



WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH LOCAL OFFICIALS

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Many of the most important decisions that affect people's lives are made not in Washington D.C. or the State Capitol, but in local communities by local officials. Local government is closest to the people, where individuals working together can have a considerable impact.

Whether the goal is addressing a neighborhood problem, delivering an existing program better, or adopting a new policy, the following are some suggested strategies for working successfully with local officials.

Understand the Issue

- First, get the facts. It is essential to do the research and analysis to build a case for making change. Public documents, reports, newspaper and magazine articles, scientific studies, the Internet and personal experience are all important sources of information.
- It helps if you can put in writing answers to several questions:
 1. What is the problem? Who is hurt by the problem? How serious and widespread is it?
 2. What has been done to date? What has worked, not worked, and why?
 3. Who else has a stake in the issue? What are their concerns?
 4. What will happen if nothing changes?
 5. What will happen if the problem is solved? How will individuals and the community as a whole benefit?

Know What You Want

- Before deciding on a specific solution, be clear about the *values* and *interests* that underlie your concerns. These will define the aims you seek. Examples of core *values* include fairness, community, economic prosperity, compassion, and environmental stewardship. *Interests* could include protecting the health of children, ensuring housing for those least able to afford it, or offering economic opportunity to people who lack access to good jobs.
- What are the possible solutions? How would they work? Have they been tried, and if so, what were the results?
- What are the costs – fiscal, economic, social, and environmental? What are the potential benefits – both direct benefits to those most affected as well secondary benefits to individuals, local agencies, or the general public?
- What solution would work best for the situation? Who might be skeptical of or opposed to the proposed solution? What are the contrary arguments and how do you respond?
- In crafting a final proposal, where is there room for compromise on means or ends? Which elements are so fundamental they cannot be compromised?

Be Organized

- Involve others in your efforts, reaching out to those with a stake in the issue.
- Be clear about how group decisions will be made. Foster open communication.
- Speak with one voice. Build consensus on the goals you seek, the changes you want to see, and the solutions you support. Don't gloss over disagreements – they often surface later.
- Identify and assemble the skills and resources you need. Assign responsibility for research, communications, outreach, and other key tasks. Develop relationships with outside organizations that can provide advice and assistance.

Understand the Process

- Who makes the decisions? Who are the opinion leaders and others who influence decisions?
- What is the process for making decisions? What are the steps? What is the timeline?
- What are the venues for public decisions? Will there be public hearings, task force meetings, community forums, or other opportunities for participation? What form will public participation take and how can your group best engage?
- What information will decision-makers use and how will it be developed? Are there opportunities to provide advice, ideas, or comments?

Build Relationships

- Get to know your local officials. Research what they care about, what they've done, where they stand on your issue. Schedule opportunities to meet with or communicate with them on areas of mutual interest.
- Reach out to others in the community with different perspectives and concerns. Build bridges and relationships based on their interests, not just yours.
- Extend your network of contacts with local officials by broadening your circle of collaborators.
- Keep your commitments to local officials and community partners. Avoid circumstances in which officials or your supporters and allies are surprised or put in an awkward situation.

Communicate Effectively

- Develop clear materials that describe the problem, your aims, the proposed solution, and why it matters.
- Don't just convey a position -- tell a story. Illustrate the issue with examples. Emphasize the local angle, express it in personal terms, and make it human.
- Focus on a few key points when you meet with officials. Let their questions and comments guide you in deciding whether and how to expand the discussion.
- Acknowledge and address opposition and skepticism. Give your best, reasoned response to questions and arguments against your proposal.
- Ask for what you want. Communicate what you would like the official to do and make careful note of any commitments, requests, concerns, or conditions.

See the Big Picture

- Keep the broader public interest in view. Recognize that there are often legitimate competing values and interests that local officials must balance.
- Understand that many issues have causes or impacts that extend beyond the local community. Appreciate how what you want local officials to do may affect people outside your neighborhood or locality.

Act with Persistence, Integrity and Respect

- Always be honest and consistent. Don't use heated rhetoric or overstate the issues. If you don't know something, say so and offer to get back with an answer.
- Respect officials, doubters, critics, and opponents. Don't threaten, demonize opponents or denigrate others' intentions or motivations. In return, insist that others treat you with fairness and respect.
- Recognize that it takes time – sometimes a *long* time – to make change and solve problems in a democratic society.

Stay Engaged

- If you succeed in getting action, don't stop there. Pay attention to implementation.
- Stay in touch with your core group, community partners, and local officials.
- Monitor results and bring any problems to the attention of local officials and staff
- Now that you're involved, remain an active community member! Bring your energy, experience, skills and commitment to help local officials address other community issues that you care about.