

Community Veterans Engagement Board Model

Public Forum Best Practices



Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB) public forums are an important tool to bring together the community, connect Veterans and their supporters with resources, and allow stakeholders to ask questions, raise concerns, and provide feedback and input.

As CVEBs launch into action across the nation, key best practices are emerging that can support local efforts to engage community stakeholders and improve outcomes. While it is up to each CVEB to determine how to structure its public forums, these best practices may prove helpful.

Choosing a Venue

- Public forums should not be hosted on VA grounds (they are not VA-managed events).
- Host the forum in a large public venue, such as a college campus, school auditorium, and public library.
- Strategically host forums in a variety of locations throughout the board's catchment area to enable accessibility for all community members.
- Ensure appropriate lighting, microphones, audio speakers, and staging exist to support shared mass-communication among participants.
- Ensure the venue has adequate parking for the number of attendees and is accessible by public transportation.
- Provide information-sharing space (booth, table, exhibit) for community stakeholders.

Preparing Communications

- Invite the appropriate federal, state, local, county, and tribal government officials (including mayor and governor, members of Congress, local VA facility executives, Veterans Service Organizations, and the State Veterans Affairs Director) to attend the public forum.
- CVEB co-chairs or the board (as a whole) should send the invitation as early as possible to maximize participation.
- Work with the board to plan communications. Consider all available opportunities to include posting announcements in their facilities, list serves, media alerts, and letters to the editor of local papers.
- Actively engage with local news stations, talk shows, and radio shows to encourage press coverage.
- Start communications publicity at least two weeks in advance of the event.
- Provide a sign-in sheet for participants to provide contact information for future outreach and communications about CVEB activities.

Designing the Program

- Plan a forum with some structure and objectives and provide a copy of the program or agenda to attendees.
- Designate one or two people, such as a co-Chair or board member, to act as a facilitator. This helps ensure the program stays on track.
- Introduce board members at the beginning of the program and have members be visible to participants.

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- Ensure there is a diversity of service providers available to participants during the event from the nonprofit and business community.
- When possible, include the Mobile Vet Center in the program.
- Invite relevant VA representatives to provide education and assistance on VA benefits and services.
- Plan how to meet the needs of any participants in distress who may attend the public forum.
- Keep any presentations and panels succinct and targeted to community needs and questions.
- Devote an appropriate portion of the program to facilitate questions and answers (Q&A). This helps ensure participants can voice concerns and experience. **Note:** Depending on the number of attendees and available venue time, consider imposing a time limit for public comments and questions to help ensure each person has an opportunity to speak.
- Allow time for networking and exchanging information at the beginning and end of program.

Capturing Feedback

- Record suggestions, comments, and concerns during the Q&A session, so information can be analyzed and addressed post-forum.
- Let participants know what will be done with the information and comments, and who will follow up with them. If no personal follow-up is required, inform attendees where the board will post information or responses to questions received at the event.
- Be responsive to Veteran issues and concerns raised in real-time and connect participants to resources present at the event.
- Consider using exit surveys or comment cards to solicit feedback from participants who may have felt uncomfortable sharing publicly and capture any suggestions for improvement. **Note:** Non-VA board members should drive surveys.
- Consider creating a community mailbox for individuals in the local area to e-mail the board directly with questions or concerns and developing a web presence to post information, including board activities and forum minutes.
- Use the information obtained at the public forum to help inform community engagement board direction and activities.

CVEB Spotlight: Connecticut community leaders took on the challenge to be the first in the nation to adopt the CVEB model. The Connecticut CVEB held its first public forum on August 27, 2015, in New Britain, CT. This inaugural public event brought community service providers from federal, state, local government, and non-profit sectors together to address Veteran issues in the local community. Veterans, service members, and their families participated in a Q&A session and obtained valuable information about local benefits and services available to them. VA Secretary Bob McDonald delivered a keynote address and answered questions from the public at the program's end.