



## STRATEGIC PLANNING AND RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS

One of the powerful and affirming insights we have gained from reviewing the more than 30 cities that have replicated the *On the Table* civic engagement initiative is that the model can be implemented even with a limited budget and a small staff. While there are many “bells and whistles” that can be incorporated if time and resources allow, the true power and impact of *On the Table* comes from the convening organization’s commitment to providing a forum for dialogue and discourse that can spark positive change in communities.

Here are four strategic planning and resource considerations that can inform the development of an *On the Table* staffing plan and budget.

### 1. What can you manage in-house and where do you need to engage outside expertise?

Many organizations that have implemented *On the Table* have taken on the role as overall project manager, with key staff members taking on duties related to community outreach, mainstream and social media, website development and graphic design.

In other cases, organizers have opted to engage consultants or freelancers to take on one or more of these tasks to fill in gaps in expertise or to allow in-house staff to remain focused on other projects and priorities.

### 2. What tools will you need to raise awareness, drive participation and create excitement around *On the Table*?

An *On the Table* [fact sheet](#) and [host guide](#) are two essential items to inform and engage residents in this exciting opportunity to convene neighbors to explore ways to collaborate and find strength in your community. While some communities have printed hard copies for hosts, others have opted to create these resources primarily or solely in digital format and post on their website for download to avoid printing costs.

[Buttons](#), [pens](#), [notebooks](#), [tote bags](#) and [participation stickers](#) are some of the very cool tools organizers have developed to brand and promote their *On the Table* conversations. While not necessary, these types of items can help spread the work and spark interest in the initiative. It is also possible to find a community partner to share costs of producing these items through sponsorship or co-branding.

Lasting items, like tote bags, while more expensive, can yield higher return on investment as they promote the organizer’s name and affiliation with *On the Table* long after the day-of conversations. However, less expensive items, such as participation stickers, help to amplify the buzz about *On the Table* in your community.

As social media channels change their algorithms, it is harder to ensure that digital content promoting and encouraging participation in *On the Table* reaches deep into our communities. Targeted digital advertising on social media can be an affordable tactic to boost content about *On the Table* in certain neighborhoods, demographic sectors and among those interested in specific topics of local interest.

### **3. What events will your organization host or sponsor as part of *On the Table*?**

In the lead-up to the conversations, some organizations have opted to hold webinars or multiple small group information sessions throughout the community to help potential hosts learn more about and prepare for their *On the Table* conversations. Others have opted to convene one, large information session and serve food as a way of introducing hosts and other partners to the *On the Table* model. Either approach can work well.

The day of *On the Table*, some organizers have opted to host their own conversation(s) – for example, a kick-off breakfast for donors, nonprofit partners and other community leaders. This could be a full, sit-down meal with table service, a continental breakfast, buffet, or even just coffee and donuts. Other organizations have opted to focus on having their leaders and Board members out in the community, attending *On the Table* conversations hosted by residents, nonprofit organizations and others. Each option has benefits and cost implications.

A few organizers have budgeted funds used to provide meal stipends to encourage local nonprofits or individuals to host *On the Table* conversations and offset their costs of hosting conversations. In one instance, a local public utility provided a grant to underwrite the cost of the meal stipends.

### **4. How/will you track outcomes and perceptions from your conversations?**

Both The Chicago Community Trust and Knight Foundation cities have worked with an academic or professional public opinion research partner to conduct surveys of *On the Table* hosts and participants to learn more about their experience, topics discussed during their conversation, current perceptions of issues and opportunities facing their communities, and actions they might be inspired to take afterwards. Examples of the survey can be found [here](#). Core survey questions are available for reference and replication in the resource library for Network members.

Other organizers have either replaced or supplemented the participant survey with a qualitative option that asks hosts or participants to take and share notes from their conversation via text message or email.

Whether insights are gathered using a participant survey or feedback collected from community conversations, organizers generally commit to reporting back to the community about their *On the Table* conversations.

Some have provided a written or digital report to share with participants, local elected officials, the media and others; many have conducted one-on-one or small group meetings with local opinion leaders and nonprofit partners to discuss how the findings might influence their work moving forward; a few have hosted larger community meetings to bring a wide range of stakeholders together to consider potential collaborative next steps. Of course, a combination of these and other approaches could work, as well. Here, again, both financial and human resources should be considered in deciding the right approach for your community.

Finally, some organizers have implemented small grant programs to encourage *On the Table* participants to turn the ideas coming out of their conversations into action. If you choose to pursue this approach, this is another place where you could consider engaging a sponsor or partner to share the costs.