



Candidate Meetings 101: Helping Every Candidate Take a Good Stand on HIV/AIDS

When fighting for new policies on HIV/AIDS, we need all the tools we can find. Along with candidate polling and bird-dogging, it's worth sitting down and talking with candidates and their staff. These conversations can be a great way to make your voice heard and improve candidates' positions on the issues.

For those who have done lobby visits, candidate visits can be very similar – a chance to establish a relationship with a candidate, to lay out the key demands of your campaign, and (hopefully!) walk out with some commitments.

While nonprofits can't endorse particular candidates or parties, they can conduct non-partisan candidate education, such as visits.

As part of your election-year advocacy, it's worth taking the time to schedule, arrange and sit down with candidates and their staff to talk over the issues.

Here are some basics to keep in mind to make these meetings work.

1. Preparing for the Candidate Meeting

- ✓ Target ALL the candidates.

Arranging these meetings begins by researching the electoral race and identifying all the candidates running for a particular office. This material is available from the local board of elections, along with the deadline dates for filing as a candidate.

To stay within the guidelines of the IRS for nonprofits, it's important to make an effort to contact and meet with all candidates for a particular race.

From the board of elections and this research, put together a list of the candidates you'll be contacting, with their phone numbers, fax numbers and office addresses.





- ✓ Do your homework.

The next step is research on the candidates themselves. Figure out what the candidates have already said on HIV/AIDS. If they've held office before, look into how they've voted in the past. Looking over their campaign website can give you a sense of how they are spinning themselves now, and occasionally will have specific promises about health and social services relevant to people living with HIV.

At the same time as you are researching the candidates, research the issues. Look over C2EA/AIDSVote materials, including the platform, demands and simple plan. These are for you to adapt and use for your specific region and race. Also look at the specific issues affecting people living with HIV in your communities.

- ✓ People living with HIV should lead the way.

Make sure the group conducting these meetings includes people living with HIV as well as advocates. Having a candidate or their staff hear directly from people's personal experiences – how we personally will be affected by HIV policy – is always a powerful and moving statement. In gathering a group, share the research on the issues, so everyone is comfortable speaking.

- ✓ Contact the candidates – and follow up until you get a meeting.

Scheduling meetings with candidate offices can be time-consuming and frustrating. It usually begins with a phone call to the candidate's campaign office. It's important to keep track of who you talk to, what exactly they tell you, and the names and contact information of whoever else you should get in contact with.

Often you're told to fax a written request for a meeting. These letters should list the key issues you are planning to address. If you have a resident of their district in your group, include that fact with the person's name and home address. Faxes should be sent to the attention of someone specific in the office so you can quickly follow-up.

Next you'll probably face a long process of calling back repeatedly. While you must be polite, definitely be tenacious, persistent, and don't let them blow you off! They are running to represent us, and we deserve to be heard!





It's important to try hard to schedule a meeting with the candidate themselves. Often, however, we end up meeting instead with their staff. Staff are often the folks who end up drafting the policies and campaign platforms, so educating them can still be worth the time and energy.

- ✓ Train and prepare your group.

While you are scheduling these meetings, do preparation and trainings with the group who will be doing the visits. Folks who have done visits with politicians before can share their experiences, everyone can become more informed about the issues, and people can think about what sorts of personal experiences they might feel comfortable sharing.

2. Carrying out the Candidate Meeting

Get your crew together beforehand and head to the meeting together. Being together as a group can help everyone relax and build confidence.

Here are a few things to keep in mind going into the meeting:

- ✓ Come prepared.

The research and training you all did on the issues beforehand can really pay off. Everyone there should be comfortable knowing who you're meeting with, each person's role, and the key issues.

- ✓ Have a plan.

Have some sense of a rough order everyone will speak in, including someone to introduce the group. Plan to do brief name-and-home introductions before jumping into the meeting. Plan to make sure that a couple of people lay out the specific issues and demands, and that folks are ready to share their personal stories about how the issues affect their lives. Often you'll end up having a give-and-take discussion, but make sure you still cover the key issues.

- ✓ Pay attention to body language.

Sometimes you'll be able to take over an hour and have a great conversation; other times you'll need to get your points made quickly. Pay attention to your target's body language; see if they seem





impatient and inattentive, or if they seem engaged by what you are saying. If they are losing interest or looking at their watch, it might be time to drive the key points home.

- ✓ Share your stories.

Sharing personal stories can be one of the most important and powerful parts of a candidate visit. How will you be affected by these policies? How will those you love and those in your communities? While it's up to each person to choose what they share, it can be a moving statement for someone living with HIV to talk about how policies impact our communities and each one of us. Everyone deserves a chance to speak.

- ✓ Be honest.

If you can't answer a question they have, admit it and promise to get back to them with the information they request.

- ✓ Listen.

Listen carefully to what they tell you, even if you disagree. They will often let you know what types of information might change their minds on specific issues.

- ✓ Be polite.

Particularly with unsupportive candidates, it can be easy to get sucked into being angry. While that may be great energy to take into the streets, it's usually best to stay cool in the meeting itself. Stay positive, and thank them for their time. Even if they can't be dignified, we can. Leave on good terms, even if the meeting is not fruitful.

- ✓ Ask for answers.

Try to get specific answers to specific questions. Politicians tend to speak in generalities and it is more effective to get them to take a position "on record" regarding your questions. Know beforehand what you are asking for, and be bold!

Leave something behind. Leave information regarding the issue being discussed, information regarding your agency, etc.





- ✓ Take a picture.

Politicians – even the most powerful – are also suckers for posed photographs. Getting a photo of you and your posse with the target after the questions have been answered – or while the questioning is going on – is a good way to extend discussion and/or seal the deal. If you wear your C2EA or AIDSVote t-shirts, the photos will be even sharper and cooler!

3. Follow-up After the Candidate Meeting

- ✓ Take notes.

Immediately after the meeting, make notes on what was discussed and agreed to by you and the candidate.

- ✓ Let the world know what you've done – send us blog entry!

Send a brief discussion of your meeting, any highlights, and a picture to be posted on the C2EA blog to info@campaigntoendaids.org – it's a way to let AIDS activists all over the country know the good work you and your crew have been doing.

- ✓ Send a “thank you” or “follow-up” letter.

Later, follow-up with a thank you letter that summarizes your understanding of what the candidate has agreed to do. Thank them if they've been supportive, helpful or respectful. And even if they've been hostile – remind them that you are available as a resource. It's never too late for someone to learn more and improve their positions on the issues. Always send separate letters to any staff member(s) you met, and make a point to keep in contact with them.

“Candidate Meetings 101” was created by [GMHC](#), which is a supporter of the [Campaign to End AIDS](#) and [AIDSVote](#).

