

Section 2:

Getting Started

First Steps

Now that you've decided to engage low-income volunteers in advocacy, you'll have to

do a few things before you start having meetings.

Demonstrating Legality

Advocacy is legal, but your organization might not be so sure. Consult with one of the many organizations that provide information on the advocacy rights of 501c3 organizations, a number of which are listed at the end of this section.

What resources do I need?

Staff hours. You'll need to decide how much staff time you'll devote to the group. How many staff hours you'll need, at first, depends in part on how much work your organization has already been done with volunteer advocates. If you already have relationships with volunteers, or if you've worked with volunteer advocates before, it may be much easier to get started.

Additional Funds. You may also need to set aside some resources for the group. If you decide to offer compensation for meeting or event attendance, you may need an additional allocation of funding. You may also need funds to generate outreach materials, order guides and books on advocacy, and purchase food for meetings.

Formulating a group vision

You should also try to formulate a clear vision of the mission and structure of your group. Potential volunteers will want to know what

they're signing up for, and you should have some notion of the group's direction in order to plan for its future. Try to answer the following questions:

What do we want the mission of the group to be? Ask yourself, what's the primary purpose of the group? What issues will it address, and how will it address them? The group I helped establish, the CAN, had a broad, anti-poverty mission. We were interested in just about any issue connected to reducing poverty, including food stamp issues, Medicaid issues, or even payday loan regulation. Another option is a more focused group that puts special emphasis on one or two social issues.

What are the goals of the group? In addition to a mission, you should think about the secondary goals you'd like the group to accomplish. The CAN's goals were four-fold: engage more volunteers in advocacy, develop leaders in the low-income community, get information from Oregon Food Bank's advocacy department's out to the grassroots, and gather information about the issues low-income people face in escaping poverty.

How will you share decision-making with your group? What should the members of the committee have the power to choose? And what will your organization choose? Now, at first you don't have to have a definitive vision for how to share decision-making with your group. But it is helpful to know where you'd like things to end up. Everyone's expectations ought to match up.

Recruitment: Bringing people to the table

Recruitment is vitally important. *Half the battle is just getting people to show up at a meeting.* This section will show you some of the basics of how to bring many people to your initial meetings. First, a few key points:

Never stop recruiting: Membership in a volunteer advocacy committee tends to be very fluid. Not everybody can make it to every meeting. People might have higher priorities or lose interest. To replace leaving members, it's crucial to always be on the look out for new members.

Relationships: Good recruiting is built on relationships. Try to recruit people you already have a relationship with, and build relationships with recruits you don't quite know yet. You may also want to ask people you know at other service providers to help with your recruitment.

Where do you start looking for volunteers?

You first want to start looking within your organization. You should start with clients with whom you already have a relationship. Ideally, you'll have a database of people you know pretty well. Use the contact information from that database to promote your group. If you don't, it's a good idea to put all the contacts you already have into a database. You'll be using it a great deal.

You may also want to recruit volunteers who do direct service. Often, there's a fine line between a volunteer and a client. Many former clients like to give back to the organization that helped them. Shop your group's vision around here; some of the best

volunteer advocates for

Oregon Food Bank are also service volunteers.

For more volunteers, you may want to visit other service providers that work with low-income people. Here's a list of groups that tend to attract potential advocates:

Head Start

Domestic Violence Programs

Poverty Action Committees

Community Colleges

Housing Advocacy Groups

Tenant Organizations

Health Care Advocacy Groups (AARP, Etc.)

Community Organizations (ACORN, USAction)

Who should I look for?

Anyone can do advocacy, but you may want to favor people who have moved out of a crisis and secured a stable income. People with few familial obligations, fairly good health, and a light work schedule tend to be even more reliable. However, people in crisis can also be strikingly effective advocates, so it's important to not write anybody off.

You may want to seek out people with certain talents. Adept communicators strengthen an advocacy campaign. People with good interpersonal skills can make future facilitators and community leaders. Again, be sure not to exclude anyone based on their skill sets. You can engage in advocacy in any number of ways, and it will be your job to find where an advocate's talents can be best applied.

Advocates also need to have a certain mindset. Look for people who

question things, who expect more from society or their lives, or who think that poverty is unjust. Look for people who pay attention to politics, like to talk about it, and may have participated in it already. People who believe that poverty is “just the way things are” may not be ready for advocacy.

Facilitating Participation

For some volunteers, it costs too much to do advocacy. Expenses like gas mileage, bus fare, lost wages, and child care expenses can be difficult to bear when your income is low. You may want to compensate volunteers for these costs at your meeting. **While recruiting, it may help to let people know if you will be offering reimbursement for participation in the group.**

At our meetings, we compensated for gas mileage, which we did at the same rate that the federal government offers. We also compensated for child care expenses, lost wages, and bus fares. Volunteers filled out a form, and we brought petty cash with us to compensate some folks immediately. For others, we took their addresses, and sent them a check in the mail.

Your compensation costs will most likely go down after your first few meetings. You'll probably find that people will refuse compensation. They'll be doing advocacy for its inherent rewards. Other types of compensation, though, do not seem to lose their appeal. Make sure to always give leftover food to meeting attendants.

You may also want to consider **giving people rides to your meeting.** Some people might not be able to come otherwise. Let them know that you can give them a ride, but it may mean that they will have to come to the meeting early.

Finally, consider providing childcare at meetings, as some volunteers may need to bring their children to a meeting.

How do I promote the group?

The easiest way to reach a lot of people at the same time is by email. If you have a database of email addresses of potential recruits, send out an announcement about the first meeting. Be brief, and include all relevant information about the meeting (time, place, length). Highlight that you'll offer food and compensation.

What email has in scope, it lacks in impact. People tend to breeze right through emails, and they may not remember what you wrote. **The most effective way to make an impression is by meeting with them, face-to-face.** After that, a phone conversation, a letter, and a personalized email message.

You also may try to advertise your group through newsletters. In-house newsletters work very well. Also, lots of service providers belong to networks that put out newsletters. If they won't help you recruit people, ask them to put something you've written on your organization in their newsletter.

You may also try to place advertisements in agency lobbies, or in other publications. Try to make these posters eye-catching, use lots of pictures, and keep your message brief and to the point. The quicker you can explain the group and the meeting, the more likely people will stop to look at the poster (see the sample poster at the end of this section).

What do I say?

When you're recruiting, always make sure to let people know **when** and **where** you'll be meeting, as well as some information on **what issues** the meeting will address. Also, let them know about **reimbursement** and **rides** to the meeting. When you're trying to pitch the group, the most significant barrier to recruitment may be hopelessness. Many people don't get involved in politics because they think that their participation doesn't make a difference. You will have to persuade them that what they do will matter (Also See Why Citizen Advocacy?, Section 1, for more ideas).

- **Stress the power of a group**

"It's a chance to make change happen, because you'll be a part of a big group of dedicated leaders that has my organization's support. We'll be speaking as a group, and many voices are always louder than one. Legislators may not pay much attention to one person, but they can't afford to ignore a whole lot of them."

- **Stress the assets that will make them effective advocates.**

"You're going to bring a perspective that'll be hard to ignore. You have the experience, and you have the knowledge, which will help make you an effective advocate."

- **Emphasize the skills that volunteers will learn.**

"We're training leaders for the anti-poverty movement. It'd be a great opportunity to learn how to advocate for the issues that may affect your life. We'll have trainings on public speaking, on government programs, on speaking with legislators- all that you need to know in order to change your community."

- **Emphasize the social aspects of working in a group.**

"Letting off steam feels good. You'll have the support and understanding of lots of other active, informed people who

understand what you've gone through. They can help you cope with the stresses that sometimes prevent people from doing advocacy."

- **Stress the information about benefits and services that they may learn from you or other volunteers.**

"You may also learn a lot about available benefits and services from our outreach staff."

- **Talk about fairness.**

"It's a chance to make Oregon work fairly for everyone. Big businesses, special interests and rich people pay lobbyists to talk to legislators on their behalf, for their causes. Legislators often don't get to hear from people who are working hard just to get by. The group would represent a side of the debate that's often not at the table. It's only fair that there be equal chances for both sides to let legislators know how they feel."

Outsourcing Recruitment

Somebody you know might be able to help recruit volunteers. Everybody listens to people they trust and know more than people they don't. You may find it best to recruit through an intermediary who has personal relationships with potential volunteers.

If someone at your agency does outreach, they may have many strong relationships with potential volunteers. Ask them to get the word out about your committee. You may also know people at other agencies who have strong ties in your community. Ask them to help your recruitment effort, accompany you at a meeting, or introduce you to some potential volunteers.

Try to make it as easy as possible to help. Prepare a letter of invitation, or a brief description of your network, for an outreach worker to pass out.

Who: All citizens with a stake in ending hunger and poverty.

Where: Oregon Food Bank (7900 NE 33rd Drive)

When: _____ at _____

Why: To advocate for policies that alleviate poverty, the root cause of hunger and food insecurity

Questions: Contact Matt Lewis at 503-282-0555x281 or mlewis@oregonfoodbank.org



SPEAKUP!

Join the **Citizen's Advocacy Network (CAN)** of the Oregon Food Bank!