

Alliance for Innovation

# Building Better Conversations

Strengthening Public Discourse in Local Government

WCMA Conference, Aug. 14, 2025



# Agenda Overview

- The State of Public Discourse
- Community Engagement Framework
- Discourse Capacity Training
- Tools, Resources
- Wrap-Up



# Why Public Discourse Matters

- Foundation of Healthy Governance
- Builds Trust and Legitimacy
- Helps Address Complex Challenges Collaboratively



# What's Changed in the Last Decade

- Digital Platforms & Echo Chambers
- Decline of Formal Meeting Effectiveness
- Rising Polarization and Mistrust
- Information Overload and Disinformation



# Community Engagement is Not One-Size-Fits-All

- Today's Residents Need Flexible, Multi-Platform Approaches
- Town Halls Alone Aren't Enough
- Engagement Must Adapt to Issue, Audience, and Outcome



# Key Engagement Principles

- Connect In Many Ways
- Match Method to the Moment
- Plan Early and Realistically
- Build Internal Capacity
- Be Authentic & Transparent
- Don't Conduct Public Engagement on a Topic That's Already Decided



# The Four-Step Framework

1. Identify
2. Analyze/Evaluate
3. Plan
4. Implement



# Small Group Exercise

- Choose a Local Issue
- Use the Framework to Outline a Community Engagement Plan
- Share with the Larger Group



# Templates and Tools You Can Steal

- Arlington VA: Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects
- Fort Collins CO: Public Engagement Guide
- Roseville MN: Community Engagement Toolkit
- Kalamazoo MI: Community Engagement Toolkit
- Pittsburgh PA: Public Engagement Guide



# Civil Discourse is a Teachable Skill

- We can rebuild civic dialogue through local training
- Government can lead by example
- Residents can learn to listen, empathize, and debate constructively



# Identify Key Challenges, Barriers

- Social media echo chambers
- Polarization in politics
- Declining trust in institutions
- Misinformation and disinformation



# Learn Detection and Response Techniques

- The SIFT Method
  - Stop
  - Investigate the source
  - Find better coverage
  - Trace to original
- Spotting deepfakes & manipulated images



# Build Constructive Dialogue Skills

- Empathy-driven communication
- Active listening & perspective-taking
- Framing without confrontation



# Role Play Activity

- Scenario 1: Controversial development
- Scenario 2: School vaccine policy
- Scenario 3: Climate regulations & business
- Participants take roles & debrief



# Local Training Options

- Integrate into citizen academies
- Offer as a workshop series
- Co-host with nonprofits or schools
- Make it part of employee development



# Citizen Driven Engagement: NGO Model

- Overcomes Trust Barriers
- Informs Without Intimidating
- Builds Civic Capacity
- Facilitates Honest Dialogue
- Scalable & Adaptable
- Learn more at [CivicLex.org](http://CivicLex.org)



# Wrap-Up

- What will you start, stop, or shift?



# Thank You!

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