

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: Community Hearing Organizer Info

What is the event?

A session involving two key groups of people in a setting such as a drop-in centre, faith-community building, community centre or other location where low-income people will feel comfortable speaking of their lives, and ideally, where at least a few of them have been before.

The **VOICES FROM THE MARGINS** project is organized by Ontario's major interfaith anti-poverty organization, ISARC (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition), which has held several community hearing processes over the past 30 years. Given the deepening crisis of hunger, homelessness and poverty in Ontario, and current provincial government policies, now is the time to hear from our low-income neighbours and their allies as we struggle to provide justice and dignity for all Ontarians.

Getting Started

Bring together a small organizing group. Ideally, the organizing group should include people from several different faith groups as well as people who have lived or working experience in the area of poverty survival.

Include two or three people directly involved in programs and services which help low-income people. Perhaps you can work with a broader local coalition like a poverty reduction network, if you have one, as you plan your event.

Planning the event:

- Find meeting space that is safe and accessible, (preferably near public transit).
- Pick a time – or times – that work for people who will be presenting. You may need to hold an event during the daytime and another during the evening in order to reach out to those who wish to participate
- Organize refreshments and other logistics such as modest honoraria for presenters, and assistance with travel or childcare costs. Recruiting a volunteer with skills in logistical planning is always helpful!
- Seek some funding from local faith groups to help defray costs.
Seek rapporteurs for the event. You will need to find one or two rapporteurs – people who will listen to the stories and record what they hear and understand. Aim for a variety of people, possibly including one or two high-profile people e.g. Director of your local United Way; businessperson; faith leader; city councillor, etc. (A rapporteur is a person who has listening skills, empathy and the ability to hear stories without bias or judgement.)

Note: Rapporteurs need to be willing to then share what they hear in written form so it can be provided to the Voices Project Coordinator. This should be done within one month of your event;

- Promote the event through organizations and agencies that have regular contact with people who live with the challenges of poverty. Reach out to local food banks, homeless shelters, etc. Also reach out to places and organizations where you can have contact with students losing student aid grants, persons cut off from the Basic Income Pilot, seniors on fixed and inadequate incomes, and precarious workers losing out on the \$15 minimum wage and/or affected by other labour law roll backs.
- Providing up-front assurance that participants will be provided with safe space and protected by anonymity (if desired) is essential
- Note: some participants may be willing to be photographed or share their story through video. You should seek someone who can take photos or videotape if participants indicate a willingness to share in that way. If it is possible to take a short (2-3 minute) video of one or two low-income people repeating their comments made at the hearing, that would be great. You could make this request at the beginning of your hearing, emphasizing that ONLY people comfortable being interviewed and having their comments publicized, need volunteer for an interview.
- Seek a facilitator for the event, someone who can welcome people, explain the focus for the event and set people at ease in assuring them that this will be a respectful and welcoming space. The facilitator can also explain that this event is part of many taking place across the province aimed at bringing about real change.
- Feel free to include something creative in your event: perhaps a poem, or song, or spoken word piece, if you can.
- Notify ISARC about your event so that a member of the ISARC Steering Committee can attend your hearing.

Questions for Low Income Participants:

Each person should be asked to speak for a few minutes on such topics as:

- What are the issues you face in your daily life?
- Please describe your life on social assistance or at a low-wage job.
- During the past few years, would you say your life has gotten better, gotten worse, or is it about the same in terms of you being able to meet your daily needs, your housing situation, being able to buy food, etc.?
- What are two or three things that would help you in terms of those issues?

Other Participants:

A second group of people you might like to include in your hearing process might be those who work on the front lines with people in poverty: foodbank managers and volunteers, community meal organizers and volunteers, emergency shelter staff, community advocacy groups.

They should be asked about the challenges they face, and their proposals for action. You can also ask them:

- Ontario brought in a Poverty Reduction Strategy six years ago. In your experience, since then, have there been improvements in the lives of people you work with?
- What has changed for them, and for you in your work, during that time?
- What are some key local issues or developments that have affected life for the poor during recent years? These could be program changes, or larger changes in society and government policy.
- What are two or three specific things you'd like to see done that improve things?

Other Notes:

If possible, ensure that you have contact information for all participants and assure them that they will receive follow-up information as ISARC moves ahead with the VOICES Project.

Try and keep your event to about two hours with time before and following for refreshments, fellowship, and networking.

Privacy:

It's important to stress that privacy will be protected during the hearings, and that while individual stories might be mentioned in the report arising from the hearings, individual names will not be used.

We recommend that you do not invite the media to your event, to safeguard people's privacy and so that low-income participants and others will feel more comfortable speaking of their lives.

Timeline:

Our goal is to hold hearings events during the spring of 2019, ideally between April and early June, if possible. If that's too early for you and your team, please try to hold your event in September or October. Here's a rough timeline for a spring event:

March - Recruit members of your local planning team; start talking up this event with local participants;

March-April - Firm up location and date for your event, rapporteurs, publicize to others taking part. See if local faith groups or community organizations can make modest financial contributions. Arrange for refreshments and honoraria or gifts for low-income participants.

April-June - Hold your event, if possible.

September-October - Hold your event.

Questions? Contact coordinator@isarc.ca