



The Leadership  
Conference  
Education Fund

# GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS & ADVOCACY

## SECTION 5: ORGANIZING YOUR COMMUNITY





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The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights is a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations to promote and protect the rights of all persons in the United States. The Leadership Conference works toward an America as good as its ideals.

The Leadership Conference Education Fund is a 501(c)(3) organization that builds public will for federal policies that promote and protect the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States.

Access this material online at [http://www.civilrights.org/action\\_center/toolkit](http://www.civilrights.org/action_center/toolkit).



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Dear Friend:

This toolkit was put together with you in mind. Its purpose is to educate, equip, encourage, and empower you to make change.

Our goal is to provide you with the basic structure and strategies needed to plan and carry out an effective grassroots public education or advocacy campaign. It's possible to write an entire book on each of the areas covered in this toolkit—in fact, many have been written. But you don't have to read half a dozen books to put together a smart campaign.

What you need to do is establish your goals, create a strategy, make a step-by-step plan, and mobilize the people, partners, and resources to make it all achievable. This toolkit is meant to be a concise guide to accomplishing that. And we include plenty of suggested resources if you want more in-depth information.

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and The Leadership Conference Education Fund provide leadership and coordination to coalition efforts and support the work of national and local partners by providing strategic and

technical assistance, preparing materials, offering training, and identifying resources to support coalition efforts. Information on training for grassroots advocacy is provided by The Leadership Conference; information relating to education and coalition building is provided by The Education Fund.



We believe in the power of coalitions to bring people together for a common purpose. History shows that change can be made when diverse voices unite around a shared goal. We hope you will consider us your partners in making needed change happen. You can learn more about our work at <http://www.civilrights.org>. You can also reach The Leadership Conference field staff at 202-466-3315 or at [grassroots@civilrights.org](mailto:grassroots@civilrights.org).

Have fun!

Ellen Buchman  
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The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights  
The Leadership Conference Education Fund



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# The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights Field Department

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights Field Department (the field team) provides grassroots consultation, advocacy coordination, support, and assistance to national, state, and local organizations regarding field campaigns around important civil and human rights issues. The team is based in Washington, D.C., with a satellite office in Atlanta, Georgia.

## Overview of National, State, and Local Work

Nationally, the field team convenes and provides field outreach and guidance to the coalition's more than 200 national civil and human rights organizations on a broad range of issues. With that focus, the field team provides field outreach and advocacy, and public education campaign guidance, on a broad range of issues.

For example, through national coalition efforts, the field team has played a role in implementation of field campaigns for legislative victories, including: the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010.

Further, when resources permit, the field team works in collaboration with local organizations to conduct national direct-service, public outreach campaigns such as the Digital Television Transition (DTV) campaign or the 2010 Census education campaign.

The field team also works throughout the country with local organizations to provide assistance and support to local coalitions' work in their communities. This support includes field outreach and advocacy,

and public education campaign guidance. The team collaborates with leaders in states including: Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Texas. As just one example, in Nebraska, the field team has worked with coalitions to preserve equal opportunity, as well as judicial nominations and immigration reform education.

In concert with The Leadership Conference's policy and communications departments, the field team works proactively to create rapid response mechanisms on important federal civil and human rights issues with national coalitions in Washington D.C., and state and local coalitions in key states.

## Support Provided to National and State Coalition Members

The field department is proud to offer an array of services to both national and local partners to help support their work. These services include:

- Strategic Campaign Development, Guidance, and Execution (when applicable)
- Webinars, National Conference Calls, and Legislative Updates
- Legislative Email Action Alerts
- Trainings and Workshops on Coalition-Building, Community Outreach, Grassroots Advocacy, and Key Civil and Human Rights Issues
- Media Readiness Training (in conjunction with the Communications Department)
- Educational Material Development, Grassroots Toolkit, Resource Guides, and Fact Sheets
- Support in Organizing Press Briefings, Lobby Days, and Coalition Convenings

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# ORGANIZING YOUR COMMUNITY

The election of a former community organizer to the presidency of the United States—in large part due to his campaign’s hugely successful organizing efforts—brought new attention to the importance and potential impact of organizing individuals and communities to take action to improve their lives.

Successful organizing includes building knowledge of a need or issue, developing a shared understanding of who has the power to make the desired change, and motivating people to take the actions necessary to influence those in power. Your choice of organizing tactics will be focused on moving people, individually and collectively, to play a part in your campaign.

Crucial to any successful organizing effort are messages that resonate with the people you want to engage, trusted messengers, and opportunities that make it easy for organizations and individuals to participate. At some points in your campaign you may be focused narrowly on mobilizing people who are already committed to your cause to take specific actions, like contacting public officials. At other times, you may seek to educate and engage a target audience that is less familiar to you. Taking time to get to know the concerns of the people you want to organize is essential to identifying your shared interests and motivating them to join your campaign.

You can reach people through in-person engagement such as one-on-one networking, door-to-door canvassing, participating in public events like neighborhood festivals, and creating your own events. There are also a wide range of tools and technologies that can be deployed to reach people as well (mail, phone, email, and online social networks).

## Starting Small

Educational and organizing events don’t have to be large productions. In fact, you might want to start

with small gatherings where organizational and community leaders and other individuals can learn about your campaign, share their concerns, and ask questions they might not feel comfortable asking in a large public setting. You could do something as simple as inviting a few people to your office for a bring-your-own-lunch conversation.

Holding small informal meetings early in your campaign can help you find out about challenges or resistance you might face in the broader community. You can learn more about people’s values, needs, and priorities, and make adjustments to your educational materials and messaging. You might also identify people to recruit as messengers and campaign leaders.

Consider easy ways to integrate small educational events into your existing programs and activities. If your organization hosts classes or regular information-sharing sessions, have campaign materials available and encourage people to take part. If a group of service providers has a monthly meeting, ask for some time on the agenda to talk about the campaign and ask for input and participation.

## Reaching Ready-Made Audiences

Take advantage of public events that will give you visibility and access to groups of people you want to engage in your campaign. If you are trying to reach residents of a particular neighborhood or constituency, plan to attend block parties, music concerts, or holiday celebrations. Neighborhood, religious and cultural festivals may give you good opportunities to set up information tables or have volunteers working the crowd and distributing information. Some may even let you speak—you just have to figure out who to ask. You may be able to encourage other organizations to help produce a major public event by creating an event that combines

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your campaign with another organizing effort, such as voter registration.

Here's a checklist for working public events:

- ✓ Make sure you understand the ground rules for setting up a table or distributing materials (for example, you may need to rent a table or get a permit to set up in a public space).
- ✓ Make sure the space is accessible for people with disabilities.
- ✓ Create engaging visuals: banners, signs, recognizable t-shirts for your volunteers.
- ✓ Try to get everyone who shows interest to give you their contact information on a sign-up sheet.
- ✓ Give people an easy way to take action, like signing a postcard or petition.
- ✓ Consider offering candy, stickers, or other small give aways that will draw people to your table, or holding a free raffle for a small prize, like a gift certificate to a local restaurant.
- ✓ Determine what kind(s) of materials you want to distribute and how much you'll need: fact sheets, flyers, palm cards or postcards that people can send to public officials, etc.
- ✓ Your budget should include the cost of renting a space, if any, as well as the cost to produce materials and provide some refreshments for your volunteers and for people who stop by.

## Creating a Larger Community Event

One way to raise awareness of an issue or build energy and enthusiasm for a campaign is to organize a larger-scale town meeting, panel discussion, public debate, or more informal event like a block party. Here are things to consider as part of your planning.

### **Budget**

An event doesn't have to cost a lot of money to produce, especially if you or a friendly organization has access to rent-free space and equipment. You can save money if other organizations co-sponsor the event, share costs, or provide materials or refreshments. Often, the local businesses and coalition partners will provide in-kind resources and other commodities if given the opportunity to be listed as a co-sponsor. You might be able to make a deal with a local copy shop and get free copies in return for advertising its name on the back of your brochures and flyers. Be creative!

However, producing an event will take some money, even if you are able to get a location and some support donated. Consider and plan for the potential costs of space, food, materials, promotion, sound system, staff time, and parking.

### **Timeline**

Develop a timeline of steps needed to plan, promote, and carry out your event. Be sure to give yourself enough time to get the word out to your target audience once you've nailed down the logistics. A good rule of thumb is to work backward from the date of the event and see where certain deadlines fall, such as being listed in a community calendar or having materials printed. Assign staff or volunteers responsibility for getting each task done.

### **Space**

Identify a location where the people you are trying to reach will naturally go; is convenient and easy to find; has free parking; is accessible for people with disabilities; can accommodate a sound system and maybe some video. Make sure the space is a good size for your expected turnout, and err on the small side. Turning out 100 people is a big accomplishment but won't feel that way in an auditorium that holds 1,000. Consider whether the location is considered neutral or common ground rather than being associated closely with one leader or political or cultural faction of the audience you want to attend.

### **Publicity and Outreach**

Create flyers promoting your event and have them available at the offices and service centers for local community organizations. Encourage local groups and congregations to publicize your event in their newsletters, websites, and blogs. Ask local radio stations to consider running public service announcements or have you on the air to talk about the event. Ask community newspapers to include



*A flyer or poster advertising an event is meant to get someone's attention and stir interest in attending. It's not meant to explain the issue in-depth—that's what the event is for. Keep the text minimal and make it eye-catching.*

## “encouraging words”

*“Build it and they will come” might work in the movies, but it’s not a successful approach to organizing. Turnout takes hard work.*

the event in their calendar sections (keep in mind that some of these need lead times of more than a week). Ask coalition partners to commit to turning out a certain number of people. And make sure all your sponsoring organizations make phone calls. Media publicity is helpful, but individual contact is the most essential element to generating good turnout. And it’s important to have good turnout at public events, which will generate excitement and momentum for the campaign.

### **Format**

How your space is set up physically will affect how people can interact. For a presentation or discussion among a small group of people, use a square or U-shaped conference table. For a larger event focused primarily on presentations from speakers or a panel, set up a head table with the audience in rows, in a theater-style setting. If you want to encourage discussion among participants, or plan to have them break into small groups to discuss issues or strategies, set the room up with tables like a banquet room, with speakers at a head table.

No matter how your room is set up overall, be sure to have tables near the door where people will sign in when entering, and sign up for future actions or take materials when leaving.

### **Agenda**

Think about your goals as you put together your agenda and speakers. Are different communities affected by the issue or coalition partners with differing perspectives represented? Is your event designed to provide information about the issue and draw them into your campaign? Include speakers who can energize people as well as educate them. High-profile community leaders and local “celebrities” can drive up turnout.

### **Materials**

Decide what kind of materials you will need. In addition to basic fact sheets about the issue and campaign, you might want worksheets for small group brainstorming, a suggestion box, flyers for upcoming events, and flyers or palm cards for participants who are willing to take part in publicity and outreach efforts.

### **Engagement**

Give people something to do before they leave the meeting. They can sign a petition or postcard, or sign up to volunteer for a campaign committee or task force, or pledge to distribute information in their community or organization.



- *Attend community meetings and ask permission to make announcements about your event.*
- *Get coalition partners to publicize your event in their newsletters and other communications with members or constituents.*
- *Submit listings to newspapers and radio stations with community calendars.*
- *Ask coalition groups and allies to make specific commitments to turn out a certain number of people and follow up with them to make sure they are planning to do it.*
- *Call your own members, constituents, and supporters and ask for commitments to attend. Try to get people to commit to bringing one or more friends with them.*

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## Canvassing

Sometimes the best way to reach a community, or residents of a particular neighborhood or electoral district, is through door-to-door canvassing. Canvassing is a labor-intensive effort that requires good planning, careful organizing, and serious attention to the recruitment, training, and management of volunteers. Members of your group or coalition who have taken part in political campaigns may have good experience in setting up and overseeing a door-to-door operation. If you

don't have that experience among your core group, you could ask local elected officials or political party activists for suggestions on people who have experience in running a canvass and might be willing to help you.

Key things to remember:

- Have training sessions for volunteers to make sure they understand your campaign's key messages and know how to handle any difficulties that may arise.

### Sample Event Agenda:

#### **11:30 am: (30 minutes)**

- Set up tables, chairs, signage, food, etc. Make sure AV equipment is set up and working, name placards and water are on the table for the speakers.

#### **12:00 pm: (5 minutes)**

- As participants arrive, have them sign in and provide name tags.
- Direct speakers to their seats.
- Coordinate people getting food and getting seated.

#### **12:05 pm: (5 minutes)**

- Forum leader introduces moderator and key organizations involved.
- Moderator thanks everyone for coming. Thanks organizations who helped co-sponsor this event, outlines the agenda for the event and gives a brief background on why the coalition organized event.
- Moderator introduces panelists.

#### **12:10 pm: (15 minutes)**

- Panelist A speaks for 5 minutes.
- Panelist B speaks for 5 minutes.
- Panelist C speaks for 5 minutes.

#### **12:25 pm: (30 minutes)**

- Moderator leads Q&A discussion session with audience.
- Coalition members should think of a few questions in advance just in case people are too shy to ask questions at first.

#### **12:55 pm: (5 minutes)**

- Forum leader wraps up with key messages, a call to action (what people can do in their community), and thanks all for participating.

#### **1:00 pm:**

- Conclusion of forum.
- Clean-up.

- Set up a good plan to cover the neighborhood and a record-keeping system so that you can track which households you've contacted. That will help you do effective follow-up canvassing to reach as many people as possible and not annoy people by contacting them repeatedly.
- Canvass on weekends or late afternoons when families are most likely to be home.
- Try to recruit volunteers who live in the neighborhood where you are going to canvass.
- Try to recruit bilingual volunteers in neighborhoods where many people speak languages other than English.
- Consider a block party or other event to launch a neighborhood canvass, recruit volunteers, and let people know that someone may be contacting them.

## Virtual Events

You can also create events that don't require people to leave their home or office by setting up conference calls or online "webinars."

### Conference calls

Conference calls can be a great way to reach a large number of people in order to hear a motivational speech from the campaign manager or a public official; to update activists (and media) on new developments or campaign milestones; or to allow activists to share success stories with each other. Readily available conference call technology can allow you to have several speakers in different locations who can also talk with each other before speaking to the wider group of participants. You can "moderate" the call in order to control audience participation, create an orderly Q&A process and more. For a simple conference call you may be able to use in-house technology for your organization or a coalition partner. Check out available services like <http://www.freeconferencecall.com>. Or, if you have more complicated needs, try a company, such as <http://www.copperconferencing.com>.

### Webinars

Webinars are conference calls with the added component of people looking at visual information on their computers. Participants phone into a shared conference call number and use the Internet to join

the webinar. You might discuss polling results while showing charts of the data, share first drafts of materials for discussion, or show recruiting videos or advertisements. Webinars can be highly interactive, allowing participants to raise questions by phone or email, or to edit materials live while other participants watch. Participating in webinars generally requires people to have a decent computer and good Internet connection, and to be willing to download some software. If your organization does not have its own webinar organizing capabilities, you can arrange with companies like <http://www.gotowebinar.com>.

## Organizing Online

Social networking sites like Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>), Myspace (<http://www.myspace.com>), Gather (<http://www.gather.com>) and others provide opportunities to create and build communities of support for your campaign. Facebook has more than 160 million users in the United States and more than 500 million worldwide. At the end of 2010, Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>) had more than 175 million active users and was growing by millions each month.

The power of social networking sites is that people connect to issues and causes through their friends and shared interests—and that they provide access through individuals' networks of friends, fans, and followers to people you might not be able to reach otherwise. On Facebook you can create a page for your group or campaign, invite people to events, share photographs of campaign activities, post campaign updates, and ask supporters to recruit among their friends.

Like having an effective website, having an engaging social network presence and campaign will require someone's time to keep it updated and lively. You'll want to have a strategy in place for feeding interesting information and action opportunities (like a contest for slogan ideas) to people who join your network.

*See the "Using New Media" section of this toolkit for more in-depth information.*

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## Resources:

- Activation Point, a report by Spitfire Strategies on what moves people to action, is available at:  
<http://www.activationpoint.org>
- For a simple conference call you may be able to use in-house technology for your organization or a coalition partner. Check out available services like. Or, if you have more complicated needs, try a company such as Copper Conferencing:  
<http://www.copperconferencing.com>
- For more information on webinars see:  
[http://www.idealware.org/articles/fgt\\_online\\_conferencing.php](http://www.idealware.org/articles/fgt_online_conferencing.php)
- For tips on planning a successful webinar, check out:  
<http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/training/page11252.cfm>
- For other technical questions, see:  
<http://www.techsoup.com>

