



A Guide to Community Organizing

Grassroots community organizing is a way to build power and work for change. It is most often used to achieve social justice with and for those who are otherwise disadvantaged and ignored in society. Ideally, this is a participatory process of working together for needed changes. People involved in grassroots organizations and groups learn how to take greater responsibility for the future of their communities, gain mutual respect for one another and achieve growth as individuals.

Grassroots groups have made enormous progress against long odds in a range of areas. Here are some ways to make your efforts at community organizing successful.

Acting

Keep people active:

- Regular meetings are a must to be effective and hold your group together—use the same time and place if possible to stay consistent
- Always have a sign-in sheet at meetings that includes contact information. Use the sign-in sheet to immediately start a database of your members and allies
- Encourage people to volunteer for active roles in the group, such as a calling committee, a media spokesperson, etc.
- Spread the workload and involve as many people as possible—people are there to contribute, so keep them active and they'll stay involved!
- Ask group members to invite others
- Don't try and do everything yourself—good leaders know how to delegate
- Try and use as many ideas as possible—it is very important to increase group members involvement in the decision making process

And keep them informed:

- Create a weekly/monthly newsletter to update group members. If most people use email, then email may be the cheapest and most efficient way to distribute the updates
- Start a website
- Have pamphlets available to pass out at events
- If your issue is more complex, have a mini-training event—make sure new group members know your message and are kept up to date with decisions that have been made

Research

Research is a critical first step in finding an effective solution to a problem. Acting before researching can waste time and energy. It can also reinforce the stereotype of active groups as highly vocal, but largely uninformed. That stereotype is often used as an excuse for dismissing calls for greater public participation in local decision-making.

Gather Existing Information	Find Out What People Want	Research the decision making process
<p>There's no reason to reinvent the wheel--information on the issue may already be there. You just have to get it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Back copies of community newsletters and local newspapers may contain the recent history of many local issues. • Your town board or municipal planning department may have community profiles, traffic studies, zoning and other maps, aerial photos, and possibly an official community plan that relates to the issue. • Local health authorities or agencies such as the DNR may have a needs assessment or more focused studies of your area, as well as results of any past testing that has been done. 	<p>Ask questions to determine what the individual needs and goals of the group are.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are people involved, and what is their top priority? • Who will benefit? • Who will be harmed? <p>When you find common ground, you can identify your allies and opponents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research potential non profit allies on the web and contact them for advice. • Call your neighbors-they are most likely having the same problems as you. 	<p>Find out how a decision will be made, who will make it, when, and how the public can participate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who ultimately approves the project you are opposing? What are the steps the project has to take in order to be approved? • Is there a public hearing coming up? How is public participation part of the decision making? • What roles do the mayor or other governmental officials play? • Are there permits and other government approvals (local, state, and/or federal) necessary for the project? • Request meeting notes on how decisions of past meetings were made. • Investigate similar proposals in other parts of the state and country.

Planning

When you have successfully researched the problem, and identified allies and opponents, create objectives and goals for your group. Questions to ask when developing your objectives are:

- Does the goal have strong group support?
- Is it specific enough? ("Eliminate pollution" is too general. "Eliminate animal waste runoff from CAFO's in our neighborhood" is more specific.)
- Is it attainable?
- Will it have an immediate visible impact?
- How will you know when you've reached your objective? How will you measure progress?

Message

After you've answered your planning questions, developing a message for potential allies, media and local officials will be clearer. **Your message should convey who you are, what you stand for, what the problem is and what your solution is.** Frame the message in terms of who will win and who will lose, and make sure that it speaks to people's biggest concern. "This is about our health." "This is about our jobs." "This will affect our children."

- Your message should be clear, concise and consistent
- Avoid making your message too scientific or technical
- Make your message about people, not things
- Your message is not a slogan

Elements of a Message Statement	Example
Context/Circumstances	There's something in our air that could be poisoning us. Improper disposal of animal waste from large livestock factories is causing increased air pollution.
The Problem(s)	Animal waste emits toxic gases such as ammonia, which causes eye, nose and throat irritation.
The Solution	We need tighter regulations and enforcement of safe animal waste disposal to ensure that our air stays clean.
The Contrast	Without these regulations, air pollution from livestock factories will continue to endanger our health.
The Call to Action	Call the DNR and your local representatives and tell them to increase regulations for air pollution from livestock factories.

Getting Noticed

If you want to expand the number of people who know what you're doing (and hopefully want to join you!), you need to get noticed. Group recognition can be achieved through the use of:

- Bumper stickers, posters, buttons, pencils/pens, t-shirts with your group's message
- Yard and road signs
- Web site
- Talk radio – Give your local stations a call
- Events – Plan an event that highlights your position
- Protests
- Write letters to the editor and opinion editorials for the local paper and other groups' newsletters
- Use community bulletin boards to advertise events and post fliers
- Go to meetings/events of other potential ally groups to spread your message

Media

Besides informing a larger public, the media can empower residents, nudge local officials, and add momentum to a grassroots initiative. When you understand the media, you can also raise public issues that are being ignored, and reframe issues from a community groups' perspective.

Develop a Media Database	Create Press Releases
<p>Find key contacts for all media outlets and know their deadlines</p> <p>Local Newspapers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News editors • Editorial boards • Reporters—who covers agriculture, health, environment, politics, etc. <p>Local Television:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment editor • Specialty shows • Beat reporter • Public service talk shows <p>Radio:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radio talk shows (know the format and ideological point of view) • Call in to shows whose topic relates to your issue. 	<p>Press Releases should be sent out whenever an event or news items develops that you would like to comment on.</p> <p>Press Releases should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have multiple contact people listed • State your group’s name and your message—put it on your group’s letterhead if possible • Have quotes from members of your group—give them “sound bites” • Have a strong, newspaper-style headline • Be no longer than one page <p>If your new release is announcing an event where you are trying to attract members of the public, send it out at least three days before the event, and follow up with a phone call the day before.</p>

Fundraising

- Set a specific fundraising goal (i.e. we will raise \$2,000 in three months)
- Consider becoming a 501(c)3 organization (nonprofit tax deductible) or find an existing 501(c)(3) to act as your group’s fiscal sponsor
- Ask members to donate and contact supporters/allies to ask for donation
- Have fundraising events such as a pancake breakfast, auction, raffle, walk/run
- Always have a donation form or jar at your events
- Ask current donors to recommend other potential donors
- Get non-monetary in kind donations—donated services such as printing, equipment, space, food and time
- Submit grant applications to foundations and community funds

About Midwest Environmental Advocates (MEA)

MEA is the first and only non-profit environmental law center in Wisconsin. MEA provides legal and technical support to grassroots groups that are working for environmental justice in the Western Great Lakes region.

MEA’s mission is to provide high quality legal services that support a diverse grassroots movement, build local leadership and implement innovative solutions to environmental problems.

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