



NORTHERN SOMERSET NJ TOGETHER

FALL 2021 LISTENING CAMPAIGN – A “HOW TO”

As part of our work together, religious congregations & non-profits working with New Jersey Together will be conducting a “listening campaign” during the fall of 2021. New congregations & non-profits are welcome to participate who were not able to join the October 2021 kickoff are also welcome to participate. (Email frank@njtogether.org or ari@njtogether.org to get involved.)

We hope participating in this listening campaign offers participating congregations & organizations an opportunity to accomplish a few, specific goals:

- To identify the most important concerns for their leaders & members;
- To identify new leaders who are interested in getting trained or taking action;
- To lay the groundwork for successful advocacy efforts starting in 2022.

WHAT DOES ‘LISTENING’ LOOK LIKE?

Community organizing and advocacy begins with listening. “Listening sessions” (also called “house meetings”) are a simple, organizing tool that can be used to identify common interests, stories, and potential leaders in your congregation or organization.

These sessions involve gathering a small group of 6-15 persons together for somewhere between 15-45 minutes. All participants answer a single question that is designed to better understand the group’s interests and concerns.

(We have offered a suggested question in this packet.)

You can hold these listening sessions in different ways. They could be standalone sessions or incorporated as a part of an existing meeting or ministry gathering (e.g., after services):

- Using on-line gatherings via Zoom or GoogleMeet
- Using in-person, small group gatherings (socially-distanced with masks required), outside or inside. These could be done:
 - At your place of worship;
 - At or near your home or apartment building
 - Outside in a park or at work (e.g., lunch break)
 - At nearby school(s)

Similarly, listening can also be done in other ways, such as:

- At a food pantry
- By making phone calls
- Door-to-door

WHO SHOULD BE INVITED?

Anyone that you or your institution wants to build stronger relationships with. This might include fellow congregants, neighbors, local business owners, ministry partners, parents at a nearby school, youth or young adults!, those you serve, and more!

SUGGESTED AGENDA & TIPS FOR LISTENING SESSIONS

Listening sessions are designed to be relatively simple & forgiving. It is more important to get started (with a few mistakes or imperfections) than to wait until you feel it will go perfectly. The below offers a basic “script” and agenda for how to conduct a listening session.

1. **Opening:** Introduce yourself and describe the purpose and context of the meeting. You might mention that congregations & non-profits across Northern Somerset County are conducting listening sessions this fall to hear from our members what they are most concerned about. You also might want to let participants know about what NJT has accomplished in other places.
2. **Set the ground rules:** Share that as part of this short session (and in sessions across the county), member organizations will be asking participants to respond to a single question. To ensure that all goes smoothly, you want to make sure:
 - Each participant will get a chance to respond to the same question;
 - Each person will have an opportunity to speak, uninterrupted;
 - Participants will refrain from commenting on what each participant has said;
 - There will be an opportunity for discussion after all participants have a chance to speak;
 - During the discussion, participants will refrain from making negative comments about or minimizing what other participants have said.
3. **Rounds:** As you start the rounds, ask people to share their name, how long they've been a member or lived in a town or in the area around northern Somerset, and then provide the guiding question. It may be helpful to put it on the screen or in the chat (if online) or on a piece of chart paper if in person. Our suggested question for this campaign is below:

What is one thing you would change in northern Somerset County or in your local community that would make life better for you, your family, or those you care about? Is there a story about how it is impacting you or other people you care about?

(Given the context of the current pandemic, you may want to encourage people to share one thing they would change in this moment and one that is important more generally.)

Make sure each person gets a chance to respond fully (1-2 minutes each). This may require friendly interruption of one or two big talkers so that everyone gets a turn.

4. **Discussion:** Based on the responses to the rounds, help lead people in a discussion about what you heard. What stood out to people in what they heard? What common themes did you hear? Reach agreement on how the group would prioritize the issues raised. **Are there 1 or 2 issues or priorities that rose to the top in the discussion?**
5. **Wrap-up and Next Steps:** Thank leaders for coming, summarize the next steps (that northern Somerset County member institutions will be meeting to share results later in the fall and to select issues for advocacy), and ask participants whether they are interested in working with others to address these and other issues you care about?

You might also have participants fill out the “listening card” or complete an online survey that lets them answer more fully. Both can be found here: <http://www.njtogether.org/somerset>

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Meet with listening session facilitators to evaluate the best moments of the listening session, and what worked and didn't work. Which individuals stood out or might it be helpful to follow up with.

You may also want to create an email list for your organization and invite participants to be on the email list to stay informed issues and opportunities for involvement.