



*Fund for*  
**Shared**Insight

# **Community Listening Sessions: A Guide for Funders**



## Community Listening Sessions: A Guide for Funders

Funders can do a much better job — setting strategies and making grants that are more equitable, effective, and sustainable — when they listen to the people and communities at the heart of their work. This guide, featured in Fund for Shared Insight's [Funder Listening Action Menu](#), shows you how to host listening sessions that can turn those who are most impacted by your decisions but typically least consulted into a much-needed guiding force for your foundation's work.

When done well, listening sessions can be a solid touchpoint for authentic and ongoing community engagement. They help funders understand and be informed by the needs, values, and priorities of the people closest to the problems they are trying to solve. We invite you to use this guide to implement listening sessions that are meaningful and useful to those participating, that are not tokenizing or extractive, and that respect the dignity and agency of the communities involved.

### Guiding Principles

We encourage you to engage with these principles and consider the associated practices set out in this guide.

- [Be transparent and intentional about power dynamics](#)
- [Prioritize accessibility](#)
- [Value and respect community members' time and expertise](#)
- [Close the Loop](#)
- [Allocate appropriate resources](#)

### [Case Story: Listening Done Well](#)

### [Deepen Your Practice](#)

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

## Be transparent and intentional about power dynamics

Community listening sessions are only as effective as the trust between a funder and the community it seeks to engage. One way for funders to build trust is to acknowledge the inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and the communities at the heart of their work, and take tangible steps to mitigate them.

### Practices

#### Engage nonprofit and community partners in co-creating and facilitating/ implementing listening session(s).

- Co-creation can ensure the community's and the foundation's interests are both being served well.
- Co-creation requires the community members to have authentic decision-making power with you.

#### Reflect on listening and power

See reflection questions to help assess your readiness to listen.

#### Be transparent about the session's purpose and what you expect to achieve.

- For example, state how you'll stay connected with participants and their funding eligibility.

#### Hire a trained facilitator who is known and trusted by the community.

- Discuss if you, as the funder, should attend the session.
- Discuss how to mitigate power imbalances while sharing your expertise with community participants.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

## Prioritize accessibility

Ensure that everyone you want to engage has equal access and can fully participate.

### Practices

#### Ensure the location(s) where your listening sessions occur are accessible to people with mobility issues and disabilities.

#### Schedule listening sessions at convenient times for the community.

- Offer multiple sessions if needed to accommodate availability.

#### Make sure materials and spoken content are translated into the languages used by the community, including sign language.

- Keep your language simple and straightforward in listening sessions and written materials. Avoid technical terms, acronyms, and jargon.
- Ensure that any simultaneous interpreters you hire practice language justice by balancing primary and interpreted languages according to the group's composition.

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## Practices to prioritize accessibility *(continued)*

Arrange transportation to help community members attend events and/or reimburse individuals for travel expenses.

Provide on-site care for children, elders, or others who require access to care providers

- Compensate providers who accompany participants.

### Planning Accessible Meetings and Events

Resources on how to make meetings and events more inclusive.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE

## **Value and respect community members' time and expertise**

Participating in a listening session can be a significant commitment of time and energy. Make sure you show respect and appreciation for the participants' time and the knowledge they bring.

## Practices

Compensate the nonprofit partners you engage and the community members you enlist to participate for their time and expertise.

Be clear about the purpose of the meeting so community members can determine if participation is in their best interest or is the best use of their time.

- Share the agenda in advance, so community members know what to expect and can prepare as they like.

Create an agenda that allows extra time for settling in but ends on schedule in recognition of attendees' other commitments.

Provide food and refreshments.

- Ensure there is food available before, during, and after the session.
- Ideally, select a local vendor known by the community.

Return learnings to the community by sharing a summary with participants for their own use.

- At the end, provide a printout or flyer that community members can take home and share with others.

### Participant Compensation

Resources to help you identify good practices, consider the appropriate financial and legal issues, and reflect on the tangible and non-tangible benefits of compensation.

### Radical Hospitality

Resources to help everyone involved in the sessions bring their full selves to the work and build meaningful connections with one another.

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## Close the loop

Closing the loop is one of the most essential aspects of the listening process so participants feel heard, trust can be built between the funder and the community, and a shared investment in continued collaboration can be fostered. The feedback capacity-building program, [Listen4Good](#), is a valuable resource for closing the loop. We have summarized some of Listen4Good's suggested practices below.

### Practices

#### Choose a clear communication method or tool.

- Be creative and have fun! Use social media, photos, videos, audio, infographics, and other unique methods to capture attention.

#### Use straightforward and engaging language.

- Consider your audience's age, literacy, languages, and accessibility needs.
- Focus on key messages and findings, sharing specific data selectively.
- Keep it concise and present the main takeaways in an easy-to-digest format.

#### Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

- The community will benefit from prompt responses. Rather than waiting for the perfect time, we recommend just taking action!
- Don't expect consensus among the feedback you receive, and don't expect to be able to act on all of it. Be transparent about what you heard and what you can and cannot do.

#### Be humble and open to being changed by what you hear.

- Value feedback, view communities as experts, and remain open to critical input. Foster a growth mindset and take responsibility for missteps.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

## Allocate appropriate resources

Community listening sessions have value for both the funder and the community. To maximize that value, hosts must plan for and provide the necessary and right-sized resources for success.

### Practices

#### Budget for fair compensation for participating community members and nonprofits.

#### Plan, staff, and budget to accommodate as many participants as possible, taking into consideration needs for:

- Translation services, sound amplification, projector(s), screen(s).
- Transportation to/from the venue.
- Child/eldercare services or reimbursement.
- Food and refreshments - attending to any dietary or religious/cultural restrictions.
- Multiple sessions and locations (if needed).



## Case Story: Listening Done Well

The (fictitious) Bright Futures Family Foundation (BFFF), a small multi-generational funder, recently shifted its focus from educational initiatives to addressing the growing need for youth mental health services. To ensure their new strategy was based on community needs, they planned a listening session to hear from youth, parents, educators, and service providers about the most pressing gaps and effective solutions in mental health support.

BFFF knew it was crucial to build trust with youth and families, many of whom had previously experienced inadequate or ineffective mental health support. To address this, BFFF met with local nonprofits, school counselors, and community-based organizations, leaning on their expertise and relationships to get early input on how to engage the community. They also partnered with a respected local mental health nonprofit to co-design and facilitate the 90-minute session. BFFF and the facilitator determined it would be helpful to have foundation reps in the room to answer questions and give a face to the foundation, but not formally present or facilitate. All of this lent credibility and ensured participants felt heard.

The foundation created community-centric materials in multiple languages to encourage attendance. Even so, overcoming community skepticism required ongoing engagement. To promote openness and accessibility,

they felt it was essential to find a neutral, welcoming community space close to public transportation instead of their foundation office. After seeking referrals from trusted partners and visiting several venues, the foundation staff secured the local Boys & Girls Club as the session location, which they knew had wheelchair-accessible entrances and restrooms.

In response to accommodation requests made by participants during the registration process, the staff arranged flexible seating to support mobility needs and reserved spots for individuals requiring extra space or assistance. Additionally, the foundation provided live interpretation services in Spanish and had an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter available for those who needed it. The agenda, discussion prompts, and summary reports were translated, and plain language, along with culturally relevant wording, was used throughout to ensure clarity for attendees of all literacy levels.

Balancing diverse perspectives during the session was complex, with more than 20 attendees. Some had conflicting views on priorities, while others doubted their feedback would lead to real change. Recognizing the divergent perspectives and requests shared by participants, the foundation team reassured them that they had heard various ideas and shared some of their takeaways. They also



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## Case Story: Listening Done Well *(continued)*

committed to returning to participants with concrete next steps within a month.

True to their commitment, the foundation spent the next several weeks creating a comprehensive report summarizing key insights from the community, including the agreements and disagreements expressed by community members. The report highlighted key takeaways and calls to action for BFFF and was shared with the community through various channels to increase exposure and ensure easy access to the information. Multiple social media platforms from participating community groups were utilized,

and youth-designed posters and infographics were displayed at the Boys & Girls Club, neighborhood schools, and local businesses to spread the news.

Rather than making funding decisions privately, BFFF reconvened a smaller group of listening session participants to review the draft priorities and refine them based on additional input. By the six-month mark, the foundation announced its first round of youth mental health grants, totaling \$250,000. This ensured that every dollar was influenced by the very voices they aimed to uplift.

### Sample Budget for BFFF's Community Listening Session

**Venue:** \$1,000

**Facilitator (design and run the meeting):** \$3,000

**Participant supports (including transportation, childcare, Interpretation services, refreshments):** \$4,000

**Participant compensation (payments decided in consultation with nonprofit partners):** \$2,000

- Adults (parents, caregivers, educators, and nonprofit leaders): \$100 cash payment each
- Youth (ages 13-18): \$75 cash payment each

**TOTAL COST:** \$10,000

## Deepen Your Practice

This guide helps funders center the voices of communities most affected by systemic inequalities in philanthropic decision making. When done well, community listening sessions can inform funding decisions and also empower communities. To learn more about the full spectrum of funder listening practices that can shift power to community, or to deepen your practice, explore our [Funder Listening Action Menu](#).



**Have questions about this guide?  
Or want to learn more?**

Please reach out to Jonathan Brack [jonathan@fundforsharedinsight.org](mailto:jonathan@fundforsharedinsight.org).

