

# CITIZENS FOR GLOBAL SOLUTIONS COMPLETE ACTIVIST TOOL KIT

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## Part I: TALKING TO YOUR FRIENDS & COMMUNITY

### SIMPLY CHAT WITH YOUR FRIENDS

Believe it or not, talking to your friends about global issues can be one of the most difficult ways to make a difference. It can also be one of the most effective. Sometimes our friends and family don't want to hear about the painful realities happening in the world. But, hearing about these things from a trusted source can really resonate in ways other sources can't. Think of it this way: You're probably less likely to give money to a 16-yr-old kid who approaches you on the street about sponsoring a sick orphan in Burma than you are to give food to a food drive being sponsored by your local place of worship.

Not sure how to talk about your issue with your friends? Take a look at the *U.S. in the World* communications guide, a fantastic resource for Americans to learn how to talk about global issues with other Americans.

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### ORGANIZE A TOWN HALL MEETING

A town hall meeting is a great way for groups and individuals to get together to discuss issues that affect the community in which they live. They also present an ideal opportunity for community members to connect with their local leaders and elected officials. The following offers a step-by-step guide on how to plan a town hall meeting in your community.

**1. Select a Time.** Begin planning the town hall meeting early. When searching for venues and speakers, remember that many invitations and requests may go unanswered. So, you may need to start planning *at least* a month in advance. Patience and persistence will be key.

Try to ensure that the town hall meeting is organized for a time that does not conflict with other community events in the area. This is especially important if these other meetings involve local elected officials and policy makers. The meeting will be easier to organize if the issue you wish to discuss is pertinent and relevant at the time. Also, because many officials travel back and forth between Washington DC, and their local districts, aim to organize the meeting when local policy makers and elected officials are able to attend. Senators and representatives visit their constituencies several times a month, so plan the event for this time.

**2. Select an Issue for Discussion.** Ask yourself: What is the main objective of the town hall meeting? Identify a key issue that you want to be the subject of the meeting. This issue should be pertinent to your local community and the assembled audience. Make sure the meeting adheres to this topic. Confirm that the community groups you are reaching out to and seeking to involve (see # 4 below) have a vested interest in the topic of discussion.

It is important to have a clear agenda because town hall meetings involve many different and diverse groups of people. It is also important that the meeting runs smoothly and maintains coherency, focusing on the key issue that has been selected for discussion.

**3. Inviting Speakers.** Consider carefully the issue that you intend to discuss and aim to reach out to individuals and groups in your local community that would be most appropriate for the subject matter. A panel of three to four people is recommended. You may consider looking for speakers among local professors, journalists, policymakers, NGO/business leaders or elected officials. You should aim to create a dynamic and representative panel that is active within the local community and will appeal to a diverse audience.

When inviting policymakers and elected officials to attend the Town Hall meeting, ensure that you contact them well in advance of the event (at least a month) in order to confirm that they will be available for the event. Aim to schedule the meeting for a time during the month that the elected official is present in the local community, as s/he may not be able to travel for it. Ensure that the dates you offer are flexible and that you are able to adjust to their schedule, to the best of your ability. If possible, it is best to organize the meeting for a time when the issue being discussed is at the forefront of the current local or political agenda.

Although this may not always be possible, these types of meetings should aim to bring an issue that has a direct impact on the local community to the table and should ensure a broad level of interest.

Finally, a moderator should be chosen to host the town hall meeting. His/her tasks will include welcoming the audience and the speakers, ensuring that the discussion does not stray from the main issue, making sure the speakers do not go beyond their allotted time slots and implementing a Q&A. Often, local print or radio journalists can serve this role well, though you may also consider asking a local professor or community leader.

**4. Select a Venue.** The meeting should be held at a place that is mutually accessible to the local community and provide adequate seating and parking. It is important to ensure that the venue has access for disabled persons. Remember that the venue should be chosen carefully based on the nature of the event, the number of people expected to attend, and the specific audience. Also, consider how well the venue lends itself to an audience. (Are their pillars in the middle of the room? Is sound quality notoriously poor?)

It is important to ensure that the audience feels comfortable with the venue and the assembled company. If elected officials and policymakers are present, it is possible that some people may feel intimidated and feel that they do not possess the expertise to speak out about the subject of discussion. People should be put at ease and made to feel that the meeting is open to the opinion of all present.

Ensure that the venue has appropriate access for the local media and if possible, lends itself to photographs. Also check whether there is a fee for using your place of choice. Examples of appropriate venues include college campuses and lecture halls, churches (especially when talking to faith-based groups, although some audiences may not be comfortable in this environment), high schools, community centers, town squares, public amphitheatres, libraries, or city or state government buildings.

**5. Working with Local Community Groups.** Working with local community groups is an excellent way to ensure that your meeting is well attended and attracts a balanced and diverse audience. Local groups should be selected based on their association with the issue that is being discussed and should be given the opportunity to speak out about their experiences and how they feel this issue impacts them directly.

Remember that many local groups often collectively embody the voice of the community and will be a vital asset in developing resources and materials as well as ensuring that the town hall meeting is effectively communicated to the local press and other interested groups. Useful partners for a town hall event may include welfare rights groups, leaders of business, minority groups, community action agencies, hunger and homeless coalitions, shelters, local advocacy groups, immigrants rights coalitions, local grassroots advocacy organizations, interfaith groups, jobs in the justice sector, community health centers and children's advocacy organizations.

When contacting potential community groups to gauge their level of interest, ensure that you are polite and persistent. Always be courteous and explain clearly who you are and your reasons for calling.

Make a note of the person you are speaking with and aim to speak with that person when you contact the group in the future. This will help foster a mutual relationship. Ask if the organization is interested in attending the event and if they can suggest any further contacts. Ensure you have all the contact details and arrange a time to follow up the request.

**6. Ensuring Publicity.** Publicizing the event is the best way to ensure a large attendance at the event. The event should be published by notifying local newspapers (see Part II of this Activist Kit, "Talking to the Media"), announcements on local radio stations, bulletin boards in local community centers and information posted in institutions such as schools, libraries, churches and hospitals. Groups that are interested in the event can also circulate information about the meeting to their membership and listservs.

To ensure that the meeting is covered by the local press, identify reporters that are interested in and, preferably, regularly write about the issue being discussed. Also, invite local business and political reporters. Send a journalist an invitation as early as possible as their time is limited and they may not be able to attend if not enough notice is provided.

Send a press release of the event to local papers and ensure that someone in the organizing group follows up with a phone call. It may take a few attempts to connect with them, but persistence will pay off. Journalists are busy people but, if they are interested they will more than likely try to attend. You should be able to gauge their interest from a brief conversation.

### **Sample Letter to Participate in a Town Hall Meeting**

[Elected Official Name]  
[Street Address]  
[City, State Zip]

[Date]

Dear [Elected Official],

I am writing to invite you to act as a panel speaker at a local town hall meeting on [topic/issue] to be held on [date of event]. At this town hall meeting, we hope to emphasize how this global threat impacts the lives of your constituents in [name of community].

As you are well-aware, educating and engaging both the American public and elected officials about international issues, such as [issue topic], is the most effective way to facilitate a farsighted, cooperative foreign policy that best reflects the opinions and beliefs of those of us in [name of community]. To that end, we urge you to support our efforts to engage Americans in [name of community] on this issue.

As a champion of [e.g. sustainable development – may need to rephrase this if it is not the case for certain individuals], we believe that this town hall meeting will present a mutually beneficial opportunity for us, your constituents, to discuss our desire for a practical U.S. foreign policy with you as well as to listen to your views on the subject.

We very much look forward to hosting you or a member of your staff as a guest at our town hall meeting. I will call your office [in one week?] to follow-up on this request.

Sincerely,

[Joe or Mary Activist]

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## HOST A PARTY

Everyone likes a good party. Whether it's at your local place of worship, a community center, or in your back yard, a party is a great and fun way to organize an action around a particular issue. Below are a few things to keep in mind as you plan your party.

**1. What are your goals?** Do you want to raise awareness? Would you like to honor someone who's worked hard to further your cause? Are you looking to get something concrete done in a span of a few hours? Here are some reasons for why a party may be a good way to organize:

- You would like to honor someone a group for doing something fantastic around your issue.
- You know someone who is well-versed in your particular issue (an expert, local leader, professor, etc.) who could give an informative talk at your party.
- You have a concrete action in mind, but need a number of people to help you make it happen. (Make phone calls; write letters – you could have people bring a letter as an 'entry fee'; sign a petition; plan a bigger event; make a film...hey, you never know!)

**2. Secure your main event.** Whether you want to invite a main speaker, an honoree, show a

film or otherwise, make sure you invite your guest(s) of honor sooner rather than later. The more 'high level' your guest, the longer it could take to get a positive response. If you're showing a film, make sure you have access to it before your party. If you're making phone calls, make sure the day and time of your party corresponds with the schedules of those you are trying to contact.

**3. Pick a venue.** Depending on what your goals are, how big or small you'd like your party to be, and what you'll need, you'll want to pick a date and time and reserve some space for your event. This could be your own home, a local place of worship, a school or community center, a movie theater (though this may require paying a fee), etc. Make sure you know approximately how many people you anticipate so space is not an issue.

**4. Figure out what else you'll need.** In many cases, you may need printouts for the group (whether of background information on your guest of honor, on a film or on the issue you'll be addressing). If you're planning to call or write letters, you may also need the contact information of those you'll be contacting. If you are showing a film, you'll need to ensure you have the right working equipment to show the movie.

**5. Invite your friends, family and community.** Coordinate with them on things they can bring, whether food, printouts, chairs or other materials.

**6. Provide a 'take-away' activity.** One of the most powerful tools party planners often forget is to give party-goers 'homework'. Having a party means having an automatic built-in audience that is there to listen, learn and have fun. Take advantage of having their undivided attention by letting them leave your party with something more to do. Make sure there's some way for them to tell you and others that they did their 'homework' and what the results were. For example, provide copies of a customizable Letter to the Editor along with a list of local newspapers, magazines, etc., including on-line periodicals. Have people target a publication for their version of the letter. It's simple, quick and effective.

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## Part II: TALKING TO THE MEDIA

Working with local media to cover the issues that are important to you is a great way to practice activism. Media has a strong effect on politics and on the way people perceive issues that are important to all of us. In fact, working with the media in your community can be a powerful way to demonstrate to policymakers that local citizens are aware of the connection between global issues and local concerns. Communicating through the media also allows you to reach a larger audience.

A well-written and strongly supported article such as a letter to the editor (LTE) or an opinion piece (op-ed), or a well articulated radio interview can have an impact on your entire community and those who govern it. The media can be, and has been, successfully utilized as a conduit for change. Voicing your opinion in local news outlets is an important part of activism. Nevertheless, media work can be a daunting experience if you've never done it before. We are here to tell you that it doesn't require expertise or experience; successful advocacy media work only requires a little bit of practice, lots of persistence and a commitment to making a difference.

This portion of the activist toolkit was created to provide you with all of the information that you need to succeed at getting media exposure and to help you understand how to better use the media to educate the public on our issues.

### WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The letters to the editor (LTEs) and op-ed sections in newspapers provide a forum to voice your opinion and send a message to your community and its leaders. LTEs are sent to publications to raise concern about an issue. They are often in response to previously published articles or current issues. LTEs are an easier alternative to an op-ed, as they are shorter, about 250 words or less, and are a great way to begin press activism.

#### Helpful Hints for writing an LTE

##### 1. Planning

- Pick one point or topic to discuss.
- Review previously published letters and identify any similarities.
- Research the publication's audience and write your letter accordingly.

##### 2. Writing Rules

- Comment on a recently published article in the publication or relate your letter to current events.
- Use facts and evidence to support your point.
- Keep it clear, succinct and memorable. LTEs are short, so get straight to the point.

- Follow instructions. Consult the newspaper’s specifications on publishing a letter to the editor. For example, word limit, author information, format, etc. Always include your name, signature, address, and telephone number.
  - Connect your article to current events. Putting your letter in the perspective of today’s world makes your letter relevant.
  - Use a unique angle. Newspapers normally receive hundreds of letters on the same subject and are more likely to use a letter that stands out and has a refreshing perspective.
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## WRITING AN OPINION PIECE (OP-ED)

Op-eds, named for their position opposite the editorial page, provide an important opportunity to get your personal perspective into a newspaper and add facts that a news story may have left out. Op-eds are written by professionals, writers, and members of the community; they offer a chance for a reader to make a contribution to the paper on an issue.

However, these articles carry a lot of weight and are often difficult to get published. A well-written and strongly supported article can have an impact on your entire community and those who govern it.

### Helpful Hints for Op-Eds

#### 1. Planning

- Determine your main take-home message.
- Explain why this issue is timely.
- Offer a solution to the issue/problem.
- Provide examples, if possible, and relate the issue to a personal experience.

#### 2. Writing Rules

- Open by grabbing your readers’ attention.
- State your point early on and in a clear manner.
- Include statistics/data for credibility and cite them.
- End with a strong conclusion.
- At the end of your op-ed, provide a short bio to display your credibility. Include your name, title and affiliation.
- Always write a cover letter to the editor. This will help the editor to better understand who you are and why you have specific knowledge in the area in which you are writing the article.
- Focus on a current event or debate; aim to inform your audience. Nobody is interested in old news. Pick a topic that is current and do your homework.
- Focus on a local angle. Illustrate to the editor and the people that will read your article why this topic is important to your community.

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## GETTING A RADIO INTERVIEW

Another great way to inform people in your local community about the interconnectedness of global issues and their impact on your local community is to do a radio interview. More and more people listen to the radio for their news, especially during the early morning and afternoon commuter time. Some radio stations allow for listeners to call in and find out how they can also become involved in your local activities.

### Helpful Hints

**1. Do Your Research.** Start by checking out local radio stations in your area. Listen to the stations' programming. Try to determine if the host would be respectful to you and your message. Most radio hosts want their guests to succeed in getting their message across.

**2. Plan and practice your pitch.** The producer or host of the radio program will judge how good an interview you are likely to give on the basis of what you say on the telephone. Therefore, it is critical to plan what you are going to say and to be prepared. Citizens for Global Solutions' staff are always available for you to practice your pitch!

**3. Important things to know before you do a radio interview**

- Is the interview going to be aired live or on tape?
- Will it be over the phone or at the radio studio?
- How long of an interview will it be?
- Will there be other guests on at the same time? If so, who are they and what is their background?
- If the show is live, will they take calls from listeners?

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## Part III: TALKING TO YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

### LOBBY YOUR LEADERS

Lobbying is one of the most effective tools available to a grassroots activist. Your elected officials at every level – local, state and federal – want to listen to what you have to say because, if you are lobbying, s/he knows that you are an active, informed member of your community. Even if you cannot travel to Washington, members of Congress visit their district offices several times every month, which is an ideal opportunity to plan a meeting in your local community.

Remember, emails and letters are effective advocacy strategies, but, there is no substitute for meeting your official face-to-face. Below is a step-by-step guide on how to plan an effective meeting with your elected officials at every level of government.

**1. Set up Your Lobby Meeting.** To make an appointment, look up the number for your elected official's office in the phone book or online. When you call, tell the scheduler that you would like to meet with your official to discuss [issue] and why this issue is important to you (perhaps explain how this global issue directly impacts your local community).

Be flexible with your time if this increases your chances of having a meeting with your official. If that is impossible, attempt to arrange a meeting with an aide. At the local level, the mayor's press secretary, constituent correspondent or, in large cities, another high-ranking person would be acceptable. The scheduler may ask you to request the meeting in writing by fax. A sample letter is included at the bottom.

Before contacting your representative or senator, it is worth familiarizing yourself fully with the issues they focus on and their position on the issue(s) you are bringing to the table. Visit <http://www.visi.com/juan/congress/> for their contact and policy information. When you call their office to arrange a meeting, note the name of the staff person you speak with and try to facilitate a long-term relationship by dealing with this person every time you call.

Gauge the level of interest on the part of your elected official and tailor your requests to this initial interest level. Like you, your elected officials are extremely busy so you may have to call several times. It is perfectly acceptable to meet with their aides and staffers, as they are always up-to-date on the current issues the elected official is working on.

Remember also, before meeting with your elected officials at any level, to ensure that you have developed an effective knowledge of the issues you wish to talk about and are aware of the latest developments. This will ensure that you can communicate the facts coherently and quickly, and will emphasize to them that you are an informed constituent.

**2. Before the Meeting.** Fax a copy of the document/information on the issue you want your elected official to advocate. This way the person you meet with will already know what you intend to talk about and can be prepared with questions for you. This will ensure your meeting is focused and productive. It will also give a professional impression of you and/or your group.

Draft an agenda for your meeting that gives everyone a chance to speak. If you have a large group – more than five people – let everyone introduce him/herself but choose only a few representatives to speak.

Be clear and specific about what you are asking for. Make sure your meeting includes a request for a concrete action that you want your official to take. For example, if they are particularly active on the issue of climate change, show him/her that signing on to the Urban Environmental Accords shows he/she recognizes how global issues have local impact and is a clear call to action for other communities across the country to become engaged.

**3. During the Meeting.** Be accurate. Tell the truth. If you aren't sure about a specific fact or can't answer a particular question, make a note of it and contact the Citizens for Global Solutions office. We will provide clarification so that you can call your elected official back and answer the question. This builds your credibility as a reliable source of information.

Be brief. Keep your meeting focused. Present your case, answer questions, make your request for action, and set a date with the official/staffer for when you can follow up to find out their position on your issue and politely depart. Set up a time/date to follow up with your official and/or their staff about your visit.

**4. After the Meeting.** Did everything go according to plan? After your meetings are over, talk with your group to discuss the outcomes of your visit. What worked? What didn't? What new information do you have on your elected official's positions?

Send a thank you letter. Be appreciative of the official's time and attention to your issue. Remind him/her of the date and time you set to follow-up on your visit. This will ensure that they have no excuse for missing your call. Follow up until you have a firm response to the request you made during your lobby visit.

#### Sample Fax for Scheduling a Lobby Visit

[Elected Official Name]  
[Street Address]  
[City, State Zip]

[Date]

Dear [Elected Official],

I am writing to request a meeting with you regarding the issue of [climate change, nuclear proliferation, etc.] and how it directly impacts my life and the lives of other constituents in [name of community/state/country].

As you are probably aware, educating and engaging the American public and elected officials about international issues such as [issue topic], is the most effective way to facilitate a farsighted, cooperative foreign policy that best reflects the opinions and beliefs of those of us in [name of community/state/country]. To that end, we urge you to support our efforts to engage Americans [in (name of community/state)] on this issue. As a champion of [i.e. sustainable development], I/we believe that this meeting would present a mutually beneficial opportunity to discuss my/our views and aspirations of a practical U.S. foreign policy with you as well as learn more about your position on the issue.

I/We are looking forward to meeting with you or a member of your staff at your earliest convenience. I will call your office [in one week?] to follow-up on this request.

Sincerely,

[Your name  
Your contact information]

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## WRITING TO YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

[Coming soon...]

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## CALLING YOUR LEADERS

[Coming soon...]