



MR. BOYD CONNECTS

By Brad Rourke

Being a participant in Public Television's *A Public Voice* gave Representative Allen Boyd of Florida a view of the public he usually doesn't get. "[These citizens] weren't talking to elected officials," Rep. Boyd says. "They were just sitting around in a room talking . . . with each other." The subject was health care. "And then we [policymakers] got a chance to see what they said, and reflect on it. . . . [T]hat is an unusual sort of setting." Singular enough, in fact, that Rep. Boyd went on to repeat it on his own, hitting the road throughout his Panhandle district to hear what his own constituents had to say about health care. What he heard by using this approach proved useful to him both as a leader—and as a fellow citizen. In a recent interview in his Washington office, Rep. Boyd spoke in detail about what this experience meant to him.



A Public Voice

Since 1991, the National Issues Forums Institute and Kettering Foundation have worked with Milton B. Hoffman Productions and PBS to produce and air the yearly show, *A Public Voice*, a unique attempt to show the American public deliberating together over important issues of the day and to connect this with national policymakers.

As Boyd points out, such a combination is rare. There are plenty of grassroots and other efforts to bring citizens together to discuss important public issues. America's public libraries, school cafeterias, and church basements are rife with them. There are also many, many examples of efforts to "brief" policymakers on some of these very same issues. What is missing is a connection between citizen dialogue and official policy. Few elected officials attend public issues forums; few citizens really have a voice on the daises of Washington.



A Public Voice is a chance for policymakers to see and reflect on a side of the public they usually don't see: a thoughtful, deliberative side as it works through important issues. And, it's a chance for ordinary citizens to have an authentic voice—not a telephone survey snapshot or a focus group report. A *public* voice.

Seeking Exchange

Congressman Allen Boyd sees something important in the deliberative forums that *A Public Voice* is based on, something that he thinks can help him do his job as an elected leader. He puts it simply. “You get average people together, and you try to encourage them to talk very candidly and openly about their feelings about certain issues,” he says. But, Boyd is looking for something more than just openness. He wants to see *exchange*. In forums like these, he says:

You see people come at issues or problems from a different approach, a different angle. Their own lives, their own life experiences, bring them to the issue from a certain way, and they see the problems related to the issue from just one side. And then, the next guy comes from a different place in life, and he looks at the problem in a different light, or with a different set of facts in the back of his mind. And now they come together and relate those two different viewpoints, and then you see them get a basic understanding of each other.

And at that point, according to Boyd, one or both may say, “Well, I hadn't thought about that.” This is when Rep. Boyd becomes animated. He is looking to see such exchanges, to see how citizens wrestle with issues not just say what they think when the pollster calls.

“I think that's how you lay a basis for solutions,” he says.

By his own admission, Rep. Boyd sees precious little of this sort of exchange in his daily work. “We're not often in those situations as policymakers or members of an elected body,” he says. Indeed, Boyd's atmosphere may be even more rare, as he holds a seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee—the committee that determines how much money will be spent by the government and on what. “Normally we would be up there, or we would be in a community, running a town hall meeting ourselves,” he reports. “And the folks out there might be a little bit guarded about what they said.”

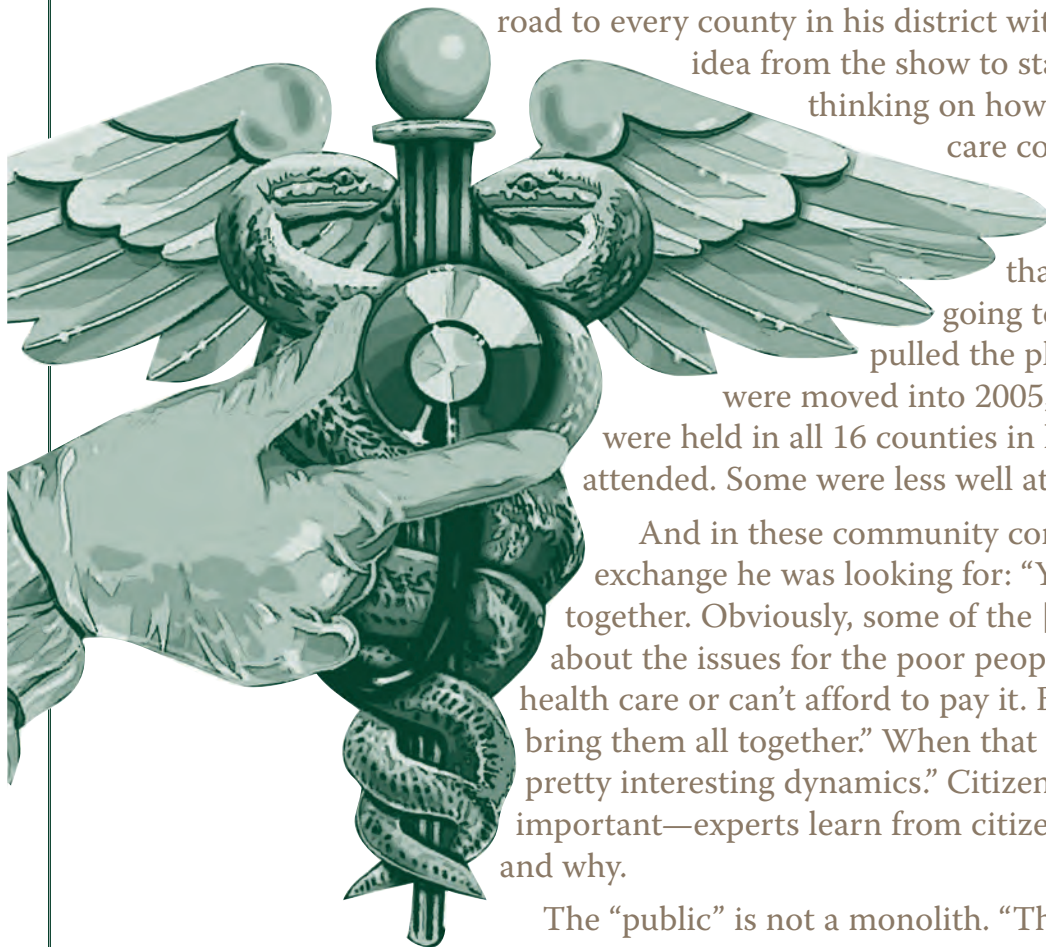
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If Boyd speaks with more of an authoritative voice than one might expect, he can be forgiven. He's done the legwork. He did more than simply spend a morning in the National Press Club watching videos of citizens and talking to other Beltway insiders.

In fact, he went to see for himself. Some months after the taping of *A Public Voice 2004*, which took place in June that year, Rep. Boyd went on the road to every county in his district with a similar event. He didn't get the idea from the show to start, but taking part in it informed his thinking on how he would design a series of health-care conversations. He'd planned them for October. But, he was in a tough electoral race, and he did not want that to interfere. "I thought this was going to be seen as a political deal, so I pulled the plug," he says. The conversations were moved into 2005, to take place in February. They were held in all 16 counties in his district. "Some were well attended. Some were less well attended. . . . I was at all of them."

And in these community conversations, Boyd found the exchange he was looking for: "You bring all these different people together. Obviously, some of the [health-care] providers may know about the issues for the poor people out in the country that can't get health care or can't afford to pay it. But a lot of them don't. And so you bring them all together." When that happens, he says, "You see some pretty interesting dynamics." Citizens learn from experts—but more important—experts learn from citizens about what matters to them and why.

The "public" is not a monolith. "The public includes the cardiologist in a place like Tallahassee, and Panama City, in the business of delivering health care on a daily basis," Boyd says. "As opposed to going into a rural area, 50 miles outside of Tallahassee, where you have a person who is retired on a very low fixed income, who has no access to critical care, because the little rural community they have doesn't even have an emergency room in a hospital or a doctor's office, or anything. When you talk about the public, you've got those two different ends of the spectrum. And people in between." Here, Rep. Boyd pauses, and his eye twinkles. He holds both hands far to the side at his conference table, a point far from him and his interviewer. "And some way over here too."



Practical Results

For Boyd, though, it's not just watching the exchange that matters. His interest, of necessity, goes further than that: As a multi-term member of Congress, he's got to spend his time on things that are more than just encounter sessions or exercises in consciousness-raising. There is one thing that every elected official will report they wish for more of, that they cannot have: time. Elected policymakers are under crushing time constraints, often scheduled in ten-minute increments. Everything Boyd does has to produce results or else it must fall by the wayside.

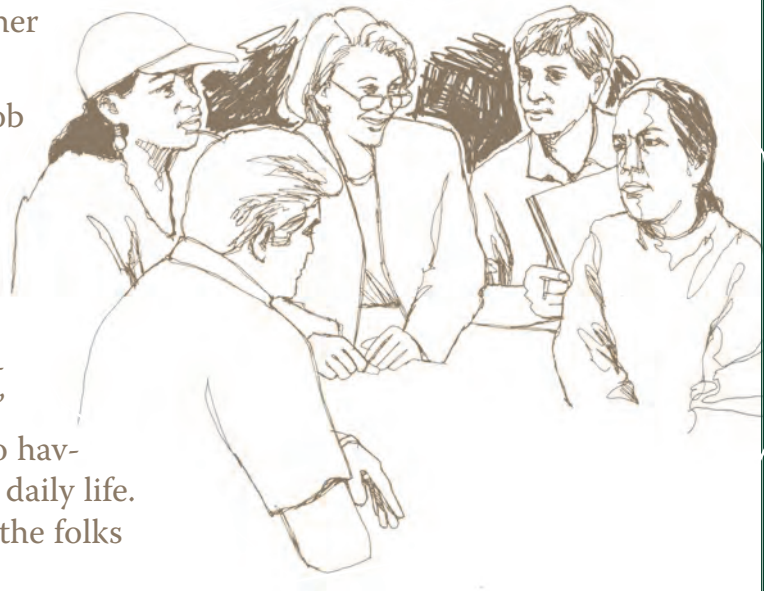
One concrete result of this series of forums is a new way of making sure local needs are connected to national policymaking. "We're in the process now of going to every county commission to ask them to set up a county health-care council," Boyd says. "Out of that we're going to make a larger regional or district council, and then ask that council system to advise us on how to solve local problems."

But more than that, Boyd says that in forums like these, he gets to see how the public thinks, which can inform him how to make his decisions. And, he finds that the very fact of having held these meetings can generate political will towards solutions.

Strong statements, and maybe a little academic-sounding. Terms like *political will* and *public thinking* are not often heard in the barbershop or over the backyard fence. Rather they are borne out by experience.

At a very basic level, Rep. Boyd describes his job as connecting resources and needs. "What we want to do is figure out how do you match [it] all up so that it comes together," says Boyd. "The guy who needs the health care when he needs it. The family who has a car wreck out there, out in the country, and it's an hour and a half to the closest hospital emergency room, critical-care facility." Like most public officials, Rep. Boyd is attentive to having an impact on the problems people confront in daily life. "I want to make sure that services are available to the folks out there that need them."

Citizens learn from experts but, more important, experts learn from citizens about what matters to them and why.



But with health care, Boyd knows, there are difficult tradeoffs. Costs are high and can only be reined in so much. Access is limited by geography and by demographics. In forums like the ones he held among his constituents, people begin to see that “everything’s not all black and white,” says Boyd. “There are all sides of the issue.” Address one aspect of the issue, and others may be affected. The question facing us, according to Boyd, is: “How do you create a system that works?”

“We’re not going to solve the national health-care crisis,” he admits. “I’ve been working on that for 16 years, with not as much success as I’d like to have.” Even from Rep. Boyd’s national perspective, an effective, workable system has proven elusive. But in deliberative forums, he finds two concrete solutions.

First, “there are individual local problems that can be solved with a little push in the right direction,” he says. Forums with local citizens remind him that the scale for every solution does not have to be national.

And second, he gets insight he can use when he makes decisions back in Washington. “In our job we have access to federal resources that we can send into the districts. Sometimes I have to make decisions about where those federal resources are directed to the district.” Watching, listening, and participating in dialogue with his constituents, as they wrestle with what to do about health care, improves those decisions.

In fact, it can have a direct bearing on those decisions. “One of the things that I want to do with the advisory council system is use them to help us determine where we can best use those resources to fill local needs,” he says.

There is a third benefit to taking part in these kinds of discussions with constituents. Rep. Boyd calls it “leverage.”

Developing solutions that have so much give and take and that take into account such a broad view of the district, means the resulting ideas can have more weight with other policymakers. “We think we can use this as leverage to get other folks, local



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and state, to provide additional resources. So, ultimately, once we get it going, by the time we come into another budget cycle a year from now, we'll have this thing cookin'."

There is a useful yardstick by which to measure results of initiatives, such as this one that Rep. Boyd mounted on the subject of health care. Simply ask, "Would you do it again?" In this case, the answer has already been given. Rep. Boyd followed his series of citizen forums on health care with a similar series, this time on Social Security.

While he has no plans at the moment to do any more such forums, he still jokes, "You know, you've done Social Security. You've done health care. I guess [now] we could do Medicare." But, whatever the issue, it will only be worthwhile if it is one in which people really have something to wrestle with. "It's gotta be contentious!" he says.

Sparking Imagination

Beyond the practical results of holding a series of deliberative forums on health care, Rep. Boyd was surprised by something he saw in the rooms themselves. He wondered, as these meetings got underway, what people would think and say. "Twelve years ago we had a very spirited debate about universal health care," he says. "That was pretty widely rejected." But things have changed in a dozen years. "I was interested, when I went out in the country to hear people's reflections on that debate now, 12 years down the road, when the number of uninsured folks has increased," what would people say?

What he found is that, in his view, people can imagine change that they were not able to imagine in the early 1990s. "I think many people, providers, business people, retired folks are saying 'Hey, we don't think we'll have the same kind of health-care system 20 years from now. We think there'll be some kind of a universal system because most of the other industrialized nations around the world have gone to that. They've gone to it for a reason.'" People are not prepared to design the system right now, but they can imagine it coming to pass.



Constituent Relations

Rep. Boyd also talks about a deeper effect of engaging in real dialogue with his constituents. “As policymakers, we’re driven by two things,” he says. “One is you want to figure out how to improve the lives of the people you represent. That’s the bottom line.” He says flatly: “If we’re not doing that, we ought to be doing something else.”

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Then his tone changes. He sounds almost apologetic. “We also are very political animals, we’re keyed into the politics of these kinds of issues: how our constituency is reacting to certain things, what do they want us to do, what do they want to see us doing.”

In terms of political strategy, Rep. Boyd sees deliberative forums as a useful way to make sure his finger is on the pulse of his district. Doing this makes it easier for him to understand how different proposals might play back home. But, he is quick to point out that his intention is not to deceive, or to manipulate, by giving people a false sense of being listened to.

Indeed, this is almost a matter of faith with him. One thing some have said in support of policymakers engaging in dialogue with their constituents is that it can give more “room” to the policymaker when it comes time to make decisions.

If people have taken part in dialogue, so the argument goes, they are more apt to give political leaders leeway when they make decisions that perhaps run counter to constituents’ individual interests. Political leaders have complained before that the public does not give them enough room to be thoughtful with important decisions.

Boyd rejects this. “People who are elected are given too much room!” he says. “By that I mean that there’s not enough attention paid by the public to the things that we do on a daily basis. . . . [T]hat allows us to go do some things sometimes that we probably shouldn’t be doing.” Striking a meditative tone, Boyd goes on: “It places an obligation on me to recognize that what you do some day will affect somebody directly. . . . It places an obligation on me to recognize that what you do some day *will* affect somebody directly.”

A series of questions sheds some light on this conviction. They are questions that Rep. Boyd has a difficult time answering. When asked why he took part in the taping of *A Public Voice*, he describes how he could find no reason not to. He was satisfied that it was a nonpartisan effort and that

there were no hidden traps lurking in his participation. He would not be zinged with unanswerable questions in public. But, there are plenty of ways that a member of the House Appropriations Committee might spend his time, and many of these match those same criteria: nonpartisan, good issue, no hidden traps. So, why do this particular event? After all, it took up a whole morning, and more.

In the end, Rep. Boyd gives no answer, as if his default response to such an invitation is “yes,” and he only declines when he sees red flags that concern him. Those who organize citizen forums will agree that this is the opposite of the typical response received from officeholders.

Perhaps a key to understanding this perspective lies in what he hopes for from his relationship with his constituents. He discusses it as if he is speaking a self-evident truth, but there is an intensity to his voice that is surprising.

“I guess the deal is that you just would like to have a personal relationship with your constituents,” says Rep. Boyd. “[I] want to be able to be in



a position that, when they think of Allen Boyd, they know him personally, what's inside his heart, what's his family like, what's his background."

You would like to have a personal relationship with your constituents. I would like people to know who I am, what I'm thinking.

He laments, "That's almost impossible to do with 640,000 people. You know, you can do it at the commissioner level, or to a certain extent maybe the state legislative level, but not even totally there. That's the kind of relationship I would like. I would like people to know who I am, what I'm thinking."

This desire for a personal relationship may drive Rep. Boyd's philosophical stands. But, here too there is a practical, political benefit. "If I can meet somebody and talk to them . . . they may not agree with me . . . but they'll certainly understand my reasoning." That is, a personal relationship with constituents can forge understanding between citizens and government. This is the kind of "room," perhaps, that he can accept.

And, Rep. Boyd has found, one practical expression of that takes place in forums in which citizens deliberate and policymakers are present. "That's what you attempt to do, and [forums like these] enable you to go look somebody in the eye, and shake their hand, and touch them. That's important."



About *A Public Voice*

A Public Voice is a public television series now in its second decade. The series is developed in cooperation with the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Institute. The series consists of one-hour public affairs television programs, produced annually, to examine how well we, as a nation, are tackling crucial public issues.

At the center of each program are American citizens, in serious deliberation in National Issues Forums around the nation, and a distinguished panel of nationally known political leaders and commentators who reflect on what this “public voice” may mean in setting a direction for America.

Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an operating and research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research.

The foundation does not make grants. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, was best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter.

He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.” Established in 1927, the foundation today continues in that tradition, but the objective of the research now is to learn how democracy can work better. Its major programs of research are designed to shed light on what is required for strengthening public life.

More about the Kettering Foundation can be found at www.kettering.org

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Author: **Brad Rourke**

Copy Editor: **Lisa Boone-Berry**

Art Director/Production: **Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.**

Illustrations: **Heidi Long and Steve Long**

The logo for the Kettering Foundation, featuring the word "Kettering" in a large, elegant, cursive script font, with the word "Foundation" in a smaller, similar cursive font directly beneath it.

Kettering
Foundation

200 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799
(937) 434-7300
444 North Capitol Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 393-4478
6 East 39th Street
New York, New York 10016
(212) 686-7016