Nourishing Communities

A PUBLIC AGENDA
CHOICEWORK GUIDE

FOR COMMUNITY SUMMIT DIALOGUES IN
NORTH AND EAST KING COUNTY, WA

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A Note on Public Agenda’s Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, as well as individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to fit your situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways--they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people will mix and match different perspectives, or add to them with related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation. For instance, for a guide on an education topic, a few well-chosen facts about local schools might be a useful adjunct to the guide if you are using it in a group setting.

Public Agenda’s Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides as discussion starters for community conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are the first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda’s approach to community conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, “beyond the usual suspects”
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda’s approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website http://www.publicagenda.org and click on “Public Engagement.”

Public Agenda Choicework Guides are provided free of charge. We encourage you to make and distribute as many copies as you like as long as it is for noncommercial or educational use only, and so long as the material is not altered and the Public Agenda copyright notice is maintained.
Using the guide in small group dialogues

The discussion guide that follows is given to each participant and moderator in a small group dialogue. The group reads through the full Choicework together and then participants are asked to indicate, through a show of hands, which of the approaches he or she believes will make the greatest impact on the issue at hand – in this case, hunger in north and east King County, Washington.

Note that the “show of hands” is only meant as a starting point for conversation. People are not committing to a single solution but simply indicating which approach appears at first glance to show the most promise. The dialogue begins by asking people why they lean the way they do, after which people are free to start combining ideas, adding new ones, etc. Participants are led through a moderated discussion about their choices and the values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs embedded in each approach.

After discussing the choices on the following pages, the moderator and participants may wish to consider and talk through the questions outlined below for the purposes of (1) summarizing the conversation and (2) bridging from dialogue into action.

(1) Summarizing a Choicework Conversation
These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework dialogue prior to considering more action-oriented questions:

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?

2. What were our important areas of disagreement or concern—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?

3. What are the questions that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about in order to address this issue effectively?

(2) Bridging from Dialogue to Action
These questions can help you move from deliberation and dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue:

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

   Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today’s conversation?

3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today’s conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?
In Washington State and in King County, we can’t always see the people around us who are facing poverty or struggling to put food on their tables. The facts show, however, that there are many in our communities and neighborhoods who deal with these challenges daily, and children and the elderly are among the most vulnerable:

- A survey of seniors living in low-income housing in Seattle found that 100% of participants could not afford to eat balanced meals and had to cut the size of their meals, or skip meals entirely, due to lack of money for food.
- In 2009, about 20,000 children were living at or near the poverty line within north and east King County. Standing side-by-side, these children would form a continuous line from the King County/Snohomish line to Sea-Tac Airport.
- An average of 10,000 King County residents applies for Basic Food (i.e., food stamps) each month in addition to the nearly 1 in 20 King County residents that are already enrolled in the Basic Food Program.
- More than 45% of the individuals using a food bank, meal program, or shelter in Western Washington have some form of post-secondary education.
- Only 9% of the people served by Food Lifeline are homeless and over 21% own their own homes.

For decades, human service providers and community-based organizations have been working hard to meet these challenges. While these organizations have a strong record of connecting many people to food and other assistance, it is clear that more needs to be done. In fact, human service providers face limitations that restrict the amount of help they can provide. For example, funders place eligibility requirements so that only people who fall under a certain poverty level can receive services, excluding large groups of people in need in our communities who cannot qualify for services. Also, some organizations can serve only a defined population because their organizational missions are very specific. Finally, organizations are only able to serve the people who seek their help, leaving out those who face barriers to seeking assistance.

There are no easy answers to the challenge of ending hunger in north and east King County, but together we can come up with ideas about what we can do within our neighborhoods and communities to fill the gaps in food and nourishment. To help you and your neighbors think and talk about this topic, this guide describes several approaches to working together as a community to address the problem.

As we consider our options, we should keep in mind that we cannot do everything at once and will have to set priorities. Which of these options makes the most sense to you and why? What other ideas, that are not included here, should we consider when thinking about solutions to hunger in our community?

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Approach A: Support community-based organizations to provide food to hungry residents

*Individuals and communities should focus on working differently with local organizations to help them expand their work and feed more people.*

There are many organizations – both public and private – that help hungry people receive the services they need. As a community we can help these organizations expand the reach of their work and overcome the limits of eligibility requirements. There are already many things that these existing organizations know how to do well, and donating money is important to keep those activities going. However, there are also other ways that we can support these organizations and help fill gaps in the services they provide.

Therefore, to provide better nourishment for our community we should do things like:

- Volunteer needed knowledge and skills, such as improving the marketing, publicity and outreach of non-profit organizations, food banks and other resources that are already acting as a source of food.
- Think carefully about the *kind* of food we donate, so that we can make sure that people are receiving not just calories but also nutrition.
- Raise local funds that offset the federal dollars that place restrictions on who qualifies for services, so everyone who needs help gets it.

People who like this approach might say,

“*Within our communities and networks we have skills and resources to support organizations so their programs can grow and help more people. That’s the most efficient way to make a difference.*”

But others might say,

“*Our communities’ existing programs are spread too thin and cannot take on the whole problem even with more money and more food; we need a new way of working together to prevent the problem in the first place.*”
Approach B: Prevent Hunger by Helping Residents Become more Self-Sufficient

Community-driven efforts to improve the skills and knowledge of its residents offer the best chance of eliminating the conditions that lead to hunger.

We need to do a better job of helping our neighbors gain skills that can prevent hunger now and in the future. Existing organizations provide a jump start during hard times, but no one wants to feel dependent on programs like these forever and there are still many others who do not qualify for services to begin with. We should help our neighbors get back on their feet by connecting them to job and life-skills development opportunities so they have a chance to improve their situations.

Therefore, to provide better nourishment for our community we should do things like:

- Start or strengthen youth mentorship programs in which retired community members can share their expertise and wisdom with younger generations.
- Participate in time banks in which you provide a special skill or service and receive a skill or service in return. Time banks offer an opportunity to build off of the life skills and capacities among us.
- Advocate for and support local workforce development that focuses on 21st century job creation by working with businesses and policymakers in our communities.

People who like this approach might say,

“As the old saying goes, ‘Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.’ We should concentrate our efforts on making this saying a reality.”

But others might say,

“Job skills and opportunities are critical, but these are more long-term solutions; what we need are solutions that can begin to fill the gaps in nourishment immediately.”
Approach C: Prevent or Ameliorate Hunger through Collective Action that Picks up where Current Programs Fall Short

Neighbors and networks should band together to create systems that strengthen and enlarge the local food supply for those in need.

There will always be people in need who fall through the cracks or face barriers to seeking assistance. In order to make sure that everyone is getting the nourishment they need, we should focus our efforts on identifying the gaps and filling them ourselves in creative ways. As individuals and communities we can use our networks and skills to weave a strong net so that no one falls through the gaps.

Therefore, to provide better nourishment for our community we should do things like:

- Increase our participation in the growing urban agriculture movement by building free and subsidized community gardens, distributing tools and information to families who want to grow their own food, or planting extras row of food in our gardens for others who cannot grow their own.
- Host community potlucks and other types of gatherings that bring people together to share food and a helping hand.
- Encourage faith communities, schools, and other networks to organize food-drives, soup kitchens and meal delivery programs for children and the elderly or to provide food for children when school supports are not available.

People who like this approach might say,

“Locally-driven solutions fill gaps in services and provide a personal way for everyone to contribute to nourishing our fellow community members.”

But others might say,

“This approach requires tremendous energy and robust participation. How likely is it that we can sustain this approach for the long-term?”
Approaches in Brief

**Approach A: Support community-based organizations to provide food to hungry residents**

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- Think carefully about the *kind* of food we donate, so that we can make sure that people are receiving not just calories but also nutrition.

- Raise local funds that offset the federal dollars that place restrictions on who qualifies for services, so everyone who needs help gets it.

**Approach B: Prevent Hunger by Helping Residents Become more Self-Sufficient**

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To provide better nourishment to our community we should do things like:

- Start or strengthen youth mentorship programs in which retired community members can share their expertise and wisdom with younger generations.

- Participate in time banks, which offer opportunities to build off of the life skills and capacities among us.

- Advocate for and support local workforce development that focuses on 21st century job creation.

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