

Among its core programs, the Forum convenes **citizen panels** to provide the opportunity for citizens to make informed judgments about addressing high-priority issues based on their values and preferences. Building around a deliberative dialogue approach, this innovative program helps to uncover unique understandings of these issues and spark insights about viable solutions. Citizen panels can be organized across Canada.

Our approach to convening citizen panels consists of five steps and each is briefly described in turn below.

Consulting with key stakeholders

We conduct three types of preparatory consultations for each citizen panel. First, we work with a steering committee created specifically for each panel. Working collaboratively with the Forum team, the steering committee helps to: 1) refine the terms of reference for the citizen brief to clarify the problem and its causes, options for addressing it, and key implementation considerations; 2) identify key informants who can provide feedback on the terms of reference for the citizen brief; 3) identify merit reviews who can provide feedback on the draft citizen brief; 4) identify the criteria used to identify participants for the panel; and 5) review the thematic summary of the citizen panel deliberations. Second, we conduct 15-20 interviews with key informants (e.g., representatives of citizen/patient groups, policymakers, stakeholders and researchers who are involved in or affected by the issue) to get feedback on the terms of reference for the citizen brief. Fourth, we seek merit reviews of the draft citizen brief by at least one policymaker, one stakeholder, one researcher, and one citizen.

Preparing a citizen brief

We prepare and circulate to panel participants a plain-language citizen brief that mobilizes relevant research evidence about a problem and its causes, options for addressing it, and key implementation considerations. We use the revised framing of the problem, options to address it and implementation considerations derived from the preparatory consultations to inform searches for relevant data and evidence.

The available research evidence about the problem is sought from a range of published and “grey” research literature sources. Published literature that provides a comparative dimension to an understanding of the problem is sought using three health services research “hedges” in MedLine, namely those for appropriateness, processes and outcomes of care (which increase the chances of us identifying administrative database studies and community surveys). Published literature that provided insights into alternative ways of framing the problem is sought using a fourth hedge in MedLine, namely the one for qualitative research. Grey literature is also sought by reviewing the websites of relevant Canadian and international organizations, as well as from reports identified during key informant interviews.

The available research evidence about the options to address the problem and implementation considerations are sought primarily from Health Systems Evidence (www.healthsystemsevidence.org), which is a continuously updated database systematic reviews and economic evaluations of delivery, financial and governance arrangements within health systems. The reviews and economic evaluations are identified by searching the database using keywords and filters related to each of the options. Depending on the topic being addressed, we may also supplement the search of Health Systems Evidence with searches of ACCESSSS (<https://hiru.mcmaster.ca/accessss>) or the Cochrane Library (<http://www.cochranelibrary.com/>) for reviews focused on the effects of clinical interventions, Health Evidence (www.healthevidence.org) for reviews focused on public health topics, Social Systems Evidence (www.socialsystemsevidence.org) for reviews and economic evaluations focused on social systems, and the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal (<http://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/>) for reviews focused on topics related to aging. The searches of these sources are reviewed for relevance by at least one reviewer, and the reviews identified as relevant to the citizen brief are then quality appraised using the AMSTAR tool, and the authors’ conclusions are extracted from the reviews.

The extracted information from the reviews and, where needed, individual studies, identified from these searches are then summarized in plain language in the citizen brief along with questions for citizens to consider and be prepared to discuss during the panel. Each citizen brief is made publicly available after the citizen panel has taken place.

Convening the citizen panel(s)

Each citizen panel convened by the Forum brings together a group of 10 to 16 citizens (and occasionally several such groups to discuss the same topic) for an off-the-record deliberation where they can bring their own views and experiences to bear on the issue, learn from the evidence and from others' views and experiences, share their newly informed views and make informed judgments about how to address it based on their values and preferences. For each panel, citizens are purposively sampled from the Asking Canadians™ panel to ensure diversity with respect to socioeconomic status, ethnocultural background, gender, and lived experiences with the issue. In addition, for each panel we exclude: 1) healthcare professionals or employees of healthcare organizations; 2) elected officials; 3) individuals working for market research, advertising, public media or public relations firms; and 4) individuals who have taken part in two or more previous citizen panels convened by the McMaster Health Forum. Increasingly we convene three citizen panels for every topic to ensure citizen input is as broad-based as possible.

Preparing a panel summary

We prepare and circulate a panel summary, which is a thematic analysis of the deliberations during the citizen panel. The summary is prepared using notes taken by the facilitator, a dedicated note-taker, and audio recordings of the deliberations. This document, along with the 'topic overview' that provides a brief plain-language summary of the key messages from the panel summary, is made publicly available on the Forum's website. We also provide customized post-event briefings to partners involved in funding or convening the panel, to further prepare them to address the issue.

Evaluating the key features of the citizen brief and citizen panel

We evaluate the key features of the citizen brief and citizen panel to contribute to our collective understanding about how citizens can best be engaged in shaping how society addresses health issues. Our evaluation consists of a survey administered to panel participants about key features of the citizen brief, which they complete prior to attending the panel, as well as a survey they complete following the panel that asks them to assess the features of the panel.

Contact us

For more information on the citizen panel program, contact forum@mcmaster.ca.

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