



NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
of STATE LEGISLATURES

*The Forum for America's Ideas*



# Building a True Partnership with Your Constituents





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By  
Bruce Feustel



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The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the states, commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- To promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- To ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

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# CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Coffee and Conversation (and a few Krispy Kremes).....	2
The Shadow .....	5
Community Partners.....	7
Solving Local Problems .....	10
What Can You Do? .....	12
Contacts for More Information .....	13
Read More About It .....	14



## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent polls show that many citizens don't like government and don't understand it. The surveys for the 2003 National Conference of State Legislatures' publication *Citizenship: a Challenge for All Generations* indicated widespread skepticism, especially among young people (details at [www.ncsl.org/trust](http://www.ncsl.org/trust)). Once they have a connection to the legislature or some other branch of government, however, citizens often express a greater appreciation for the complexities of the work performed by legislators and other state employees. They also tend to enjoy being a part of the process or seeing things from the inside. State legislators generally agree that their constituents frequently feel disconnected from government, but other than responding to telephone calls or personal requests, legislators may not know how to strengthen the citizen connection. Several state lawmakers share their experiences here and offer some fresh ideas for constituent involvement.



## COFFEE AND CONVERSATION

### (and a few Krispy Kremes)

Minnesota Senator Sheila Kiscaden began what she figured would be a routine phone call, asking a constituent to see if he would put up a campaign yard sign for her again. As it turned out, the man was new in the home and had actually voted only once in his life—for former Governor (and professional wrestler) Jesse Ventura. The man said, “He talks like me, he looks like me—he’s not like you people.” The encounter crystallized Sheila’s sense of the barrier between citizens and legislators and the lack of trust. As she thought about the “you people” comment, she realized that one thing she wanted to change was her constituent meetings. To that point, they had generally involved presentations by her or others. She had something more interactive in mind.



*Senator Kiscaden*

Sheila worked with representatives of the League of Women Voters, community colleges and other local groups to launch a series of public discussions based in part on the National Issues Forums (NIF) model. The NIF is a network of educational institutions, civic groups, churches and other organizations that convene gatherings where citizens can talk about public issues. They emphasize deliberation, not debate, using a structured approach that stresses “listening carefully to the views of others and talking through the conflicts that arise when people disagree.” NIF provides participants with informational background material (issue books), trained moderators, defined policy choices and a framework within which participants can discuss the pros, cons, tradeoffs and other ramifications of those choices. These forums occur throughout the country on timely and critical topics; a recent series addressed terrorism.

Sheila and her group call their meeting series “Coffee and Conversation.” The two-hour meetings include an introduction and explanation of ground rules, presentations by experts to help frame

the discussions, small group discussions in groups of five to eight people, and final comments by elected officials. The participants are fueled by gallons of hot coffee and seemingly endless boxes of Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

On Saturday, April 9, 2005, at the Rochester Mayo High School cafeteria, approximately 100 constituents came to participate in the second “Coffee and Conversation,” which featured education funding. Although the 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. time block was strictly followed for the meeting, the school board, city council and county board members and state legislators arrived early to meet and talk with their constituents. The forum format called for elected officials to observe group conversations rather be active participants, so the before and after meeting times gave a chance for more traditional official/constituent discussions. In the introductions, the moderator explained that the officials were present to listen and learn, and that those with questions for the officials could catch them after the meeting. The experts described some of the key facts and themes involved in the funding of both K-12 (plus preschool) and higher education, and questions were kept to a minimum. The moderator then started the first of two small group discussions on the topic. At each table were a volunteer moderator and an elected official (acting as an observer). The table moderators had some questions they could use, but most of the groups seemed to plunge right into their topics. After some 20 minutes or so, the participants were told to find a new table, and a second series of conversations occurred. To conclude the event, the elected officials each described the comment or theme that seemed most important to them.

The participants seemed genuinely enthusiastic about and appreciative of the opportunity to talk with each other. The conversation groups had a nice blend of parents, teachers and others, which allowed officials to hear some different perspectives. A number of themes predominated, such as the importance of looking at the purpose of schools, the need to address the effects of technology in today’s society, the need to reach a wide variety of students, and the key public (not just parental) interest in education.

Sheila notes some lessons she's already learned:

- The meetings are attracting some diversity in attendees, although the participants tend to be older, with about 70 percent women. To this point, announcements have largely been by e-mail and through groups that are involved in the effort, such as the League of Women Voters.
- There is a great benefit to having city, county, school board and state legislative officials at the same gathering. Not only can the citizens talk with representatives of the various levels of government, but the officials can talk with each other. The gathering is informal enough that the walls between citizens and officials really come down. The conversational setting, in contrast to a presentation and question-and-answer session, makes officials seem much more approachable.
- The meeting location is important, and the planning group may explore using the local community college for future events. Although Mayo High School is easy to find and has a wide open and bright setting, some perceptions about each of the various local high schools may make the community college the best long-term location.
- Putting on this type of meeting takes a lot of work, and the planning group has evolved into a small, core group of “action-oriented” people. In their first planning meeting they created the group, wrote a mission statement and set the first two forum dates. So far, group members have taken on the responsibility for such tasks as lining up experts and group moderators, providing background materials, and bringing the coffee and doughnuts.
- The group wants feedback on how things are going, and they plan an e-mail survey to follow up on this meeting.
- Although there are perceived areas for improvement, there was a strong sense that “Coffee and Conversation” is valuable both for the community and for its citizens and officials.

## THE SHADOW

Kentucky Representative Susan Westrom realized right from the start that she wanted to emphasize communication in her constituent service, but her experiences have taken some unexpected turns. As part of one of her early district newsletters, she asked if anyone would like to shadow her in Frankfort for a full legislative session day. During the past four years, this has led her to bring 45 citizens to participate in an experience that Susan feels goes a long way to improve understanding of legislative work.



*Representative  
Westrom*

The shadow program truly spans “daylight to dark” as Susan and the shadow go to floor sessions, committee and lobbyist meetings, and wherever else the flow of the day takes them. There usually is no lunch break and the shadow often is tired at the end of the day but has a greater understanding of a legislator’s job. The shadow experience breaks down a lot of preconceptions people have about government and the legislature. Susan’s fellow legislators have been comfortable conducting discussions with the shadow present, although they are not particularly ready to try such a program themselves. Some of her colleagues have asked her if she is concerned that a “shadow” will decide to run against her some day. “I’m certainly not entitled to the seat,” she says. “My intent is to possibly plant a seed in someone who may run for office in the future.” Susan’s interns assist with the program, which allows her to involve up to three shadows per day if necessary to meet the demand.

One of her cardinal rules is to open the shadow program to any interested citizen, with no political party or other test. She doesn’t even know the person’s party affiliation unless the shadow brings it up. “I’ve enjoyed the company of doctors, lawyers, housewives and even a 16-year-old student.” She has learned from all of them, but she has particularly nice memories of a 25-year-old engineer from out of state who responded to her on-line invitation to be a shadow.

He took a day off from work and was vitally interested in everything that went on. “I was really impressed by his initiative and dedication, plus it was just a fun day as my interns enjoyed meeting him, too.”

“I get so much out of it,” she says, emphasizing that she learns a lot and is buoyed by the enthusiasm of someone who is new to the legislature. She now mentions the shadow option in all her citizen meetings and other constituent communications. “One day in our halls and meeting rooms will deepen the understanding of the different viewpoints legislators are exposed to, how we find solutions to public problems, and why negotiation and compromise are part of the policy process.”

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Senator Nancy Boettger of Iowa has connections worth their weight in gold—community partners. Frank and Kimberlee Spillers live in her district and are long-time meeting facilitators and planners. Frank is an economic development director in Cass County, Iowa, and together the husband-wife team are



*Senator Boettger*

private consultants. They became acquainted with Nancy through visits to the Capitol and by attending Nancy's legislative coffees. Frank and Kim had been involved in promoting citizen forums (using the National Issues Forums model as a starting point) through projects with the Kettering Foundation and the Iowa Partners in Learning, a group of Iowa citizens who promote a variety of public deliberation projects. Among Frank's and Kim's prior experiences was a project (with the Iowa Partners group) where they led a series of deliberative dialogues on immigration. The Iowa Partners group conducted hundreds of interviews just to frame the issue for their citizen conversations. Ten of these conversations were held around Iowa, resulting in some excellent dialogues. The subsequent report to the legislature seemed to have little effect, however, and they realized they had to strengthen that legislative link.

Senator Boettger is a fan of "process," and the National Issues Forum model really appeals to her. Frank and Kim invited her to a Public Policy Workshop sponsored by the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, in 2004, where she participated in several forums on such subjects as *Americans Role in the World*, and Nancy quickly became enamored of the forum process. "I like the way it builds the conversation" she says, as you get people to describe their personal stake or experience and "they start to open up." The use of defined approach options leads the group "right into the issue" in a way that they analyze things and start to see the trade-offs with the various possible choices. In deliberations Frank and Kim have moderated,

Nancy particularly likes the “empty chair” that is used to help the group realize what voices haven’t been represented in the discussion. Deliberative dialogue is a valuable tool because it ultimately helps the group find common ground to take action. Nancy feels this tool can help the legislature with some issues that have become “gridlocked.”

Senator Boettger has asked Frank and Kim to help hold a series of discussions on health care in Iowa. In particular, the dialogues deal with the tensions between traditional and complementary health care treatment. The issues include the regulation and availability of complementary health care options, the degree to which citizens should be free to choose their own health care treatments, and the amount of regulation and oversight the state should provide to protect Iowans. Nancy, Frank and Kim offer a number of observations to date:

- The legislators who have participated in these discussions are really intrigued with and find practical value in the process. The dialogues have elicited respectful discussion, the sharing of some fascinating stories, and seem to break down barriers that may exist between citizens and legislators.
- A major challenge has been to work with the lobbyists involved in the issue. The lobbyists are skeptical of the process used and seem to be much less willing (than legislators) to jump into the discussions as participants. Frank and Kim feel this was a challenge that they just didn’t anticipate and that will require planning and relationship-building in the next round of this work.
- The discussions have shed some light on what people like and don’t like about the present health care system and what is appealing and concerning about having government involved in health care. Some of the developing areas of common ground include registration, accountability and background checks.

- Nancy, Frank and Kim have intentionally called their meetings “deliberative dialogues”—rather than “forums”—to emphasize the conversational nature of the process and the respectful listening, thinking and learning that occur.

## SOLVING LOCAL PROBLEMS

Representative Ralph Becker serves a district that includes the State Capitol in Salt Lake City, Utah. One of the persistent problems that has faced that district is commuter traffic on neighborhood streets. Even before Ralph was elected, his predecessor had formed an unofficial committee involving a local neighborhood group and the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) to try to resolve problems. As with many similar communities around the nation, the situation weighed the needs of residents to have a safe and reasonably quiet neighborhood and the needs of commuters to have quick and efficient transportation routes to work.



*Representative  
Becker*

Although the matter did not involve creating state policy, it fell within the role of legislator as local problem solver. As part of his “day job,” Ralph is a consultant on conflict resolution, so leading the group to try to resolve the conflicts seemed natural. His first step was to involve more individuals and groups, particularly the city transportation and city executive representatives, plus adjacent neighborhood groups. Adding more people slowed the process in some ways, but it was critical to involve the key “stakeholders” in order to reach a lasting solution. The process, which continued for several years, resulted in new speed bumps, better signage, traffic signals, four-way stops and other measures. The amount and speed of traffic in the neighborhood have changed significantly. Ralph stresses that these types of issues don’t go away because traffic controls in one area affect other routes. The group has not created a final solution, but it has to follow a “try it out, refine and adjust” approach.

Ralph has learned a lot about the power of a legislator to help push for solutions to local problems. He’s acted as both convener and facilitator at these meetings, in a sense as an intermediary between

the government and the neighborhood. Ralph notes that he had to let the solutions emerge from the group, but that his position as a legislator helped ensure constructive participation from UDOT and other government agencies. He lists a series of key points for those lawmakers who try to lead similar local conflict resolution projects:

- Determine who needs to be present to make a lasting agreement and extend a personal invitation.
- Define the objective. Have the group agree on the goals.
- Identify and focus on the issues that need to be addressed and keep the group from getting sidetracked (for long).
- Gather the key information (which for the work in Utah included such things as accurate traffic counts and analyses of the consequences of changes).
- Establish standards and criteria—have the group agree on how it will measure success.
- Develop alternative options—really flesh them out.
- Make a group choice and plan the implementation.

A legislator who leads this kind of effort must not only have patience, but he or she also must handle the impatience of others. This kind of problem solving takes a long time, but it has the potential to yield longer lasting solutions. Ralph stresses that he took on the dual roles of convener and facilitator because of his professional background, but that legislators often can enlist community facilitators to help guide the process.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

All these stories involve legislators who used ingenuity and energy and who took the time to build relationships with key people in their communities. Legislators often don't have to start from scratch; they can plug their legislative expertise into existing programs such as those run by AmericaSpeaks, By the People, Policy Consensus Initiative or the National Issues Forums. There may be local programs, community colleges or other groups or individuals that would be happy to work more closely with a legislator. Sometimes you just have to take a chance—as Susan Westrom did with the “shadow” offer in her newsletter—and then put in the time, effort and enthusiasm to make it a success. Here are some final tips from our experts:

- *Use community talent.* Holding town meetings or other constituent gatherings is difficult and time-consuming. Find constituents who have a talent for logistics or facilitating meetings or possess other key skills.
- *Create a “citizen advisory council.”* Louisiana Representative Diane Winston uses an informal version of this approach; small groups of constituents give her a sounding board on key legislative topics. She often taps these knowledgeable citizens to provide testimony on her legislation.
- *Partner with local officials.* Programs that allow constituents to meet with a broad range of elected and appointed state and local officials can draw a larger audience.
- *Have patience.* It takes time to build a successful constituent meeting or program. It takes even longer to make it a tradition.
- *Have fun with it.* This type of initiative offers an opportunity to let your creative juices flow.

## CONTACTS FOR MORE INFORMATION

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- Bruce Feustel, NCSL at [bruce.feustel@ncsl.org](mailto:bruce.feustel@ncsl.org) or (303) 856-1399
- National Conference of State Legislatures Web site at [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)
- National Issues Forums Web site at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org)
- AmericaSpeaks Web site at [www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org)
- Policy Consensus Initiative Web site at [www.policyconsensus.org](http://www.policyconsensus.org)
- By the People Web site at [www.macneil-lehrer.com/btp](http://www.macneil-lehrer.com/btp)
- America's Legislators Back to School Program Web site at [www.ncsl.org/public/backsch.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/public/backsch.htm)
- Trust for Representative Democracy Web site at [www.ncsl.org/trust](http://www.ncsl.org/trust)
- Senator Sheila Kiscaden Web site at [www.sheilakiscaden.org](http://www.sheilakiscaden.org)
- Representative Susan Westrom Web site at [www.susanwestrom.com](http://www.susanwestrom.com)
- Senator Nancy Boettger Web site at [www3.legis.state.ia.us/ga/member.do?jsessionid=D7CAA9A35F94A8A06C538DD5C5C0E62C?id=141](http://www3.legis.state.ia.us/ga/member.do?jsessionid=D7CAA9A35F94A8A06C538DD5C5C0E62C?id=141)
- Representative Ralph Becker Web site at [www.le.state.ut.us/house/members2003/bios2003.asp?id=24](http://www.le.state.ut.us/house/members2003/bios2003.asp?id=24)
- Representative Diane Winston Website at [www.house.legis.state.la.us/H-Reps/members.asp?ID=77](http://www.house.legis.state.la.us/H-Reps/members.asp?ID=77)
- Frank and Kimberlee Spillers Website at [www.ghorizons.com](http://www.ghorizons.com)

## READ MORE ABOUT IT

Available through the Kettering Foundation at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org):

- *Making Choices Together: The Power of Public Deliberation*
- *What Citizens Can Do: A Public Way to Act*
- *For Communities to Work*

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