

How to... Hold a House Meeting

#15 in a series of citizens' guides by the
Western Organization of Resource Councils

January 1998

A house meeting is a small gathering of ten to fifteen people who are invited to the home of someone they know and trust to discuss issues of shared concern and develop ways to work together. The comfortable setting is an ideal forum for getting to know people, sharing information about an organization and its issue campaigns, listening to what people have to say, and encouraging them to become involved. Common purposes for house meetings include getting people to commit to take a specific action on an issue or agree to hold a house meeting, and recruiting new members.

Organizations often hold house meetings in a series, which can lead to significant growth by expanding membership into new social circles. In the early days of their organization, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers used a sophisticated, long-term house meeting strategy to build a national movement.

Preparing for a House Meeting

A team approach works well for house meetings, with one member hosting the meeting, and another, the leader, representing the organization. The host holds the meeting at his or her house, invites his or her friends, and facilitates the meeting. The leader makes the presentation and answers questions. With the team method, the host and leader can learn from each other, especially if one is a more experienced leader, and back each other up to help make sure that everything runs smoothly.

A house meeting should be planned about two weeks in advance. The host and leader should meet to set goals for the meeting, such as eight new members, twelve letters to the governor or three people to hold house meetings. They should also plan the agenda, decide who to invite, choose a date and time for the meeting and plan other details.

Turning people out is critical to the success of a house meeting, so the host and leader should pay

special attention to the turnout plan. The host should invite friends, neighbors and family who he or she thinks will be concerned about the issue and interested in becoming involved in the organization. It is important that the host get a commitment from each person who is invited. Jessica Govea of the Center for Community Change says that "maybe" almost always means "no", and recommends that the host send an invitation, follow up with a phone call to confirm, and make two reminder calls—one call two days before the house meeting and another call on the day of the meeting, a couple of hours before it begins. When inviting guests, the host should tell them what will happen at the meeting, who will be there and how long the meeting will last.

The host and leader should meet a second time to prepare for the house meeting. The host should tell the leader something about each person who has committed to come, and they should practice their presentations and give each other feedback. They should also plan what they will say to set the tone of the meeting and how they will make sure that each guest has an opportunity to participate. They should try to anticipate problems that might come up and think through the best way to solve them.

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Running a House Meeting

The meeting should last no more than an hour and a half. As guests arrive, the host should greet them and introduce them to each other. Once everyone has arrived, the first agenda item should be another round of introductions with a short "ice-breaker" to help people get to know each other and feel more comfortable.

Next, the host should briefly describe the agenda and let people know what time the meeting will end. Before the leader begins the presentation, the host should introduce him or her again, telling the guests a few things about the leader to add to his or her credibility. The introduction can be simple, such as, "I go to church with John. I became involved with this group when he encouraged me to go to a Board of Supervisors hearing on the safety of the bridge."

The presentation should be as brief as possible. The leader should:

- Talk about the organization, not just the issues.
- Tell people how the organization got started, and what it has accomplished.
- Stress how each member is important, and give examples of how people have gotten involved and made a difference.
- Focus on what each of the guests is most likely to care about. Leave out the dry, technical information.
- Be personal. The host and leader should each tell the guests why they care about the issue and became involved in the organization.
- Give the guests an opportunity to enter the discussion and ask questions as early as possible.
- Be friendly. Call on people by name.
- Above all, have fun.

The peak of the meeting is the action request, which should be made by the host. The request should be more than a membership pitch. It should also include something that the guests can do to get involved right away, while their interest is high. For



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example, they might call or write a public official, come to the organization's next meeting or host another house meeting.

The host and leader should try to get commitments from the guests without pushing too hard. Some people may need time to think the request over, and the host can follow up with them later. However, the host and leader should be prepared to accept a membership check if someone agrees to join on the spot. They should have on hand any materials they might need if any guests want to get involved right away, such as a sample letter, a flyer with information about the next meeting, or the house meeting coordinator's name and phone number.

At the end of the meeting, the leader or host should handout some materials with more information about the issue and the organization, such as newsletters, membership forms and action alerts. By saving handouts until the end of the meeting, people will not be distracted by them during the presentation and discussion.

Finally, the host should thank everyone for coming and invite them to stay for refreshments and socializing.

Follow Up and Evaluation

After the guests leave, the host and leader should meet to make a follow up plan. The host should talk to each guest within a day or two after the meeting to get their feedback and ask them again to get involved. Before the host begins the follow up calls or visits he or she should compare impressions with

the leaders of how the meeting went, which guests seemed the most interested in becoming involved in the organization, and what commitments were made.

The host and leader should also do a written evaluation of the meeting so that others can learn from their experiences for future house meetings.

House Meeting Tracking Form

When an organization is planning a series of house meetings, it is helpful to have one member or staff person coordinate them all and keep track of the results. The coordinator's job will be made easier through the use of tracking forms that include the information listed below. The host and leader fill out the forms together and turn them in after each house meeting.

- Host's name, address, phone number and email address.
- Leader's name, address, phone number and email address.

First Planning Meeting:

- Meeting date, time and day of the week.
- Goals and expected outcomes.
- Who will be invited? (name, address, phone number and email address)
- What might interest each person coming?
- Potential problems in getting each person to come – possible conflicts, child care needs, etc – and how to solve them.
- Needs and who will fill them:
 - refreshments
 - handouts (newsletters, membership forms, action alerts, flyers announcing the next meeting, etc.)
 - extra chairs
 - someone to watch children
 - someone to answer the phone
 - table for water jugs
 - membership/donation receipts

Second Planning Meeting:

- Did the host personally invite each person?
- When will the host make reminder calls?
- Who has committed to come?
- Does the leader know something about each guest?
- Is the agenda ready, including time limits for each item?
- Did the host and leader practice what they're going to say?
- Are the handouts ready?
- How will the chairs be arranged?
- When will the evaluation take place?

Follow Up and Evaluation:

- Who came to the meeting?
- What feedback did the guests give?
- Which guests seemed most interested in getting involved in the organization?
- What commitments were made?
- What follow up needs to be done (including calls or visits with people who did not show up), who will do it, and by when?
- What were the high points of the meeting?
- What should be done differently at the next meeting?



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Getting the Ball Rolling

One way to educate members of your organization about house meetings and how to run them is to hold a training session that ends by asking for volunteers to be the host and leader for the first house meeting, which will serve as a dry run. Other

members who attend the training session can volunteer to be guests, which will allow them to see what is required of the host and leader. The action request at this house meeting should be to ask the guests to volunteer to host a house meeting, or to be a leader.

For more on House Meetings:

Principles of Community Organizing training sessions are held twice a year by the Western Organization of Resource Councils. **Advanced Leadership and Staff Development** training sessions are held once a year.

How to Run a Good Meeting and **How to Speak in Public**, #8 and #13 in this series of citizens' guides to community organizing.

More How-To's:

Available from WORC for \$2 each

- How to Deal With Intimidation
- How to Research for Organizing
- How to Use the Freedom of Information Act
- How to Research Corporations
- How to Hold an Accountability Session
- How to Deal With the Wise Use Movement
- How to Do a Radio Commentary for the High Plains News Service
- How to Run A Good Meeting
- How to Recruit Members
- How to Develop a Winning Strategy
- How to Take Action
- How to Hold a Press Conference
- How to Speak in Public
- How to Deliver a Message in the Media

Let us know when you use these How-to's. Give us suggestions for improving and updating them.

More about WORC:

The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is an association of six grassroots organizations with 6,000 members and 42 community-based groups, united to advance the vision of a democratic, sustainable and just society through collective action. Find out more about WORC, and hear our award winning radio program, the High Plains News Service, on the World Wide Web at <http://www.worc.org>.

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