NAVY ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CENTER

'GUIDE TO PUBLIC MEETINGS'

ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMS DIRECTORATE

FOREWORD

THE PUBLIC HAS A RIGHT TO KNOW

It's a fact! The public's demand for information about public health, the environment and government affairs continues to strengthen across the United States and around the world. A number of legislative initiatives are now in place to encourage public involvement on issues affecting public health and the environment including Community Right-to-Know, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), Superfund and others. Americans at home and abroad have become acutely aware of their rights and responsibilities to 'speak up' and ask questions about potential risks to health, community and the environment.

As public involvement increases, so does your responsibility as a Navy or Marine Corps scientist, engineer, health expert or other technical professional to share complex or controversial information with community members, local government representatives, community boards and other stakeholder groups. **The manner in which you share this information can have a major impact on your project or program success. The best way to ensure success is by proactively sharing information with your stakeholders through effective communication channels using good risk communication skills.**

Risk Communication is a science-based approach to communicating sensitive, controversial or technical information to a concerned audience. Its theories are founded in the knowledge that 'experts' simply telling the public there is 'no cause for concern' is no longer an acceptable approach to communicating risk in 'high-concern, low trust' situations. **One of the most important vehicles for communicating effectively and building relationships in the community is the public meeting.** Hosting public meetings based on two-way communication and designed to meet the needs of the organization, public and other stakeholders can be a very effective component of a good risk communication plan.

RISK COMMUNICATION DEFINED
An interactive process or exchange of information and opinions amongst interested parties or stakeholders, concerning a risk, potential risks, or perceived risk to human health, safety or the environment.

The public health professionals at the Navy Environmental Health Center (NEHC) have been assisting Navy and Marine Corps installations with risk communication and community involvement efforts since 1991. A large part of this assistance has been providing guidance and support during the planning and execution of public meetings. Lessons learned in numerous public meetings over the past decade have been incorporated into this guide to provide a framework to help you host an effective public meeting. It is based both on our extensive experience at NEHC as well as published Risk Communication literature and research. For more detailed information on Risk Communication see the Navy Environmental Health Center Risk Communication Primer and other resources on the NEHC website at **www-nehc.med.navy.mil**.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

Table of Contents

Public Meeting Formats 1

Public Information Session 2

Meeting Plans And Logistics 3

Communication Tools 9

Key Points 16

PUBLIC MEETING FORMATS

There are several different types of public meetings – public availability session, town hall meeting, information session, poster session and open house. The types of meetings differ primarily in their format – but the basic premise is consistent: to open up lines of communication to increase knowledge and understanding, enhance trust and credibility, and resolve conflict.

Since the rise of organized protests and public advocacy in the 1960s, government agencies have traditionally used the 'town hall meeting' format when providing information to the public. In the traditional town hall set-up, government representatives and hired experts sit or stand at a head table, facing an audience of concerned citizens who are seated in rows of chairs. Although this format is designed to provide information to the people, it has had limited success. When concern is high and trust is low, this format can be perceived as 'us against them' and may lead to adversarial, even hostile behavior.

The potential 'us against them' scenario is just one of the possible drawbacks to a town hall meeting. For example, traditional town hall public meetings can limit public participation because only a limited number of questions can be addressed in a reasonable amount of time. In addition, some audience members may not be comfortable asking questions or expressing opinions in front of a large audience, especially if their viewpoint is in opposition to those expressed by more outspoken audience members.

Drawbacks to a Town Hall Meeting:

- Limits amount of information
- Encourages unproductive/negative group dynamics
- Limits participation
- Forces presenter to be a public speaker
- Limits expression of diverse viewpoints
- Fails to meet individual needs

While the formal town hall meeting still has a place in public communication, current research and years of experience at NEHC with many Navy and Marine corps installations have revealed far more effective ways to engage in public dialogue concerning environmental, health and safety issues. One way is the use of a more open format, often referred to as an Open House, Public Information or Public Availability Session.

At NEHC we recommend using the Public Information Session format anytime you are dealing with issues that have the potential to cause high concern or distrust within the public or other stakeholder groups. If, for site specific reasons, your organization has decided to hold a town hall-style meeting in spite of this recommendation, please keep in mind that the two formats can be used together in one meeting. This combination type meeting will often include an Information Session portion before and/or after a formal town hall style presentation. Although this is not the meeting format most recommended by NEHC, it will help alleviate some of the potential problems associated with hosting a traditional town hall meeting.

PUBLIC INFORMATION SESSION

A Public Information Session is typically conducted in an Open House-style format. It is less formal than a town hall meeting, with informational (poster) displays that allow community members to access information at their own pace and encourage one-on-one interaction with the technical experts.

Public Information Sessions...

- Encourage one-on-one communication
- Provide access to consistent information
- Meet individual learning styles
- Allow for community participation
- Minimize confrontations
- Build third-party credibility

The remainder of this guide is dedicated to helping you plan and host an effective Public Information Session using the Open House-style format. The tips and recommendations are based on proven risk communication principles. Some of these principles are mentioned or discussed briefly throughout the guide. Before planning and hosting an information session, it is important to understand these principles in detail.

If you have not received risk communication training, or need a refresher, please review the NEHC Risk Communication Primer before developing materials to present at your information session or selecting your 'subject matter experts' to man your displays. There is much to be considered and understood about message development, messenger selection and preparation before effectively providing information to the public or other concerned audiences. Please contact NEHC for more assistance or more information. NEHC is funded to provide risk communication support for issues concerning the Navy and Marine Corps Installation Restoration Program or Base Realignment and Closure sites.

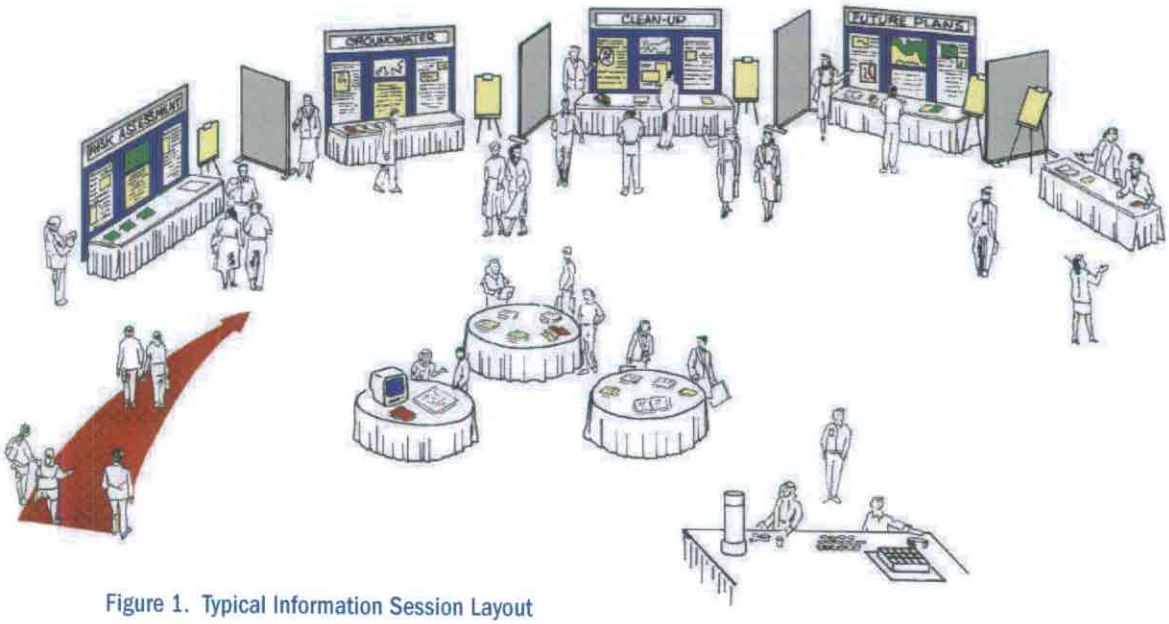


Figure 1. Typical Information Session Layout

MEETING PLANS AND LOGISTICS

Hosting a Public Information Session requires a considerable amount of time and work. Because of this, it is important to first evaluate if this is the best communication tactic for the situation. In some cases, other communication channels such as small group meetings or fact sheets are more appropriate. Attendees will be frustrated and less cooperative if they give up their own time to attend meetings where there is little new or useful information or if the information provided does not address their main concerns and questions. On the other hand, it is important to hold meetings regularly to ensure that stakeholders are aware of the milestones of a particular project.

If you decide to host a Public Information Session, the first step is to prepare a detailed plan. The plan should include the following sections:

1. Meeting objectives (including desired outcomes)
2. Audience assessment (including current, emerging issues and information needs)
3. Information displays – a general description of information needed to meet your organization's objectives and address stakeholders' concerns.
4. Participants (both internal and external and the roles and responsibilities of all)
5. Meeting logistics and advertisement
6. Communication tools
7. Administrative displays and checklists

Section 1: *Meeting Objectives - Why are you holding the meeting?*

Begin by developing a list of your team's objectives for the meeting. Objectives may include: improving communication between residents and project personnel, addressing incorrect information that has been featured in local media, collecting feedback from stakeholders about their concerns regarding work completed to date, conveying new information, updating current project status, and/or meeting regulatory requirements.

Section 2: *Audience Assessment – Who are they and what are their concerns?*

To help determine what information to provide and which groups should be represented at the meeting, begin by assessing the target audience and considering their information needs. Develop a list of information the audience has been given, information they need, and current and emerging issues. If there has been media coverage, review the questions, issues and allegations raised. If possible, include research with focus groups or members of community groups to collect this information first hand. It may be surprising to learn that what your team understands to be a minor concern is the most relevant and central to the stakeholders.

Section 3: *Information Displays – What do you want your stakeholders to learn, AND what do they want to know?*

Open House meetings typically have 4 to 7 information displays; each dedicated to a specific topic or step in a project or investigation. The goal of these displays is to separate and layer information so that people can get an overview of the entire issue and also focus on specific components that interest or concern them personally.

To determine which topics to include, go back to your list of objectives for the meeting. Reconsider the objectives with the audience in mind. Make a list of your main objectives and your stakeholders' main concerns. A good rule of thumb is to start with 3 general lists: a list of the most important things you want the public to know; a list of what the public would most like to know; and a list of what the public would most likely misinterpret unless emphasized and very clearly explained. Use these lists as a starting point to determine which topics need to be presented at the meeting.

It's often helpful to think of telling a story with these displays. At a minimum, the story should answer the following questions:

"Why are we conducting this project or investigation?"
"What is currently happening with the project?", and
"What will happen in the future?"

To answer these questions, there are typically individual displays providing background, current project status or accomplishments, and future work. When regulators or public health agencies are involved, their efforts and responsibilities should be explained in a display(s) as well. In addition, issues involving risks to the environment or human health and safety will often require displays about the chemical(s), illness or activity of concern.

Section 4: *Participants - Who are the best people to share the information?*

Generally, a Public Information Session includes a number of displays from associated organizations and stakeholders. The varied sources of information will help educate your audience and the addition of third-party experts will lend credibility to your meeting.

For example, if the objective of your meeting is to inform the community about an environmental clean-up project, exhibitors might include:

- Local, state and federal regulators such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency;
- Local, state and federal health agencies such as the local and state public health department and the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry (ATSDR);
- Technical experts and scientists who have studied the site and recommended the cleanup action;
- Environmental contractors responsible for the remediation work;
- Specialized government organizations that may assist in the site studies and cleanup (i.e. Naval Facilities Engineering Support Center - NFESC, the Navy Environmental Health Center – NEHC, and the Ordnance Environmental Support Office – OESO);
- Community organizations and advocacy groups.

Your internal planning team should determine which organizations and displays would be appropriate to the subject matter at hand and helpful to the community. Once the list has been approved, you should contact each organization, explain the objectives of your meeting, and invite their participation.

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) – Each information display needs to be manned by appropriate SMEs. For this meeting format to be effective, there should be enough experts at each display to encourage discussion and answer individual questions. Typically, 2 to 3 experts per display will be adequate unless you are expecting a very large turn out for your meeting. It is crucial that these people be seen as both knowledgeable and trustworthy.

In many issues involving risk to the environment or public health and safety, trustworthiness can actually have more impact on the success of your communication efforts than exhibiting detailed knowledge. For this reason, it's very important that SMEs have good risk communication skills and use these skills when interacting with the public at informational displays. To help maintain trust with your local community, NEHC recommends that installations avoid relying too heavily on contractor support to fill the SME role for Navy and Marine Corps displays. It is a common complaint that people want to hear about Navy/Marine Corps issues and efforts from Navy/Marine Corps personnel who are responsible for the project and not from a "hired gun". Contractors play a very important role in many environmental projects, and they can help with public meetings but they typically should not be seen as the primary spokesperson for your organization on an environmental, health or safety issue.

Also, remember that your SMEs are not the only people you need working to make a successful meeting. At a minimum, you will also need greeters, a floating facilitator or "ring leader", a media representative, someone to handle the refreshments and other supply issues, and, possibly, someone to take official comments or questions requiring a response after the meeting. These additional participants are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Persons required to conduct a successful public meeting:

- Project Manager and other Subject Matter Experts
- Greeters
- Floating Facilitators
- Media Representative
- Comment Takers
- Refreshments and Other supplies

Greeters - People are often not familiar with the poster station format. Even if they are familiar with the format, they might feel intimidated by the displays if they don't first understand the layout and where to go for the information they need. This is why greeters are crucial. As the first person that people see at the meeting, the greeter makes the first impression or "sets the tone". Friendly and informative greeters make people feel welcome while at the same time explaining the format of the meeting and directing people where to go to get their questions answered. They can also discourage pile-ups at one display by explaining the flow of information around the room, and encouraging everyone to visit all of the displays in order to make sure they get the whole story.

Floating Facilitator – One of the main advantages of a poster station meeting is one-on-one discussions between stakeholders and SMEs. It's difficult to have these one-on-one talks if there is a large pile-up at one station or when someone gets very angry or upset and the SME feels overwhelmed and can no longer handle the situation. This is when the floating facilitator becomes so important. This should be someone with good general knowledge of the program, good risk communication skills and, preferably, respected by the stakeholders and/or in a position of some authority within the installation. Often times this can be the Commanding Officer or Executive Officer of the installation, the project manager, and/or other Navy or Marine Corps representatives with management responsibility for the project. The floating facilitator can often diffuse an angry member of the public simply by listening to their concerns and addressing them one-on-one in a non-threatening environment.

Media Representative - Handling the media takes specialized training. You need to have your Public Affairs Officer (PAO) or someone else who has experience working with the media available at your meeting to handle requests for interviews. Often, the PAO can also double as a back-up floating facilitator when there are no media inquiries. **Your team needs to work with the PAO and have a plan in place on how to handle the media. The day of the open house is not the time to be appointing media spokespeople!** The spokesperson needs to be well versed in key messages so everyone can stay on the same page. Everyone assigned media responsibilities should also rehearse key messages for consistency. **CONSISTENCY BUILDS CREDIBILITY.** Keep in mind that the PAO will likely accompany the media around the meeting and possibly make a statement, but the Commanding Officer, project manager, or other experts may be called upon to participate in a media interview. This is when your media plan becomes crucial. You must decide in advance who will talk with the media and exactly what they will and will not cover.

Once participants have been determined, you can begin to develop a list of roles and responsibilities of all team members. This will prove to be a useful tool in the planning process and help ensure that all participants are prepared for the session and are familiar and comfortable with their involvement.

A key point to understand is that the open house format was selected to encourage one-on-one discussions and people flow. Everyone needs to stay in their role or position for this to happen. This means the greeters need to stay by the door, the SMEs need to stay at their displays, and the facilitators need to be roaming about and available to help.

When people bring up questions concerning information at another display, all representatives need to understand the importance of directing people to the right area and right person to get their questions answered. Including a description of each person's roles and responsibilities in a package with a layout diagram and predetermined space or table allotted for each participant is a great planning tool. The group should also determine procedures for ensuring that people who have particular questions make it to the appropriate display and SME to have those questions answered. These procedures can also be part of the roles and responsibilities package given to all of the project team members.

Section 5: *Meeting Logistics and Advertisement*

Logistics - The first step in planning the logistics of your meeting is to develop a detailed timeline of action items. Begin with the tentative date for the meeting and then work the timeline backwards listing all of the tasks that need to be completed before the actual date of the event. As you get into more detail, your timeline may include a list of tasks identifying who is responsible and will list completion dates for each task.

When and Where to Hold the Meeting - One of the first tasks in the timeline is to finalize a date, time and location for the meeting. It is important to ensure that the location and time are convenient for the audience as well as to all participants.

Occasionally, meetings are held on-site at a military base or corporate facility. Although this may be convenient for the hosts, it may not be comfortable for your audience.

If the meeting site is itself the source of the community's concerns (due to the presence of environmental impacts or other potential health and safety risks or access issues) the public may be reluctant to attend. Military sites and corporate facilities that the public rarely visits may also seem intimidating, especially if past interactions have been hostile or unpleasant. Audiences may be uncomfortable entering what they consider "enemy territory."

Location, Location, Location!

Avoid locations that may intimidate your audience such as:

- Presence of environmental impacts
- Potential or perceived health and safety risks
- Unfamiliar sites
- Private, military location
- Security access
- Past hostile meetings
- "Enemy territory"

Therefore, the session should be held in a location that is both familiar and easily accessible to members of the community. An audience with a significant proportion of seniors, for example, may have special access needs. **It is usually best to choose a location that is located close to, or within the community involved in the project.**

Community centers and schools often have appropriate facilities. An ideal location will be within walking distance of public transportation and have plenty of parking spaces. It should also be large enough to comfortably accommodate the number of people expected. If attendance numbers are uncertain, choose a location that can provide flexibility (i.e. expandable room dividers, extra chairs). Once you have determined a feasible location, ask for diagrams, or draw your own, of the room and begin planning a layout for the Public Information Session.

If the target audience is drawn from a large geographic area, a series of meetings in different locations throughout the area may be necessary to accommodate everyone.

The date and time you choose for your public meeting is crucial. While it is virtually impossible to find one date and time that will work for everyone, it is possible to choose a schedule that is convenient to most people.

Watch the calendar for religious, cultural or community events. **Before scheduling, ask for input from community members.** Scheduling a meeting that conflicts with a PTA meeting or an important religious or cultural celebration will not only result in low attendance, but may also appear insensitive to the community.

When choosing a time of day for the meeting, keep your audience in mind. Daytime meetings are rarely convenient to those who work during the day, while early morning or dinner-hour meetings can be difficult for parents of school age children.

When planning a date and time for meetings, consider:

- Potential conflicts with community events
- Input from community members
- Religious and cultural celebrations and holidays
- Traditional working hours and shift work
- Alternative times and dates
- Multiple session times
- Multiple days

One of the advantages of the Public Information Session format is that it can accommodate a flexible schedule and multiple sessions. A meeting can be scheduled for several time slots in the morning, afternoon and evening of one day, or spread out over different days. This allows your audience to choose a time or day that works best for their schedule. It may also help reduce the number of attendees arriving at one time, which will allow your SMEs to spend time with more people on an individual level. At a minimum, plan for a 2 hour meeting on a convenient weekday evening.

There will always be people who cannot attend a particular meeting regardless of the time scheduled. Plan to have options in place to allow these people to access the information presented at the sessions. Such options may include: individual mailings of executive summaries of documents, fact sheets for proposed actions, posting of information to websites with public access, one-on-one follow-up meetings, etc.

Advertisement - It is time consuming and costly to hold a large public meeting. The Navy and Marine Corps typically hold optional public meetings when there is a relatively large, diverse group of people who have questions or concerns on a variety of information about a project or topic. If your situation fits this description, then your meeting has not been a success if only a couple of people show up and there are still many upset or concerned people with unanswered questions in the community. To make sure this does not happen, you need to get the word out about the meeting and you also need to make sure people understand the format in advance.

Because many people are not familiar with the open house format, they will assume that an advertisement for a public meeting means that a Town Hall style meeting will be held. Often, especially angry or upset people or activists who want to be heard publicly can get very upset when they arrive at a meeting prepared to grandstand and there is no stage. It is very important that your advertisements explain the format and the types of information and SMEs that will be available to answer questions. (See Figure 2 for an example of an advertisement for an actual public meeting)

The Navy is holding a meeting on (insert date) to update the public on what is happening with the (insert project title).

- The meeting will be held from 7:00 to 9:00 in the evening at (insert location).
- Please note that there will not be one formalized presentation of the material at 7:00, but several displays organized to provide a variety of information.
- The meeting will be an Open House with poster displays at which representatives from the Navy, EPA, and Public Health Agencies will be available to answer your individual questions about the (insert project title).
- If you are interested, please attend the Open House at your convenience between 7 and 9 pm.

For more information on the upcoming meeting or the (insert project title) please contact the Navy's Public Affairs Officer, (insert name), at (insert contact information).

Figure 2. Public Meeting Advertisement Example

There are a number of ways to announce or advertise your meeting:

- ***MAILER*** – If you have a list with contact names and addresses, sending a flyer or invitation in the mail is a very effective way of getting the information out to the audience. Send the information 2 to 3 weeks in advance and include all of the relevant information (time, date, location, format description, topics, etc.)
- ***DOOR-TO-DOOR*** – Delivering a flyer or announcement door-to-door works well if the meeting topic concerns a specific, limited neighborhood (such as base housing). A simple, one-page flyer with the topic, date, time, location, format and contact information can be very effective for notifying community members.
- ***ADVERTISING*** – Paid advertising in local media (news, radio) will hit a larger, but less targeted audience. Also, consider alternative advertising venues like church bulletins or community centers.
- ***MEDIA RELEASES*** - One week before your meeting date, send out an advisory to inform the media of the meeting. The advisory should include details such as the time, location and place of the meeting, and a short summary of the format, participants and display topics. Be sure to include contact information for a media spokesperson that can address any questions about the upcoming session. Follow up to determine which media outlets will be attending the session and create a list that can be distributed to your team. This will help the team prepare to meet the needs of each specific media outlet and reporter.

A combination of one or two of these methods will usually suffice. Consider your audience and the best way to reach that particular group.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

There are a number of communication tools to prepare for the Public Information Session that will help ensure your meeting objectives are met. Go back to your goals and the list of information the audience has received, information they need, and current and emerging issues to develop key messages, information displays and frequently asked questions and answers. Preparing these communication tools prior to the Public Information Session helps to ensure consistent messaging with participants and very effective communication with session attendees.

Key Messages

Key messages are approved statements about the project that demonstrate your understanding of the issues and the impacts. Good and effective statements are positive and emphasize empathy, honesty and commitment to address the underlying concerns shared by most audiences. Your key messages should be a limited number (usually 3 or 4) of concise and easy to understand statements about the key aspects of your project or situation. These messages will form the basis for all other communication tools, such as presentations, displays, handouts, and media "sound bites" that are developed for the Public Information Session.

KEY MESSAGE

- Short and clear statements about important aspects of a project
- Demonstrate understanding of the issues and impacts
- Include empathy and honesty
- Address underlying concerns

The list of goals, issues, and required information in your public meeting plan will serve as a starting point for developing your key messages. In most situations, you should have one key message that addresses each of the following three questions:

"What have you done, or why did you do this project?"
"What are your results, or what is the new information?"
"What comes next, or what are your future plans?"

Key messages should be distributed and reviewed by all of the internal participants and exhibitors before the Public Information Session. **When dealing with environmental clean-up projects or other issues that require partnering between multiple agencies or groups, it is very important that there is agreement on the key messages among the project team representatives before the meeting.** If all of the project team participants (i.e. Navy, EPA, and state regulators) do not agree or approve on all aspects of the project, then it is very important that the team work together to identify what they **CAN** agree to say. If there are technical disagreements between the team members, then work on developing key messages that highlight what you do agree on and future commitment to work together on the remaining issues. All agency representatives need to know and understand each other's position and agreed upon key messages to help eliminate the possibility of surprises or verbal disagreements during the session. This is critical as public disagreements between agency representatives can seriously undermine trust and credibility of the entire team.

Information Displays

At the center of the information session are the information displays. Each display includes posters, handouts and copies of studies or reference materials, all designed to highlight one topic or aspect of the project. These displays are staffed by SMEs, preferably experts with risk communication training. The information displays are positioned around the room to encourage individual discussions. A more formal technical presentation or video presentation can also be held at a pre-determined time during the session for those who prefer directed learning. The information displays and experts are then available for questions before and after the presentation.

Well designed posters typically contain a combination of graphics, short sentences or bulleted lists of information that work well for visual learners.

Learning Styles

Visual learners – learn by watching and reading (videos, demonstrations, handouts, display boards).

Auditory learners – learn by listening (lectures, presentations, demonstrations, question and answer sessions)

Active or Tactile learners – learn by doing (interacting, demonstrations, samples, one-one-one discussions).

The needs of auditory learners are best satisfied by a formal oral presentation. With the poster station format, the needs of the auditory learner can be met by having each of the SMEs prepare a "mini-presentation" that they can share with people one-on-one. After greeting visitors, the experts can ask people if they would like them to explain a few of the highlights of the information at the display. It is often easier to engage these people in a good question and answer exchange after providing this type of mini-presentation. This is also helpful for attendees for whom English may not be their first language.

Displays may also include sample equipment, small demonstrations or take home materials that may be helpful to active or tactile learners. A copy of the actual study or report should always be available for review at the appropriate display. Also, virtually every display should have "take home information" such as copies of the posters themselves and/or informational fact sheets or brochures.

With an open house you will likely have individual displays dedicated to providing information in support of your key messages. At times, you will have more than one display that provides background information or supporting facts for the same key message. A good example is presenting risk assessment results for a Navy or Marine Corps environmental cleanup site. A typical risk assessment open house may have 5 to 7 displays to explain and provide supporting facts about the following three theoretical key messages:

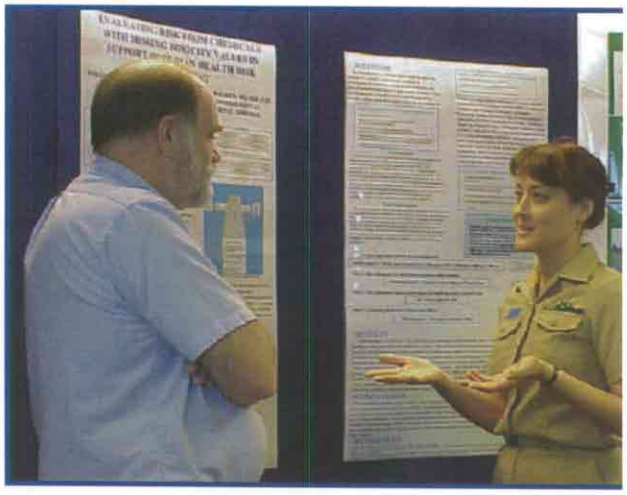
1. The Navy conducted a risk assessment at site X on Naval Station Y to make sure the site is a safe place for people to live and work now and in the future .
2. The results found that clean up actions or other risk management actions may be needed to ensure the site is safe.
3. The Navy is working with the US EPA and the state regulators on a study of possible clean up actions to make the site a safer place.

Depending on your audience and what information has been provided in the past, you may need poster displays explaining the following:

1. Environmental cleanup program and site history (including what work has been done so far in the program at the site);
2. The risk assessment and risk management process and the type of results you receive from a human health risk assessment;
3. The actual risk assessment results (including a plain language summary of what they actually mean);
4. Plans for future studies and sources for additional information Point of Contacts;
5. General information and health information on chemicals of concern in the risk assessment; and
6. Displays by EPA, state regulators, or other involved stakeholders.

Each of the displays will then consist of their own sub-set of key messages or supporting facts organized into individual posters. These information displays are positioned around the room to encourage individual discussions between attendees and experts at each display.

Posters



Poster displays are designed to highlight important information about the project and the organization hosting the display. Key messages can be repeated on the display board, but additional detail should also be included. A combination of graphics, short sentences and bulleted lists make the most effective display boards. Diagrams and graphs that clearly illustrate results help to break up the text on the poster and provide a visual understanding for many people. Be sure to use large size font so that the boards can be read from a distance and choose color schemes that are easy to read.

It is important to include factual scientific or technical information, but it must be understandable. Audiences can feel discouraged and frustrated if the information is too complex. Use plain language when possible and replace complex words, jargon and acronyms with definitions using simple, every day words. It is important to keep sentences short, clear and to the point, as attendees will be reading the posters from a distance. Generally, it is advisable to target information displays to a 6th or 7th grade reading level and provide additional, more technical detail, in handouts or reports.

TIP

The Navy Environmental Health Center's (NEHC) Environmental Programs Directorate produces Community Outreach Posters to assist Navy and Marine Corps installations. Posters include information on specific chemical topics and processes and are also available as handouts. Please contact NEHC for details.

By backing the posters up with more facts and details in your handouts and making studies available for review, you are layering your information. This is recommended by risk communication experts as an excellent technique to provide just the right amount of information to each person. Those who only want or need the level of detail provided by the conclusions and summaries presented on the posters will move on to the next display. Those who need more information or want to know the details can learn more by reviewing the additional materials and talking with the experts. It is very difficult to provide this type of layered information in a Town Hall meeting where everyone must sit and wait through one or more presentations and the subsequent public question and answer sessions.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Key messages and audience concerns can be used to develop a list of anticipated questions, sometimes called FAQ's (frequently asked questions) or Q&As (questions and answers). Before the Public Information Session, all internal participants and exhibitors should work together to identify possible questions and concerns that might be raised by the public or media before, during and after the session.

Sources for anticipating questions and concerns

- News coverage
- Citizen calls and interviews
- Similar situations in the past
- Information from opinion leaders, focus groups and surveys
- Other information sources regarding the issue

> "When an audience is concerned or angry, they often want to know that you care before they care what you know"
>
> Will Rogers

Non-technical participants in the project or from the department should also participate in this activity to help identify questions and test the clarity of technical information.

Once the list of questions has been developed, key messages should be used to help develop appropriate answers. While your answers need to contain factual information, it is equally important that they convey empathy, caring, honesty, openness, dedication and commitment to the project. This will help build and maintain trust within your local community and maximize the amount of information your audience hears, understands and remembers.

The Level 6 Response, which is a fundamental element of risk communication technique, is an important tool to help prepare answers to questions regarding risks to health, safety and the environment. It is a format for developing an answer to satisfy the needs of your audience and to communicate your key messages effectively.

LEVEL 6 RESPONSE

1. Express empathy or concern
2. State your key message or conclusion
3. Support it with two or three facts
4. Reinforce it with third-party credibility
5. Repeat your conclusion or key message
6. Describe future action that confirms your ongoing commitment

Once you have developed the list of questions and answers, group the questions in categories that match the poster display topics. This will make it easier for the SMEs during the meeting. By reviewing in advance the types of questions to be addressed at each station, they will have a better grasp of where to send people who ask a question that does not pertain to their poster display or area of expertise.

Administrative Displays

In addition to your poster displays, you will need a welcome and sign in table, a refreshments area, and a means for people to leave official comments or questions for which they would like a follow up response.

At the entrance:

Before the information session, dedicate a table near the entrance for registration, greeting and information purposes. Your greeters should encourage the public to sign in, pass out materials and provide directional information as required.

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- ***Sign in sheets*** – A number of sheets of paper with pre-typed subtitles and columns (name, address, phone, e-mail, and comments) create a useful sign in sheet. Sign in sheets are a good way to keep track of the number of attendees at each session and develop a mailing or phone list to announce upcoming meetings or provide information. This tool can also provide demographic information about who is attending the meeting (from what neighborhoods, etc.). Be sure to have plenty of pens available near the sign in sheets.
- ***Welcome Sheets*** – make sure you prepare and distribute a welcome sheet that includes a diagram showing the layout of the room with displays labeled and a brief description of the type of information available at each display. These welcome sheets should be handed out by the greeters to people as soon as they enter the meeting. (See Figure 3 on the following page)
- ***Comment Forms*** – there are several ways to accept comments or written questions from the public. Examples include: a centrally located comment table with comment forms to fill out, comment forms and a box at the sign-in table near the door, comments forms or a flip-chart of paper at each display to take

Logo

Project Title

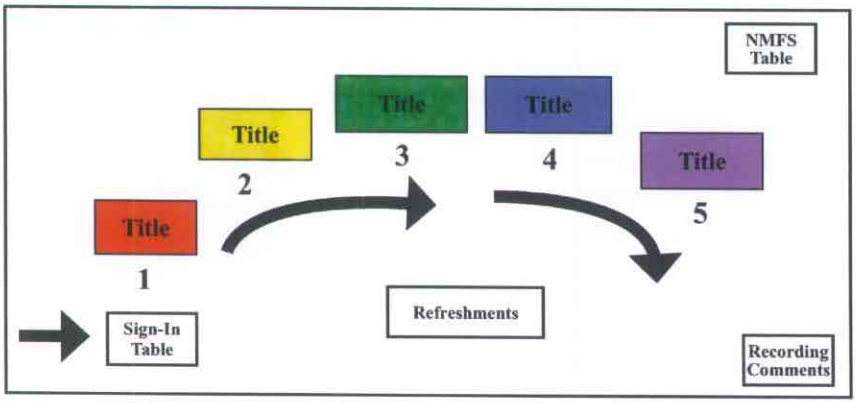
Command Name

Welcome...

Thank you for coming to the U.S. Navy's public meeting for (insert brief project description). The meeting tonight consists of two different components to allow you to ask questions and provide official comments on the proposed project. There will be a traditional public hearing from 6:30 to 8:00. We are also hosting an Open House prior to the public hearing this evening. The Open House is essentially a poster exhibit. Each poster station in the exhibit is dedicated to a particular topic of interest for the (project name) and staffed by subject matter experts to answer any questions you might have.

The diagram below is a general layout for the five poster stations followed by a brief description of the types of information explained at each station. There will also be a table staffed by (insert name of other participating organizations) personnel and a comment table for you to submit official comments either in writing or verbally to a stenographer during the Open House.

Open House Layout



1. Title - Brief Description
2. Title - Brief Description
3. Title - Brief Description
4. Title - Brief Description
5. Title - Brief Description

For More Information Please Contact:
Name
Address
Phone
Email

Figure 3. Sample Welcome Sheet

comments, computers where people can type in their comments, or a person available to document the comments or questions for people. Depending on your audience and regulatory requirements, you may use one or a combination of these options.

Supplementary information:

- ***Fact Sheets*** – An informational handout or fact sheet can and should be developed by the hosts to communicate/summarize the project's overall key message material that is presented at the various displays. In addition, there may be fact sheets or other handouts developed for each individual display or other organizations that are participating. Fact sheets should not be more than one piece of paper, and include all of the most relevant information about a topic in short, clear and concise sentences.
- ***Copies of displays*** – Consider providing copies of the information that is on the poster displays in a handout at each station. Attendees may want to take home information to review it and may not have enough time to read and digest all of the information on the poster displays.

TIP

All information handouts should include contact information for additional questions. It is important that the contact is someone who will be available, especially in the days immediately following the meeting, to answer or redirect questions.

Reference Package for Meeting Participants:

- ***Location information*** – Include the name and address of the facility for the meeting and directions or a map.
- ***List of participants (displays)*** – List all of the organizations that will be represented at the session, key spokespeople and topics to be covered. Advise exhibitors of each participant's area of expertise. This will help them redirect questions to the appropriate SMEs during the sessions.
- ***Agenda*** –Be sure to include a starting and estimated finishing time. **Always start on time, but do not end the session until all of the attendees are finished visiting the displays and asking questions.**
- ***FAQs*** – Provide a draft of possible frequently asked questions and responses. Ask participants to add more and share them with the group.
- ***Layout*** – Provide a diagram of the suggested layout for the session including the location and space allotted for each participating organization. (Figure 4 is a sample Public Meeting Layout)
- ***Handouts*** – Provide copies of all fact sheets, posters, welcome sheets or other materials that will be presented by all organizations at the meeting.
- ***Advertising flyers*** – If the information session is open to the public, provide flyers to each participating organization to pass out to their contacts that may be interested.
- ***Name Tags*** – Prepare nametags for each of the participants for the meeting. Have plenty of blank nametags and markers available in case of lost, misspelled or replaced names.

REMINDER

Prepare a package of information for all of the organizations and subject matter experts that will be hosting a display or presenting at the Information Session. Get this package to everyone in plenty of time to review.

Make checklists of all the supplies you will need at the meeting. (Figure 5 is a sample checklist that you can build for your meeting)

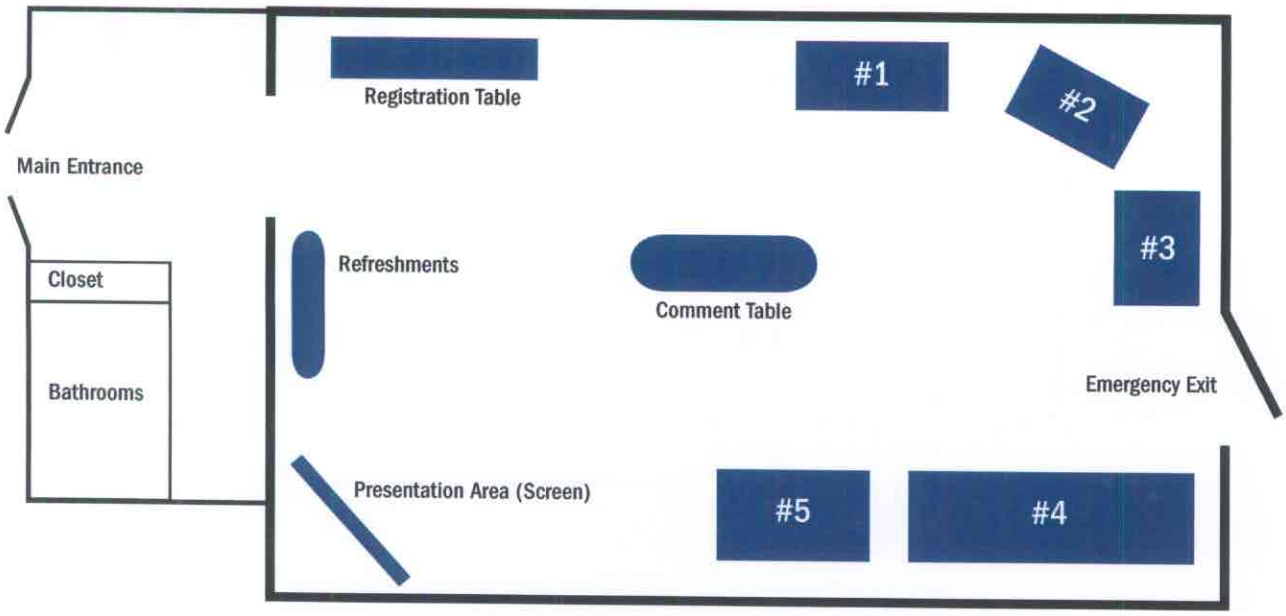


Figure 4. Sample Public Meeting Layout

Supplies Checklist

1. Welcome Sign
2. Banners
3. Posters
4. Tables or Display Boards
5. Sign in Sheets
6. Pens
7. Name Tags
8. Comment Materials (Cards, Computer, Flip Charts, Box, etc.)
9. Refreshments
10. Scissors
11. Tape (clear packing)

Figure 5. Supplies Checklist

When communicating sensitive information in public meetings, it is important to keep the information factual, yet understandable. Audiences can feel discouraged and frustrated if the information is too technical or complex. They may also feel that they are being intentionally confused or misled in order to cover up negative results.

Here are some important tips to remember:

- Avoid using jargon or acronyms. This is hard to do, so try to practice prior to the meeting.
- Use plain language and replace complex words with simple everyday words. Keep sentences short, clear and to the point.
- Present only results and recommendations, not statistics and data. Ensure your methodology and data are available for anyone who wants to review it.
- Use everyday analogies to illustrate technical points (an area as big as two football fields, OR, equivalent to one can of soda being poured into a backyard swimming pool, etc.).
- Generally, it is advisable to gear your information displays and presentations to a 6th or 7th grade level, but provide more technical detail in handouts and reports.
- Include diagrams and graphs that clearly illustrate results.
- Create executive summaries for technical reports.
- Develop fact sheets and make copies of presentations that can be taken home by the audience. Ensure they include a contact name, phone and fax number, and email and mailing address for someone who can provide follow up information.
- Provide short and concise backgrounds on your technical presenters that highlights their expertise.

Good luck with your Public Information Session!

Remember, the key to an effective Public Information Session is careful planning and open lines of communication. Risk Communication training will help you develop the skills you need to prepare good key messages, incorporate them in answers to tough questions, and deliver them properly to angry or upset people. If you have not had training or are dealing with a highly concerned audience or a project team that needs help focusing key messages, then please contact NEHC for assistance. Poorly developed or delivered key messages or messages that hint at disagreements between agencies can be very damaging to an installation's reputation as a trustworthy and credible source of information in the community and can negatively impact progress on your project. NEHC representatives are available to participate on project teams to develop key messages, plan public meetings, develop posters and other written materials, and prepare SMEs for dealing with upset people and difficult situations. In addition, the NEHC Risk Communication Primer gives guidance on preparing and delivering key messages.

For assistance with planning your information session, or other Risk Communication assistance or resources, contact the Navy Environmental Health Center at (757) 953-0932 or visit our website at **www-nehc.med.navy.mil.**

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