Public Availabilities/Poster Sessions

Overview

Public availabilities and poster sessions are open house-type events that present site information visually and allow community members to learn about the site by interacting one-on-one with the site team in an informal setting. Generally, a public availability session does not revolve around a formal agenda or presentation. Instead, members of the site team make themselves available at a given place and time to provide information and respond to questions from community members in an informal setting. These informal forums are preferred in some situations when ***public meetings*** are not required. A poster session is a specific type of public availability session. Educational posters on a specific topic are prominently displayed by an expert who is at that location to discuss that topic and respond to questions.

Why This Is Important

This activity is important because public availabilities/poster sessions serve many purposes. Public availabilities/poster sessions:

- Allow the site team to present a great deal of detailed information on several topics concurrently, in a short time period, and to break down complex concepts into understandable terms and present them visually.
- Provide an opportunity for the site team to obtain feedback from community members in real time, and to identify concepts or issues that are not fully understood by the community.
- Allow the site team an opportunity to interact one-on-one with community members. Community members can get to know individual members of the site team as caring, listening people who are willing to talk to them about their concerns.
- Allow individual community members to inquire about the issues that are of most concern to them, without having to attend an entire public meeting.
- Allow community members an opportunity to speak freely with the site team on a one-on-one basis and for less outspoken community members to be heard individually.

This and all tools in the Community Involvement Toolkit should be used in conjunction with the ***Community Involvement Handbook****, which provides guidance to EPA staff on how EPA typically plans and implements community involvement activities at Superfund sites.*

- Focus on the material at hand, not on emotions, and minimize grandstanding, which sometimes occurs at large, public meetings.

Implementation

Public availabilities/poster sessions are useful when you have a great deal of information on separate topics to present in detail. They also are good for covering special topics that are generating, or are likely to generate, concern among residents. For example, if local drinking water is affected by the site, a public availability is a good way to make information available explaining how and why local water is affected, what types of actions EPA is considering or taking to address these issues, and what community members can do to help protect themselves. If vapor intrusion is an issue, a poster can illustrate how this form of contamination occurs, show pictures of equipment that might be installed in homes or businesses, and provide an opportunity for community members to ask questions and voice concerns one-on-one with an expert. Public availabilities and poster sessions are excellent ways to provide periodic updates and maintain contact with concerned members of the community. These informal sessions demonstrate that the site team "is there for you," and will provide site information throughout the process, not just when required by law.

When to Use

Public availabilities/poster sessions can be useful at any point in the Superfund process. They often are held in the early stages of the remedial investigation and feasibility study (RI/FS) process to acquaint the community with the Superfund process and the specific issues at play at their site. These informal sessions can help put community members at ease by answering their questions about site contaminants, the Superfund process, and the specific actions EPA is taking to protect their safety. This can help the community develop confidence in EPA's decisions about the site's cleanup activities.

It often is helpful to host a public availability/poster session shortly after the proposed plan is released, in preparation for the proposed plan public meeting. The site team can use the feedback received from individual community members in this informal setting, including the questions that community members ask, to identify areas that are not fully understood or issues of most concern, and address these questions and concerns at the public meeting. You may be able to circumvent a potentially heated situation at the public meeting by knowing and understanding the community's concerns and questions beforehand and addressing them explicitly during the public meeting.

At the other end of the Superfund process, it often is helpful to host a public availability/poster session in the period before deletion of a site from the National Priorities List. A public availability/poster session at this point in the process can help bring closure for the community and provide the last opportunity for community members to ask questions and assess what has been accomplished for their benefit. A public availability/poster session before site deletion can help EPA assure residents that all the necessary cleanup activities have been completed and that EPA cares enough to continue addressing any final questions.

A public availability/poster session is not appropriate for all situations. Public availabilities/poster sessions should not be used to inform the community initially about any site issue or topic. They are not a substitute for required public meetings nor should a public availability/poster session be used to make a major or controversial announcement. Public availabilities/poster sessions are very effective as a follow-up to such announcements. They provide opportunities to further explain, answer questions and clarify what was announced.

Avoid scheduling public availabilities and poster sessions at certain times of the year. Residents are less likely to attend site activities held on major national holidays and during the week of the April 15 tax deadline. Also, consider traditional school holidays or vacation periods. Know when important weekly, monthly or annual community events are held and schedule around them. Do not compete with local special events, such as community festivals or annual events, unless it is appropriate to present information to the community in conjunction with these activities.

Generally speaking, public availabilities/poster sessions should be scheduled during hours that are convenient for community members. Generally, these events work best when you offer availabilities/poster sessions during both day and evening hours, such as between 2:00 PM and 5:00 PM and then again between 7:00 PM and 9:00 PM. Depending on your community, Saturday afternoons also may be a good time.

How to Use

A poster session generally uses one or more carefully prepared posters to visually tell a story about the site or a specific site issue. Community members learn about the site by viewing the poster and reading the information it provides about the site or a specific site issue. One or more members of the site team are there to provide additional detail or explanation and answer any questions.

For a public availability, one or more members of the site team usually are stationed in separate areas, or stations, in different parts of a large room. Each station may display a poster or other visuals and offer fact sheets or other materials specific to the topic. Community members can move freely between these stations and can choose to visit only the stations for their topics of concern. They can learn more about that topic, ask questions, raise specific concerns, and talk individually to the site team member.

Preparation is key. All members of the team must agree beforehand about what they will say about the site, the cleanup effort, and the information they will offer. In effect, each site team participant in a public availability offers a separate part of a common overall Agency message. For that reason, care should be taken to plan in advance how information will be provided and what communication materials will be offered at each station.

Follow-up after the public availability/poster session also is very important. Ensure that all site team or regional management members who participate take notes to record what they hear from community members and share this feedback with each other, so that these community questions and concerns can be documented, followed up on, and given careful consideration during the process.

Planning an Effective Public Availability/ Poster Session

Follow the steps below to plan and implement an effective public availability/poster session. Also use Attachment 1: *Public Availability/Poster Session Checklist*, to help you plan your event.

Planning – Event Format and Content

- Know clearly why you are holding the session and what messages you wish to convey. Decide if a poster session or a public availability will accomplish your purpose.
- Identify groups who should have a representative in attendance: Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), community advisory groups (CAGs), the state health department, etc.
- Clearly identify what topics you want to cover and who will be on hand to discuss each topic. The key to holding a successful public availability/poster session is to have individuals available who can speak knowledgeably about each topic to be covered, and who are also good listeners. If you try to have one person cover too many topics, or do not have someone available who can address questions and concerns about a certain aspect of site activities, it will frustrate or anger those who attend the session. If the session is to have a limited scope, be sure to include that information in your announcements.
- Prepare a list of questions you are likely to receive on each topic covered in the public availability/poster session. Help the team prepare appropriate answers to these questions.
- Take some time to review the last few activities performed and announcements you issued. Check recent issues of local papers for letters to the editor or editorials that could give insight into current community concerns or issues.
- Advertise the session widely. Provide a minimum of two or three weeks notice. Do not rely solely on an ad in the local paper or a press release to inform community members about the event. Use any and all communication methods to get the word out, including social media, as appropriate. Send a notice of the event through your site listserv and, if available, post announcements on local ***social media*** pages, such as Facebook. Consider placing door hangers advertising the event at the homes of affected community members and handing out flyers in the local supermarket and schools.

Planning – Event Logistics

- Check with your community contacts to determine the best date and time for your activity.
- Check your ***community involvement plan*** for the community's preferred locations and ensure that the chosen venue meets the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. (For requirements, visit the Center for Independence (CFI) website.)
- Decide on a room layout that suits your needs. Take time to logically position stations and team members so that guests move through the topics at each station as they travel through the room.
- Ensure that there is enough room to accommodate the crowd you expect to attend. Here are some options:
  - Position site team members at separate stations, each sitting or standing at a table, with a poster designating the topic covered by each team member hanging on the wall or on an easel. Have two or three chairs at each station where residents can sit while talking with the site team member staffing that station.
  - Seat team members at one table in a logical order, with tent signs on the table, clearly indicating which topic each team member can discuss. This will not work if you expect a large crowd.
- Prepare and use effective visual aids. If you are presenting complex technical information, such as different components of a cleanup plan, use diagrams and maps to help explain what will be done, when, and where. Remember, people usually understand technical information more easily if they can see it, rather than hear or read about it.
- Have literature or fact sheets available, either at the entrance or at each station with the individual site team members. This serves three purposes:
  - It will help the community better understand the latest site happenings, enabling them to ask questions about what they do not already know or comprehend.
  - It gives people something to read if they need to wait to speak to the site team member.
  - It gives people written information to take with them to reinforce what they learn.

Preparing Site Members for the Session

- Make sure that each team member knows that he or she should be open and responsive to all questions posed by community members who attend the event. They should answer all questions that they can. If they cannot answer a question themselves, each team member should refer community members to the appropriate team expert who can answer the question. If no one present has the proper answer to a question, record the question, along with the person's name, address, phone number, and/or email address and promise to get back to them with an answer. Then be sure you do so.

- Conduct a rehearsal or dry run to make sure all site team members are responding to the potential questions in a uniform manner. Have someone play the role of the community member and ask the questions. The site team member should ensure that the question is answered directly and that they are not going off on a tangent about another point. You also should listen to ensure that all answers are stated in understandable terms rather than overly technical jargon.
- Review these tips about interactions with community members with each team member before the dress rehearsal and the event:
  - Listen - every question is an opportunity for you to gain a greater understanding of the community. You can uncover the community's concerns, needs, suggestions, desires, and misconceptions. This information can help the site team address these issues and inform future communications.
  - When fielding questions from community members, consider repeating or rephrasing the question before answering. Restating the question in your own words gives you time to formulate a response while ensuring that you are responding to the right question. It is acceptable to pause and think before responding; it shows that you care about the question and your reply.
  - Answer the question that was asked at the most basic level. Let the community member set the direction and move you into more technical areas.
  - Be aware of the terminology you use when answering questions; avoid jargon and overly technical explanations. Of course, use your judgment; if you are speaking with someone who seems to have a firm technical knowledge of the subject, speak with them on an appropriate level.
  - Remember that every question is a valuable one. Make them feel that their questions are important. Answer with respect and in terms they can understand. Be prepared to answer the same question several times. Always be alert for opportunities to reinforce the key message points on which the site team agreed.
  - Never answer in a defensive manner, become argumentative, or enter into a debate. No matter how hostile or agitated a community member may become, always maintain your composure. Answer questions calmly and kindly, then move on to the next person.
  - Remember that in general, the thing people care about most is the health and safety of themselves and their family. Practically every conversation will afford the opportunity to address that point.
  - Stick with the facts, and do not make editorial statements. Your opinion will be construed as being EPA's position. If someone asks for your personal opinion, remember that you are representing EPA and must answer even that question in your capacity as an EPA employee or agency representative.

Preparing on the Day of the Event

- Arrive early, well before the starting time for the event, so you can set up the room and ensure that site team members are positioned correctly and have everything they need. Allow yourself enough lead time in case you need to rearrange the room or take care of other last-minute situations that inevitably arise.
- Familiarize yourself with the facility. Know the locations of lighting system/switches, water fountains, restrooms, telephones and controls for the sound and ventilation systems, and locate all exits.
- Give every team member a pen and some paper to keep track of questions and record important comments, concerns, and suggestions for each topic area covered.
- Provide nametags or table tents for each site team member and clearly label each station.
- Have two sign-in sheets at the door; one sheet that the guests will initial for an attendance count, and another list for them to complete if they wish to be put on a confidential mailing list for information about the site. Give guests the option of wearing a nametag by providing blank nametags and pens at the registration area.
- Place a flip chart at the entrance of the room that can be used as a guide that identifies site team members present, their specialty/topic, and where they are stationed. Clearly label topics on posters.

- Consider providing maps identifying the location of the topics throughout the room. Place them at the entrance, or by the sign-in sheets. Be sure to give a few to all team members.
- Assign someone (it can be you — the community involvement coordinator (CIC) — or another member of the site team) to act as a greeter/guide who welcomes guests as they arrive, asks them to use the sign-in sheet, and directs them to the appropriate station/team member to answer any specific questions. The greeter should take a few minutes to explain the public availability/poster session concept to community members as they arrive and give them any handouts (such as a room map) that they might need.
- The CIC can answer any non-technical questions, but should then refer the community member to the appropriate site team expert. The CIC must also monitor activity in the room and do what they can do to keep things moving. Be sensitive to instances where one community member appears to be monopolizing a site team member's time, which can leave other community members impatient for their turn.
- Maintain the one-on-one format. Make every effort to answer questions on an individual basis so that community members feel the "personal touch" of this activity.
- Above all else, smile, be friendly, appear open, and have empathy for your guests. One goal of this activity is to foster trust and confidence between the community and EPA; nothing goes further than a genuine smile and a truly interested ear!

After the Event – The Follow Up

- Immediately following the event, gather team members to share their observations and the information they recorded during the event, and identify "homework" necessary to follow up with various members of the community.
- Conduct a "hot wash" meeting following the event. Everyone should analyze their effectiveness and share lessons learned. The team can discuss what they felt was particularly effective and what could be improved upon, and discuss suggestions obtained from community members at the session.
- Ensure that site team members follow up on any promises made to community members. Ensure that all additional information was sent out as promised.
- Revise your mailing list to include any additional community members who indicated they would like to be on the mailing list.

Tips

- Designate a spokesperson from each agency and/or organization to answer media questions.
- Consider hosting public availabilities/poster sessions at locations other than traditional meeting rooms. Consider using an on-site area, if it is appropriate and safe to do so.
- In some cases, instead of hosting a larger public availability/poster session, setting up a small information table/poster in the local community may be appropriate:
  - Consider asking a local store or mall if you could set up a poster session or an information table in a conspicuous spot.
  - Check the community calendars of the hospitals, police departments, fire departments, and civic and service clubs for upcoming community events. If the community is having an annual event that is fair-like in concept and it is appropriate to do so, ask if you may have a booth or table. This gives you the opportunity to participate in the event, attend the event or, at the very least, avoid schedule conflicts.
- Always provide consistent information to the public.
- Listen! If you hear the same comments or questions over and over, you might need to revise communication materials or provide additional outreach on that topic.
- Make it fun. Consider having stamps at each topic area, and a card for community members to have stamped for each topic area attended. You can have a drawing to win a prize for those who received all available stamps.
- If possible, make things interactive. Have some hands-on demonstrations that community members can do themselves.
- If possible, you can show a video showing work being done at the site. Include pictures of workers in protective gear and a few workers in regular clothes.
- Include children as a target audience:
  - Hold a poster contest for kids at the event.
  - Include a topic just for kids at the public availability/poster session, like a kids' corner.
  - Host an entire event just for children at a local school.

Attachments

- Attachment 1: *Public Availability/Poster Session Checklist*

Attachment 1: Public Availability/Poster Session Checklist

Site: ________________________________
Venue Address: ______________________
Event Date: _________________________

Meeting Preparation

- ☐ Meeting date and time: ____________________
- ☐ Meeting location: *(enter venue info below)*
  - Venue name: ________________________
  - Contact Name: ______________________
  - Phone #: __________________________
  - Rental Rate: $ ______
  - Seating Capacity: ___________________
- ☐ Create meeting flyer
- ☐ Number of people expected:
- ☐ Translator needed: Yes ☐ No ☐
  - Name/Contact Info: __________________
  - Contacted/confirmed: ______
  - Rate: $ ______
- ☐ Pane/station members notified (*list names below*)
  - ☐ RPM: __________________________
  - ☐ Tox: __________________________
  - ☐ Hydro: ________________________
  - ☐ State: _________________________
  - ☐ Local Officials: __________________
  - ☐ Others: ________________________
- ☐ Prepare agenda
- ☐ Prepare meeting evaluation forms
- ☐ Prepare presentations
- ☐ Prepare presentation materials
- ☐ Schedule dry run date and location *(enter dry run info below)*
  - Date: ____________ Time: ____________
  - Location: ________________________
- ☐ Dry run conducted
- ☐ Last minute review and pep talk for the team

Announcement

- ☐ Alert all key community contacts *(phone, email, public notices)*
- ☐ Print mailing labels
- ☐ Prepare and distribute fact sheet(s)
- ☐ Prepare and post social media announcements
- ☐ Prepare press release
  - Release date: ___________
- ☐ Send materials to information repositories

Audio-Visual Equipment

- ☐ Laptop computers and power cord
- ☐ DVD/Video presentation loaded on computers
- ☐ Projection screen (if necessary)
- ☐ Microphones (at least one, for introductions and announcements)
- ☐ Extension cords
- ☐ 3-prong electric adaptor (several)
- ☐ Laser Pointer for projection screen (if using)
- ☐ Extra bulb for projectors (if using)
- ☐ Power strips
- ☐ Flip charts, pads and markers

Room Arrangements

- ☐ Room layout: ____________________
- ☐ ADA standards met?
- ☐ Room setup *(enter times below)*
  - ☐ Time available: ___________
  - ☐ Setup time: ___________
  - ☐ Must vacate by: ___________
- ☐ Security (meet prior to and day of)
- ☐ Janitorial services
  - ☐ Restrooms open
  - ☐ Ventilation
  - ☐ First aid supplies
  - ☐ Return room to original condition
- ☐ Tables, chairs for stations
- ☐ Internet/wifi access? Password: ________
- ☐ Press table (if necessary)

Meeting Follow-up

- ☐ Return equipment
- ☐ Debriefing among meeting participants
- ☐ Respond to requests for information
- ☐ Send thank you letters
- ☐ Prepare meeting evaluation
- ☐ Distribute recommendations
- ☐ Add meeting attendees to mailing list

Meeting Supplies

☐ 3” x 5” index cards	☐ Extra batteries
☐ Pens and pencils	☐ Masking tape
☐ Dry erase markers	☐ Duct tape
☐ Blank pads of paper	☐ Scotch tape
☐ Business cards	☐ Name tags (EPA)
☐ Push pins	☐ Name tags (Blank)
☐ Stapler and staples	☐ Scissors
☐ Table tents, signs	☐ Hand cart