

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CHILD & ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY

W W W . A A C A P . O R G

Organizing Forums on Children's Mental Health

Educating policymakers about mental health issues happens not only on Capitol Hill or in the state legislature, but also in communities. AACAP members can organize Forums for Children's Mental Health to bring together policymakers, physicians, mental health providers, advocates, and families to dialogue and exchange ideas on improving healthcare for the state's children and adolescents. Forums can not only educate policymakers on the unique needs of children with mental illness, but can facilitate collaboration between AACAP regional organizations and allied advocacy and professional organizations.

Use the tips below to help organize and implement a forum in your state or community. If you have any questions or would like assistance from AACAP in planning a forum, please contact Liz DiLauro, Grassroots Advocacy Manager, at edilauro@aacap.org or (202) 966-7300 x107.

Identify a Planning Committee

Building a strong coalition of organizations dedicated to hosting a Forum on Children's Health will help to ensure broad participation in your event and increase engagement in future collaborative activities. As you begin to conceptualize your forum, form a committee to jointly plan and host the event.

Consider reaching out to leaders from state and local allied organizations to participate in your planning committee, such as:

- Professional medical organizations for psychiatrists, pediatricians, and family physicians;
- Family organizations, such as National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Mental Health America (MHA), Child and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD), and National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health;
- Mental health provider organizations, such as school counselors and community behavioral health centers; and
- Advocacy organizations, such as Voices for America's Children and parent advocacy networks.

Initial Planning

Once you have identified a planning committee, begin to host regular calls to bring all of the participants together and flesh out your ideas for the forum. Be sure to allow time for the participants to get to know each other and each organization's work, as well as build trust.

- Identify a specific goal for the forum that is realistic and achievable.
- Discuss the roles and responsibilities of each participating organization.
- Discuss possible funding sources for the forum.
- Identify a topic, keeping in mind current legislation and policy proposals related to children's mental health.
- Brainstorm possible panelists, as well as target audience members. Be sure to consider how to incorporate the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders – providers, families, and policymakers. Possible panelists include:
 - State legislators;
 - State agency administrators;
 - Child and adolescent psychiatrists;
 - Primary care physicians;
 - Community mental health providers; and
 - Youth with mental illness and their families.

Details, Details, Details

Work with your planning committee to organize the logistics for the forum. Divide responsibilities for completing the tasks to ensure that all participants are engaged and that the workload is shared.

- Identify a date for the forum, taking into consideration your state's legislative session, election dates, and other events that pose possible conflicts for attendees.
- Identify a location, taking into consideration proximity to policymakers' offices. It may be possible to host the forum at the office of one of the forum's cosponsors, making it a cost-free venue.
- Finalize the list of panelists and confirm their participation.
- Identify a moderator to facilitate the forum.
- Develop a working agenda, including the order of panelists, amount of time for each presentation, and ways to engage with the audience.
- Develop an invitation and/or flyer for the forum, including an RSVP.
- Disseminate the invitation as widely as possible, encouraging all members of the planning committee to:
 - Email the invitation to colleagues;
 - Include an announcement in their organizational newsletters; and
 - Distribute the flyer in person during meetings and other gatherings.
- Order any food or beverages for the event.
- Consider developing a press release to invite local newspapers and television stations, highlighting the diverse attendees and the goal of the forum.

Leading up to Forum

As the forum approaches, work with the planning committee to develop materials, confirm details, and ensure a good turnout.

- Confirm the logistics with the venue, including seating arrangement, technology needs, and food or beverage.
- Contact the panelists to go over their roles, presentations, and any last minute questions.
- Send a reminder to all attendees.
- Follow-up to any media contacts to ask if they will attend.
- Develop a program for the night, including the agenda and a list of planning committee members.
- Gather any educational materials you'd like to have available for the audience members.
- Create a sign-in sheet to record who attends, as well as their contact information.
- Decide roles for the planning committee members, including someone to welcome the panelists, register the attendees, distribute education materials, troubleshoot any technological issues, and take notes.

At the Forum

With the hard preparation work behind you, keep in mind these few last minutes details during the forum:

- Try to identify concrete action steps that come out of the discussion and have the moderator reiterate these at the end of the presentations;
- Leave time for questions and comments from the audience; and
- Take pictures!

Follow-Up

After the forum, capitalize on the momentum and ideas generated by doing some follow-up work.

- Connect with the planning committee and develop an action plan to move forward on any ideas from the forum.
- Include a summary of the forum in organizational newsletters, including photos.
- Schedule follow-up visits with any policymakers who were present.
- Consider making it an annual event!