**Objectives**

Community members will:

- Understand sense of community and social capital and their importance to communities
- Describe how attitudes can affect sense of community and social capital in a town
- Plan to increase personal sense of community and social capital within their community
- Organize and participate in community task forces or action groups to increase sense of community and social capital in their community

Communities are made up of people working together to improve the situation in which they live. Individual residents often get involved in neighborhoods, schools and organizations to take local action and may ultimately feel a stronger community connection. This feeling of connection and belonging builds a strong sense of community.

This discussion guide on sense of community is adapted from community conversation materials developed by Everyday Democracy, a national organization that helps communities find ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to solve problems. Created in 1989 by The Paul J. Aicher Foundation, Everyday Democracy has worked with more than 600 communities across the United States on many different public issues. Learn more at www.everyday-democracy.org.

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Session One – Meet Each Other

Opening
We can bring new life and ideas to existing efforts in our community by talking together.

Getting Started
● Welcome to everyone!
● Please remember to bring your booklet with you to each session.
● Briefly review all five sessions together.
● Please read the Introduction aloud as a group.
● Facilitators will be responsible for keeping the dialogue going. They will make sure the group stays on track, and they will not take sides.
● Sessions usually take up to two hours but groups can continue the dialogue longer. You do not have to cover every question in the dialogue guide.
● Create ground rules in each small group to help stay on track. Suggested ground rules are listed but the group may have others it would like to add.
● Supplies needed: flip charts, markers, tape and a copy of this packet for each participant.

Ground Rules
1. Listen to one another.
2. Treat others with respect. Do not blame, attack or engage in put-downs.
3. Everyone gets a chance to talk. Share air time.
4. Do not interrupt when another person is speaking.
5. Speak for yourself, not the group.
6. Disagreeing is OK. Work toward understanding.
7. Stick to the issue.
8. If you talk about people who are not in the room, please don’t use their names.
9. Some of what we talk about will be very personal. Please do not share outside of the group unless everyone says it is OK.
10. Help the facilitator keep things on track.
11. Other suggestions?

Why Use a Discussion-to-Action Approach?
Healthy communities require many individuals working together to make a difference. In a discussion such as this one, we can learn about what others think of the community and how people can get involved to make it an even better place to live and work.

The approach that a discussion-to-action program takes is that small, diverse groups of people will meet a number of times to think, talk and work together to address issues affecting them. The overall goal is to take action on these issues in the community.

This discussion program is set up this way:

Session One: Meet Each Other
● Get to know each other and your connections to your community.
● Learn what sense of community and social capital mean.

Session Two: Study the Problem
● Discover various viewpoints of why a community might lack sense of community and social capital.
● Connect various viewpoints to your own community.

Session Three: Describe an Ideal Community
● Talk about ways to increase feelings of sense of community and social capital.
● List attributes of an ideal community.

Session Four: Plan for Action
● Share ways to individually increase sense of community and social capital.
● Identify ways to increase sense of community and social capital as a community effort.

Session Five: Action Forum
● Collect ideas from all dialogue groups.
● Sign up to take action on ideas.
● Meet with action committee briefly.
Introduction

Rural America has experienced a disruption of roots in the past 20 years as young adults migrate to urban areas, leaving an aging population in many rural towns. This means fewer people are left to sustain the community economically, socially and civically (Rathge, Clemenson and Danielson, 2002). Rural communities face many challenges as they work to sustain themselves, and growth often is seen as impossible.

For many people, though, rural communities are the ideal place to live and raise a family. These communities are an essential part of the nation’s landscape and are home to 21 percent of the people in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau). People locate to rural areas because of a preference for a safe, friendly, family-focused routine associated with a small town way of life (Salamon, 2003). These shared values illustrate a strong sense of community and can be promoted as quality of life incentives to bring people back, as well as keep them in rural America.

People in both urban and rural communities are often working together to improve the place they live. Individuals may feel a stronger sense of belonging and community connection when they are involved in their neighborhoods, schools and local businesses. Residents begin to have a shared sense of identity or sense of community, which is a concept in community work that focuses on the “experience” of community. A sense of community involves a feeling of belonging and importance. Sense of community describes overall community support, even though members may not always have personal relationships with each other (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Sense of community can be used as a means for social involvement and participation in the community that eventually may lead to increased social capital for that town. Social capital is all about networks and connections with others as well as the trust among those in the networks. Social capital describes what can arise from these networks when people do things for each other and add value to the quality of life of individuals in a community (Putnam, 2000; Flora and Flora, 2008).

Social capital takes many different forms. It can be the neighbor down the street who knows all of the children and is willing to help out in an emergency. Social capital can be the local police officer who coaches Little League or a group of volunteers who come together each year to organize a Relay for Life event. In fact, this powerful connector can be the local women’s church group or the families in a local 4-H club. Whenever people come together, building relationships of trust or networking to get things done, social capital is at work improving the community.
Discussion Questions

1. Who are you? Where were you born? Where did you grow up?
2. Where do you live now?
3. What is the story of this community? How do you remember this community in earlier days? What is our community like now? Who lives here? What is growing up here like these days?
4. What do you like about living in this community? What’s going well? What’s not going so well?
5. What does this community look like when people are involved and connected with each other (and have social capital)? What does it look like when people are not?
6. Describe a time or instance when you, or someone close to you, felt disconnected from your community, a community organization, event, neighbors or an individual. What was it like? How did you or others react?
7. Do you feel you have influence in your community? Why or why not?

Record on Flip Chart Paper
What does “sense of community” mean to you? Think of some examples and list on flip chart paper. What would living in a community be like if these examples happened more often?

In Closing
Have you ever wished some individual or family was not a part of your community? How would you feel if you knew others felt that way about you or your family? Think of things you can do to make people feel good about being a member of your community and make them feel included.

Reminders for Next Time
- Bring books
- Look for examples of sense of community or social capital in your community
- Facilitator – bring back flip chart notes
Session Two – Study the Problem

Opening
Before we can figure out how to build our sense of community and social capital, we need to know how a problem can develop in a community and why.

Discovering the Attitudes in a Community
Here are some views people have about why a community may lack a sense that people belong, are connected to each other and matter to each other.

- Cliques
- Suspicious of new people
- Stereotypes/offensive jokes/racism/bigotry
- People want to be involved but others do not ask them to be involved
- No pride in the community
- No activities for kids/families
- Feelings of insecurity, not safe
- No influence in the community
- No support from friends or family
- Poor attitudes/negativity/gossip
- Don’t want to see others succeed
- Other views?

Record on Flip Chart Paper
When someone uses a negative viewpoint listed above, in what ways a negative viewpoint listed above, in what ways could you respond? Facilitator should record suggestions on a flip chart.

In Closing
How do these viewpoints or attitudes affect sense of community and social capital in a town? For next time, think about how we can help change these attitudes if needed.

Reminders for Next Time
- Bring books
- Facilitator – bring back flip chart notes

Discussion Questions

1. Which viewpoints were evident in the Calling it Quits case study? From whose angle?
2. Are you surprised that any of these viewpoints even would be considered in a community? Why?
3. Which of the viewpoints have you heard or observed in your own community? Can you give examples?
4. Have you observed any people in your community effectively handling any of the viewpoints above? Does anything surprise you?

Read case study—“Calling it Quits in Rural America” (page 9)
Session Three – **Describe an Ideal Community**

**Opening**

In Session One, we learned about sense of community and social capital and what they mean for our communities. In Session Two, we discussed viewpoints on why sense of community and social capital might be lacking in our communities and how our attitudes can affect sense of community and social capital.

In Session Three, we will talk about what we would like our community to be like before working on a plan for the future. If we want to have a positive sense of community and strong social capital in our towns, we need to better understand what these terms mean.

In Session One, sense of community was defined as a feeling of belonging, and a sentiment that residents are important to each other and that their needs will be met just by being dedicated to each other and to their community. Sense of community can be broken down further into four elements:

1. **Membership** – a feeling of being part of a community or belonging to a group
2. **Influence** – a two-way give-and-take relationship between the community and residents
3. **Fulfillment of Needs** – the positive reinforcement and rewards a member gets just by being a resident of a community
4. **Shared Emotional Connection** – a sense of shared history and the bonds developed through time through positive relationships with other community members (McMillan and Chavis, 1986)

In Session One, social capital was defined as the networks and connections with others as well as the trust among those in the networks (Putnam, 2000). Social capital can be broken down further into four elements:

1. **Civic Engagement** – participation and involvement by community members in their community providing opportunities to further a cause or push the ideas of the community to public action
2. **Trust** – a positive, confident interaction with others. Trust often is forged with specific people through common participation in groups, neighborhoods, associations and activities.
3. **Civic Responsibility** – feeling a sense of civic duty and responsibility to make the community a better place
4. **Networks and Connections** – groups of individuals who can be counted on for support and backing when needed

Sense of community relates to an individual feeling while social capital relates to the connections among individuals and groups. They are inter-connected but have distinct differences.

**Exploring Sense of Community and Social Capital in Our Community** (pages 10-11)

Participants individually fill out each section of the survey.

**Record on Flip Chart Paper**

After each section of the survey, the group members discuss their answers and ways to increase each component in their community.

**In Closing**

If you had to write a letter to the editor, what three positive points would you make about your town?

**Reminders for Next Time**

- Bring books
- Facilitator – bring back flip chart notes
Session Four – Plan for Action

Opening
Each of us can contribute individually and collectively to the overall vitality of our community.

Individual Action
Participants individually review “150 Things You Can Do to Increase Social Capital” (pages 12-14) and circle 10 items they already do. Have them underline five items each will commit to in the next six months to increase social capital or sense of community in their community.

Discuss and share with the group two items to which each participant is willing to commit.

Save your “150 Things You Can Do to Increase Social Capital” page and look at it periodically to ensure you stay committed to the items underlined.

Community Action
Review flip charts from Session 3: How to increase components of sense of community and social capital in your town and “150 Things You Can Do to Increase Social Capital.”

Which things could the entire community do?

Pick two or three ideas that seem useful for your community and discuss:

- What would your community need to make this happen? Are other communities trying these ideas? How are they working?
- What community action could we do to move the idea/ideas forward?
- What would our next steps be?
- What kind of support do we need to take these steps? With whom could we link to make this happen?

Record on Flip Chart Paper
List the two or three ideas and details on flip chart paper; choose reporter(s) to summarize to the entire group in Session Five.

Closing
Research suggests a powerful link between a community’s economic prosperity and the degree to which its individuals, institutions and organizations are interconnected. How well are people in your community connected to groups in your community?

Reminders for Next Time
- Bring books
- Facilitator – bring back flip chart notes to Action Forum and combine with other groups for overall “big picture”
- Attend Session Five - Action Forum
Session Five – Action Forum

Opening
An action forum is a large-group meeting at the end of all small-group discussions. One facilitator from the community leads the Action Forum. Ideas from each small group are presented at the action forum. After presenting the ideas, people in the community form action groups or committees. Some community members may join these groups or committees, while others may help in other ways. The more people who get involved, the more action that can take place.

Action Forum Agenda
- Post summaries of each dialogue group around the room. Give time for participants to walk around the room and see the summaries of each group. Have snacks or refreshments if time and resources allow.
- The facilitator for the day welcomes everyone, talks about the community efforts and thanks those involved.
- A representative from each dialogue group gives a summary report of the key issues and concerns from his or her group, as well as ideas for group or community action.
- A recorder takes notes as each group reports.
- The facilitator identifies common themes for action and they are listed on a flip chart.
- Individuals sign up for action groups in which they are interested.
- Action groups or committees should meet briefly before leaving, select a leader and set a time for the first meeting.
- Close the meeting by thanking participants and asking wrap-up questions below.

Wrapping Up
- What has surprised you?
- Has your thinking changed about your sense of community and social capital? If so, how?
- How will you stay involved in addressing the sense of community in your town?
- Will you do anything differently because of this dialogue?

Closing and Next Steps
1. Ask someone to consider writing a report for public officials, leaders, the news media and others on action forum ideas and future committee work.
2. Make a plan for how action efforts will be tracked and tied to further organizing.
Case Study

You are a resident of a small town in rural America. Like many of your neighboring towns, your community has decreased in population and businesses in the last several years. Many residents have moved on or passed away. Your local school has experienced declining enrollment several years in a row, and the superintendent expects those numbers to continue declining unless something changes.

Despite these negatives, you and many others in your town have worked hard to keep your town viable and thriving. Five years ago, a decision was made by the local development board to run ads around the country, offering any family two free lots and up to $20,000 toward a home purchase, and businesses were offered free lots and up to $50,000 to relocate to your town. Much of this money was funded privately through donors who wished to remain anonymous.

Your town's proposal was advertised and soon made headlines across the country. Town residents were very excited to see hundreds of inquiries from around the world. Several families from other states made visits to your town, and city residents gave tours and answered many questions. However, only one family, John and Jane Johnson, ended up making the commitment to move. They said the cost and effort to make the move across the country was worth it because they were tired of crime, traffic and the high cost of living in California. The Johnson family included two school-age children, a bonus to the local school.

John and Jane bought a house that was moved to town and put on two lots donated by your city. They bought a third lot, and later were given $15,000 by the city. John had a background working in retail, and Jane was a former accountant. They soon opened an eatery and coffee shop on Main Street.

Within weeks of opening their business, the couple petitioned for a restraining order against the long-time owners of another diner. The Johnsons filed court papers alleging the diner owners were verbally abusive to their family, seemed out of control, and threatened damage to the Johnsons' home and property. Both businesses now are closed. The Johnsons eventually found other work, continue to live in the community but prefer to spend time together and have little to do with the locals. Their house, however, has been on the market for several months.

Since the news media picked up on your town’s initial proposal five years ago, they recently came back to do a follow-up story. The headline read “California Family Calls it Quits,” and John Johnson was quoted as saying, “It hasn’t been an easy move. No one here seems to really want new people; we’ve experienced a lot of cliqueness. I think because I came to town wearing an earring and a ponytail, and didn’t wear overalls or work boots, people thought I was a con artist or was running from the law.” Jane Johnson said, “People here didn’t try to get to know us; they assumed we were unstable and didn’t trust us.”

Jim Wilson, the local mayor, also was quoted as saying, “Not everybody fits in a small town.” The Johnsons are planning to move back to California as soon as they can sell their house.
Exploring Sense of Community and Social Capital in Our Community

Take a few minutes to answer the following sample questions. Place your answer to each question in the correct column. This exercise will not be scored. This survey is a general tool to explore thoughts and assess your personal sense of community and social capital activities.

### Sense of Community

#### Membership

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1. I can recognize most of the people who live in my community.
2. I feel at home in this community.

What are some ways your community could increase feelings of membership among residents of the community?

__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

#### Influence

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1. I care about what others in my community think of my actions.
2. I have influence over what this community is like.
3. If this community has a problem, people who live here can get it solved.

What are some ways your community could increase feelings of influence among residents of the community?

__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

#### Reinforcement of Needs

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1. I think my community is a good place to live.
2. People in this community have similar values.

What are some ways your community could provide for residents to make them feel that their values are appreciated and needs are being met?

__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

#### Shared Emotional Connections

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1. Living in this community is very important to me.
2. People in this community usually get along with each other.
3. I expect to live in this community for a long time.

What are some ways your community could help increase the shared emotional connections among residents?

__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
The text on the page is as follows:

**Social Capital** (Saguaro Seminar, 2002).

**Civic Engagement**

1. I have contacted a local tribal/public official in the last 12 months.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

2. I have donated my time to do volunteer work of any kind in my community in the last 12 months.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

3. I have attended a government or political meeting in the last 12 months.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

What are some ways you could increase your civic engagement within your community?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

**Trust**

1. I feel safe in my community.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

2. If I took a two-week trip, I could ask a neighbor to watch my home, take in my mail or water my plants.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

3. Overall, I trust people in my community.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

What are some ways you could increase trust within your community?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

**Civic Responsibility**

1. If I lost my wallet with $200 in it, people in my community would return the money to me if they found it.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

2. People here care about how the community looks.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

3. I vote regularly in city, county or other local elections.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

What are some ways you could increase civic responsibility within your community?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

**Networks and Connections**

1. I have had friends come to my house for an informal visit in the past 12 months.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

2. I have attended a faith-based service or event in the past 12 months.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

3. I have taken part in community events in the past 12 months.  
   - [ ] YES  - [ ] NO

What are some ways you could increase your networks and connections within your community?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
What to Do: 150 Things You can Do To Build Social Capital

Social capital is built through hundreds of little and big actions we take every day. Try some of these or some of your own. You know what to do. Build connections to people. Build trust with others. Get involved.

1. Organize a social gathering to welcome a new neighbor.
2. Attend town meetings.
3. Register to vote and vote.
4. Support local merchants.
5. Volunteer your special skills to an organization.
6. Donate blood (with a friend).
7. Start a community garden.
8. Mentor someone of a different ethnic or religious group.
9. Surprise a new neighbor by making a favorite dinner - and include the recipe.
10. Tape record your parents' earliest recollections and share them with your children.
11. Plan a vacation with friends or family.
12. Avoid gossip.
13. Help fix someone's flat tire.
14. Organize or participate in a sports league.
15. Join a gardening club.
16. Attend home parties when invited.
17. Become an organ donor or blood marrow donor.
18. Attend your children's athletic contests, plays and recitals.
19. Get to know your children's teachers.
20. Join the local Elks, Kiwanis or Knights of Columbus.
21. Get involved with 4-H or Cub/Boy/Girl Scouts.
22. Start a monthly tea group.
23. Speak at or play host to a monthly brown-bag lunch series at your local library.
24. Sing in a choir.
25. Get to know the clerks and salespeople at your local stores.
26. Attend PTA meetings.
27. Audition for the community theater or volunteer to usher.
28. Give your park a weatherproof chess/checkers board.
29. Play cards with friends or neighbors.
30. Give to your local food bank.
31. Walk or bike to support a cause and meet others.
32. Employers: Encourage volunteer/community groups to hold meetings on your site.
33. Volunteer in your child's classroom or chaperone a field trip.
34. Join or start a baby-sitting cooperative.
35. Attend school plays.
36. Answer surveys when asked.
37. Businesses: Invite local government officials to speak at your workplace.
38. Attend Memorial Day parades and express appreciation for others.
39. Form a local outdoor activity group.
40. Participate in political campaigns.
41. Attend a local budget committee meeting.
42. Form a computer group for local senior citizens.
43. Help coach Little League or other youth sports - even if you don't have a kid playing.
44. Help run the snack bar at the Little League field.
45. Form a tool-lending library with neighbors and share ladders, snow blowers, etc.
46. Start a lunch gathering or a discussion group with co-workers.
47. Offer to rake a neighbor's yard or shovel his/her walk.
48. Start or join a carpool.
49. Employers: Give employees time (for example, three days per year to work on civic projects).
50. Plan a “walking tour” of a local historic area.
51. Eat breakfast at a local gathering spot on Saturdays.
52. Have family dinners and read to your children.
53. Run for public office.
54. Stop and make sure the person on the side of the highway is OK.
55. Have a block party or a holiday open house.
56. Start a fix-it group of friends willing to help each other clean, paint, garden, etc.
57. Offer to serve on a town committee.
58. Join the volunteer fire department.
59. Go to church or temple or walk outside with your children. Talk to them about why this is important.
60. If you grow tomatoes, plant extra for a lonely elderly neighbor. Better yet, ask him/her to teach you and others how to can the extras.
61. Ask a single diner to share your table for lunch.
62. Stand at a major intersection holding a sign for your favorite candidate.
63. Persuade a local restaurant to have a designated “meet people” table.
64. Have a potluck supper before your town meeting.
65. Take dance lessons with a friend.
66. Say “thanks” to public servants - police, firefighters, town clerk, etc.
67. Fight to keep essential local services in the downtown area - your post office, police station, school, etc.
68. Join a nonprofit board of directors.
69. Gather a group to clean a local park or cemetery.
70. When somebody says “government stinks,” suggest he/she help fix it.
71. Turn off the TV and talk with friends or family.
72. Have a neighborhood barbecue.
73. Bake cookies for new neighbors or work colleagues.
74. Plant tree seedlings along your street with neighbors and rotate care for the trees.
75. Volunteer at the library.
76. Form or join a bowling team.
77. Return a lost wallet or appointment book.
78. Use public transportation and start talking with those you regularly see.
79. Ask neighbors for help and reciprocate.
80. Go to a local folk or crafts festival.
81. Call an old friend.
82. Sign up for a class and meet your classmates.
83. Accept or extend an invitation.
84. Talk to your kids or parents about their day.
85. Say hello to strangers.
86. Log off and go to the park.
87. Ask a new person to join a group for a dinner or an evening.
88. Play host to a potluck meal or participate in them.
89. Volunteer to drive someone.
90. Say hello when you spot an acquaintance in a store.
91. Play host to a movie night.
92. Exercise together or take walks with friends or family.
93. Assist with or create your town or neighborhood’s newsletter.
94. Organize a neighborhood pickup project with lawn games afterward.
95. Collect oral histories from older town residents.
96. Join a book club discussion or get the group to discuss local issues.
97. Volunteer to deliver Meals on Wheels in your neighborhood.
98. Start a children’s story hour at your local library.
100. Tell friends and family about social capital and why it matters.
101. Greet people.
102. Cut back on television.
103. Join in to help carry something heavy.
104. Plan a reunion of family, friends or those with whom you had a special connection.
105. Take in the programs at your local library.
106. Read the local news faithfully.
107. Buy a grill and invite others over for a meal.
108. Fix it even if you didn’t break it.
109. Pick it up even if you didn’t drop it.
110. Attend a public meeting.
111. Go with friends or colleagues to a ball game (and root, root, root for the home team).
112. Help scrape ice off a neighbor’s car, put chains on the tires or shovel it out.
113. Hire young people for odd jobs.
114. Start a tradition.
115. Share your snow blower.
117. Join a project that includes people from all walks of life.
118. Sit on your stoop.
119. Be nice when you drive.
120. Make gifts of time.
121. Buy a big hot tub.
122. Volunteer at your local neighborhood school.
123. Offer to help out at your local recycling center.
124. Send a “thank you” letter to the editor about a person or event that helped build community.
125. Raise funds for a new town clock or new town library.
126. When inspired, write personal notes to friends and neighbors.
127. Attend gallery openings.
128. Organize a town wide yard sale.
129. Invite friends or colleagues to help with a home renovation or home building project.
130. Join or start a local mall-walking group and have coffee together afterward.
131. Build a neighborhood playground.
132. Become a story-reader or baby-rocker at a local child-care center or neighborhood preschool.
133. Contra dance or two-step.
134. Help kids on your street construct a lemonade stand.
135. Open the door for someone who has his or her hands full.
136. Say hi to those in elevators.
137. Invite friends to go snowshoeing, hiking or cross-country skiing.
138. Offer to watch your neighbor’s home or apartment while the person is away.
139. Organize a fitness/health group with your friends or co-workers.
140. Hang out at the town dump and chat with your neighbors as you sort through your trash at the recycling center.
141. Take a pottery class with your children or parent(s).
142. See if your neighbor needs anything when you run to the store.
143. Ask to see a friend’s family photos.
144. Join groups (for example, arts, sports, religion) likely to lead to making new friends that bridge race/ethnicity, social class or other social cleavages.
145. Attend or start a free summer music series at a local park.

Note: Expanded from original list of “100 Things You Can Do to Build Social Capital” (Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America project at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government).
References


Building a Strong Sense of Community

Discussion Guide