

# SOLUTION

# NARRATIVE



This Citizen Engagement Technique is part of a series that Cities of Service has created to help city leaders work with citizens to solve problems. To learn more and access additional techniques, visit [citiesofservice.org](http://citiesofservice.org).

Solution Narrative is an exercise cities can use to imagine possible solutions to a given challenge in partnership with their citizens. In a small group setting, residents discuss enablers and inhibitors to their creative solutions and pinpoint the strongest ones to suggest to the city.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Prior to implementing any citizen engagement technique, it is important to set goals and expectations, identify stakeholders, and more. For a checklist of steps you should take before you begin, please visit [citiesofservice.org/techniques](http://citiesofservice.org/techniques).

## HOW TO LEAD A SOLUTION NARRATIVE SESSION:

1. Welcome citizens to the meeting and remind them of the meeting purpose, the challenge they are helping to address, and how their input will be used.
2. Break citizens into small groups of five to eight with a trained facilitator for each group. Instruct each group to assign a scribe.
3. The small group facilitators instruct citizens to individually reflect on the following question and write their answers on paper: "If the challenge were solved, what would you see, hear, and feel?" The small group facilitator invites citizens to share their answers with the small group.
4. In each group, the small group facilitator leads a discussion about possible solutions to the identified problem. The facilitator instructs the scribe to write these on posters as the group brainstorms.
5. The facilitator instructs each member of the small group to individually reflect on the questions below and write their answers on paper.
  - a. What in the city enables this solution?
  - b. What in the city inhibits this solution?
6. The small group facilitator invites citizens to share their answers, and together they write down their top enablers and inhibitors for each solution.
7. The lead facilitator asks each small group to share their solutions with the whole group and then post them to the wall. Next, the lead facilitator invites citizens to walk around the room, read each solution, and place a green dot next to the ideas they like most.
8. Discuss the results of the voting with the entire group and choose five to eight ideas for the next round of consideration.



9. Once the group chooses five to eight solutions, the facilitator instructs the group to pick their top three and identify any improvements they would like to make to each. Discuss how the enablers can be maximized and the inhibitors can be managed. Explore what project staff and community partnerships will be needed to make the solutions successful.
10. At the end of the session, collect the posters and explain what will happen to the information citizens provided. Remind citizens of potential parameters or restrictions that could influence their ideas or suggestions, like legal requirements, grant requirements, or financial limitations.
11. Thank citizens for their participation and remind them how they can stay up to date on the project's development.
12. Capture the lessons from the Solution Narrative technique and integrate them into the final design.
13. Report what you've learned to citizens and explain how their input will be used by the city.

#### EXAMPLE:

Peoria, Illinois was looking for ways to drive reinvestment in historic commercial corridors in the oldest parts of the city. Instead of prescribing solutions, they wanted creative ideas that would have buy-in from community members from the beginning.

First, the city's Innovation Team conducted in-depth interviews with community members in one of the corridors, West Main Street. They had these interviews transcribed, and they teased out key insights. Some of these insights were challenges, such as entrepreneurs struggling to find affordable storefronts, not enough things to look at or do along West Main Street, and fear of walking alone on West Main Street, especially at night.

The Innovation Team trained a community organization to facilitate the engagement. First, the facilitators presented the key challenges that surfaced in the interviews to a group of about 80 community members.

The community members divided into five groups based on their interest in the specific challenge. With the help of a facilitator, each group brainstormed multiple ideas that could address their particular challenge. For example, the group that was focused on entrepreneurs and storefronts suggested a tenant-storefront matchmaking program, a business owner mentorship program, and tools to help entrepreneurs navigate the process of starting a business. The group that was working on the safety and enjoyability of West Main Street suggested transforming parking spaces into parklets, adding traffic calming measures, and installing wayfinding signs. As the individuals in each group shared their ideas, the facilitators asked participants to keep a list of potential partners already working on these issues that could enable a solution, such as real-estate agents, the West Main Merchants Association, and the Public Works Department.

The groups voted to narrow down the list of solutions. Through the voting process, enablers were considered, and proposed solutions with major barriers to success were eliminated. After the proposed solutions were narrowed down for each challenge, the facilitator convened the full group of 80 participants to do another round of voting. The full group eventually chose three solutions that the community members had both the resources and local buy-in to implement themselves. The ideas that went forward were: (1) adding seasonal programming to the community garden that would appeal to a group of diverse residents and visitors to showcase interest in the corridor, (2) adding a parklet to increase seating and appeal to a street with minimal sidewalk space, and (3) creating a business-tenant matchmaking program to help fill vacant storefronts.

For guidance on using this and other citizen engagement techniques, or to learn more about customizing solutions for your city, contact Cities of Service at [info@citiesofservice.org](mailto:info@citiesofservice.org).