Transforming Governance *Through Innovation*

2008 Program Report

AMERICASPEAKS
Engaging Citizens in Governance

About AMERICA*SPEAKS*

America*Speaks'* mission is to reinvigorate our nation's democracy by engaging citizens in the public decision-making that most impacts their lives. Our vision is to bring millions of Americans together in critical policy discussions that are linked to decision-makers and governance processes. To achieve our vision, we are developing innovative tools and infrastructure and implementing them across the country and around the world.

Believing deeply in the collective wisdom of ordinary people, America*Speaks* integrates state-of-the-art technology with small-group, face-to-face dialogue to allow thousands of people to deliberate simultaneously about important issues and come to shared priorities. Over the past decade, America*Speaks* has engaged over 145,000 people.

Founded in 1995, America*Speaks* is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based in Washington, D.C. Our international arm is Global Voices.

www.americaspeaks.org
www.globalvoices.org

AMERICA*SPEAKS*

A Message from America*Speaks'* President:

Transforming Governance through Innovation

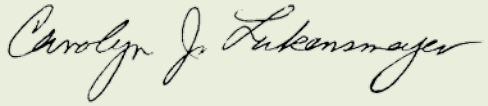
On his first full day in office, President Barack Obama issued an unprecedented Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government that calls for the federal government to redesign itself according to the democratic values of transparency, public participation and cross-sector collaboration. With this watershed message, President Obama initiated plans that take a critical step toward ensuring the American people have a strong voice in the public decision-making that most affects their lives.

To achieve the President's vision – and to truly change the system at all levels – America will need to take risks, test innovative approaches, and substantially build on already-proven citizen participation methods so that millions of people can be routinely involved in key government decision-making.

America*Speaks* continues to lead in these areas of participation and collaboration. Building on our 13-year history of advancing citizen engagement in governance, in 2008 we accomplished a number of important innovations in the field of public engagement: we brought leading democracy reform advocates together to develop a common set of recommendations for the new Administration to strengthen democratic participation; we brought citizens, advocates, and agency leaders together to rebuild lives in hurricane-affected Louisiana; we convened national online deliberations; and more.

As a result, we are clearer than ever about two key imperatives: all levels of government must make a commitment to innovations that will enable greater citizen participation; and citizens, too, must do their part to renew our democratic system. Greater participation will require all of us to stay informed, collaborate across our differences, and hold decision makers accountable for the results we want.

I hope you will join us in actively engaging with the new Administration's Open Government efforts and, at all levels, making sure citizens have a real voice in our nation's governance.

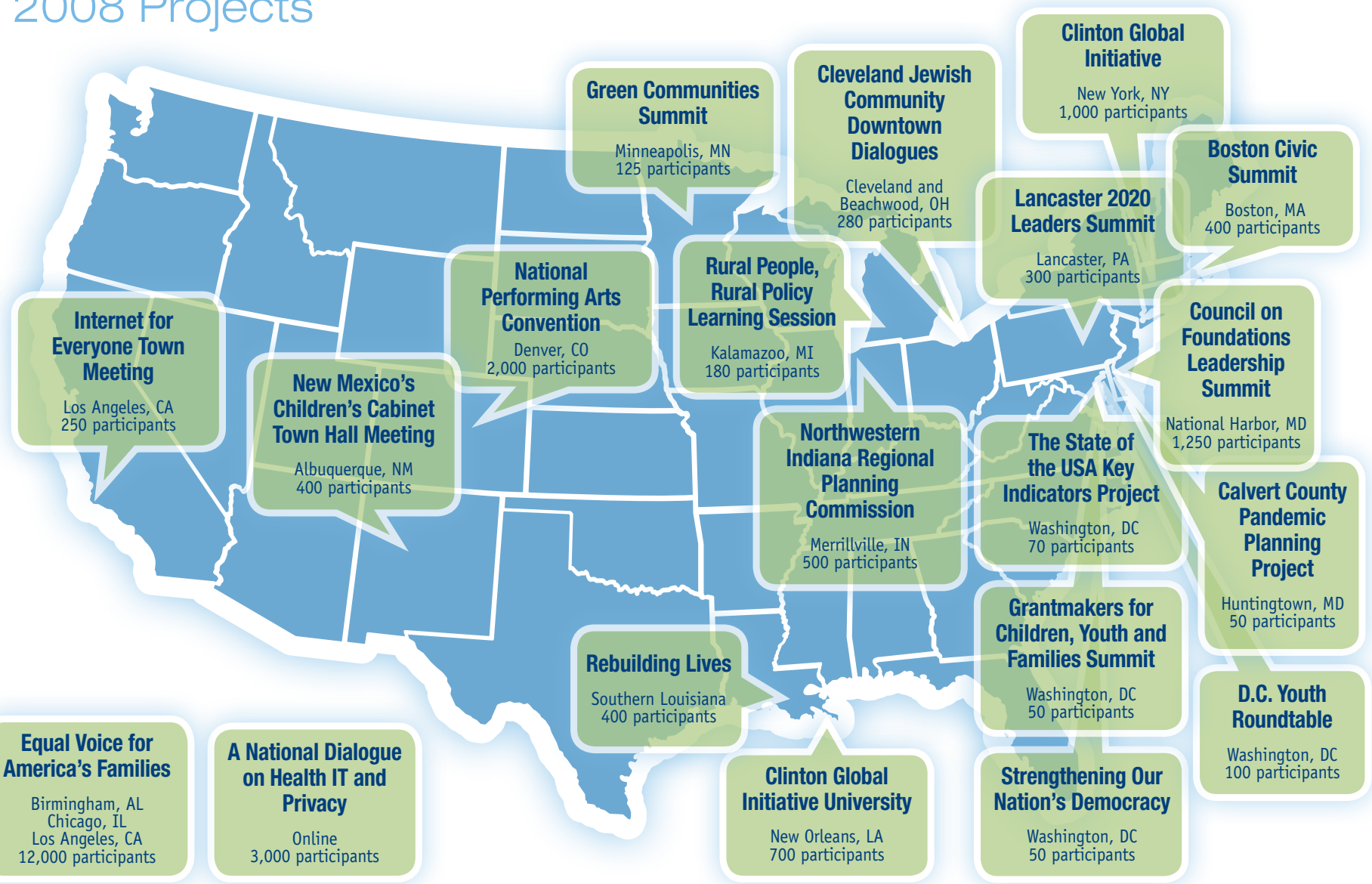


Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, Ph.D.
President and Founder, America*Speaks*

2008 – A Year of Innovation

Online engagement, a national agenda for democracy, and multi-day meetings for large coalitions are just some of America*Speaks* innovative program activities in 2008. We are breaking new ground in convening citizens and decision makers to address some of the most challenging issues of our day.

2008 Projects



Rebuilding Lives in Louisiana

***America*Speaks is ensuring, for the first time since Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, that displaced residents from across the state are collaborating with advocates and decision-makers to rebuild their lives and communities.** The Louisiana Recovery Authority, a state agency that oversees recovery efforts from recent hurricanes, has invited America*Speaks* to replicate its innovative strategy that mobilizes large, diverse groups behind a common agenda.

America*Speaks* is combining its large-scale meeting method with traditional organizing strategies to identify the individual needs of displaced residents, build an action plan for residents' needs, and engage service providers and community leadership to transition residents to safe, permanent and affordable housing.

The resulting Rebuilding Lives Coalition is a diverse group of citizens, advocates and public officials from across southern Louisiana. Convened by America*Speaks*, these individuals are working collectively to advance a common agenda in support of those still recovering from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike. Our team of local organizers and partners spent the fall facilitating discussions with citizens, public agencies and advocacy organizations to identify and take action on the greatest needs of displaced residents.

Since 2006, America*Speaks* has been active in southern Louisiana; engaging residents to develop a plan to rebuild New Orleans that resulted in the release of hundreds of millions of recovery dollars; convening employees to prepare for future disasters; and supporting displaced residents to receive the support and resources they need to rebuild their lives.

Creating a New, Online Platform for Citizen Engagement

Days before a critical presidential election, America*Speaks *worked with partners to organize a new online mechanism for consulting citizens on complex policy decisions. At the request of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), America*Speaks* co-developed a ten-day online conversation that explored how the nation can realize the benefits of health information technology while also safeguarding privacy.

Hundreds of ideas about health IT and privacy were submitted and discussed by over 3,000 website visitors who then voted on the best ideas – as identified by participants. The *National Dialogue on Health Information Technology and Privacy* resulted in new understanding on some of the toughest aspects of this policy question, which is becoming increasingly important as our nation looks for health care cost savings through electronic records.

The National Dialogue on Health Information Technology and Privacy proved that the Internet is a viable tool for engaging diverse perspectives in dialogue, promoting peer learning, and identifying shared priorities. The innovative platform that America*Speaks* helped to develop was later used by the OMB to consult the American public on the use of economic recovery funds.

America*Speaks* partnered with the National Academy of Public Administration and online tool provider Delib to design, develop content, and recruit participants for this online project.

Citizen Leadership after the Hurricanes

– Lydia Ball-Arthur

"I was displaced from my New Orleans home after Hurricane Katrina. As a resident of Renaissance Village Trailer Park, I saw and experienced first-hand how people are struggling to get back on their feet, and how the government support system is failing us.

"Recently, I and a few others from the trailer park gave testimony to the Louisiana State Committee on Housing Needs. We shared the voices of displaced residents across southern Louisiana, which were gathered through the Rebuilding Lives initiative. Our testimony ensured that state policy was informed by the needs of displaced residents.

"The work of America*Speaks* in Louisiana has helped us to have a more informed, accepted, and strong voice. Being involved makes me feel so useful and so purposeful, it has helped me rebuild my life."

2008 Publications

More Than the Vote

Being a citizen must involve active participation in the governance process, argue America*Speaks*' Joe Goldman and Demos' Stuart Comstock-Gay in the *American Prospect*.

Where is Democracy Headed?

Five years of collaborative research is reported by leading academics and practitioners affiliated with the America*Speaks*' initiated Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

Latino Outreach Strategies for Civic Engagement

Demographic diversity is critical for a public engagement project's legitimacy and success. California*Speaks* outreach staff Greg Keiden presents ten strategies for successfully involving Latino participants; published in the *National Civic Review*.

Leveraging Philanthropy to Make Citizen Engagement Count

Foundations can play an essential role in ensuring citizens have a seat at the decision making table, and in doing so, advance their own goals for positive impact on their target populations, demonstrate America*Speaks*' Carolyn Lukensmeyer and Steve Brigham.

This is Democracy in Action

An America*Speaks* report on how citizens, leaders, and communities can retake their rightful roles in our democracy and get real results.

Agenda to Strengthen America's Democracy

How should the new Administration revitalize our democracy? Leading thinkers and practitioners in electoral reform, deliberative democracy and community development came together to answer this question. America*Speaks,* Demos and Everyday Democracy co-hosted a summer 2008 conference to build on the incredible participation seen during the election season and consider how every American can have a real voice in our governance process.

The resulting Agenda presented an innovative set of recommendations to strengthen democracy in America:

- Establish a White House Office of Civic Engagement and make an institutional commitment to greater participation
- Convene regular national discussions to provide the public with a greater voice in national policy making
- Implement a unique set of policy reforms to increase participation in public life with a focus on the right to vote, elections financing and measures to ensure higher quality local and federal public participation

Hundreds of organizations, universities, businesses and individuals endorsed the *Agenda for Strengthen Our Nation's Democracy*, powering a November submission of the Agenda to the newly-elected Obama Administration.

America*Speaks* and its partners continue to work with the new Administration to ensure that new policies are put in place to strengthen the relationship between Americans and their governing institutions, such as by providing input on a federal Directive that will increase participation, transparency and collaboration.

High Performance 21st Century Summits

America*Speaks' *large-scale processes are revitalizing the way employees and members are heard in national organizations, trade associations, and leadership groups. The 21st Century Summit brings democratic values and processes to traditional meetings, tapping the wisdom of all attendees to develop shared priorities and plans.

In a 21st Century Summit, presenters interact with all participants, conference sessions can build on the outcomes of previous sessions in real time, and hundreds or thousands of participants can explore ideas and efficiently identify shared priorities. These Summits are being held by county governments and service agencies, philanthropic groups, professional associations, international leaders and more.

We convened one of America*Speaks'* most innovative 21st Century Summits in 2008 for a multi-day conference of thousands of performing artists. Participants from more than 30 organizations nationwide interacted across traditional boundaries during daily, two-hour, caucuses that identified common themes using a paper process. In a final plenary, the National Performing Arts Convention held a full-technology session, where thousands of artists voted on — and committed to — strategies to advance performing arts at the national, local and individual level. Five task forces are now developing multidisciplinary implementation strategies based on the priorities identified by participants.

A Professional Performance

– Salima Barday

"I attended the National Performing Arts Convention just after completing my music degree at the Julliard School. Each day I was surrounded by new people, new ideas. This was my first chance to mix with colleagues as a professional. I met a diverse group of artists, many of whom I can now contact about my current projects.

"I facilitated different tables of arts professionals all four days. The composition of our small discussion groups was constantly changing, and each day we got a chance to be with new people, hear new ideas. This really built momentum at the table, in the room, and across the rooms!

"I left these conversations with an understanding that, on every level, we need to be advocates for our work because *we're the artists*."

As Citizens, We All Have a Role to Play

America's greatest asset is its people. Get involved with America*Speaks* to strengthen the role of citizens in your community, workplace and across the nation.

To take action in any of these areas, visit www.americaspeaks.org

1. **Participate** in an upcoming America*Speaks* meeting or help hold your own local conversation about an issue that matters to your community.
2. **Become a Table Facilitator** by signing up for the America*Speaks*' Facilitator Network. You'll get monthly updates on opportunities to share your skills and passion on issues that matter.
3. **Donate to America*Speaks***. Your support will help us strengthen citizen voice on more issues and in more communities. Help us reinvigorate democracy.
4. **Stay Informed** by subscribing to our e-newsletter for regular updates on our work and issues where AmericaSpeaks is helping citizens to have a greater voice.
5. **Get Connected** to other people who are passionate about revitalizing democracy through America*Speaks*' Facebook pages, Linked-In Facilitator Network, and Twitter feed.
6. **Write a Letter to the Editor** in support of local citizen engagement.
7. **Request our Services** and tell us about your potential project and how we might work together. You can help transform an important issue in your community or workplace.
8. **Endorse the Agenda to Strengthen America's Democracy** and help advance important reforms that will build a stronger connection between citizens and our government.

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