Tools for Community Discussion & Engagement

MICHIGAN Oral Health Coalition



About This Resource

Community conversations about fluoride often involve questions about science, public health, personal choice, and community values. This resource is designed to help community leaders, public health professionals, healthcare providers, advocates, and residents navigate those conversations with confidence and respect.

The materials included in this document focus on effective communication strategies for public meetings, community forums, stakeholder discussions, and one-on-one conversations. Rather than providing technical evidence alone, these resources emphasize how to communicate information in ways that are clear, accessible, and responsive to community concerns.

Materials Included

Community Forum Guide: Talking About Fluoride	**Practical guidance** for planning and participating in community discussions about fluoridation, including communication **principles**, audience engagement **strategies**, and **approaches** for addressing questions and concerns.
Responses to Questions & Comments	**Sample responses** and communication **strategies** for addressing common **questions**, **concerns**, and **misconceptions** about fluoride and community water fluoridation.
Reframing Technical Language	A **plain-language reference guide** that translates technical dental, public health, and water system terminology into language that is easier for **community audiences** to understand.

Community Forum Guide

Talking About Fluoride

Community Forum Guide:
Talking About Fluoride

Whether you're a public health professional, a community volunteer, or simply someone who wants to share accurate information, this guide gives you the practical tools to have calm, credible, and respectful conversations about community water fluoridation (CWF) at public forums. The goal isn't to win a debate, it's to help your neighbors feel informed.

1

Frame First
Lead with shared values, not data points

2

Plain Language
Speak like a neighbor, not a report

3

Acknowledge Concerns
Validate, contextualize, then respond

4

Close With Respect
Leave space for continued conversation

Opening Strong & Explaining Clearly

The first 60 seconds of any community forum set the tone for everything that follows. If you open with statistics and citations, you signal "expert lecture." If you open with shared values, you signal "neighbor conversation." The difference is everything.

Your Opening Frame

"We all want safe water, healthy kids, and to make decisions based on good information. I'm here to share what we know about fluoride so we can have an informed conversation."

This works because it signals respect rather than persuasion, reduces defensiveness right away, and positions you as a resource, not an advocate pushing an agenda.

What Is Fluoride? (Keep It Simple)

"Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral found in water, soil, and some foods. Community water fluoridation is the process of adjusting it to a level that helps prevent tooth decay."

Keep this explanation factual, non-judgmental, and short. The moment it sounds like a textbook, you've lost the room. Aim for the tone of a trusted friend explaining something over coffee.

Speaking in Plain Language

Technical language creates distance. Every time you reach for jargon, ask yourself: would a neighbor say this? A simple rule of thumb, if it sounds like a report, simplify it. If it sounds like a conversation, keep it.

> Instead of saying...
>
> "Optimal fluoridation levels prevent caries"

> Say this...
>
> "Fluoride helps protect teeth and prevent cavities"

Leading With Real-World Benefits

When you do share benefits, ground them in human outcomes rather than abstract claims. Real-world framing lands better and feels more honest to a general audience.

Reduces cavities in children and adults

A tangible, relatable outcome that resonates across all age groups in the room.

Helps those without regular dental care

This equity angle is meaningful and humanizes the public health rationale.

One of the most studied public health measures

Signals confidence without overstating certainty, avoid phrases like "completely safe" or "no risk ever."

Handling Concerns & Tough Questions

People come to community forums with real worries, about safety, personal autonomy, and long-term effects. The worst thing you can do is dodge, dismiss, or over-explain. The best approach follows a simple three-step rhythm: **acknowledge → contextualize → respond.** This keeps you credible and keeps the conversation open.

When someone raises a concern, you don't have to agree with it to validate it. Validation simply means: *"I hear you, and that's a real question worth addressing."* This small shift in posture changes the entire dynamic of the room.

Citing Sources Without Overwhelming People

Reference trusted organizations sparingly and conversationally. You don't need a citation list, you need one or two names people already recognize and trust. Try: *"Organizations like the CDC and the American Dental Association support water fluoridation based on the available evidence."* That's it. Don't recite URLs or study titles mid-conversation.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

A widely recognized and trusted U.S. public health authority

American Dental Association (ADA)

The professional body most associated with oral health in public perception

World Health Organization (WHO)

Lends global credibility and signals

Common Traps to Avoid & Your Pre-Forum Checklist

Even well-prepared presenters can fall into patterns that undermine trust. Knowing what *not* to do is just as important as knowing what to say. Below are the key behaviors that erode credibility in community forums, and the ones that build it.

Instead of This...

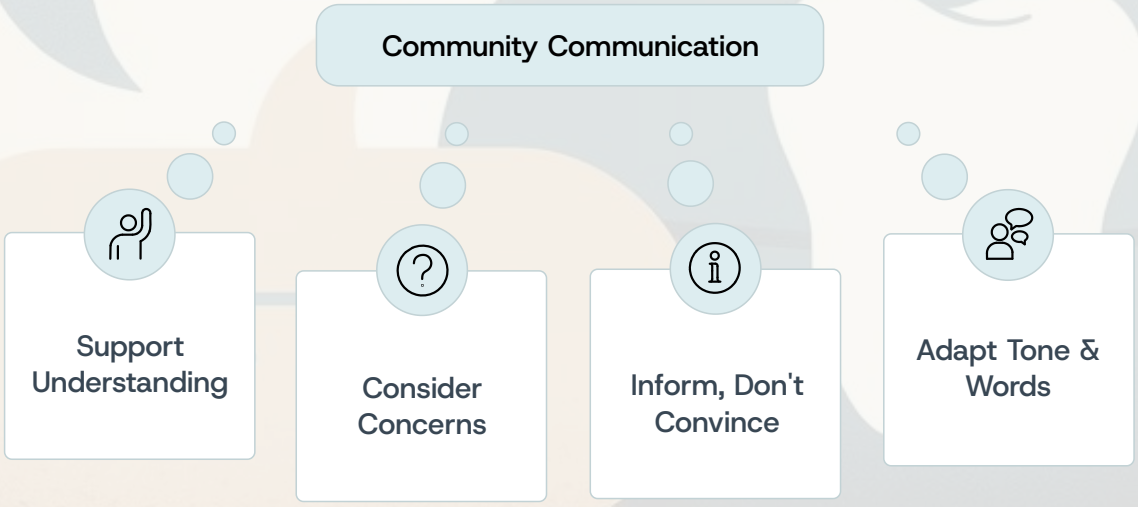
- Debate aggressively or match emotional escalation
- Dismiss concerns as "misinformation" or "conspiracy"
- Overwhelm the room with studies and statistics
- Use sarcasm, eye-rolling, or visible frustration
- Sound absolute- "completely safe," "no risk ever"

Do This...

- Stay calm and steady, even when pushed
- Repeat key points simply and consistently
- Redirect attention toward shared goals
- Use plain, conversational language throughout
- Be confident, but leave room for nuance

Know Your Audience: Forum vs. Academic Talk

Community forums are not academic symposiums. The mental shift you need to make is from explaining evidence to supporting understanding. Before you walk into the room, ask yourself two questions: What are people in this community worried about? What do they need to feel genuinely informed, not convinced? When you orient around those questions, your tone, your word choices, and your responses will naturally align with what the room actually needs.



Closing With Respect & Openness

> "I appreciate everyone taking the time to engage on this. These decisions matter, and it's important that communities have access to clear, accurate information. I'm happy to share resources or continue the conversation."

A closing like this hands agency back to the room. It says: this isn't the end of the conversation, it's the beginning. That posture may build more long-term trust than single fact or citations may have.

Tone Checklist: Before You Present

- Calm, not defensive
- Clear, not technical
- Respectful, not dismissive
- Confident, not absolute
- Informational, not persuasive

Responses to Questions and Comments

Responses to Questions and Comments

Comment

"What is fluoride?"13

Response

"Fluoride is natural. It is not something that people make in a lab. It is a part of nature and is all around us. It comes from a natural element called fluorine. Fluoride is found naturally in rocks and also in the water in rivers and oceans. We all get a little bit of fluoride every day because it is in the water we drink, the foods we eat, and even some of the fruit and vegetables we buy."

Strategy

Use plain, neutral, respectful language

Comment

"Ions are bad/man-made fluoride is unnatural."

Response

"We share the goal of safety. Fluoridation doesn't add a new substance people aren't already exposed to; the key is the amount. At the recommended level, the fluoride ion—natural or adjusted—helps protect teeth. Our water is routinely tested to stay within those limits." OR "Chemically, the body can't tell whether a fluoride ion started in rock or was adjusted at the plant—the ion is identical. What matters is that we keep it in the well-studied, low range."

Strategy

Use accessible analogies (many ions like calcium or sodium) are essential in small levels; toxicity depends on dose and context. Emphasize that there is no difference between "supplemental" and "natural" fluoridation. "Man-made" is an inaccurate term for supplemental fluoride.

Comment

"I don't understand how fluoridation works."

Response

"Water fluoridation is like wearing a seatbelt. It protects against the impact of acid attacks. It reduces risk. It is simple and easy to use. It not only protects the individual, but also protects other people in the car (or community)."

Strategy

Share analogies that make connections

Comment

"I am afraid fluoride is toxic."

Response

"It's normal to be cautious, and it is okay to have questions. Early on, people in Colorado Springs noticed that naturally fluoridated water came with fewer cavities. Scientists studied many towns, set a low, safe level, and began adjusting water—first in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1945). At these levels, research hasn't found consistent harm to the kidneys, thyroid, or the brain."

Strategy

Meet your audience where they are / Use neutral, respectful language

Responses to Questions & Comments

Comment

"It's mass medication/chemicalization."

Response

"Fluoride is a mineral that naturally occurs in many water sources. Adjusting fluoride levels for good dental health is similar to how we fortify many foods with essential vitamins and minerals."

Strategy

Reframing rather than rebutting arguments / Share analogies that make connections

Comment

"Why do we need fluoride?"

Response

"Brushing and cutting sugar help, but cavities are hard to stop with habits alone. Tiny amounts of fluoride are attracted to the minerals in our teeth to strengthen enamel and repair early weak spots—one reason kids today have far fewer cavities and adults keep more teeth than past generations."

Strategy

Use plain, neutral, respectful language / Solutions-oriented

Comment

"I'm just following the facts."

Response

"I have some information to share so that you can make your own decision. I hope it is helpful!" OR "I agree, facts first. Here are the facts I use: what's added, the exact level, and the test results that confirm it. Do you want to look at these together?"

Strategy

Meet your audience where they are / Use neutral, respectful language

Comment

"I don't want to put my (children) at risk."

Response

"We all want the best for our families, and I can tell you care deeply about their health! I want to hear your concerns, and I want to work through them together."

Strategy

Meet your audience where they are / Establish counternarrative around shared values (e.g., fairness, strong and healthy communities or families)

Responses to Questions & Comments

Comment

"I heard fluoridation can lower your IQ and impact development."

Response

"Our shared goal is healthy mouths and healthy minds. At community levels, fluoridation helps prevent painful, costly decay; agencies set conservative limits and require routine testing to keep levels in a well-studied, low range."

Strategy

Contextualize with critiques of methodology (small sample sizes, high exposure levels, confounding variables, etc.). Use credibility checklists (peer review status, journal reputation, funding transparency). / Consider audience - for some, taking a fact-based approach will be less effective compared to other strategies / Meet your audience where they are

Comment

"It's a financial burden on taxpayers."

Response

"I hear the concern about costs. Fluoridation uses existing water systems to prevent problems before they're expensive—fewer emergency room visits, less uncompensated care, and more predictable local spending." OR "We all want to spend public dollars wisely. Good oral health lowers costly fillings, extractions, and emergency visits. Fluoridation helps protect household budgets and the public budget at the same time."

Strategy

Meet your audience where they are / Establish counternarrative around shared values (e.g., fairness, strong and healthy communities or families)

Comment

"It's an attack on personal freedom."

Response

"Personal freedom matters. Fluoridation helps protect our freedom to live, work, and learn, and stay free from avoidable pain and costs—so families can spend their time and resources on what matters."

Strategy

Affirm autonomy / Reframing rather than rebutting arguments / Validate concerns and emphasize open data, transparent review processes, and peer-reviewed debate

Comment

"Media only shows one side—they should platform all views equally." OR "The media leaves out details to push chemicals."

Response

"Fairness matters. But giving equal time to claims with very unequal evidence creates false balance. Just like we don't present 'seatbelts save lives' and 'seatbelts are harmful' as 50/50 - stronger evidence gets more space; weaker claims get context and caveats so people understand the difference."

Strategy

Discuss how giving equal weight to unfounded claims is false balance, not fairness.

Responses to Questions & Comments

Comment

"What is community water fluoridation?"

Response

"Community water fluoridation is the process of adjusting fluoride levels in public water systems to a level that helps prevent tooth decay. Fluoride occurs naturally in many water sources; fluoridation simply ensures the amount stays in a range that supports oral health."

Strategy

Use plain, neutral, respectful language.

Comment

"How is fluoride monitored in public water systems?"

Response

"Public water systems regularly test fluoride levels as part of routine water quality monitoring. Fluoride levels are adjusted and monitored to help ensure they remain within recommended guidelines."

Strategy

Emphasize transparency, monitoring, and accountability.

Comment

"How much fluoride is in drinking water?"

Response

"In the United States, the recommended fluoride level for community water systems is 0.7 milligrams per liter (mg/L). Water systems routinely test and monitor fluoride levels to help ensure they remain within recommended guidelines."

Strategy

Use clear, factual information and emphasize transparency.

Comment

"Is this the same as fluoride in toothpaste?"

Response

"Toothpaste and fluoridated water both help prevent cavities, but they work in slightly different ways. Toothpaste provides direct protection when brushing, while fluoridated water provides consistent, low-level exposure that helps strengthen teeth throughout the day."

Strategy

Use plain language and focus on how multiple prevention tools work together..

Responses to Questions & Comments

Comment

"Is fluoridation mandatory?"

Response

"Community water fluoridation is typically decided through local or state processes. Communities may consider public input, scientific evidence, and public health recommendations when making decisions about water treatment practices."

Strategy

Emphasize transparency and community decision-making.

Comment

"Can I choose not to drink fluoridated water?"

Response

"Yes. People who prefer alternatives may choose bottled water or certain home water treatment systems. Communities that fluoridate water aim to provide a public health benefit while individuals retain choices about what water they consume."

Strategy

Affirm autonomy while providing factual information.

Comment

"Why is fluoridation discussed as a community issue?"

Response

"Tooth decay is one of the most common chronic health conditions. Community water fluoridation is used because it can reach many people at once, help prevent cavities across the population, and support oral health regardless of age, income, or access to dental care."

Strategy

Focus on shared community benefits and health equity.

Comment

"Where can I learn more?"

Response

"I encourage you to explore information from multiple trusted sources. Organizations such as the CDC, ADA, WHO, and local public health agencies provide information about community water fluoridation, oral health, and water quality. Reviewing a variety of sources can help you make an informed decision."

Strategy

Encourage informed decision-making / Use neutral, respectful language / Promote transparency and access to information

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Reframing Technical Language

Reframing Technical Language

Technical Language	Language Reframe	Strategy
Caries	Decay	Use a familiar everyday word ("decay") instead of clinical terms; compare to "rotting or softening spots in teeth."
Deciduous Teeth	Baby Teeth	Use the term parents already use; avoid Latin/medical wording.
Biofilm	Bacteria layer on teeth	Use plain language and explain it's "the sticky film of germs that causes cavities."
Restoration	Filling	Describe the purpose ("filling a hole caused by decay") instead of the technical procedure name.
Dental Prophylaxis	Teeth Cleaning	Name the action ("cleaning") rather than the clinical code.
Enamel demineralization	Early weakening/softening of enamel	Explain the process simply—"outer tooth layer starting to weaken."
Remineralization	Repair/re-hardening of teeth	Describe process as "healing/strengthening enamel again" rather than chemistry.
Incipient lesion	Early cavity starting	Use the idea of a "tiny starting cavity" to make it tangible.
Pit-and-fissure sealant	Protective coating on back teeth	Describe function ("seal tiny grooves so food doesn't get trapped").
Prophylaxis	Routine dental cleaning	Swap to a familiar service name ("regular cleaning").

Reframing Technical Language

Technical Language	Language Reframe	Strategy
Periodontal disease	Gum disease	Use a term patients know ("gum disease") and explain that it affects the gums and bone.
Dental fluorosis (very mild)	Faint white marks on teeth	Describe appearance ("small white flecks") and reassure about harmlessness.
Consumer Confidence Report (CCR)	Annual water-quality report	Use plain language and explain that it comes from your water utility.
Statistically significant	Unlikely due to chance	Translate statistics into everyday certainty: "strong enough that experts are confident it's real, not random."
Overfeed event	Too much fluoride accidentally added	Use clear cause-and-effect language: "adding too much by mistake," and note that safety systems catch this quickly.
Underfeed event	Too little fluoride added	Use clear cause-and-effect language: "not enough fluoride going in," and note this means less protection.
Fluoride enhances tooth remineralization by accelerating the growth of fluorapatite crystals on the partially demineralized subsurface crystals in the carious lesion. Fluoride adsorbs into this surface and attracts calcium ions.	Fluoride is a mineral that helps make teeth stronger and more resistant to decay. OR Fluoride acts as a shield for your teeth.	Shorten long scientific sentences: explain what it does (strengthens enamel) and why that matters (prevents decay).