

INFORMAL ACTIVITIES

DESCRIPTION

Informal Activities are unstructured visits into the community to give people a chance to get to know you and to discuss the site in a relaxed atmosphere. Informal Activities can include visits to a resident's home; a table at a local festival; getting your haircut in the local salon; or going door to door in a neighborhood close to the site. Such activities show community members that you care about them and their concerns.

These activities are comfortable forums to address the specific concerns of particular groups. Many people are more comfortable in informal settings and may be more likely to communicate honestly how they feel about site issues. Informal meetings with small groups of people, especially when held in someone's home, can help foster an honest dialogue that may be lost in a forum such as a public meeting. Informal meetings are a great way to observe and understand cultural behaviors within the community and are strongly recommended in the *Cross-Cultural Communication* tool.

Informal community visits have five main purposes:

- To inform local residents about a site;
- To inform you about the cultural behaviors of the affected community;
- To involve community members in the process;
- To provide access to EPA personnel; and
- To provide you with feedback about site activities and community opinion.

REQUIRED ACTIVITY?

No.

MAKING IT WORK


WHEN TO USE

Informal activities are useful at anytime during the process. They are especially helpful for the Level 3 and 4 sites identified with the *Hot Sites Template*, as they can fulfill a requirement for a community interaction without placing an undue burden on time or resources.

They are also useful if different factions within the community have different opinions about an issue. Public meetings, where competing groups are present, can easily deteriorate into counterproductive battles over whose opinion is correct. Holding informal chats with small groups can elucidate each group's position without arguments.

You can use informal activities whenever there is an aspect of site work that may only be relevant to a portion of the site community. This allows you to spend more time directly speaking to affected community members without alarming those who are not affected. For example, if there is a small number of residences whose water must be tested, or whose property may be disrupted by work at the site, consider asking one of them to invite the others into their home for a meeting of affected individuals.

It is equally important that communities are not left hanging after the initial flurry of site activity. Periodic visits or small group sessions demonstrate continued access to site informa-

 [See Cross-Cultural Communication, Tab 12](#)

 [See Hot Sites Template, Tab 19](#)

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tion and EPA personnel. It is difficult to foster a sense of community involvement and ownership once a site has progressed and local residents may already feel alienated. Continued involvement from the beginning is the key.

How to Use

Regardless of the session's informality, always have a message in mind for the audience. Be prepared to discuss all aspects of the issues at hand when you hold a small group meeting. If the issue is a technical one, consider bringing the RPM. Let residents know if there are other information sources or contacts who can help them. Be clear about what EPA can and cannot do; make no promises that you cannot keep. Know people's issues and be prepared to discuss them, regardless of whether you bring them up.

Take an afternoon to walk the streets of the town; get a feel for what's going on. Have lunch in the local diner or get your hair done in a local shop; you'll pick up a wealth of insight into local opinions. If there is a resident who is especially interested in the site, ask him or her to host a small meeting for neighbors, either to present your information, or to answer questions. Stop by to visit this person occasionally.

CICs have been known to play on community softball teams, have lunch regularly at the local diner, visit key opinion leaders to keep them up to date, and visit key local officials. There are so many things that a creative person can do, but you must think of things outside the realm of formal, structured activities. Remember to conduct yourself in a professional manner at all times.

Examples

The residents of one affected community were angry with EPA. The CIC asked key residents to invite their neighbors and friends for an informal session with himself, the toxicologist, and the hydro-geologist. He also invited the strongest opponent to attend each session so that critics could be ensured that the Agency was dispensing consistent and correct information. The CIC held up to three sessions per week over several weeks, and received positive feedback; these sessions helped the community to trust EPA.

Tips

- Pay attention to names that keep cropping up in residents' conversations — these people are the opinion leaders within the community. Get to know these people; stop by every so often "just to talk," and to let them know the latest. They are also an excellent source of information about site-related issues that may be festering in the community. By establishing good relationships with opinion leaders, you can make your job of staying in touch with the community easier.
- Do not build your program solely on formal or planned community visits. Informal channels of communication are important because they give you a connection with the community and a better sense of the community.
- Use small group sessions to keep in touch with the community, not just to put out fires. Don't wait until there is trouble to meet with a particular group. Hold small group meetings frequently to develop relationships and stay abreast of developing issues.
- Be creative. The examples discussed here are by no means an exhaustive list of the types of informal community visits/small group sessions that you can do. Think about each of your sites individually and plan activities that would be helpful in each community.

RELATED TOOLS/RESOURCES IN THE TOOLKIT

- ◉ [Cross-Cultural Communication, Tab 12](#)
- ◉ [Focus Groups, Tab 17](#)
- ◉ [Hot Sites Template, Tab 19](#)
- ◉ [On-Site Activities, Tab 26](#)
- ◉ [Presentations, Tab 29](#)
- ◉ [Public Availabilities/Poster Sessions, Tab 30](#)
- ◉ [Public Meetings, Tab 32](#)
- ◉ [Special Events, Tab 38](#)

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