matters often leads to breakdown in willingness to engage or development of understanding that can move us forward.

Action Plan:

In this round, the group considered the points made above. We realize that this is a personal and professional



practice. Individuals need opportunities for self-assessment (to understand more consciously how they respond to public disagreements), training and resources, and ongoing reminders about the importance of this practice to the health of democracy.

The conversation raised some provocative ideas. How could we create a campaign, something that could be used by groups, shared by social networks?

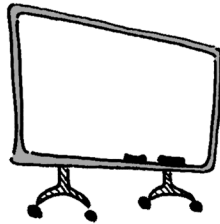
- *Develop and share tools, encourage practice and reflection.*
- *Look at the curriculum offered on the NGA website and other sources.*
- *Tell stories: What are the problems that are being tackled with more intentionality? Why is it important to disagree better in those cases? What is the reality of the practice and skill needed? What results?*
- *Help people understand that disagreements are essential in a democracy but not all disagreements (those about fundamental values) are productive.*

In this way, we will encourage and support more courageous action in the public domain. The campaign could normalize that there are many diverse people who want to act in this way in public, and that the skills and experiences of people practicing this way will vary.

Celebrating, Promoting and Rewarding Bi-partisan Collaboration

Table Host Name: *Katy Terry*

Participants: *Tracey Carlos, Tom Bugert, Alyssa Patrick, Shelly Farnham, Leatta Dahlhoff, Julie Martin, Jennifer Butte-Dahl, JT Wilcox, Phil Gerson, Cory Struthers, Craig Gannett, Erin Beck, Jeff Gadman, Fred Jarrett, Nikki Torres, Linda Redmon, Penny Sweet, Paul Rucker, Morgan Hickel*



Summary: There are many root causes for why bipartisan collaboration is not happening or being recognized, so it is important to create incentives to foster this work. In this session, we developed many ideas on how to address this, ranging from supporting electeds to form nonpartisan identities to creating more opportunities for electeds to interact with people from the other party (such as developing a bipartisan buddy system or having a meal before a meeting). Throughout, we heard that it is essential to meet in-person to create personal connections, and the opportunities to meet could either be policy driven or aimed to connect on a human level outside of policy.



Synthesis of Ideas: Many good things are already happening at the local and state level, but they may not be talked about because of concerns over receiving a backlash. Social interactions are happening (bipartisan meals, teams for pickleball, golf, karaoke, etc.), as well as joint communications (podcasts, newsletters), and community celebrations. It was noted that these interactions need to be followed by joint work for the social interactions to be meaningful. Some of these efforts require individuals to step out of their party in order to collaborate or celebrate the work of others across the aisle where they agree with a policy.

There are civic resources that have historically played a role in celebrating and promoting bipartisan work, such as unions and the business community. The media and public universities could be venues to showcase bipartisan work, as well. Nonprofit organizations could help in the immediate term (Chambers of Commerce, League of Women Voters, YMCA), though it was noted that some of these legacy organizations do not have the volunteers or influence they once did. This is all the more reason to diversify the organizations promoting bipartisanship (including the Hispanic Chamber and Center for Latino Leadership). Finally, in the long term, public education is central to instilling a sense of the value of bipartisan work, and there are good models currently being used in Washington state, including mock trials and elections run by the YMCA and the mock city council for 2nd graders done by the City of Kirkland, that could be broadened in scale.

Action Plan:

Many people and organizations could work on fostering and rewarding bipartisanship. It will take a concerted effort to make visible the good work that is going on to promote civility among elected officials:



- *In some communities, the City Council has weekly meals together and shows up jointly to events (parades, etc.) to build relationships and create a public identity as one body. Other local jurisdictions could follow the lead.*
- *Local Chambers of Commerce have and could once again provide a nonpartisan forum, and provide a source of stability.*
- *Nonprofit organizations could track and highlight bipartisan efforts (through an award, newsletter, etc., in order to tell the story), and support efforts by members of both parties when they do bipartisan work. This support can make up for votes lost by a politician's own party when they take a bipartisan stand.*
- *Politicians could pledge to endorse someone from another party, or even just attend their fundraiser to learn more.*

- *Individuals could make a pledge to support bipartisan collaborators. They can encourage people who are known for who they are - not for their politics - to run for office.*
- *The state legislature could repeal the 10 meal restriction/reporting rule or make an exception for bipartisan meals in order to encourage more interactions between individuals in both parties.*
- *Finally, a bipartisan buddy system could be formed. One model would require electeds to talk with their "buddy" from the other party before a vote, to understand what they are each for or against in a bill and why. This model could also incorporate what one city council already does, where each person paraphrases back the reasons they heard the other person is for or against a bill.*

While there are many root causes for why bipartisan collaboration isn't happening and/or being rewarded, it then becomes important to develop a countervailing force.

Strengthen Local News by Creating New, Credible Local/Regional/State Nonprofit Sites

Table Host Name: *Maria Denny*

Participants: *Carlos Jimenez, Angie Hinojos, Kiana Scott,*

My-Linh Thai, Christopher

Tounsel, Camille Gipaya,

Kate Dexter, Josiah Johnson, Teresa Wippel,

Neal Black, James Rolph



Summary: We started by identifying the importance of local news and the current problems facing it. Problems facing local news outlets include: Unstable revenue; breadth/reliability of distribution; reliability and consistency of reporting; low pay for news staff; news deserts (surprisingly even in suburban settings, not just rural).

We also discussed the importance of local news platforms (historically newspapers) for local elected officials. They use them to disseminate information to their constituents regarding basic government proceedings/decisions, hold themselves accountable, and create a cohesive community (via stories on sports, local interest, etc.). Additionally, having a reporter at every council meeting also improves civic discourse and the quality of decision making. Increasingly, the local government often has to fill in the gaps to inform the public when there is no local paper.



Synthesis of Ideas: Given the importance of local news, there are solutions that can be developed: state funding, utilizing higher-ed institutions, internships, collaborative journalism (combining resources sort of like a local AP), or non-profit models. Yet there are

also alternatives to newspapers that can be developed, because communities themselves have ways of sharing information. For instance, the Centro Cultural

Mexicano has found that their community is best served by a bilingual radio show. Libraries (city, county and university) were brought up as good resources for disseminating news. Other organizations do this work well - Rainier Beach Action Coalition, Axios. One issue to grapple with is that these efforts are developing organically, and each community is served by different platforms for consuming news (radio, podcasts, newsletters). These are audience based models (in other words, meeting the needs of the particular community) but we need to have a way to aggregate these specific responses. Perhaps a state database of all media outlets could be developed?

Action Plan:

The group came up with the idea of creating a Center for Cooperative Journalism housed at a public university which could expand on the Fellows program enacted during the last legislative session.



This center can provide integration for community-based journalism and support collaboration among journalists. This could be a type of local AP service. The Center could also be an incubator for different news platforms (radio, podcasts, etc.) to serve a diversity of communities (including non-English speaking communities). We imagine a blended funding model, including state and private investments. Cities could be encouraged to also invest. Next steps would be to find legislative leaders committed to this idea.

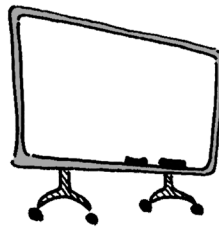
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Legislative Action to Strengthen Local News Ecosystem

Table Host Name: James Rolph

Participants: Mark Smith,
Joe Nguyen, Kevin Ballard,
Jeff Gadman, Teresa Wippel,
Matthew Lundh



Summary: In round one we discussed incentives for journalists and spent most of the time on credentialing for reporters for press conferences. There was frustration at the table over who and how folks get press credentials in a post-print world where not all talented journalists are part of institutions and not all institutions conduct ethical journalism. Some journalists are not permitted in some elected officials press conferences though other officials find them worthwhile to speak with. This raises a question of what objective standards can be applied. There was no consensus on what factors should lead to credentialing. Some important pieces include tenure, intent, ownership of a small business as it relates to having 'skin in the game', size of audience, and reach. We all agreed that careless misquoting or similar betrayals are a strong reason to pull or withhold credentials. Calls for violence also were listed as a reason to withhold.



Synthesis of Ideas:

The group brainstormed improved criteria for credentialing:

- Track record with recognized history of journalism.
- They have an ethics code (Society of Professional Journalists or similar).
- They have an accessible 'About' page listing their leadership and giving insight into their history and mission as an organization. Includes code of conduct.
- They have consistent standards of reporting and stick to them.

The discussion shifted here from credentialing to Public Notice Contract:

- Participants worried that some papers with the contracts are incentivized to kid-glove politicians with their reporting to not put the contract at risk.
- Others noted that because the public notice orgs must be in print and have been in business for over a year there are significant bars to full competitiveness.

We then discussed how to work on direct subsidies for journalism without implying state meddling:

- *Voucher system: Seattle has freedom vouchers for elections. Could a similar system be used to create a list of non-profit options for public subsidy? A wild idea, but definitely outside the box.*
- *Collaborative methods: Organizations sharing resources for reporting like the AP does. We discussed the possibility of a state level organization that did similar resource sharing to the AP. This could include both reporting and reporters with perhaps a shared pool or resources managed by academic institutions.*

We finally discussed journalism education as an important component of civics education. This would include not just training in news literacy - though that is critical - but the literal teaching of how to do journalism and report on a community. This should include ethics, process, value and emphasize journalism as a vocation as well as a job.

Action Plan:

Our group joined the other journalism group (see page 13). The synthesis of the state-level AP or collective resource organization for local journalism represents the result of our conversations. Note that the collective journalism model would also offer tools to handle the credentialing questions raised in this group.



We all agreed that careless misquoting or similar betrayals are a strong reason to pull or withhold credentials. Calls for violence also were listed as a reason to withhold.

Deepening Civic Understanding and Engagement among Adults: Building a new chapter for TVW

Table Host Name: *Corey Paulson*

Participants: *Claire Wilson, Kristine Reeves, Linda Redmon, Paul Rucker, Rubén Betancourt Chongsun Abbott, Jeanne Rolph*



Summary: TVW is a state resource that provides video documentation of government activity. But many people in Washington are unaware of the channel and the transparency to the government that it provides. This is particularly true for people who aren't born in Washington and aren't exposed during their early years of education.

In the last few decades, there has been a decrease in understanding of the importance of civics and government operation, so fewer people want the type of access that TVW provides. But the organization is focused on developing a new series of programs and approaches to engage people more directly. This session explored those ideas with a diverse array of participants.



Synthesis of Ideas: TVW should find ways to tap into the agenda/issues that people are passionate about, ensure the material is accessible to the community, focusing on what that community needs with an emphasis on equity. New products – such as game play – can encourage deeper engagement.

To engage in policy issues, the public needs to have a variety of information about a topic (we discussed police funding and police pursuit bill as an illustration). Programming could explain the roles of each

branch of government in addressing particular issues as a way of helping people to understand the operation of this complex democratic, federalist system.

Partner with local governments and municipalities who are engaging in adult civic education. Highlight their work on TVW and link to statewide legislative action.

TVW has a potentially important role in providing those resources and developing understanding so that people could engage on a policy level.

Action Plan:

- *Partner with local governments and municipalities who are engaging in adult civic education. Highlight their work on TVW and link to statewide legislative action.*



- *Engage with issues - don't shy away from controversial issues as that brings people's interests to the table, and show, through legislation, the operation of the administrative and judicial branches, how the government works. In these accounts, highlight areas for advocacy and community engagement.*

- *Summarize bills/hearings/sessions for the public so they don't have to watch it all (time is a factor for most people).*

- *Utilize other media outlets, especially local ones, to partner.*

Aligning Social Media with Civic Health

Table Host Name: Carol Vipperman

Participants: Participant's names

were not recorded.



Summary: There was a lengthy discussion of the problem: how social media algorithms support what the individual wants to believe in, how people can post anonymously, and it is so easy to spread information, true or not, and it can't be taken back. People agreed that there is a need for individuals to take responsibility to check the sources and accuracy of the news they consume, and that social media platforms need to be accountable for what's on their sites.



Synthesis of Ideas: There were many suggested actions including these focused on the platforms:

- Focus on enforcing social media platforms to provide more oversight on disinformation.

- End immunity for social media platforms under USC S231.
- Look at EU laws on social media protections.
- Follow Canada's lead to support local news by making social media pay to distribute news/articles.
- There was acknowledgment that social media isn't all negative. They do good as well.

Action Plan:

To be pragmatic, much of our attention in this round focused on what we, as individual users, can do:

- Don't use social media for news - fact check.
- Focus education about bias starting in K-12 instead of college or high school students.



Make this a requirement for graduation.

- Conduct a public campaign incentivizing people to care about media literacy - use co-generational efforts - that don't segment youth and adults.
- Provide disinformation/misinformation trainings as part of user agreements.

People agreed that there is a need for individuals to take responsibility to check the sources and accuracy of the news they consume, and that social media platforms need to be accountable for what's on their sites.

- Oldest form of education is stories. Have education about disinformation sprinkled into movies and TV.
- Create influencers for civic health.
- Create a platform to promote civic health.
- Support local news sources.
- Grow TVW's app and social media.

As one participant said, "Social media platforms are here to stay, the question is how to use them for public good."

Local Efforts that Build Relationships and Civic Capacity

Table Host Name: *Deanna Dawson*

Participants: *Kayla DeMonte,*

Amy Cast, Karen Crowley,

Amy Howard, Matthew Lundh

Angie Hinojos, Chris Stearns,

Natalee Singleton, Benita Horn,

Lillian Sherman, Charlotte Shannon

Diane Douglas, Erin Murray, Ed Prince

Jeanne Rolph, Carlos Jimenez, Loni Greninger

Jonathan Chen, Marissa Rathbone, Phil Gerson

Mike Winkler, Gary Baker, JT Wilcox,

Alyssa Patrick, Mike Rosen, Mike Brandstetter

Kate Kruller, Jeff Carter



Summary: In this session we began by articulating the problem: Residents can feel disconnected from each other, from community, and from their government and civic structures. This has been exacerbated by political divides, and by the isolation experienced by all of us in the COVID-19 pandemic. People are not as engaged in civic institutions (groups like Rotary and Lions clubs, League of Women Voters, etc.) as they once were. They don't necessarily understand local government and its relevance. And local government is not always transparent and welcoming. A lack of civility can impact who is willing to serve in local government. A disconnect is felt between generations.

With that in mind, how can local government and local civic structures help residents to re-engage, to build both relationships and civic capacity?

Synthesis of Ideas: To address this problem, we need to meet community where they are, rather than expecting them to come to us. We should go to where community is meeting and engage



with them there, and in a way that is transparent, engaging, and fun! We need to help people understand the role of local government, and why it matters to them. We need to avoid jargon, and have good language access. It helps to host meetings with food to bring people in. There also is power in being personally invited, rather than sending a blast to everyone. Consider child care or stipends to encourage people to attend meetings or serve on committees.

Existing community groups can be engaged to help with outreach and trusted community ambassadors can be found to help make connections. Existing models like National Night Out and associated block parties, weekly waffle breakfasts, etc. are ways for elected officials and city staff to get out in the community and make connections. Having easy ways for people to volunteer in the community (organized days of service) can be another way to build connections. A civic engagement commission/community involvement commission is another promising model, see also "CityLab" (White Salmon: <https://www.whitesalmonwa.gov/bc/page/citylab-board>). There is great interest in this topic - hosting community discussions on civic engagement might itself yield engagement and good ideas. We can learn from existing successful examples in cities, tribes, and other governments.

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Engaging with youth is also a way to engage with the community more broadly. Youth councils or youth members of city councils can help with connections, as can having local officials going out to schools to engage. Some city officials have done mock city council meetings as a way to engage middle and elementary school stu-

dents. Organizing visits to city hall is another promising way to engage kids. Scholarship programs (like the Association of Washington Cities' Center for Quality Communities) can help. City Hall 101s and City Academies are a good way to demystify local government and to build relationships. Cities can also host tours for the community of projects and activities. Representation matters. We need to mentor and build a bench, and we need to be intentional about being inclusive as we do so.

As noted in other small group topics, it is important to encourage local officials to partner with and build relationships with those across the political aisle. How can we provide support to those who are willing to "cross party lines" and/or compromise? We need to better resource civic engagement. If it is important to us, we need to fund it.

Additionally, it is important to build relationships between local government and local media (and do media training), and build relationships between local governments (cities and school boards, junior taxing districts).

Overall, relationships take time. Engagement cannot be merely transactional to be successful. And it starts with us!

Action Plan:

- *Create a civic engagement guide for local officials highlighting best practices.*
- *Train local officials on how to disagree better, and how to work with people across the political spectrum.*
- *Provide additional resources to prioritize civic engagement.*





Supporting Civility on County Councils and Commissions

Table Host Name: *Nathan Loutsis*

Participants: *Joan Souders, Larry Phillips, Nate Nehring, Jared Mead*



Summary: One of the points discussed was the need for communication between colleagues in these roles. Some participants expressed that the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) creates obstacles in fostering personal relationships with coworkers outside of an official setting. All group participants expressed strong support for promoting informal conversations and personal relationships and getting to know one another outside of a professional setting, which they believed was critical for fostering council/commission teamwork, participation, and productive engagement, while still understanding the need for transparency and connection with the public. The act of listening to one another was similarly emphasized during this conversation and its critical role in promoting civility.

Another point of popularity was the role of social media in promoting incivility. Participants viewed social media as a weapon for unfiltered speech and personal attacks that cause instability and

incivility on councils and commissions. One commenter stated, “Stability promotes civility.” Participants also expressed the observation that social media acts as an echo chamber for the glorification of personal opinions that hurt the ability to work with others to find alternatives and compromise on legislation.

Partisanship was another area of concern for participants. Party labels on councils and commissions have become indicators for colleagues and the public that immediately inform opinion and judgment, leading to hostility and distrust. There was also a sentiment among participants that there is an environment of political pressure among constituents to act in a partisan way, pursuing partisan goals, and immediately aligning against any position a colleague of a different party may propose.

One final comment from one participant was that unrealistic expectations are held by the public and colleagues on councils and commissions about one another. They stressed the fact that there is a lack of patience and understanding with public officials, who often do not know everything.

Synthesis of Ideas: There were a number of trends that emerged. One concept was communication, both internally on council and commissions and with the public. Increased communication, whether formal or informal, helps reduce barriers and encourage listening



between parties, as well as creating a consistent level of understanding.

Another common concept was regulation. Regulation, both formal and informal, is critical for governing discourse between members on and offline, and ensuring ethical behavior and practices. Doing this prevents growing tension and distrust that affect collaboration. A third concept was transparency. Transparency between both colleagues and the public is critical, for reducing surprises and tensions in a way that promotes cooperation and civility.

A fourth concept was participation. Having diverse participation that involves the public in commissions is a great way to promote civility among constituents and affected groups. Active and equal participation of council or commission members in projects, subcommittees, and other opportunities helps promote transparency and cooperation that can allow for the building blocks of civility. A fifth – and maybe most important – concept was respect. Promoting respect with partisan entities, the public, and colleagues is essential before civility can be achieved. Increasing an environment of general tolerance and support, while identifying the merits of different arguments allows for civility to emerge.

Action Plan:

There were a number of ideas for the trends identified, which included the use of internal social contracts and standardized codes of ethics to address regulation and respect, adhering to Open Meetings rules and encouraging direct dialogue with the community in order to increase communication and transparency with the public, the use of internal council/commission subcommittees and public advisory committees to encourage participation, and increasing the frequency and presence of communication between colleagues/staff and public groups to promote communication and respect.





State Level Political Reforms to Support Civic Health

Table Host Name: AK Sterling
Participants: Alicia Rule, Betsy Wilkerson, Sawyer Tuttle, Manny Santiago, Denny Heck, Annette Cleveland, Mia Gregerson, Mary Fosse, Elizabeth Doll, Lauren Simonds, Tom Bugert



Summary: State level political reforms can support many of the changes discussed in other small group conversations. But this work needs to be reinforced by the local initiatives and change discussed by other groups.

Synthesis of Ideas:

- Rank choice voting could be a way to engage.
- How can we replicate this structure in other aspects of community?
- Agency will increase voting.
- Incentivize competition.
- Cross-partisan working groups (urban/rural).
- Civic discourse needs to start in regular, every-day gatherings.
- Create meeting agreements.
- Code of ethics post-Me Too movement.
- Start young & teach basics in how to build relationships & community. This was lost during Covid.
- Get out of disparity narrative.
- Humanize democracy.



Action Plan:

- *Community engagement and building trust in community are necessary.*
- *We are missing community centers that bring people together to discuss issues (i.e. dispute resolution centers). We need more “third places” where people can engage across divides.*
- *We need to find and invest in trusted messengers in community & technical colleges, non-government organizations, and community centers.*
- *Fund community engagement on the community/neighborhood level.*
- *Public participation grants.*
- *Building physical space for gathering.*
- *Fund Community Director role to engage across communities on a local level.*
- *Leadership training for neighborhood leaders (Pomegranate Center).*
- *Stipends for people with lived experiences to engage in conversation.*
- *Politically balanced commissions to promote respect across communities.*
- *Increase state-wide ballot initiative filing fees to support.*
- *Engage younger people.*
- *Launch civic engagement education.*
- *Create guidelines for social media usage to deter misinformation.*
- *Utilize the WA Consumer Protection Department.*
- *The Foley Institute at WSU could be a resource.*



We are missing community centers that bring people together to discuss issues. We need more “third places” where people can engage across divides.



Bolstering Civic Health in School Boards

Table Host Name: *Kevin Harris*

Participants: *Sandy Hayes, Mike Brandstetter, Liza Ramkin, Kevin Ballard, Julie Martin, Amy Cast, Arlista Holman, Brad Douglass*



Synthesis of Ideas:

- *Develop consensus-based understanding of roles/responsibilities of superintendent and school board (although dictated in state law, it's not publicly understood).*
- *Level-setting this may help tamper down mis/dis-information related to politically-motivated incivility during school board meetings, along with facilitated listening sessions.*
- *Start to build relationships between the superintendent and the public as well as between the school board, teachers, and parents.*
- *Make superintendents more accessible and responsive to parents, since they currently default to school board members to complain.*
- *Create effective feedback loops between superintendent, school board, teachers, and parents. Demonstrate effective feedback loops, as board behavior ends up being reflected in the classroom.*
- *Model good behavior. This group was unsure of how to deal with the limitations of Open Public Meetings Act, and how it can crush deliberative process.*

Summary: School Boards often experience internal friction with Superintendents and external friction from the public's political positions and grandstanding. This workgroup suggested going back to the root cause, and asking 'why' and 'what' questions: Why does public education matter? What is its core purpose (vocational indoctrination, horizontal/critical thinking skills, college prep)?

Our current K-12 education model is based on the industrial revolution strategy of "sit and get." This is obsolete and needs to transform for the 21st century to consider that 60% of current jobs will no longer exist in the future.

Incivility at school board meetings is often rooted in differing perceptions of how and whether to measure student achievement. The group referenced that several state research projects show that school board civility leads to better student achievement outcomes. The group discussed the need to address many reasons for parental disengagement that create incivility.

Barriers:

- 1) *school board members are unpaid and investment of time in these activities is substantial;*
- 2) *school districts/boards do not have funding for communications professionals which could help strength-*

en relationships between stakeholders, superintendents, parents, children, and school boards.

Action Plan:

Most school boards have a positive relationship with their Superintendent. Other superintendents have developed “allied” vs “adversarial” relationships with board members, creating a “get three in your camp” mentality, which breeds incivility.



Modeling good behavior works! It takes time to weed out the uncivil board members, but eventually a consensus-mindset of agreed-to “good behavior” takes hold and becomes part of the group culture. Boards need to collectively determine what those rules of good behavior look like, and how the Board President should appropriately intervene at times, when necessary. Some school districts start with a simple ‘be kind and respectful’ rule, and have on-boarding processes that emphasize what good behavior looks like. This helps to build collaborative muscle.

We need to recognize that positive stories about organizational development don’t make it into the press - and that journalism focuses on the sensational: the fights between school boards, the public, superintendents, etc. As discussed by other groups at this Summit, working with local journalism is essential to explore positive stories that may appeal to beat reporters interested in educational reform efforts.

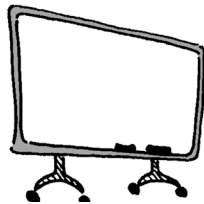
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K-12 Civic Education Reform and Civic Health

Table Host Name: *Jannat Musawi*

Participants: *Participant's names were not recorded.*



Summary: During Round 1, we discussed the problems that we are facing with K-12 Civic Education Reform, then we worked to come up with some solutions for said problems. Problems that were identified include: Biases and partisanship in teachers' materials and methods; civic education is not offered until high school; many adults have a lack of education on international history and issues; teachers fear controversy and avoid it; when students don't get the opportunity to discuss and engage in class, they rely on social media; some under-informed teachers are teaching the material.

Solutions that were identified include: teaching students to discuss matters in a healthy way, so that they can approach controversial issues maturely; starting civic education in elementary school; engaging students in their education; including context when teaching civics; supporting and empowering teachers and educators rather than blaming them; providing more education about local governments and how they work; and incorporating experiential learning.



Synthesis of Ideas: We focused our ideas more on experiential learning and exposure to civics in the community. We discussed having students' families involve them in civic activities and having students witness civic processes in real life so that they may understand them more.

We also discussed sourcing and teaching students to find reliable and unbiased resources rather than just drilling information into them and expecting memorization. Due to today's technologies and advancements, individuals can get any information with a Google search. Therefore, memorization is no longer beneficial, but helping students

know what information they get online is to be trusted, is what will help them in the future.

Action Plan:

In order to implement our ideas, we discussed the following action plan:



- *Start civic education in elementary school (including mock trials) and progressively add to it.*
- *Teach students to find reliable sources rather than to memorize.*
- *Ensure that the materials taught are engaging and not outdated or biased.*
- *Keep special education in mind.*
- *Encourage healthy debates and discussions so students learn to have mature conversations about serious and controversial issues.*
- *Encourage questions about politics. Organize class visits from elected officials (local and state level).*
- *Include more relevant and contextualized information. Rather than speaking about everything in a historical sense only, it is important to also connect it to modern-day issues and to show its importance.*
- *Provide more funding to programs that already exist to encourage civic education and engagement.*

Of note, some people said that teachers should have the freedom to create their curricula and decide what to teach, while others said that teachers should have more specific state standards and school district model curricula about what they should teach. We did not reach a consensus regarding this.

Due to today's technologies and advancements, individuals can get any information with a Google search. Therefore, memorization is no longer beneficial, but helping students know what information they get online is to be trusted, is what will help them in the future.

Develop Programs to Connect Elected Officials to K-12 Teachers and Classrooms

Table Host Name: *Maura Sullivan*

Participants: *Gaby Diamond,*

Esther Himmelfarb,

Rathi Sudhakara, Chris Reykdal,

Chongsun Abbott, Luckisha Phillips, Gabi Rico,

Amy Howard, Rhonda Lewis, Sue-Ann Hohimer,

Karen Crowley, Sara Betnel, Roger Neal



Summary: By creating connections between students and our political system, students can understand the system better and see themselves as future civic leaders. We want students to feel empowered and believe they can positively impact society, to feel a sense of belonging in our system, to have the skills needed to be effective leaders, and to be informed citizens. Adults should take responsibility for what's in their realm, build trust, listen, and engage, in order to encourage a shared sense of responsibility for our community. Students should be informed about how our political system works, how policies affect them and others, and how to advocate for change. We hope students feel that there are leaders working on behalf of the people, and that their voices matter.

There should be clarity about the purpose of the elected officials' visit, and visits should respond to students' needs. It would be helpful to connect the learning to how policy directly impacts students and their families

Creating these connections should be seen as the responsibility of elected officials and geared toward benefiting the students (not just a photo op!). It's important to create a pathway for students toward civic leadership, while understanding that being an elected

official may not be a full-time paid job. Some roles are part-time (state legislators), minimally paid, or unpaid. Making connections between school district boards and other local elected government positions is important. We want to demystify public policy - it can be an intimidating process!

Synthesis of ideas: Elected officials (broadly defined, including tribal government leaders – not just legislators or city council members) should be willing to come into classrooms and engage with students. They can explain the political process and their roles to the students. And the initiative should help them know about and use engaging and age-appropriate methods to connect with students. Overall, it is more accessible if the officials come to the schools, but students also should be able to visit the places of power and know they belong there (field trips!).



Students should be encouraged to actively shape the policy agenda. One way might be to utilize youth advisory committees or support student councils in reporting to city councils. Leaders and organizers should include questions from students in debates, interviews, etc.

There should be clarity about the purpose of the elected officials' visit, and visits should respond to students' needs. It would be helpful to connect the learning to how policy directly impacts students and their families (e.g. taxes go to support education). Explain why government and the political system is relevant for the students, and why students should aspire to be an elected official. Make it fun and engaging! For example, have a mock city council meeting with actual council member participation.

And new things could emerge from this engagement, such as student internships and mentoring opportunities. Perhaps schools could offer community service credit for students that volunteer in government?



Action Plan:

- For partisan positions, bring a Republican and a Democrat into the classroom to discuss a topic in order

to represent both sides. For non-partisan positions, schools could bring in just one person (e.g. judges).

- Schools could host events to connect youth with elected officials, such as Lunch with the City Council or Legislators Day; programming could be formal or informal.*
- Develop a centralized place to connect elected officials with schools and teachers, and for related civics education resources.*
- Listen to youth and amplify the youth voice! What do they want and need? Involve them! Students need to be at the table for their own sakes and for better policies.*