



“No Body Gets Left Behind!”

PARK EQUITY AND ACCESS DIALOGUE GUIDE



National Recreation
and Park Association



INTRODUCTION

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is committed to the broad goal of cultivating healthier communities. We believe — and are seeing — local park and recreation agencies play a unique role in coalitions focused on creating healthy, vibrant and equitable communities. There is growing evidence that shows the positive linkage between park systems and physical and mental health, youth development, social well-being, and economic vitality. Furthermore, increased physical activity and increased access to parks are an important part of the lifestyle solutions that address the upward trends in obesity and related chronic diseases.

What is less certain is how accessible and welcoming our park, recreation and green space systems are to all people of all abilities, ages and socioeconomic status. In turn, this raises questions regarding the distribution of the benefits associated with these resources and ultimately impacts the (in)equity of health and wellness experienced by different community members.

NRPA is the leading advocacy organization dedicated to the advancement of public parks and recreation opportunities. Founded in 1965 through the merger of five national organizations dedicated to the same cause, NRPA has grown over the years — in total membership, in outreach efforts, in building partnerships, and in serving as the voice and defender of parks and recreation.

NRPA is dedicated to educating professionals and the public on the essential nature of parks and recreation. Through learning opportunities, research, and communications initiatives, we strive to generate significant public support for our movement in order to advance the development of best practices and resources that will make parks and recreation indispensable elements of American communities.

What is health equity and why is it important?¹

A basic principle of public health is that all people have a right to health. Differences in the incidence and prevalence of health conditions and health status between groups are commonly referred to as health disparities. Most health disparities affect groups marginalized because of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, disability status, geographic location, or some combination of these. People in such groups not only experience worse health but also tend to have less access to the social determinants or conditions (e.g., healthy food, good housing, good education, safe neighborhoods, freedom from racism and other forms of discrimination) that support health. Health disparities are referred to as health inequities when they are the result of the systematic and unjust distribution of these critical conditions. Health equity, then, as understood in public health literature and practice, is when everyone has the opportunity to “attain their full health potential” and no one is “disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of their social position or other socially determined circumstance.”

¹ The following is drawn from *Promoting Health Equity: A Resource to Help Communities Address Social Determinants of Health*. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2008.

INTRODUCTION

Creating or improving community parks so they are accessible and equitable for all residents, regardless of physical ability, race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or age may not always be an easy or quick task. Embarking on this kind of a process often requires a deep understanding of complex systems and policies that have been put in place over a long period of time. When some people live in a system that they feel hasn't been accessible or served them well, their experience can be a world apart from others who function in the very same system. It takes patience and careful listening to understand each other's experiences and perspectives, to develop an accurate analysis of the situation, and to create a shared vision of success.

It is important for local park and recreation professionals to create opportunities within their community for people to explore when, where and how their park and recreation systems and facilities may be less accessible to all people in the community.

Making progress in creating parks and recreational systems that are accessible and welcoming to all community members requires the participation of a variety of local leaders and stakeholders. Partnering with public and private organizations, developing coalitions of community leaders that represent schools, businesses, public health agencies, municipal and county governments, and other key policymakers, and engaging the broader community in the development of plans and strategies that address their highest interests and aspirations will all be necessary for making and sustaining progress.

Convening diverse groups and laying the ground work for successful partnerships or coalitions may be a new role for some park and recreation leaders.

This tool is designed to help local park and recreation agencies play a leadership role in bringing together a diverse group of people and organizations who are interested in or working towards creating healthy, vibrant communities by creating or improving the accessibility of community park and recreational systems for all residents, regardless of physical ability, race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or age.

This tool offers a starting place, a small step towards building the trust, relationships and shared understanding that are needed in order to make progress toward creating and sustaining more equitable, accessible systems. And through the tips, materials and resources offered here, we hope that groups will use the attached action planning template (see Attachment 3: "Our Next Steps") to begin to identify steps they can take to enhance the accessibility and inclusiveness of the parks and recreational systems in their community.

Whether you are new to convening diverse groups, or have lots of experience building coalitions and partnerships, the discussion guide that follows will help you hold a highly productive conversation with potential partners and volunteers. A well-planned and well-facilitated initial meeting will:

1. **Raise awareness about the importance of access to parks, trails and recreational infrastructure in healthy communities;**
2. **Begin the process of creating greater shared understanding of when, where and how these resources and their benefits are not equally accessible to all community members;**
3. **Start to identify shared interests; and**
4. **Begin to establish a strong foundation for future collaborations.**

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A. USING THIS TOOL

There are different ways to use this tool, including:

1. To host an initial conversation about a particular park (or several parks) **within one neighborhood**. This has the advantage of people already having a strong tangible connection and interest in the conversation. It can also help people move towards shared action following the initial conversation.

2. To hold a conversation among representatives from different neighborhoods to look at equity and access across an entire community park system.

3. To undertake a comprehensive public engagement process to **look more broadly at the community's entire park system**. For example, this guide could be used to host concurrent neighborhood-level conversations across different neighborhoods. Themes that emerged from these could then be compiled and compared, and individuals from each neighborhood conversation invited to look at opportunities across the entire park system to improve access and equity.

These different approaches each have their potential advantages. Multiple conversations among a broad range of residents can build momentum and lead to a variety of outcomes including: grassroots activities; the creation of task forces; and the inclusion of resident recommendations into a strategic plan. Neighborhood-specific dialogues sometimes have the advantage of gathering people who already have a strong tangible connection and interest in the conversation, and also may be able to move more quickly and readily towards shared action following from the initial conversation. In all cases, the *Action Plan Template: Our Next Steps* (Attachment 3) will be useful in helping groups to be clear about how they are moving forward.

Whether your focus is an individual park, a section of town, or the whole community, plan to engage a diverse group of participants and be sure to invite formal as well as informal leaders.

The convener tips in the next section will walk you through the basics needed to organize and facilitate a successful conversation. For additional tools and advice about how to organize public dialogue and community change processes, see Attachment 7 in the Resources section.

B. CONVENER TIPS

Tips for *organizing* an effective conversation:

1. Consider co-convening the conversation with several partners who have diverse perspectives and interests.

- This can increase the credibility of the meeting.
- Diverse partners can more effectively reach out to and invite diverse meeting participants.
- This can also set the stage for collaboration if a specific initiative grows out of the initial meeting.

2. Be clear about what you are asking people to do and why.

- Explain the purpose of the meeting.
- Identify the goal(s) of the meeting.
- Let people know the time commitment for the initial meeting.

3. Identify a diverse group of 12 to 18 people, including:

- Formal and informal leaders.
- Community members who use the park(s).
- Representatives from local “friends of the park” groups and related community-based organizations.
- Representatives from organizations working with and/or advocating for special needs populations.
- People who are in a position to make decisions about parks, both within government (e.g., city planners, elected officials) and from non-government organizations.
- People from different age groups, income or education levels, cultural or racial groups, and physical abilities.
- People from different parts of town (or different parts of a single neighborhood).
- Organizations that are working on issues such as housing, education, recreation, transportation, community health, economic development, equity.
- Local business owners.

4. Use a personal touch to recruit participants.

- Do some homework about those you are inviting, so you have a sense of why this issue might be relevant for them.
- Begin with a personal phone call or visit.
- Follow-up with a written invitation.
- Send a confirmation prior to the meeting.
- If the person you are recruiting is not available, invite them to suggest another person who might have a similar perspective/interest.

5. Choose the time and location of the meeting carefully.

- Keeping in mind the invitees, decide whether business hours or evening hours will work best.
- Make sure the meeting space is welcoming and accessible to people of all abilities.
- Consider adding elements such as healthy snacks to create a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere.

6. Invite someone with facilitation experience to lead the discussion.

- This meeting will work best if convened by and/or facilitated by a team who reflect the different cultural and ethnic groups in the neighborhood or community. Facilitators should have experience working with people of different racial, ethnic, cultural, generational, and economic backgrounds. They should be prepared to manage the dialogue in a way that ensures equitable participation.
- If you plan to lead the discussion, become familiar with basic facilitation skills to ensure a successful meeting (see Attachment 1 in the Resources section for facilitator tips).

7. Evaluate the process.

- See Attachment 4 in the resources section for a sample evaluation.

8. Be prepared to establish next steps if needed.

- Use the *Action Plan Template: Our Next Steps* with the group to identify, clarify and record proposed action items emerging from the dialogue.
- Follow up with attendees and participants to clarify their roles and action items for potential next steps.
- Schedule follow-up meetings.

C. DISCUSSION GUIDE

AGENDA (3 HOUR MEETING)

1. Welcome and Introductions

15 min.

Introduce yourself and set the stage for the meeting.

Briefly describe ways that parks can be an important factor in creating healthy communities; for example:

- **HEALTH** — Parks are recognized as major contributors to the health of the nation. When people have access to parks, public exercise facilities, trails, and greenways, they significantly increase the frequency of physical activity and exercise, leading to improved health and chronic disease prevention.
- **YOUTH DEVELOPMENT** — Play is an essential part of every child's life and is vital for the enjoyment of childhood. It is proven to be fundamental to social, emotional, cognitive, intellectual and physical development. Park communities serve as the entry point and first introduction to physical activity, organized play and team sports; helping to develop confidence, teamwork and sportsmanship while instilling positive behaviors and values.
- **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION** — Parks within community and urban settings help improve air quality, offer opportunities for reducing and capturing stormwater run-off, and provide habitat for both plant and animal species.
- **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT** — The practice of developing or redeveloping parks and open spaces, which become catalysts for revitalizing neighborhoods and communities, is spreading throughout the United States.

Share your interest in creating an equitable system where parks are welcoming and available to ALL community members regardless of ethnicity, culture, age, physical ability, level of income, etc.

Acknowledge that talking about equity can be challenging, especially if you successfully engage a diverse group of people in the conversation.

- **People with different perspectives and life experiences may have very different perceptions about what is needed. There may also be many different ideas about what positive change will look like.**
- **Creating equitable and just community systems is complex and often takes a long time. Acknowledge that this meeting is only one small piece of a larger discussion that the community may already be holding (or may need to begin) in order to address a variety of issues.**

Introductions:

- **Invite people to say name and briefly describe their connection to the neighborhood or community.**

Review the Purposes of Meeting:

- **Get to know each other.**
- **Begin to assess how well our park(s) meet the needs of all residents.**
- **Envision changes to our park(s) that would help our neighborhood or our community be healthy and successful.**
- **Identify possible opportunities for future collaboration.**

Establish discussion ground rules (see Attachment 1 for some sample "Operating Agreements").

2. Opening Discussion _____ 45 min

Invite participants to discuss the following questions in small groups of two or three:

- Share a story about a time when you felt proud to live or work in your neighborhood or community.
- What makes your neighborhood/community a healthy place to live?
- What are some other neighborhood/community strengths?
- What are some of your neighborhood's or community's greatest needs?
- What are some ways a park might help your neighborhood/community build on its strengths?
- How might a park help your neighborhood/community meet its needs?

Invite each group to report the highlights of their conversation. Encourage the group to keep these ideas in mind as the discussion continues.

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

As each group reports their key ideas, record key ideas on several pieces of flip chart paper labeled *Strengths, Needs and How Changing the Built Environment Can Help*.

3. How well do our parks meet the needs of all community members? _____ 45 min

Invite participants to work in small groups (4-6 people per group) to create a map of the community's park or parks. Below are some details to consider including on the map.

- Facilities (for example, playgrounds, ball courts, swimming pools, etc.).
- Events that happen in the park.
- Who uses the park.
- Gathering spots.
- Green spaces.
- Treasures.
- Trouble spots.
- Important features of the areas surrounding the park (for example, community treasures, public transportation, gathering spots, challenged areas).

Once you've created your map, discuss the following questions within your small group.

- Describe your personal experience using the park(s) in your community.
- When do you go to the park? What kinds of things do you do when you are there?
- Which park(s) feel welcoming? Why?
- Has there been a time when you felt limited in your ability to participate in community events or areas because of access issues? If yes, please describe.
- Do all different kinds of people use the park (people of different ages, physical abilities, income levels, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds)? Why or why not?

Invite participants to share their maps and the highlights of their discussion with the other groups.

- What stands out for you when you see and hear each group talk about their map?
- Do you see or hear anything surprising?
- Where do you notice similarities?
- Where do you notice differences?

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

Hand out one large, blank piece of paper to each small group.

Hand out multi-colored markers or pencils to each group.

4. Approaches to change

45 min

Invite participants to look at some different approaches to make parks welcoming and accessible to all members of the community. Ask volunteers to take turns reading through all the ideas listed below.

- **Improve the appearance of run down or neglected parks.**
- **Work to create an environment where people feel safe.**
- **Ensure that there is good public transportation to existing parks.**
- **Upgrade park equipment.**
- **Improve accessibility so people with different abilities can easily enter, exit and move through parks.**
- **Work with community members and/or businesses in the neighborhood to identify and carry out park improvements.**
- **Redesign parks to accommodate new uses that fit with the interests of diverse residents.**
- **Build new parks in neighborhoods or other parts of the community that are without a park.**

After reading these possibilities, invite people to have a discussion about these possible approaches, using the questions below. Encourage them to remember the maps they just created as they have their discussion.

Discussion Questions:

- **What stands out for you when you look at these approaches?**
- **Which of these approaches seem especially promising?**
- **Is there an approach that's missing?**

Invite each small group to go back to their map, and spend a few minutes drawing or writing their ideas for possible improvements. Each group is free to include ideas for several parks throughout the community, or to focus their attention on one particular park.

Have each group share their top three ideas with the whole group.

- **What, if any, themes or priorities do you notice as you hear each group's ideas?**

5. Identify potential next steps _____ 30 min

Invite participants to reflect on the conversation so far, and consider whether there is enough shared interest in order to move forward. If the interest is there, the questions below will help the group begin to explore next steps. Use the *Action Plan Template — Our Next Steps* (Attachment 3) to record the group's responses and clarify your intended next steps.

What existing relationships, capacities, experiences and successes can we utilize and build upon if/when we move forward?

- **If we decide to move forward with work to enhance our neighborhood's parks, what role might our different organizations play?**
- **Who else needs to be at the table?**

What resources do we need? What funding and grant opportunities are available to fund park projects in our community?

What specific next steps will we take?

If there is interest in moving forward:

- **Use the attached action planning template — "Our Next Steps" — to identify possible future directions.**
- **Discuss plans to reconvene the group.**

Thank everyone for coming.

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

Handout copies of *Rejuvenating Neighborhoods and Communities Through Parks — A Guide to Success*. (www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore_Parks_and_Recreation/Research/Rejuvenating_Neighborhoods-D2.pdf)

Encourage participants to review this document prior to the next gathering.

D. RESOURCES

ATTACHMENT 1: FACILITATION TIPS

It's important to stress that you don't need to have an expert facilitator to have productive meetings. The following are tips and ideas to help make your team experience as productive and enjoyable as possible.

Know Your Role

As the group's facilitator you should:

- Help the group understand its task/purpose.
- Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard.
- Create a safe environment for dialogue (including disagreement).
- Keep an open and balanced conversational flow.
- Focus energy of the group on the common task.
- Manage the group's time.
- Manage the group decision making process.
- Maintain neutrality when playing the primary facilitator role.
- Have available a mechanism through which contact information can be exchanged (e.g., a copied sign in sheet or a networking worksheet).

Set Simple Operating Agreements

Review "group operating agreements" and ask the participants if they agree with them or want to add anything. Basic operating agreements may include:

- Be respectful.
- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Share "air time."
- One person speaks at a time. Speak for yourself, not for others.
- If you are offended or upset, say so, and say why.
- You can disagree, but don't make it personal.
- Everyone helps the facilitator keep moving and stay on track.
- Personal stories are not shared outside the group.

Support the Group Process

Even though your team has agreed on some basic operating agreements, you will need to monitor how well the participants are honoring these agreements and communicating with each other — who has spoken, who hasn't, and whose points haven't received a fair hearing. Here are a few ideas to support the process:

- A well thought-out agenda is the key to a productive meeting; agenda needs to include desired outcomes/ agenda items/key questions/time estimates. (It is always good to give people a chance to shape/refine the agenda before the meeting and help with the creation of the agenda for the following meeting).
- Send relevant materials being discussed a couple of days before the meeting to make sure people have enough time to review them.
- Give the group an estimate of time you propose they spend on each question and give them time updates as needed (have a "game plan" for how the group could use its time and then be flexible).
- Don't be afraid of silence (it will sometimes take a while for participants to offer an answer to a question you pose).
- When deciding whether to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Facilitators are frequently trapped into taking too much responsibility for the group which can undermine the group experience. Encourage the group to take responsibility for the quality of their process.

Focus On Content

In addition to helping the group with process, you will also need to help the group deal with the "content" of the discussion:

- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views.
- Ask the group to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Steer the group away from focusing too much on or be overly influenced by one point of view.
- Remain neutral about content and be cautious about expressing your own values.
- Help participants identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

TIPS FOR HANDLING TYPICAL CHALLENGES

The Quiet or Shy Participant

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact: it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues to see if they want to speak. You can be more direct and ask them for their opinion: "Laurie, what do you think?"

The Dominator

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to help ensure an individual does not dominate the discussion. Once it becomes clear that a person is dominating, you must intervene and set limits. Start by reminding the group (and the individual) that you want to hear from all participants. Next, you might ask the individual to wait until everyone else has had a chance to give their opinion on the question. If the pattern continues you may need to be more direct: "Joe, please finish your point because I feel we are wandering a bit from our agreed upon agenda and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

Lack of Focus/Wandering Off Track

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

Responding to this can be a hard call.; After all, the discussion belongs to the group members. Yet, it is the facilitator's job to maintain group focus. You may wish to give some leeway to participants who want to explore closely-related topics. However, if only a few participants are carrying the discussion in a new direction, the others are likely to feel frustrated, resentful, and bored. The facilitator should try to refocus the discussion, perhaps by asking, "How does your point relate to the ____?" or stating, "That's an interesting point, but I'd like for us to return to the initial question."

Lack of Interest/Excitement

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

When people help craft the agenda, they are more likely to engage in the discussion. However, lack of interest/excitement can happen when the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond after posing the questions. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle so that everyone has a chance to respond. Another possible reason for the apparent lack of excitement in the discussion may be that the group seems to be in agreement. In this case the facilitator might check this assumption and then gain agreement for moving on to the next question or topic on the agenda.

Conflict/Tension

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is fine and useful. You must interrupt personal attacks, name calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. Remind group/the individual that it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but it is not acceptable to challenge them personally. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if the group members are bought into the ground rules, they will support you.

RESOURCES

DIALOGUE V. DEBATE

DEBATE/DISCUSSION	DIALOGUE
Assuming there is one right answer, and you have it	Assuming many people have pieces of the answer and together can craft new solutions
Combative: participants attempt to prove the other side is wrong	Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding and commitment
About winning	About exploring common ground
Listening to find flaws and making counter-arguments	Listening to understand, find meaning, and agreement
Defending assumptions as truth	Revealing assumptions for re-evaluation
Critiquing the other side's position	Re-examining all positions
Defending one's own views against those of others	Admitting that others' thinking can improve on one's own
Searching for flaws and weaknesses in others' positions	Searching for strength and value in others' positions
Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position	Discovering new options, not seeking closure

Adapted from The Public Conversations Project, Study Circles Resource Center, The Common Enterprise and Community Initiatives.

RESOURCES

ATTACHMENT 3: ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE

OUR NEXT STEPS

What change(s) do we want to see?

What specific action ideas do we want to work on?

ACTION IDEAS/ STRATEGIES	WHAT IS ALREADY BEING DONE?	WHAT OBSTACLES AND/ OR OPPORTUNITIES DO WE SEE?	WHAT INFORMATION DO WE NEED?	SOME IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS: • Who will take the lead? • Other key participants?

ATTACHMENT 4: EVALUATION FORM

1. Please rate the discussion:

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

2. How well did the meeting achieve the goals listed below:

GOALS

- Begin to establish a shared understanding about the role and equity and access to parks plays in our community.

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

- Identify shared interests among meeting participants.

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

- Identify possible opportunities for future collaboration.

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

3. Are there topics or issues regarding equity and access to parks that we missed during this discussion? If yes, what?

4. What next steps would you recommend?

5. Would you like to continue to stay involved?

YES NO MAYBE

6. Contact Information.

NAME

E-MAIL

PHONE

ADDRESS

RESOURCES

ATTACHMENT 5: INFORMATION ABOUT PARKS, EQUITY ACCESS AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Below is a list of available resources that may be helpful for you to reference. Please note this list is not inclusive, but rather a short list of compiled resources that NRPA has found useful in the past.

2010 Outdoor Recreation Participation Report:

www.outdoorfoundation.org/pdf/ResearchParticipation2010.pdf

NRPA Guide to Rejuvenating Neighborhoods and Communities Through Parks:

www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore_Parks_and_Recreation/Research/Rejuvenating_Neighborhoods-D2.pdf

ATTACHMENT 6: RESOURCES TO UNDERSTAND EQUITY AND HOLD EQUITABLE DIALOGUES

ADA Standards for Accessible Design:

www.ada.gov

National Disability Rights Resources:

www.ndrn.org

Parks and Recreation in Underserved Areas: A Public Health Perspective: www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/Papers/Parks-Rec-Underserved-Areas.pdf

Universal Design Alliance:

www.universaldesign.org

Race Matters, Annie E. Casey Foundation:

www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/PublicationsSeries/RaceMatters.aspx

Racial Equity Checklists for Facilitators & Organizers:

www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.156.aspx

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — Healthy Communities Program:

www.cdc.gov/healthycommunitiesprogram/overview/healthequity.htm

ATTACHMENT 7: RESOURCES FOR PUBLIC DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY CHANGE PROCESSES

Everyday Democracy:

www.everyday-democracy.org

Community Initiatives:

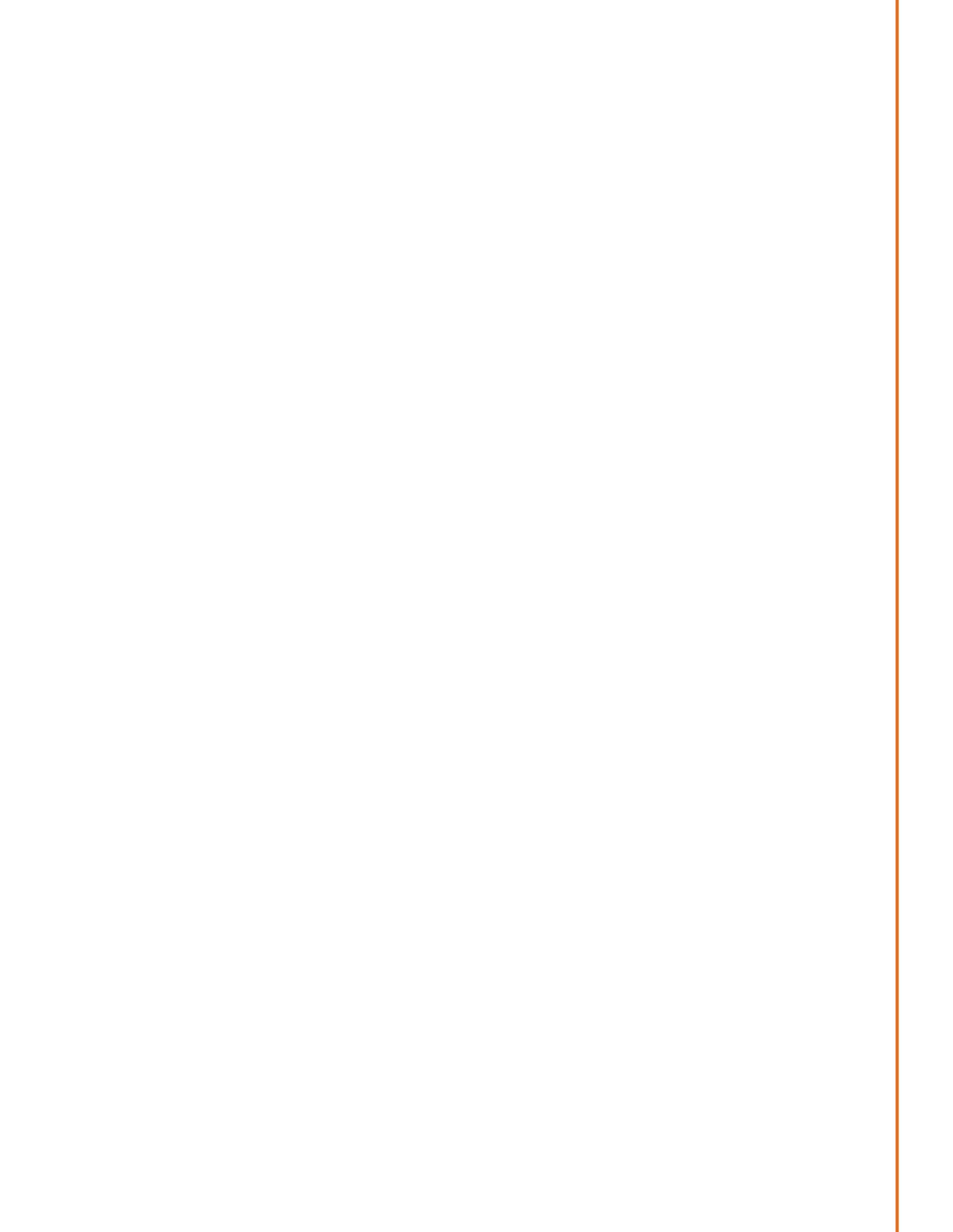
communityinitiatives.com

National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation:

www.ncdd.org

Participedia:

www.participedia.net





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