Part 6: Advocacy During Election Years

An election year offers a unique opportunity to influence the agendas of our future policy-makers by educating the candidates running for public office about child and family issues. And while there are many exciting advocacy activities that you can initiate, keep in mind that there are some guidelines about what a tax-exempt, non-profit organization can and cannot do related to a political campaign. The most basic rule of electioneering is that a non-profit organization cannot endorse, contribute to, work for or otherwise support a candidate for public office. It follows that neither can a non-profit organization oppose a candidate.

This section will focus on what you, as child advocates, can do to promote your cause within the context of a political campaign. The discussion of each advocacy technique includes a summary of the legal guidelines within which you must operate as a 501(c)3 organization.

It is worth noting that the following advocacy activities are generally more effective when organized and sponsored by a coalition of child advocates rather than by any single organization. Look to working with your larger, statewide or regional coalitions for children and families. There is strength in numbers!

It is important to have a focused advocacy effort and a well-defined advocacy agenda. When working with candidates, it is imperative to be clear about what it is that you are promoting. The more specific you are about what you want from your candidates, the more likely it is that you will get a positive response. Often a larger coalition will have an established children's advocacy agenda. If you are working on your own, it is important to develop a clear advocacy agenda from which to apply the tools described in this section.

The tactics outlined on the upcoming pages – mailing campaigns, candidate forums, candidate questionnaires, candidate interviews and briefings, and asking candidates to make a pledge – are important at the local, state and federal levels.

Mailing Campaign

Remember:
Participation in the Democratic process is encouraged as long as it is non-partisan.

Candidates for public office – including city councils, state legislatures and Congress – depend on their constituents for support and for votes. Thus, as a constituent, you have the right and the obligation to communicate your concerns and expectations to the candidates who will ultimately be serving you! Candidates need to know what is on the minds of their constituents. One way to communicate with your candidates is through the mail.

Initiating a letter-writing campaign will help ensure that your candidates hear your voice. In general, it is inexpensive, relatively efficient and easy to organize. The primary goals of a letter-writing campaign are:

- To encourage candidates to create a children's agenda; and
- To let candidates know that a large, broad constituency is concerned about the health and safety of children and the support of families.

Candidate Forums

A candidate forum gives you the opportunity to bring together candidates and voters to discuss children's issues. A variety of formats can be used that give voters the opportunity to question candidates, and candidates the opportunity to communicate their views on children's issues. You have the option to open your forum to the media to raise awareness of the issues being discussed. (See section on Media Advocacy for tips on contacting the media). A media presence also helps to hold the candidates accountable for their promises. The goals of a candidate forum are to:

- Educate voters on the candidates' platforms for children;
- Encourage candidates to commit to a children's agenda for which they may be held accountable; and
- Encourage forum attendees to become more involved in community action for children.

Getting Started

Your organization or coalition should create a team responsible for organizing the forum. This steering committee should appoint a forum coordinator, whose duties may include:

- Developing a timeline;
- Facilitating and scheduling steering committee meetings;
- Serving as a liaison to all involved organizations;
- Serving as a point person for negotiating with candidates and/or campaigns;
- Acting as a media spokesperson for the steering committee;
- Maintaining adherence to deadlines;
- Coordinating activities;
- Assisting as other concerns arise;
- Ensuring attention to legal guidelines; and
- Documenting and archiving all activities for evaluation and future forums.

The team should create an organizational structure from which to work and from which to assign responsibility. It is helpful to divide responsibilities to ensure that the diverse talents of the various members will be utilized and that the burden will be shared. The table below identifies matters to consider when planning a candidate forum.

Facilities	Site selection; Furniture and technical requirements; Video taping requirements; Accessibility for disabled persons; and Immediate needs on the day of the event.
Program	Moderator, panelists, opening and closing speakers; Written confirmations of attendance and thank-you notes; Confirm details of the program; Requirements for the day of the event; and Timekeeper.
Media	Press releases; Talk radio, news stories and events calendars; Editorial board meetings; Commitments for pre-post media coverage of children's issues; and Live broadcasts.

Audience	Format/rules for participation; questions to ensure a broad range of issues are addressed; Invitations to experts to ask substantive questions; Volunteer enlistment and training; Translators if the community is predominantly non-English speaking; and Sign language services.
Candidates	Invitations and thank-you notes; Recruiting candidate participation; Terms of participation; Briefings on the issues; Written commitments; Candidates' needs the day of the event; and Rules for candidate materials.
Issues for Discussion	Questions for candidates; and Pre-forum issues survey for candidates
Research	Audience evaluation of the forum; and Pamphlet on children's issues/supportive data.
Finance	Budget; and Fund-raising strategy.
Outreach	Video distribution in the community
Legal	Legal advice form experienced attorney.
Oversight	Legal approval for candidate election, format, publications, speakers and other forum aspects.

Selecting a Format

There are several different formats from which you can choose for your candidate forum. Regardless of which format you decide works best for your forum, remember that the purpose is to promote a dialogue about the issues with which you are concerned. As such, the questions presented to candidates should be focused on the present issues. The following list provides a brief overview of several different accepted formats.

Equal Time Format: An impartial moderator and panelists question candidates, who are all granted an equal response time. Candidates are usually unaware of the exact questions ahead of time, but do know the general focus of the forum. Questions to the candidates need not be the same, as long as each candidate is given equal time to present his or her viewpoint.

Follow-up Format: the moderator and panelists ask the candidates the questions. Follow-up questions are permitted to prevent evasive answers by candidates. These follow-up questions force candidates to provide exact answers to the questions at hand.

Town Meeting Format: Members of the audience pose all of the questions, but the moderator has the discretion to screen questions to avoid redundancy. One way to facilitate comprehensive questioning is to invite experts in child and family issues to attend and participate in the forum. This helps educate candidates about their constituents' concerns.

Pro and Con Format: The moderator begins the forum reading a statement or position on an issue. Sponsoring organizations and/or candidates may submit positions ahead of time, and the planning team selects a representative sampling of all issues. Each candidate responds, either pro or con, detailing his or her position on the statement. The opponents have time for rebuttal. This format allows only three or four propositions and encourages prepared or rehearsed responses. To create some spontaneity, you may allow candidates to question each other.

Prepare and Spontaneous Format: Before the forum, you give candidates several prepared questions constructed to elicit specific, detailed responses. You then ask a selection of these questions at the forum. In addition, you allow panelists, opponents or the audience to ask some questions which candidates will respond to spontaneously.

Equal Opportunity Format: Questions are presented to all candidates. Each candidate can choose to answer, pass, or simply indicate agreement or disagreement. By their choice, candidates may have differing amounts of time to express their positions.

Discourse Format: A strong nonpartisan moderator is essential for this forum design. The moderator asks a question, and then candidates discuss the issue. The moderator must be comfortable and able to control candidates who try to dominate the discussion. The idea is to hear every candidate's views in a discussion format.

Feedback/Hearings Format: Focus the forum on your coalition's agenda, or on the agenda of your organization if you are organizing the forum independently. For each of your agenda items have an expert or a family present concerns and suggest solutions. After an expert-family presentation, the moderator or panelists will ask the candidates to respond with specific program proposals to address the presented concerns. Allow candidates to make closing remarks after discussion of all agenda items. This is an opportune time to educate candidates about program initiatives.

Forum Site Selection

Location, location, location! Location is everything. Where you hold your forum event can determine the forum's success. Legally, you must select your forum site based on non-political considerations. For example, you should not choose to hold your forum on the grounds of an organization that is affiliated with a political party. Here are some considerations when deciding on your location:

Accessibility: Convenient access for the physically disabled, public transportation and parking.

Size: You need a space big enough to comfortably accommodate the numbers you expect.

Layout: A forum is designed to be participatory. You want to ensure that the physical layout of the space is conducive to audience participation and that there is adequate space for audience and media viewers.

Neutrality: You should choose a location in which the community near the site favors no particular candidate.

Miscellaneous: Necessary security, insurance, reception area, rest rooms and furniture.

Selecting the Moderator and Panelists

Your moderator and panelists will largely set the tone for the forum. It is very important to give this careful thought when making your selection. The moderator's responsibilities include:

- Ensuring that the format works fairly well for all candidates;
- Managing the time;
- Enhancing the discussion during lulls or tense moments;
- Enforcing rules of the forum; and
- Coping with the unexpected.

When selecting your moderator, you should look for someone who:

- Is very comfortable in front of large groups of people;
- Possesses audience appeal;
- Has extensive knowledge of the issues;
- Is acceptable to the participating candidates;
- Has no partisan affiliation;
- Is flexible; and
- Has broadcast experience.

When selecting your panelists, you should look for people who:

- Are confident in front of an audience;
- Are skillful at posing questions;
- Are credible and acceptable to candidates and the audience;
- Represent a broad range of points of view;
- Exhibit independence in questioning candidates;
- Know the issues; and
- Adhere to the guidelines.

Incorporating Your Audience

The format you choose for your forum will determine the kind of participation you will get from your audience. You want to make sure that the candidates hear the views of their constituents. Thus, you want to encourage audience participation as much as possible. Here are some tips for encouraging participation:

- Ask co-sponsors or coalition members to submit the names of potential speakers.
- Consider tickets or reservations if seating space is limited.
- Promote outreach to a broad-based audience with diverse political perspectives. This ensures that you do not appear partisan. If invitations are going to be limited to specific organizations, candidates must agree to this in writing in advance.
- Instruct the audience members who want to ask questions during the forum to write and submit them. This allows you to screen them for a broad array of topics and to avoid endorsements of or attacks on candidates. Return the questions to the audience members to indicate that they can ask them.
- Consider distributing a printed program providing information on the issues to be discussed. Members of the audience can refer to this when considering the candidates' platforms. The program can also provide community recognition for sponsoring agencies and serve as a resource for those interested in making future contacts, either for volunteering or further information.
- Enlist volunteers to collect written questions and evaluations, to staff literature tables and to be ushers, greeters and ticket takers. Volunteers should not wear campaign buttons from individual candidates or otherwise express support for or opposition to candidates.

Approaching the Candidates

It is important for your planning committee to develop written criteria for inviting the candidates to participate in the forum. If there are several announced candidates for a particular office, you must invite all viable candidates of all parties. One standard for determining a “viable candidate” is one who has at least 5% in major public opinion polls.

As soon as you have determined the date, time and format of the forum, you should contact the candidates. First, send a formal invitation. It is then advisable to meet with the candidates or their staffs in person to present the details for the forum. Here are some other things to consider:

Schedule: Be as flexible as possible about the date, recognizing that candidates have full schedules during an election season.

Negotiations: Selecting a balancing format from the beginning will help you avoid needless negotiations. Doing so protects the interests of all candidates and provides equal opportunity for each to state his or her views.

Agreement: Once the candidates have agreed on the details, have them all sign an agreement document. A written agreement will help avoid most last-minute complaints.

Partisan Literature: Avoid background material and voting records that describe candidates’ positions unless all candidates have an equal chance to provide their own literature.

Providing Documentation

Provide the moderator and panelists with a general outline of the topics you wish to cover during the forum. The topics should be specific enough to make certain that the candidates have the opportunity to describe their points of view or solutions to a problem. You might also consider the following suggestions for providing information to both your candidates and audience:

- Many candidate forums provide nonpartisan publications on the issues for the audience. You may want to prepare a pamphlet including statistics and local efforts.
- Prior to the forum, develop a simple candidate questionnaire and send it to the candidates. You may be able to distribute the results at the forum (However, there are strict legal guidelines for distributing questionnaire results. See Candidate Questionnaires section. A checklist of specific issues with space for notes may help participants, if they want to record the stated positions of the candidates.
- Sponsoring organizations may display nonpartisan literature about their agencies or programs. This will give the audience a chance to contact you for more information.
- Any written information available to the audience should also be made available to the candidates, moderator and panelists. Consult with your attorney first to make sure that all information meets legal requirements.
- Ask members of the audience and the planning committee to complete an evaluation survey to provide you with feedback.

Timeline for Planning the Forum

How much time you need to prepare for your forum depends largely on who will be included in the forum. Consider the following:

- Look at the number of offices you'll include, as well as the level of the office(s) and the number of candidates seeking office. In any case, allow four to six months to plan and implement the forum.

- If the forum will be held before the primary election, invite candidates as soon as they announce their intentions to seek the office. If the candidate forum will target the general election, invite candidates as soon as you know the results of the primary election.

Regulations for Non-Profits

Non-profit organizations are free to invite candidates to meetings or public forums in order to get the candidates' views on relevant issues. The invitation should be extended to all serious candidates. It is best to invite them all simultaneously and to use identical language in the invitations. The non-profit should not state its views or comment on those of the candidates. If there is a question-and-answer component, each candidate should be given adequate time to answer.

Candidate Questionnaires

Candidate questionnaires provide a way to let constituents know how their candidates feel about certain issues – for our purposes, issues affecting children and families. The goals of creating a candidate questionnaire are:

- To help voters distinguish among candidates' views on child and family issues;
- To make issues concerning children and families influence the voting choices of a growing number of citizens;
- To persuade candidates to consider (and hopefully commit to) these issues; and
- To lay the foundation for holding elected officials accountable on decisions affecting children and families.

Helpful Hints

- Consider using fewer open-ended questions and more yes/no questions. This makes answers easier to compile and read, and more readily shows differences between candidates.
- In your published results, you may note a candidate's failure to complete a questionnaire.
- List the candidates' campaign headquarters' phone numbers, so citizens can call and inquire further about the candidates' platforms.
- Avoid questions on "candidate experience with children's issue." These answers tend to be self-serving.
- Consider purchasing a special insert in the local newspaper to publish questionnaire results. Be sure to alert candidates in the cover letter of any planned advertising. This will provide extra incentive to complete the survey.
- If a candidate does not respond, list the questions in full and note "no response" for that candidate.

Timeline for Candidate Questionnaires

You should begin preparing the questionnaire and dissemination strategy up to six months before the election. Four months before election or immediately following the primary election, send questionnaires to the candidates. Give a specific deadline for returning responses.

Regulations for Non-Profits

For non-profits with a narrow focus, candidate questionnaires pose some problems. The IRS feels that a narrowness of focus implies endorsement of those candidates who reply favorably to the questions asked. Therefore, it is advised that if your focus is narrow, you should avoid disseminating the results of candidate questionnaires. If you want to publish the results of your questionnaire, it is best to send the questionnaire under a broader coalition instead of a single organization.

Steps to Take:

1. Bring together a coalition of diverse and politically savvy child-focused agencies to sponsor the candidate questionnaire. This will show candidates the broad community interest in their positions on children's issues. It is best for the sponsor of the questionnaire to have a broad focus.
2. Design a questionnaire for each race (senate, governor, school board, President, etc.) selected by the sponsoring coalition. Limit your questionnaire to between five and eight questions.
3. Define the issues. Draft and redraft the questions. Ask candidates to give their positions on the issues that are in the domain of the office that they are seeking. Give the same questionnaires to all candidates running for the same office.
4. Compile a list of campaign headquarters for declared candidates, using information available at the registrar of voters.
5. Write a cover letter for the questionnaire, explaining to the candidates its purpose and intended use in the community. Be sure to include information on what your organization plans to do with the results of the questionnaire.
6. Send out the questionnaire, then follow up to make sure candidates received it. This will encourage their response. If you distribute the questionnaire prior to the candidate registration deadline, be sure to send it to any candidates who register later.
7. Keep a careful log of each contact you make with a candidate's office. Record the date and time of each call, and the name of the person with whom you spoke. Should you not receive responses from all candidates, it is good to have this record to demonstrate that you made a "good faith effort" to secure all responses.
8. Compile the results. Format results in an easy-to-follow format and print them. Do not indicate approval or disapproval of candidates' responses.
9. Publish the results and disseminate the publication. Mail it to your newsletter mailing list, newspapers and other press, and distribute it at candidate forums.

Candidate Interviews and Briefings

Meeting face-to-face with candidates is one of the most effective ways to communicate with candidates about the child and family issues on which your organization or coalition is focused. The candidate interview is a meeting between the candidate and a small group of advocates, service providers or volunteers. The purpose of the interview is to question the candidate on his or her views about early childhood issues and to raise the "child awareness" of the candidate's campaign. The candidate briefing is similar to the candidate interview, but usually consists of a larger group of advocates who lead the dialogue on the critical issues of child safety and protection. The goals of a candidate interview or briefing are:

- To educate candidates for local, state, or federal offices on issues important to children and their families; and
- To encourage candidates to include children's issues in their campaign literature.

<u>Steps to take</u>

1. In following nonpartisan policies, it is not appropriate to interview one candidate for a specific office and not another. In races in which there are several candidates for office, you will most likely want to interview or brief all of the candidates, or at least the major ones.
2. Form a team of advocates who will plan and conduct the candidate meetings. If you are part of a broad-based children's coalition, you will probably want to include at least one advocate from each area of concern – such as child poverty, education, health, abuse and neglect, child care, early childhood, and child welfare.
3. Decide what issues you want to address with your candidates. Questions should be prepared and a spokesperson designated.
4. Get names, addresses and phone numbers of the candidates' campaign headquarters, as well as the names of the scheduling secretaries and campaign managers.
5. Call candidates' campaign headquarters, explain the event you are planning, and ask to speak with the scheduling secretary.

6. Explain that your group would like to meet with the candidate to discuss his or her views and positions on issues of concern to children and their families.

7. Agree on a date, time, and place for the meeting and who will attend. Let them know that the meeting will last no longer than an hour.

8. Follow up your phone calls with letters of invitation. Letters should be addressed to candidates, with attention to the campaign staff arranging the meetings. The letters should include the following:

   - Date, time and place of the meeting;
   - Restatement of the purpose of the meeting;
   - List of the issues to be discussed. Do not send the candidates the actual questions you plan to ask;
   - A statement of whether all comments will be "off the record" or "on the record." "On the record" means that you can use the candidate's response in the media;

9. Call campaign or scheduling secretaries a few days before interviews to confirm appointments. This is a good opportunity to ask if there are any questions about the meeting.
10. Call campaign or scheduling secretaries the morning of the events to reconfirm.
11. Call the other advocates a few days before the briefing to confirm their attendance. Ask them to arrive 15 minutes early. Your group should use the following as ground rules to convey a sense of unity and organization:
    - Decide on the lead spokesperson;
    - Anyone may ask follow-up questions;
    - All must speak with a single voice on public policy issues; and
    - After priority issues have been discussed, feel free to open the discussion to other state or local issues.

12. Foster a friendly atmosphere. Never threaten and do not become upset by a certain amount of disagreement. It is healthy and to be expected. If you sense hostility around an issue, try a different approach or move on to another subject. You want to keep the door open between candidates and your advocacy community.
13. Try to cover as many issues as possible in the time you have scheduled. Do not hesitate to politely interrupt a candidate who begins to ramble, skirts an issue or switches to a different topic.
14. If you don't feel comfortable or competent about some of the questions or issues, skip them. But remember to skip the same ones and ask the same set of prepared questions of candidates.
15. Always send candidates and their staff a thank-you note.

Helpful Hints

- Know the issues and the candidates' previous statements or activity on children's issues.
- When planning interviews or dialogues, allow plenty of time for issues to be discussed and developed in some depth.
- Your meeting team should rehearse some key points prior to your interviews or briefing:
    1. Prepare opening statements and pointed follow-up questions;
    2. Decide who will handle introductions;
    3. Assign someone to restate what will happen with the information given by the candidate and the goals of the meeting;
    4. Decide who will ask what questions and follow-up questions;
    5. Assign someone to watch the time.

Timeline for Candidate Interviews and Briefings

Conduct the interviews/briefings early in the candidates' campaigns to encourage them to call on you for more information as the campaign progresses and to increase the chances that they will speak out on your issues during the campaign. It is also easier to gain access to the candidates early in the campaign. Allow three weeks prior to the activity to prepare the spokespersons who will represent the issues.

Steps to Take

1. Generate a mailing list of all candidates for each office for which you want to seek pledges. Include phone numbers for follow up. Get the candidates' addresses from the Board of Elections or from each campaign party's headquarters.
2. Draft a pledge.
3. Visit personally with the candidates or their staffs to brief them on relevant issues. This can be done through a candidate briefing as discussed above or a meeting specifically to discuss making a pledge.
4. If you cannot arrange a personal visit, mail the pledge materials to the candidates. Include a cover letter with your mailing that explains:
    a. Who you are (either an individual organization or a coalition of groups);
    b. The purpose of the pledge (to solicit support for your children's agenda from candidates and to help ensure accountability after the election);
    c. Some key facts about children in your community;
    d. Whether or how the pledge will be shared with the public; and
    e. Your request that the candidate sign and return the pledge.
5. Be prepared to follow up by phone with those candidates not willing to meet with you and those that do not return the pledge.
6. Send the pledge signers a thank-you note.
7. Make yourself available for candidates who may want to speak with you about ideas for developing a children's agenda.
8. Publicize the existence of the pledge and encourage voters to ask candidates whether they have signed the pledge and why.

Ask Candidates to Make a Pledge

The candidate pledge is a great tool to generate commitment to a children's agenda both during an election campaign and for post-election accountability. Your pledge should be designed around the issues on which your coalition or organization is focused. For example, if your organization is part of a larger children's coalition, your pledge may include a range of child welfare initiatives. However, if you create a pledge as a single organization, your pledge may be more focused on a specific early childhood issue. The crucial first step is defining exactly what you want your pledge to include, based on your advocacy agenda. The goals of asking candidates to make a pledge are:

- To focus candidates' attention on developing a children's agenda;
- To provide a post-election accountability tool; and
- To meet the candidates prior to the election.

Timeline for Asking Candidates for a Pledge

- Start early in the campaign year, sending the pledge to each candidate as soon as his or her campaign becomes official.
- Ask for the candidates' responses at least six weeks before the primary or general election.

Regulations for Non-Profits

It is entirely proper for a non-profit organization to educate candidates about your position on certain issues and to urge candidates to support this position. Further, it is proper to ask candidates to go on record pledging support of these positions. However, as a non-profit you do not have the ability to publish and distribute candidate responses to your requests for support. You cannot distribute a candidate's statement to the media, general public or to other non-profit organizations. The candidate has the freedom to distribute his or her response, but you do not.

There is one final note on non-profit campaign regulations. It is very common for non-profits to keep track of how members of a legislature vote on key issues and disseminate this information to their members. This is an important tool to know which legislators to thank, who needs to be convinced, and to show how well or how poorly the proposal fared. There is no problem with this practice, as long as the information is presented and disseminated during the campaign in the same way that it is at other times. When presenting results, do not use language such as "voted for us" or anything similar. Just note if the legislator voted for or against the measure.

If you are in the practice of disseminating information as relevant votes occur throughout the year, then it is fine to continue to do so during a campaign. However, if you haven't published records throughout the year, it would not be prudent to publish a recap of the legislative votes throughout the year during the campaign.

Post-Election Advocacy Strategies

The months following an election present an ideal time for you to develop relationships with newly elected officials and their staff members. This is a great time for you to introduce your organization to policy-makers (if you have not already done so) and strengthen these alliances. As has been mentioned before, so much of your legislative advocacy work depends on establishing relationships.

By making the effort early in your public officials' term, you have the opportunity to firm-up these connections before you show up with a specific request. Spending time with your legislators and their staff in low-pressure settings helps to create strong ties that can go a long way down the road.

- Set up a meeting with your newly elected official to introduce yourself and your organization. Offer yourself as a resource on child and family issues, and encourage your newly elected official to call you with questions.
- Provide information on child and family issues, and your organization's prevention efforts. Send organizational materials to your newly elected officials. Providing something in writing helps officials remember who you are and what your organization does for the community.
- Add newly elected officials to your mailing list for periodic newsletters and other mailings. This will provide continuous information on your organization and your efforts in child abuse prevention.

Invite your newly elected officials for a site visit of one of your programs. This is a great way to educate policy-makers about your organization.