



Citizens' Assembly: Problem Solving Through Public Participation

A citizens' assembly is a small-scale forum in which a representative group comes together to learn, deliberate, and make recommendations about a specific issue or proposal. While citizens' assemblies harken back to ancient Greece, they have regained popularity in recent years as a way to engage communities in addressing complex issues, ranging from affordable housing to digital safety. With guidance and facilitation from UW-Madison's Division of Extension, local communities are using this tool to address some of their most complex issues.

Case Study: Addressing Homelessness in Eau Claire County

Like many communities, Eau Claire County is seeing an increasing number of people facing homelessness. Numerous city and county departments have joined forces through the Housing Our Neighbors Planning Collaborative, an effort to prevent homelessness and ensure that the number of people experiencing homelessness never exceeds the county's capacity to move people into permanent housing. The effort brings together the Eau Claire Chamber of Commerce, Eau Claire City-County Health Department, and Eau Claire County Department of Human Services.

With guidance and facilitation from UW-Madison's Division of Extension, the county recently convened its first-ever Citizens' Assembly on Homelessness to develop insights and recommendations from a wide range of participants.

Forming a Representative Assembly

Citizens' assemblies bring together diverse groups of individuals to participate in the democratic decision-making process and foster public participation. To form a Citizens' Assembly in Eau Claire, a recruitment announcement was shared widely through several channels, including the City Manager's weekly email, the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce bi-weekly email, flyers posted at the Eau Claire County Department of Human Services and The Community Table, and in the local newspaper. Over 200 Eau Claire County residents expressed interest. Invitations were then sent out to a randomly selected group to help ensure that the assembly included a representative cross-section of participants. To fill a few remaining open spots, the invitation was then extended to all those who expressed initial interest. On May 10, 2025, 21 Eau Claire County residents participated in the Citizens' Assembly. Participants reflected a cross-section of Eau Claire

85%

of participants evaluated the process as **collaborative, genuine, and worthwhile.**

72%

found the information **clear, useful, and balanced.**

90%

would recommend citizens' assemblies to other local governments.



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County residents in terms of age, locality, housing status, and length of residency, with 15% of participants having lived or living experience with homelessness.

Facilitating the Citizens' Assembly

Throughout the day-long assembly, facilitated by Amber Wichowsky, Associate Professor at the La Follette School of Public Affairs and Leadership Wisconsin

Endowed Chair for the Division of Extension, participants learned about local housing challenges and collaboratively developed actionable solutions. Participants reflected on data provided by the Eau Claire County Human Services Department and Eau Claire City-County Health Department, and on the information shared by fellow participants. Breakout groups and facilitated activities led to in-depth dialogue as participants grappled with the complexities of homelessness and began to form recommendations.

Community Driven Recommendations

The assembly made 10 recommendations, all receiving super-majority support, which will directly inform the county's comprehensive community plan and the Housing Our Neighbors Planning Cooperative's community plan development. The recommendations include:

-  **Education:** Widely distribute de-stigmatizing information on homelessness and housing insecurity.
-  **Community Engagement:** Foster events that bring community members and those experiencing homelessness together.
-  **Resources:** Create simplified roadmaps for services, standardize processes, and identify resource gaps.
-  **Funding:** Secure diverse, sustainable funding, increase transparency, and build system-wide capacity.
-  **What's Working:** Implement best practices from other communities and highlight local successes.
-  **Re-entry:** Develop systems to support individuals returning to the community post-incarceration, including transitional living.
-  **Lived Experience:** Center the voices of those with lived experience in decision-making and support peer mentorship.
-  **Collaboration:** Emphasize true relationship-building and "working trust" over mere coordination.
-  **Policy and Systems Change:** Encourage city and county collaboration on housing development strategies and redefine "affordable" housing.
-  **De-criminalization:** Allocate funding for non-criminal outreach teams focused on individual needs, including substance misuse and mental health, in collaboration with law enforcement.

Results

The recommendations formed by the assembly have helped propel the county and collaborative's work forward and will be used in future planning. "The Citizens' Assembly provided an invaluable platform for our community to engage directly with this critical issue," said Angela Stokes, Assistant Director of Human Services with Eau Claire County. "The insights and recommendations from our residents, especially those with lived experience, are fundamental to building a truly effective and compassionate plan to address homelessness in Eau Claire County."

Participants expressed high marks for the experience:

- **85% of participants** evaluated the process as collaborative, genuine, and worthwhile.
- **72%** found the information clear, useful, and balanced.
- **Over half** reported gaining new perspectives and viewpoints.
- **9 out of 10** would recommend citizens' assemblies to other local governments.



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Learn More

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