This presentation introduces online tools that can be used to support public deliberation.
During this presentation, we discuss the types of online tools that can be used to support public deliberation and what to consider when selecting an online tool for deliberation. We also present the Deme platform, a web-based tool developed by the Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford University. We used Deme in the Community Forum Deliberative Methods Demonstration project for posting resources, discussions, and voting.
Public deliberation is a method of obtaining informed public input, usually to guide program or policy decisions. Topics appropriate for deliberation are generally complex, involving multiple tradeoffs. In deliberative sessions, participants engage in open discussion, learn about others’ perspectives, exchange views, and explain the reasons for their own opinions.

Public deliberation brings diverse public perspectives together; provides information such as educational materials and expert testimony to encourage informed discussion; and provides the opportunity for facilitated discussion.

This presentation focuses on the use of online tools to support public deliberation. These tools can be used in deliberative methods that are fully online, or in methods that are in person but have an online component.
Online tools can enhance face-to-face interaction or be used alone. Online tools can help:

Enable participation by a large, geographically diverse participant pool;

Help accommodate participant schedules, allowing participants to join conversations when it’s most convenient;

Provide multimedia learning;

Offer multiple modes of expression;

Facilitate collaboration among participants;

Promote collaboration and policy input through document sharing, collaborative editing, and decisionmaking tools.
Traditional online deliberative tools include:

- Document sharing
- Comment submission systems
- Publicly visible commenting
- Discussion/message boards

Traditional online deliberative tools include:

Document sharing, which provides participants with relevant documents for learning and review;

Comment submission systems, which offer participants a way to submit comments, usually to program officials or policymakers;

Publicly visible commenting, such as the comment sections at the bottom of blogs and news articles, which give people a way to share reactions to a target article; and

Message boards, which provide a forum for discussions where participants can respond to others’ posts and comments.
The online tools used in deliberation are sometimes built for special purposes, such as polling, argument mapping, budget development, and collaborative editing. These tools, which are often paired with online forums, are helpful for supporting the process of deliberation - open discussion, learning about others’ perspectives, exchanging views, and helping participants explain the reasons for their own opinions.

A polling tool allows participants to vote or express preferences among different options. Polls can provide insight into where participants stand on specific issues and can be useful for generating discussion among participants once they see how their fellow participants are responding to these issues.

Similarly, brainstorming tools foster idea generation by allowing for participants to submit ideas to the group and are often paired with polling tools to help a group see the preferences of fellow participants.

Argument mapping tools apply techniques for visualizing the components of an argument. They can illuminate the various sides of an argument, rationale, supporting evidence and how they are related to each other. Argument mapping often consists of diagrams with boxes and arrows and can resemble a flow chart of how an argument fits together. For example, specific conclusions might be placed at the top of an argument map with arrows connecting to specific evidence in support or objection to this conclusion. This type of “thought mapping” can help participants understand their own thinking more clearly and can help them communicate the reasoning behind their arguments to other participants.

Argument mapping tools can be added to an online forum, allowing participants to create and post their argument maps to generate discussion.

Budgeting tools can serve as another visual aid for supporting discussions. Participants can create virtual graphs or pie charts to see how different pieces of a budget fit together. For example, participants can be given a set of competing priorities for spending and asked to allocate certain amounts of money to each item. A virtual pie chart, which can be altered based on how the participant chooses to allocate spending, can help the participant see the tradeoffs in his or her choices.

Collaborative editing tools allow participants to work together on the same document by inserting comments, in-text edits, and/or highlighting text or sections that are visible to the group.

Petition tools allow participants to develop and sign on to proposals for action. Participants can provide reasoning for developing their petitions and can pair their petitions with collaborative editing tools to allow for input from multiple users.
Now we can talk about a few examples from the previous slides and specific examples of how they have been used to gather public input and support deliberation.

The San Francisco Transportation Department needed a way to get public input on how to spend transportation funds. The department used an interactive budgeting tool as part of the discussion. The budgeting tool allowed participants to divide up a “virtual pie” for priorities regarding where to spend transportation funds. This helped participants visualize how a set amount of funds would be distributed and helped inform their discussion.

An example of an active online community and discussion board is the Peer to Patent project, an initiative by the United States Patent and Trademark Office (or USPTO), which opens the patent examination process to public participation. This initiative uses an online system where members are “peer reviewers.” The project aims to improve the quality of patents issued by allowing the public to supply the USPTO with information relevant to assessing the claims of pending patent applications.

Comment submission tools have been used by many government offices for administrative law e-rulemaking. These offices use comment submission boxes for participants to provide written input or ideas on specific topics. The comments are compiled through the submission tool for easy review by the government office. This process has been used by the executive branch for more than a decade.

Finally, a recent example of polling and petition tools can be found in the Open Government Initiative, begun in 2009. The Open Government Initiative used the online tool IdeaScale to promote public participation in government by encouraging participants to submit specific ideas on new initiatives, vote on these ideas, and then see which ones were rising to the top based on the public’s votes. Similarly, the petition tool (We The People) at Whitehouse.gov promotes public participation in Government by offering an online system where participants can create, view, and/or sign e-petitions on specific issues of interest to them. As promised on the Web site, if a petition gets enough support, White House staff will review it, ensure that it is sent to the appropriate policy experts, and issue an official response.
When selecting on tool for online deliberation, it is helpful to think about different features of the tools.

First, different types of online tools require different types of media. Generally speaking, online tools can be text-based, voice-based, or video-based.

One example of a text-based tool is a discussion board, where participants provide input in written form. For voice-based communication, people can use telephones or computer microphones and speakers to communicate. For videos, they can use cameras to record themselves and post the videos or participate in live video chats.
Next, the type of participant interaction should be considered.

Some online tools allow for “live” interaction, where participants communicate in close to real time. This type of interaction is sometimes referred to as “synchronous communication.” An example of this interaction might be a live chat room.

Other tools are set up for “asynchronous communication,” where participants post comments with no expectation of an immediate, real-time response, but with the idea of contributing to the conversation over a period of time. In this situation, participants do not have to be online at the same time. These types of tools include discussion boards or forums, where participants post and reply to comments on their own time.

Both kinds of tools—live and asynchronous—can be used in the types of media described in the last slide: text, voice, and video. For example, text-based tools, where participants communicate in written form, can be live in the case of a live chat room or asynchronous in the case of a discussion board. Video-based tools can be live, such as a live “video conference,” whereas in other cases, participants can record and post videos at different times in response to each other. This would be a form of asynchronous video communication.
Just as with in-person meetings, the form of online deliberation can vary according to its purpose. Some online discussions are more free-form. Others are more “item-centered;” that is, they focus on specific documents or questions posed to the group. The type of discussion often determines which tool is most appropriate for the deliberation.

For example, if you are looking to hold an open, free-form discussion, you might look for a tool that provides a chat room or discussion board where participants can develop and post their own ideas and topics and are free to respond to one another.

If you are looking for a more directed discussion where you need input on specific documents or questions, such as a proposed guideline within a community, you might look for a tool in which participants have access to the same document and can provide comments directly into the document. For example, you might post a set of draft guidelines on proposed immunization requirements, and allow participants to add their comments and highlight specific sections or lines in the document.
At this point, we would like to move to a description of the Deme Web Site. We used Deme to support the Community Forum Deliberative Methods Demonstration, an initiative funded by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). This demonstration was a randomized trial evaluating the effectiveness of public deliberation, comparing alternative approaches to public deliberation, and gathering public input on a topic central to the mission of the funding agency, specifically, public views on the use of evidence for making health care decisions.

The Community Forum team worked with the Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford University to tailor Stanford’s Deme platform for use in the Community Forum project. We highlight this tool both to demonstrate the ways an online tool can be used to support online and in-person deliberative methods, and because this free, open-access tool is available to those wishing to use or modify it to support their own projects.
The Deme Web site was used to:

- Introduce the project and establish expectations
- Host a welcome video
- Provide pictures and names of facilitators*
- Provide pictures and brief bios of clinical experts*
- Provide pre-meeting reading materials
- Provide a discussion board and polling tool*
- Link to a post-session survey*

*features used in some but not all deliberative methods

The Deme Web site was used to:

- Introduce the project and describe what participants would be expected to do
- Host a welcome video
- Provide pictures and names of facilitators
- Provide pictures and brief bios of clinical experts
- Provide pre-meeting reading materials
- Provide a discussion board and polling tool
- Link to a post-session survey
We used cognitive testing to help design a web page that was user-friendly, including tabs for pages and a resource box for meeting materials and instructions for using the Web site.
When designing our discussion board, we considered threaded and unthreaded discussions, and decided to tailor the design for threaded discussions. A “threaded discussion” allows a participant to respond directly to another participant’s comment, and comments are formatted to show that they are in response to a previous comment. For example, they can be posted below the previous comment and indented. This is different from an “unthreaded discussion,” which is a running list of comments. A threaded discussion facilitates participant dialogue, which is considered more deliberative and closer to in-person discussion.
Finally, the Deme platform offers a polling tool, which we tailored for our discussion questions and response options. We posted three statements and asked participants to “Agree” or “Disagree” with each statement.
In addition to responding to these three statements, participants could write their own statements on the issue by submitting ideas through a comment box posted on the results page. This encouraged continued discussion and open-ended responses to polling questions.
The Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford University is continuing work on the Deme platform with the goal of increasing usability for outside users to download and customize their own Deme Web sites. To help meet this goal, the Stanford team has developed instructions for installing Deme on a Web server, and for navigating and customizing the Deme Web site. Deme is free to use and tailor for your own group deliberations.

To access instructions for installing Deme, and both written and video descriptions of how to use Deme, please visit http://deme.stanford.edu.

Thank you.