

Story Circles

DEEP LISTENING AND
BRIDGE BUILDING ON
ISSUES THAT MATTER



Story Circles bring diverse residents face to face in intimate settings to talk about important issues, hear one another, and envision the way forward. It begins with listening. It begins with you.





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INTRODUCTION

Like many cities across the country, Sacramento, California is grappling with a housing crisis. We've had the fastest rising rents in the nation for two years in a row. We have record-high home prices, a growing homeless population and intensifying gentrification and displacement. There are many neighborhoods that have been overlooked years, due to historic housing policies and lack of economic opportunity.

Capital Public Radio, Sacramento's National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate, responded by spending a year exploring the history, politics, and economics of housing in California's capital. We produced *The View From Here: Place And Privilege*, a ten-part podcast, hour-long radio documentary, and online community voice platform.



To carry the conversation deeper into the community, CapRadio collaborated with community partners to co-host a series of Story Circles. These events brought diverse residents face to face in intimate settings to talk about housing, hear one another, and envision the way forward. The results were phenomenal, so we trained community facilitators to bring even more people together to engage in meaningful conversations on housing. Our goal is to build stronger communities through storytelling events that connect us to each other's experiences, challenges, and dreams.

This guide covers how to host a Story Circle so that you can cultivate listening and bridge-building in your neighborhood, organization, or community. It's designed for people with some background in organizing and facilitating events. And while it focuses on housing, the Story Circle process can be used to bring people together to explore any issue or aspiration.

"I'm leaving with hope that we can solve this problem. I think it's inspiring to know that so many people are thinking about this. And I personally plan to get more involved and do my part more in the community."

This guide builds on the Story Circle methodology developed by Roadside Theatre, Junebug Productions, and the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture (see page 17 for links to their work). It was created in collaboration with neighborhood leaders, non-profit directors, social service providers, and housing advocates who partnered with CapRadio to plan and facilitate the Story Circles. The content reflects Capital Public Radio's unique approach to Story Circles and includes tips and recommendations from community facilitators. It's written for public radio stations, community organizations, and other groups who wish to listen to, learn from, and build trust with the communities they serve.

We hope you find this guide useful in your efforts to build community with deep listening and sharing.

WHAT IS A STORY CIRCLE?

A Story Circle is a small group of individuals sitting in a circle, sharing stories from their own experience focused on a common theme. As each tells a personal story, a larger and more complex narrative unfolds. By listening deeply to each



other, individuals can see both real differences and commonalities in their experiences. In a public radio context, the process builds public understanding of an issue, expands the conversation, and informs reporting.

Why host a Story Circle? Story Circles introduce people to new neighbors and journalists in a way that reinforces the

“After our story circle, I have a greater sense of appreciation and respect for the fluidity of our housing situations. Many of us may not be as secure as we think we are — many of us could end up in an insecure housing situation.”

principle that everyone’s story counts. The process of sharing personal stories lifts up community challenges, needs, and aspirations. Story Circles help individuals discover their own thoughts about an issue and develop new ideas in dialogue with others. Creating an inspiring and safe space to listen to people’s experiences helps humanize complex issues, nurture empathy for each other, build bridges across differences, and generate local solutions.

Story Circles typically take about two and a half hours. They are most powerful and effective when they include people with different backgrounds and perspectives. The story sharing and group discussion can feel richer and more intimate when the circle includes eight to ten members. However, a larger group

(from 40-50 people) will have broader reach. With more than ten people, you’ll need to break into small groups, with a trained facilitator for each, in addition to the lead facilitator. Story Circles can be done at low to no cost with volunteers and a donated facility. It’s ideal, though, to have a small budget for snacks and supplies.

STORY CIRCLES & ENGAGED JOURNALISM

At a time when public trust in the media is at an all-time low, journalism organizations are seeking new ways to connect with and reflect the diverse communities they serve. Story Circles are a powerful tool to reach beyond the traditional core audience, so reporting can accurately represent the broader community.

STORY CIRCLES

- CREATE a forum for reporters to listen to diverse community members
- PROVIDE a space for residents to share experiences, resources, and solutions
- INSPIRE community dialogue and problem-solving
- STRENGTHEN community networks to address local challenges
- GIVE journalists ideas on what's missing in current coverage of an issue
- BUILD trust and respect among participants and journalists

The circles can be recorded with participants' permission. Or you can set up a mobile storybooth to record stories and take portraits after the event. See page 17 for examples of how CapRadio gathered images and stories during Story Circle gatherings.

"It was really great to meet other people with similar experiences in the housing crisis and to connect with people that could start a group to address some of the issues."

BY PARTICIPATING IN CAPITAL PUBLIC RADIO'S STORY CIRCLES

- 82%** of participants met people who they wouldn't normally connect with and heard diverse perspectives and life experiences.
- 83%** reported an increased awareness in local housing challenges, the root causes of the crisis and potential solutions.
- 83%** said they had increased empathy for others.
- 89%** plan to talk to friends and family about the stories they heard, the issues, and solutions.
- 91%** are inspired to act, which they described as staying connected with others at the event, get involved in projects they learned about, or write publicly elected officials.



STORY CIRCLE GUIDELINES

Use these principles to help participants to feel welcome, heard and safe.

LISTEN DEEPLY

Listening is as important as speaking. Each person receives full attention while telling a story. Listen for the essence of what is being shared, however the storyteller wants to tell it.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Respect all points of view. Your truth may be different from, even the opposite of, another person's perspective. Don't debate with, correct or embellish someone else's story.

ACCEPTANCE

Suspend judgment as best you can. Doing so will enable you to hear new things from others or see old ideas in a new way. It also helps everyone feel safer if they think they're not being judged.

SINCERITY

Speak from your heart and personal experience. We want to hear what's important to you not just your opinions or data. Trust that your contribution is respected.

CURIOSITY

If someone expresses a point of view that seems different from yours, pause to think about what you might ask to gain clarity or understanding.

SILENCE

Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. It may take time for a storyteller to find the words for their story. It's OK to spend some time together without speaking.



PLANNING AND PREPARING

IDENTIFYING GOALS AND LOGISTICS

Every Story Circle is different. You'll want to consider:

- What topic do you wish to explore?
- What's motivating you to bring people together to explore this topic?
- Do you want or need to partner with another community group?
- How will this event support your personal or organization's goals?
- Do you want to host a small (8 - 10) or larger group (20 – 50)?
- What day and time will work best for the people you will invite?
- What location is accessible and inviting for the people you hope will attend?
- Will you need childcare or interpreters?

INVITING GUESTS

Story Circles work best with a wide range of people and perspectives. Consider the range or backgrounds and experiences you want represented. In the *Place and Privilege Story Circles*, for example, we wanted people who were homeless or formerly unhomed, people living in affordable and public housing, business association leaders, city planners, developers, seniors, and Millennials, in addition to the Capital Public Radio's audience (who tend to be affluent, working professionals who own homes).

Then think about how to best reach the people you want to attend. For our Story Circles on housing, Capital Public Radio promoted the events on-air, in member newsletters, and social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). We made personal calls to housing industry executives and neighborhood leaders. Our community partners made flyers, shared Facebook events, and recruited guests through word of mouth.

If you want vulnerable populations to be included—recent immigrants, for instance, or transgender youth—partner with organizations they trust that can personally invite them. If you'd like community leaders or city staff to attend, it's helpful to find someone who is close to them to extend the invitation. If you really want to ensure a specific person shows up, call them the day before the event.

“What I gained from this event was hearing multiple perspectives. To be honest, I probably wouldn't be interacting with many of the folks here. I think just being put in a situation where everyone is on equal footing, you're in this circle. After a few minutes it really feels like they are your neighbors.”

You can download customizable templates for Story Circle flyers, press releases, event checklists, social media posts, and other tools created by the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture for its annual civic ritual, the *People's State of the Union*.

See Resources on page 17 for the link.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Be sure to give yourself enough time to promote the event – ideally four to six weeks. Make the time, date, and location clear and easy to find on your materials. If you want to involve elected officials, talk to staff who are responsible for their calendar (typically they schedule at least a month in advance).

There are many invitation management systems. We used Eventbrite since it's free, user friendly, and sends both registration confirmations and reminders a few days in advance.

Since many people are accustomed to civic gatherings consisting of presentations or discussions, it's useful to emphasize that this event is about sharing and listening to personal stories. If you want specific communities to participate, consider providing transportation to event.

CREATING THE SPACE

The physical space sets the tone of the event. Pick a location where all community members would feel comfortable and welcome. Be sure that it has good acoustics and comfortable chairs. Make it feel special by adding a rug, candles, and flowers as a centerpiece. You can also use colorful seat cushions, vibrant table cloths, and string lights to create a warm, inviting environment. These small aesthetic gestures have a big impact in terms of making everyone feel appreciated and glad they came to the event.

SHOWING HOSPITALITY

People listen and stay curious when the atmosphere is welcoming and comfortable. Greet and talk with each person as they arrive. Introduce them to others in the room as you would introduce guests who've come to dinner at your house. Provide name tags and snacks to help them connect and feel tended to (if possible, provide food and beverages so guests can share a meal before the circle begins). Consider providing small gifts from your organization to thank people for their time and stories.



CRAFTING PROMPTS

It's important to frame Story Circle prompts so that anyone could answer using their own life experience. For example, if your circle focuses on crossing political or racial divides, you might ask: Tell a story about a time when you broke through a barrier to connect with someone different from yourself. Or if you want to explore community safety, your prompt could be: Tell a story about a time when you've felt safe – or the opposite – in your neighborhood. For other topics, you might ask: Share a story about an experience that gave you an insight into the state of (education, healthcare, parenting, policing, etc.) in this country. For our circles on housing we asked: Tell a story about a time when housing made a difference in your life.



FACILITATING THE EXPERIENCE

You'll want a facilitator who is skilled at creating a friendly environment, managing group dynamics, and generating meaningful dialogue. In Story Circles, group members tell a personal story in response to a prompt. The facilitator goes first to model how it works. It's best to model a descriptive story that shows vulnerability; that gives others permission to go deep. Then everyone around the circle is invited to share. Facilitators should practice their story before the event, so that they will feel confident and genuine as they share their experience.

If you are planning a large event, you'll need facilitators for each breakout circle (we recommend smaller circles of 8 – 10 people, including the facilitator). Be sure to bring the facilitators together—in person, over the phone, or via internet—to review roles, process, and timing. Even better, meet an hour before the event for a “dry-run”.

As a facilitator, you don't need to be a subject matter expert, but it is useful to be able to state why you (and/or the organization) are hosting the Story Circle. It's also helpful to provide a handout so guests can continue the conversation, learn more, or get involved. This might include links to media stories and resources, or community partner contacts and activities. See Hosting Tips on page 13 for more on leading Story Circles.

WHAT IS A STORY?

A story is a personal memory, a reflection, a moment in time.

A story usually has a beginning, middle, and end, characters, and atmosphere.

A story is not a lecture, an argument, a debate, an opinion or statistics.

LEADING THE STORY CIRCLE

SETTING THE STAGE (30 MINUTES)

- Doors open for food and mingling.
- Facilitators help connect people, greeting and talking with each person, introducing them to others during an informal socializing time before the program begins. If possible, offer guests food and beverages.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS (15 MINUTES)

- Ask people to get seated and turn off their phones.
- Welcome and thank them for joining the event.
- Introduce yourself, partnering organizations, and the circle's theme.
- Initiate brief introductions. (Suggested format: Share your name, the area of town that you live in, and one word that comes to your mind when you think of housing. If only 8 - 10 people are attending, they can share one sentence on what motivated them to attend this Story Circle.)

EVENT FLOW

5:00	Event set up
6:00	Setting the stage
6:30	Welcome and introductions
6:45	Purpose and process
7:00	Story sharing
7:45	Small group reflections
7:55	Full group dialogue
8:20	Closing reflection
8:30	Adjourn, event clean up



PURPOSE AND PROCESS (15 MINUTES)

- Describe the purpose and process that will happen.
- Talk about what makes a story (consider inviting the group to brainstorm elements of a story, like plot, characters, challenge, scene, etc.,)
- Let them know that they do not have to tell a story and can pass. After everyone has spoken they will again be offered a chance to share a story.
- Share the guidelines (on page 6). Consider having participants volunteer to each read one guideline.
- Invite and answer any questions.
- If more than 10 people, count off to break into groups.

STORY SHARING (45 MINUTES)

- If you've divided into small groups, go around and share names, beginning with the facilitator.
- Read the prompt(s). Remind the group to not interrupt, ask questions, take notes or make comments during the story sharing. The goal is to listen deeply.
- Discourage folks from thinking too much about what they will say when it's their turn. Invite them to trust that the right story will arise when the time comes.
- Let the group know how long each person will have to speak. (Calculate # of minutes/person so that the storytelling goes for about 40 min. For example 40 min/8 people = 5 min each)
- Facilitators begin by sharing the first story.

PROMPTS: Tell a story about a time when...

- having a home made a difference in your life.
- you realized how other people perceive the place you call home.
- you felt a sense of belonging - or the opposite - in your neighborhood?

DURING STORY SHARING

- There are no observers - only participants.
- Participants speak only during their turn.
- The order of telling is either clockwise or counterclockwise.
- Participants should not distract themselves by thinking ahead about what story they will tell when it is their turn.
- Participants should listen to the stories told, and, when it is their turn, tell a story brought to mind by the previous stories, or pass.
- There is no cross-talk until all the stories are told.



SMALL GROUP REFLECTIONS (10 MIN)

Invite members to partner with someone they usually don't have the opportunity to talk with, and reflect on what stood out to them in the stories they heard. Any insights or surprises?

FULL GROUP CONVERSATION (25 MIN)

Invite participants to reconvene as a full group. Ask open-ended questions to explore and share diverse perspectives and experiences. Encourage dialogue and cross-talk among participants.

CLOSING (10 MIN)

- Go around the circle and give everyone an opportunity to share one insight that they are taking away from this gathering.
- Recap any next steps that emerged during the group conversation or share planned opportunities to continue the conversation. Share resources and networks for deeper involvement.
- Thank everyone for their time, attention, and generosity.



GROUP CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

- How do these stories relate to your own experience?
- What stood out in the stories that you heard?
- What common threads did you hear in our stories?
- What were some differences in the stories? Why do you think that is?
- How did someone else's story open up a window into an experience you've never had?
- What is one image or moment from someone else's story that will stay with you? Why?
- What did you hear that's missing from the current conversation about housing (or the topic you are addressing)?
- What is one action you are inspired to take based on the stories you heard tonight?

HOSTING TIPS

CREATING AN INVITING AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

- Set chairs in a circle to equalize roles and put everyone at the same level.
- Use the centerpiece as metaphor: “Our stories are shared, like flowers in the vase. They may seem different, but they all come together to form a cohesive narrative.”
- Say: What is shared in the room, stays in the room.
- Give individuals permission to step out of the circle if needed to take care of themselves.
- Tell participants in advance how you will signal when their time to speak is coming to a close. Show them a hand signal you will use and let them know that this signal does not mean they need to abruptly stop, but rather to begin to complete their thought.
- Use your best judgment about when to wrap up a story. Sometimes you may need to let a group member go longer than the time allotted.

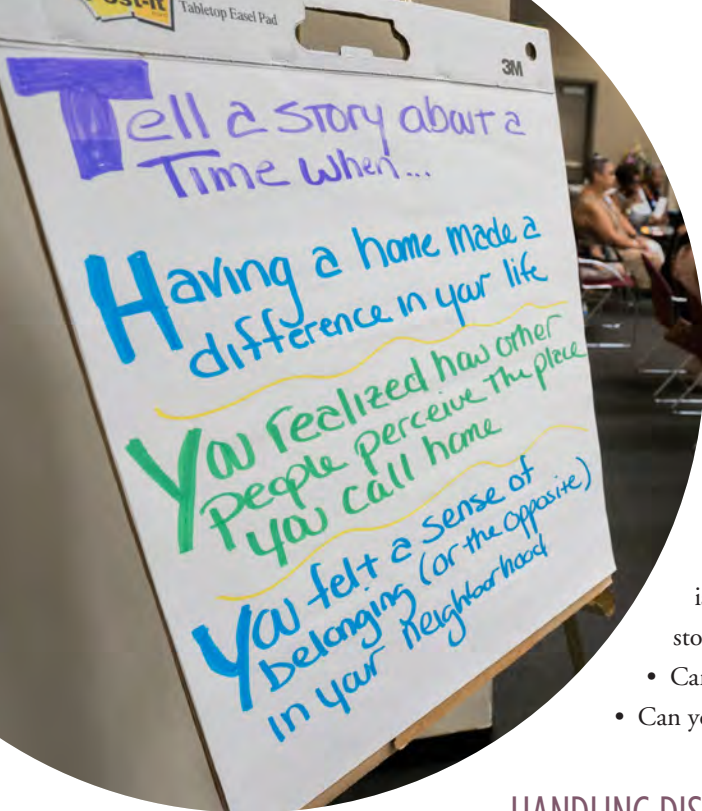


ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

- Use your body to indicate interest and attention (lean in, nod, breathe).
- Maintain consistent eye contact.
- Give people a time to reflect on the prompts before the story sharing.
- During the discussion, encourage those who haven't spoken to share.
- Consider taking a pause between stories to slow things down.
- Say “thank you” after each story to bring it to a close and cue the next person to begin.

WORKING WITH LARGE GROUPS

It helps to have one person (the event organizer or lead facilitator) stay out of the small groups to hold the space and watch the door or deal with any emerging needs. They can also listen for common themes to weave into full group conversation.



HELPING PEOPLE TELL STORIES

After you share the story prompts, people will usually start thinking about what story they are going to tell. A natural response! But if they are focused on what they will say then they won't pay full attention to the stories being told. Encourage them to just listen to what others say and trust that a story will arise in their mind when the time comes.

Sometimes participants start off by describing or explaining an issue, instead of telling a personal story. To help them tell their story consider asking:

- Can you share a moment that illustrates what you're describing?
- Can you describe a situation where what you're talking about happened?

HANDLING DISAGREEMENT AND DISRUPTION

- If disagreements or side conversations occur, pause the group and repeat the Story Circle guidelines. For example: "I feel as though our conversation might be trespassing over the guidelines. Let's review what we agreed to..."
- If two participants disagree in the post-story discussion, thank them for sharing their different opinions and make them feel listened to. Story Circles ensure that people with different views can come together to voice and express those views.
- If someone is struggling with their emotions, or is behaving disruptively, ask the group to take a break as you check in with them privately.
- If you break into small groups and sense that the noise in the room is interfering with the experience, ask people to be mindful of how loud they are speaking to ensure that everyone can be heard.
- Redirect those with a specific agenda, so they understand that the event is about listening, learning, and bridge-building vs organizing on a specific issue.

HALTING A STORY CIRCLE

Sometimes, difficult and painful stories emerge in a Story Circle. The facilitator must exercise judgment about when to continue a Story Circle and when to stop it. Story Circle facilitators should not try to serve as therapists, social workers, or doctors – even if these are their occupations in their professional lives – because participants did not come to the Circle to receive these services.

The facilitator can consider calling for a break, talking individually with the distressed person, referring the distressed person to the proper professional, or, rescheduling the Story Circle.

PLANNING CHECKLIST

PLANNING

- ☐ Reserve event location
- ☐ Create invitation and RSVP management system
- ☐ Promote event
- ☐ Arrange flowers for centerpiece and/or sign in table
- ☐ Arrange food/drink
- ☐ Identify Story Circle facilitator(s)
- ☐ Gather supplies

COMMUNICATION

- ☐ Manage participant RSVPs
- ☐ Send reminders
- ☐ Send thank you notes after events

SUPPLIES

- ☐ Throw rug
- ☐ Tablecloths for sign in and food tables
- ☐ Flowers for sign in table and centerpiece
- ☐ Candles, candle holders, and matches
- ☐ Name tags and sharpies
- ☐ Sign in sheet
- ☐ Clipboards, pens, post-its
- ☐ Flip chart pad(s) with program, prompts, and reflection question
- ☐ Flip chart easel(s)
- ☐ Story Circle guidelines (printed on yellow half sheets of paper and put on chairs)
- ☐ Story Circle prompts (printed on the reverse side of the guidelines)
- ☐ Evaluation surveys (if you wish to assess participant experience)
- ☐ Releases (if you plan to record stories)
- ☐ Printed resources (if you'd like to point people to possible next steps)
- ☐ Boxes of tissues



SAMPLE PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

SACRAMENTO'S HOUSING CRISIS: WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Sacramento is grappling with a housing affordability crisis. We've had the fastest rising rents in the nation for two years in a row. We have record-high home prices, a growing homeless population and intensifying gentrification and displacement. And there are many neighborhoods that have been overlooked for years, due to historic housing policies and lack of economic opportunity.

Residents from all walks of life are impacted by housing, though in very different ways. That's why Capital Public Radio is collaborating and ten community partners to host a series of Story Circles that bring diverse residents together to share experiences, listen to one another, and explore the way forward.

Join a Story Circle where we'll hear personal stories that explore housing and community health. Sign up at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/sacramentos-housing-affordability-crisis-lets-talk-about-it-tickets-47441551959>

Sacramento's Housing Affordability Crisis

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

WEDNESDAY, JULY 25, 2018 | 6:30 PM

Sacramento is grappling with a housing affordability crisis. We've had the fastest rising rents in the nation for two years in a row. We have record-high home prices, a growing homeless population and intensifying gentrification and displacement.

Arrive at 6:00 p.m. for heavy appetizers and socializing.

Greater Sacramento Urban League
3725 Marysville Blvd.
Sacramento, CA 95838

Hosted By

 Greater Sacramento Urban League Young Professionals

 capital public radio
Licensed to SACRAMENTO STATE



To learn more about Sacramento's housing crisis visit capradio.org/view.

The Story Circles are part of Finding Common Ground, a project funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

RESOURCES

EXPLORE OTHER STORY CIRCLE GUIDES AND TOOLS

Roadside Theatre <https://roadside.org/program/story-circles>

The Winter Institute <http://winterinstitute.org/national-day-healing-toolkit/>

US Department of Arts and Culture <https://usdac.us/psotu>

People's State of the Union <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B8TOgF0LhVwxQTg3SjV3SWM5TjQ>.

LEARN MORE ABOUT STORY CIRCLES AND ENGAGED JOURNALISM

How a station used 'deep listening' events to take on

Sacramento's housing crisis. <https://current.org/2018/07/>

[how-a-station-used-deep-listening-events-to-take-on-sacramentos-housing-crisis/](https://current.org/2018/07/how-a-station-used-deep-listening-events-to-take-on-sacramentos-housing-crisis/)

Listen – Learn – Act: Story Circles on the Housing Crisis (video)

<https://youtu.be/AgL8Pepp61E>

Story Circle Mobile Storybooth Voices <http://www.capradio.org/news/>

[the-view-from-here/2017/08/11/community-voices/](http://www.capradio.org/news/the-view-from-here/2017/08/11/community-voices/)

HEAR AND DISCUSS FIRST PERSON STORIES ON NAVIGATING THE HOUSING CRISIS

The View From Here: Place and Privilege

<http://www.capradio.org/news/the-view-from-here/2017/10/06/place-and-privilege/>



The View From Here: Place and Privilege Discussion Guide

<http://www.capradio.org/news/the-view-from-here/2018/05/09/housing-affordability-a-conversation-guide/>



THANK YOU!

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Black Women Organizing for Political Action
Greater Sacramento Urban League Young Professionals
Healthy Sacramento Coalition
House Sacramento
Local Government Commission
Mercy Housing California
Mutual Housing California
Sacramento Area Congregations Together
Sacramento Housing Alliance
Sacramento Loaves & Fishes
Valley Vision
Women's Empowerment

COMMUNITY FACILITATORS

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Erica Kohl-Arenas and Mina Matlon, Imagining America

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Vanessa Nelson / Capital Public Radio
Mindaugas Drigotas / Nanook Multimedia



WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

“I appreciated the openness. We shared very deep experiences in our personal lives and sometimes we forget that we can trust in others that we don’t know.”

“My experience with this project demonstrated that a radio station can meaningfully engage with the community in ways other than ‘give-aways’ or taking audience comments.”

“This approach teaches a format about how to listen and learn. It encouraged respectful and thoughtful dialogue so that each member could be seen.”

“What was unique is that we are more alike than we are different. There was something that I identified with in everyone’s story.”





Capital Public Radio is the National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate serving the Central Valley and Sierra Nevada. With historically high levels of listenership and support from its members, CapRadio is a trusted and indispensable source of information, music, and entertainment, and strengthens the civic and cultural life of the communities we serve. Seven frequencies, over 500,000 listeners, and one mission: to build stronger communities by listening deeper.

We believe in informing and empowering our audience through impactful storytelling that acts as a catalyst for change whether it be in individuals, organizations, or social realities. Our focus on audience and community engagement reinforces our role as a community convener, gives us multiple opportunities for interaction with our audience, allows us to tell stories in diverse and meaningful ways, and gives us a different lens by which we measure the relevance of our work.

STORYTELLING + COMMUNITY = IMPACT

At CapRadio, community engagement helps us discover, develop, and report stories that impact and inspire. It's how we surface a wide array of perspective and make sure the voices in our stories are as diverse as the as our community.

We are here to serve our community—to listen, to provide a space and tools to help tell stories, and to create social impact. Bringing together reporters and community members to listen to one another and reflect on their experiences generates journalism that can change minds and empower communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

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NEWS:

90.9 FM Sacramento
90.5 FM Tahoe / Reno
91.3 FM Stockton / Modesto
88.1 FM Quincy

MUSIC:

88.9 FM Sacramento
91.7 FM Groveland / Sonora
88.7 FM Sutter / Yuba City

