

**Common Sense for Drug Policy Presents  
The Organizers' Toolkit:**

# Getting Started

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# Getting Started

You have an idea that you would like to do something about failed drug policies. You are considering organizing a group in your city, region, or state. Here are some suggestions about making that group successful.

**Make lists.** This is a good way to become more concise in your thinking about what you want to do. Some lists that should be in your notebook are:

- a) List of drug policy issues you want to address
- b) List of people you know who might be interested in helping you.
- c) List of organizations in your region (or state) which may have some interest in one or more of the issues on your list
- d) List of coming events where you might be able to introduce your ideas about reform in order to recruit helpers

You may not have anything to write for some of these lists. That's OK. Just focus on what you know and work your way out from there.

**Develop the information on the lists.** For example, on your issues list, you may have written “medical marijuana.” How much do you know about this issue?

Before you start talking with other people about the issue, you should have some basic information in hand. Get online and learn. Get books and learn.

Has anyone worked in your region or state on medical marijuana? If so, what happened to them? Can you contact them and pick up the ball?

Do you know what has happened on medical marijuana efforts in other states?

Once you feel comfortable with the information you know about your issues, then it is time to **contact the people on your people list**. Meet with them, individually or in a group, and give a brief outline of the issue(s) and its status in your region. Ask them if they are interested in helping do something about it.

Don't be surprised if your friends surprise you. Many people, no matter what their personal habits or frequently-voiced frustration with current policies, are not willing to step up to the plate and take a swing at changing public policy.

Again, work with what you have. And don't waste your time or your friends' feelings by getting upset. Just because you've had an epiphany about taking action for drug policy reform doesn't mean anyone else has reached a similarly enlightened point. They may come around later, so don't make an enemy.

Once you have a couple of helpers, it's time to have your first **“organizational meeting.”** At this meeting, write down what you do. This is called taking minutes. Write the date, people present, and jot down what you talk about. You may make a list in advance of what you expect to discuss. This is called an agenda.

Keep your agenda reasonably short. The focus of the meeting should be to:

- a) Set issue priorities. In determining which issue to rank as top priority, consider some key features of the issue.
  - 1) Public acceptance of your issue. Know your region's people. What works in one place might not work in another. It's best to start with an issue that is more likely to receive a fair degree of public acceptance.
  - 2) The issue's impact on local community. In a farming region, your work to legalize hemp as an agricultural crop would bring up topics like economic impact, environmental benefits, etc.
  - 3) Body of knowledge that exists about the issue. Issues that have been investigated and promoted in other places carry a “body of knowledge,” both pro and con. These will pop up whether you want them to or not. If you want to work on hemp, know what the arguments against it are as well as its good points.
  - 4) Potential supporters of your issue. Who will help you?

Give yourself a break and give top priority to an issue that:

- 1) has the best chance of getting supporters right away,
  - 2) will have an easily identified favorable impact on the community and will therefore gain public acceptance fairly soon, and
  - 3) for which a good body of knowledge has been developed without too many negatives.
- b) Start deciding on a name for your effort. This is important, so take your time. A snazzy acronym is nice for teaching the media and public to recognize you, but it is more critical to have a name that describes you accurately. For example, if you plan to sponsor an initiated act or lobby the legislature to pass reforms, you might want to use the term “political action” in your name. If you plan to educate people about drug policy issues through meetings, seminars, panel discussions, and publications, then the term “education” should be in your name.

The name of the group comes with other serious questions. Whose phone number will be used? Who will share their personal phone with the group or agree to put a second phone line into their home? What address will the group use? Sometimes it makes sense to use someone's residence for the address, but most of the time it is better to get a post office box. That way, when people come and go on down the line, the address on your group materials doesn't change.

- c) Start a treasury. A trustworthy person should immediately become your treasurer. Whatever money is donated at your first meeting should fall under the care of the treasurer. If it is more than \$100, you should open a bank account. A bank account provides an automatic bookkeeping system of your receipts and expenditures.

Bank accounts require a group name plus some document showing that you have a formal existence (minutes of your first meeting will do, as long as you list the name and address of each person who attended), and a federal employment identification number (EIN).

To get an EIN, go to your local IRS office and get an SS-4. Questions about how to fill it out? Ask the IRS or talk with people who have started other non-profit groups in your area. It may take a couple of weeks for the SS-4 to be processed. The EIN works like a social security number for your group. The only other option in opening a bank account is to give the social security number of one of your members. This is not recommended, since the bank will report the transactions of this account as though it was that person's personal income.

Every item purchased with group money for your group's reform efforts must be considered the property of the group. Write on the check what was purchased. Keep the receipts, preferably with the check number written on the receipt. Keep the receipts in an organized way.

- d) Develop a time line. When will you meet again? Are there deadlines or time goals for the issues you have prioritized? Do you want to have a public meeting and invite people to learn more about your issue(s)? – and if so, when do you want to have that meeting?
- e) Be clear about your goals. Even though this is difficult to establish in the early days of your effort, it should be a natural part of your issue list. If medical marijuana is at the top of your issue list, you would say that legalizing marijuana for medical use is your goal. Then, perhaps your next meeting is the time to determine all the steps along the way toward that goal. For example, do you expect to get a legislator to introduce a bill in your state's next legislative session? What will it take to get a legislator to do this? What will it take to get enough legislators to support the idea so that the bill will pass?

OK. You've got a group started and it has a name. You've prioritized your issues and stated your goals, started a treasury and opened a bank account, complete with federal EIN. You're doing great. Now it's time to do some administrative work.

### **Paperwork.**

In order to have a professional appearance and be taken seriously by the media and community, you need to present yourself like a business. You don't have to spend lots of money on this.

- Have a rubber stamp made with your return address, so that you can avoid hand writing your return address on every letter you send out.
- Use a computer word processing program to write your letters. If no one in your initial group of activists has a computer, use one at your public library or university. You can create a template of your letterhead and re-use it each time you write a letter. This allows you to not spend money printing letterhead. It also means that your letters will look nice and orderly. Buy a package of white paper and envelopes.

- Keep files. Buy a box of file folders. Have a file for your meeting minutes, a file for your EIN materials, a file for your bank account, a file for your copies of letters you send, a file for each issue you're working on, and so forth.
- Get a phone message book. Record every call you get about your efforts with as much information as possible about the caller. This is the beginning of your contact list.
- Produce a brochure. Most word processing programs have a brochure format. All you have to do is plug in the information. If you aren't sure about making a brochure, visit your library and look at brochures from other organizations. Basically, you need to show your name, address, phone number and any other contact information (email? website? who are you?); you need to state your organization's purpose (goals, planned activities); and then list what you want other people to do (volunteer time? donate money?).

Your brochure becomes your face to the world. Make it good. If you can't make it good yourself, visit with an advertising agency or at least a printer to learn more about layout and design. Don't print 500 of your first draft. Go to a photocopy place and make two or three dozen. Without doubt, in a week or two you'll figure out some important changes. Work with small batches until you are sure you have something worthy of 500 copies.

- Produce a business card. Basic information. Nothing too cute.

With all your paperwork, keep in mind that you are creating an image of yourself as an organization. Your paper should be crisp and clean and up to date in layout and language. Get as much professional help as you can. Try your ideas on as many friends as possible, especially friends who are in the business and/or political community. This is one area where you can get help from people who are afraid to help in any other way.

## **SPECIAL TOPICS**

### **Media**

As soon as you have figured out your name and goals and get your paperwork in order, it's time to get involved with the media. Look on this as the beginning of a long and tortured love affair.

Go to your local library and ask the reference librarian for a guide to local, regional, and/or state media, depending on your projected realm of activity. Prepare to spend some time collecting this information. Your media list is the key to your success, so don't scrimp on this project.

Copy down the name of every newspaper, radio station, and television station, along with their mailing addresses, phone and fax numbers, email if they have it. Separate your list according to type of media. Weekly papers should not be mixed with daily papers.

For the best possible media coverage, you will need to work through a computer. Develop an email list of your media. Most media accept press releases by email. In your media email list,

once you've entered all your media in your address book, create groups such as “daily papers,” “tv stations,” etc, because you will sometimes have a notice that is appropriate for only one type of media. In a statewide list, you should also have email groups such as “Central,” “Northwest,” etc., so that you can target media in a specific region. Regional groups would include all media in that region.

Don't panic. You don't have to do all this at once. Start where you are and work out. Develop your local media list first.

If you know a reporter, ask him or her for tips on getting media coverage for your first public meeting or your first press release. You may find out that television crews aren't going to make it to a 6 pm event because that's their big news hour of the day. If you have a morning paper, you may discover that they don't want a story after 3 pm if you expect coverage the next day. Learn their schedules and make your events fit.

Why the media? Because if you are going to be successful in drug policy reform, you must get your message to the public. And yes, you can buy advertisements, but even hundreds of thousands of dollars of advertising is not as powerful as a story on the evening television news cast or a front page article in your city paper. Advertisements are not as trustworthy as the news. You need news.

At first, you may in fact be the local media darling. Someone in this city (region, state) working on drug policy reform?!!! Every reporter is there, recording every word. Your issue, your face, and the mission of your group may be spread across multiple pages of newsprint. This is NEWS!

[A word of caution: The media is really just people who, like all of America, have been conditioned to think of drugs in certain ways. Don't be surprised if your event about medical marijuana gets aired with canned video footage of intoxicated kids in tie-dyed shirts, smoking marijuana. The tendency is to play to the stereotype. You have to anticipate and compensate. Give them the other images, the right footage you want delivered into the living rooms of people in your region. Do everything you can to direct the images and phrases used in reporting your news.]

Once the “new-ness” has worn off your news – then you'll find it more difficult to gain the media's attention. Then you have the long hard road of building an effort that involves the mainstream community and which will be taken seriously by opinion editors and reporter's analysis. Work toward this long term goal.

But don't miss the opportunity of your honeymoon with the media. Anticipate the fact that you will have this flush of coverage and make sure you are ready. Do everything you can to let all the media within a reasonable radius know about your event.

A preliminary press release should announce your event, your group, and your mission. Give them a contact name and number so they can call you for more details. Start with all capitol letters “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE” followed by the date and your name and phone number as contact person. The body of the release should be fairly concise. They'll want details from you personally and after they receive your release, they will call you for these details. End your release with the number “30” or ###. Send it out at least two days before you want it to appear in print.

You can send out a release that says “EMBARGOED UNTIL \_\_\_\_”. This means they can't print or broadcast news about the information until the date you state. This allows them to plan on the space for your story and get the information ready but not publish or broadcast until the date you specify.

Just because you plan your media coverage carefully does not guarantee that the media will cooperate. They have other priorities. An earthquake in Seattle will knock your story off the front page. A four-car pileup will bump you off the evening newscast. When these conflicts occur and it looks as if your story won't make it to the public, contact the news editor and nicely ask if they plan to release your story at a later time and if so, when. Remember this is a person with whom you should be building a relationship of mutual respect. It is usually appropriate to ask for their advice in getting your story out.

Local radio stations may want you to talk with a DJ for a live or pre-recorded broadcast. Have a few talking points ready. Don't talk too much or too fast. Be friendly and express your concern that people are being hurt by this policy and your group is trying to help. Give an example of a person being hurt. Don't sound whiney.

The two biggest selling points of your group's effort are how you come across and how the “victims” in your stories come across. People – from reporters to Mrs. Jones at home in front of her television – are most influenced by personal impressions. Your voice, your appearance, and your language will be the first thing your entire group and issue are judged by. Obviously you must look mainstream, speak gently and compassionately, and use good grammar. If you manage these critical elements, they will then be willing to take you and your issue seriously.

Framing your issue for the media and public is a complex strategy that depends upon your location and your issue as well as the history, if any, of any drug policy reform efforts that may have taken place before. For example, if a local rag-tag group of long-haired kids have put on noisy demonstrations about marijuana decriminalization, you will have to overcome a lot in order to be taken seriously if you are going to work on marijuana decriminalization. The public has already decided what they think about that issue, based on the previous news coverage of those kids. The general assumption about “those kids” would be that they just want to get high themselves. Their appearance and actions fulfill all the stereotypes perpetuated in government propaganda for three decades. You must be one step ahead of such stereotypes and outmaneuver the propaganda.

For example, if you and your group determines that marijuana decriminalization is in fact the very issue you want at the top of your priority list, in spite of these obstacles, then you must be clever, disciplined, and dedicated in order to have any hope of success. In your planning sessions, you must select a spokesperson who will provide the most mainstream appearance. The spokesperson must have “good vibes” and be able to build a long-term relationship of trust with the public through interviews and other media appearances. This person becomes the representative of drug policy reform in your community/region/state.

In addition to having the best possible spokesperson, you must also select approaches to your issue that demonstrate to the public why it is in their best interest to consider decriminalization. If you're going to talk about lowering taxes by eliminating a percentage of arrests, you had better be able to state exactly how many arrests would be eliminated and how much taxes would go down.

If you plan to talk about the economic impact of arrest on an otherwise law abiding citizen who might use marijuana in the privacy of his home, you had better have the numbers ready. How many persons arrested for minor marijuana offenses lose their jobs as a result of the arrest? What percentage have families that may become dependent on social support systems such as food stamps and public housing? You will find it very difficult to establish these numbers and this is where you go back to your first list of issues and the homework you should have done. There are national statistics from which you may be able to derive some numbers that will work for your location.

In other words, you must frame a strong argument supported by verifiable facts that you and your group's efforts at drug policy reform are in fact a public-minded effort to improve the well-being of your community. You cannot count on anyone taking you seriously if all you can say in front of the camera is that America is a free country.

One of the easiest and first ways to get into the media is through letters to the editor. Everyone in your group should take the local papers. Don't overlook weekly papers that may be part of the life in smaller, outlying communities. Don't overlook weekly papers that may be protest publications or college papers. You want to get your ideas into every conceivable outlet.

Letters to the editor should be fairly short and make only one point. Don't unload your entire angst into one letter. Think of the reader as someone you know who is clueless about drug policy. Take a first step in your first letter. Introduce your priority issue and the basic argument. Sit back and hope that someone will write a letter violently opposed to your letter. Then you have a great opportunity to write a second letter in response.

NEVER ridicule someone personally in a letter to the editor, no matter how vile or personal their letter against you and your cause might be. Make your letters maintain a tone of patience, concern, and determination to educate the other, more reasonable people about the facts of your issue.

Don't expect to begin at perfection. The process of working toward your goals is an educational experience. You will write much better letters after a year and even better letters after two years. When you get really good and your issue has picked up a modicum of public support, don't be surprised if the editor invites you to write a guest editorial column. But don't go in on the first day demanding that they do so.

Once the blush of your media honeymoon dies away and a year or two has passed since your first public meeting, you will find that the media yawns when you offer yet another public meeting. Remember – they want news. You're not new anymore.

In seeking ways to continue to educate the public through the media, you must think of new events or ideas that will interest the media. For example, in your work on marijuana decriminalization, you may need to hold a public meeting and invite a guest speaker who has been arrested. His presentation would include the details of the arrest and what happened afterwards. Did the SWAT team break down his door, terrorize his children, kill his dog? Did he lose his job? Did his car get repossessed? These stories can be told as high drama, and that makes the news.

But where does this story go? Just that he wanted to get high? Or was there a good reason for his use of marijuana? Was he in fact using it for medical purposes, to relieve a painful migraine, for



example? Was he trying to avoid the use of alcohol but wanted an alternative way to “take the edge off” after a hard day at work? At the very least, he should voice concern that such an expensive set of community resources were expended in his arrest when in fact he was harming no one by using marijuana in his home.

Another public meeting might feature a public official who is willing to discuss the cost of building yet another jail in the county. You may find it difficult to get anyone with a respected position to come to your meeting. An alternative would be to personally meet with a sheriff, prosecutor, or city/county government official and jot down interview notes. You would then present a report at your public meeting and quote the person you interviewed. This might lead a reporter to go directly to that official and interview them, combining your remarks and the interviewed account into a news story that makes the front page “Sheriff Doesn't Want Small Time Arrests” or “No New Jail Necessary After Decrim.”

Long term, your best media strategy will be the result of what you learn. Learn what the media world is all about. Learn the facts of your issue. Learn about the people in your community. It's no accident that successful businesses have a media specialist at work for their organizations. It's that important.

## **Building Your Organization**

Every bit of media coverage will generate interest in one or more readers, listeners, or viewers of the evening news. You will get phone calls. Each person calling will have some story to tell, some personal reason they are interested in what you are doing. Chances are that you won't get many negative calls. Most will be people who in some way want to help.

Managing volunteers is one of the biggest challenges of any non-profit organization. If you take the big view, you can operate on the philosophy that everyone has something to offer. In the moment, however, sometimes it is very difficult to discover just what use someone might be. As the leader(s) of an organization, however, you must anticipate this and plan accordingly.

The core group – you and the friends who began this effort – will always have a certain commitment and understanding that will be difficult to transfer to newcomers. You have ownership that comes from your investment in making it all happen. But in order to make your organization grow, you must find way that newcomers can also invest and therefore gain that important feeling of ownership.

Investment is most often gained through work. So don't be stingy about the work. Ask a caller if he/she is willing to help. They'll ask “do what?” You must then be able to say what kinds of work you might need them to do.

What do you need people to do?

- Show up at meetings, so the room has more than seven people when the TV cameras show up.
- Rubber stamp return addresses on envelopes, fold letters, stuff envelopes, seal envelopes when you get ready to mail out a notice of another meeting or send letters to a list of friends and acquaintances, inviting them to a pizza party where someone will present a

short program about decriminalization efforts in other states – or anything that helps increase the knowledge base of your group.

- Share networks of people. Perhaps a newcomer is a member of the Lions Club and would be willing to get you or your spokesperson invited to present a fifteen minute program at the next Lions Club meeting. Always consider a newcomer as the tip of an iceberg, with neighbors, relatives, coworkers, and friends that constitute a mass of people – all of whom might accept a phone call or letter inviting them to your next meeting.
- Help develop and implement fund raising ideas. Perhaps they know a wealthy donor who would give \$1000 but doesn't want anyone to know who she is. Perhaps they have an idea for the perfect gimmick you could use to attract contributions.
- Do the legwork in gathering signatures on petitions, posting flyers about your next meeting, asking business owners to keep a few of your business cards near the cash register – at the very least, every person has their own realm of familiar businesses where they can gain favors that a stranger cannot. Always view each new contact as another new route into previously undiscovered country.
- Contribute unique talents. Perhaps the person calling used to work with an advertising agency and learned how to lay out graphic design. Wouldn't their skill be useful the next time you design a brochure or plan a paid advertisement? Perhaps the caller works at a copy shop and can get discounted copies. Perhaps they work at a food manufacturer and can get two free cartons of chips – free refreshments at your next public meeting.

Working with volunteers is an exciting challenge for anyone and it is particularly important in drug policy reform. As leader(s), you must be able to field every call in the most optimum way. Not only is it important to build your organization by retaining as many members as possible, but it is also critical to your long term success that you are inclusive to the extent that you can encourage good people to invest in your effort and become co-owners with you and your original core group.

That said, you must also be able to handle persons who – at first glance – may not seem good for your group. Drug policy reform attracts people who may be too radical for your goals and/or whose appearance in the media could seriously detract from the careful work you have done to build credibility in the community. You will without doubt get phone calls from people who are mentally ill or extremely intoxicated. Some of these calls you will have to dismiss. But not many. Finding a suitable role for radical people is very difficult. To the greatest extent possible, you should try to find ways to accommodate this element in your efforts.

In steering the best course in dealing with the radical element, you may find it useful to simply be up-front immediately. Tell him/her/them that you are working on building an acceptable image in the minds of the mainstream population and that you are afraid their presence might detract from that effort. Ask them if you could make a presentation at a special meeting of them and their friends where you could explain your efforts and gather ideas and input from them. They will have some good ideas. And they will know about events that offer you and your cause new opportunities to educate, raise money, and gain helpers. To the greatest extent possible, make them feel part of your effort.

But don't be afraid to ask troublemakers to stay away from your events. The key to any volunteer is to remember who is in charge. You can't let them take over the organization or wreck all your hard work.

On the other hand, you can't build an organization without volunteers. Some states actually have a governmental office that works with non-profit organizations, helping them learn how to manage volunteers. Think of yourself as the Literacy Council or the Disability Consortium. As far as function goes, you are the same. Learn from others.

## **Public Meetings**

In the beginning, have a public meeting. You know the media will herald this new, controversial quest you have undertaken. This is your chance to attract a batch of people who can become the backbone of your growing organization. There are several critical elements in making this event a big success.

### **1) Selecting the Location**

Most public libraries have a community meeting room available at no charge. These rooms are popular among many groups, so you may have to schedule far in advance. Sometimes they require a deposit. The rooms usually have tables, chairs, a podium, and other useful furnishings. Plenty of parking is available, including handicap spaces, and just about everyone knows where the library is located. For all these reasons, this is usually the best possible place to hold a public meeting.

Don't forget that the location of the meeting denotes a certain atmosphere to your effort. Meeting in a bar may please everyone who wants to talk and have a beer, but even if the media takes it seriously enough to show up, will you have accomplished anything useful in the public mind? If a bar meeting at happy hour sounds good, save it for private planning sessions for you and other organizers.

The size of the room is important. Chances are your first meeting won't attract more than 50 people. That would, in fact, be a great turnout. So don't get a room that holds 200 people, because in a room that large, even your great turnout of 50 will look miserably small in a TV newscast.

### **2) Program**

Plan on an hour at the most. Your program should include an introduction – who you are, what you're working on, and why. Then you should have a featured presentation, either a video or a speaker who will focus on your priority issue for about 15 minutes. Then you should have a question and answer period about the video or involving your guest speaker. Limit the Q&A to ten minutes at the most.

At that point, you should be approximately a half hour into your program. This is when you should talk about your goal as an organization and introduce your plan of action. Do you hope to gather petition signatures for an initiated act? You need everyone in the room to leave with petitions, instructions, and motivation to go out and gather signatures. Do

you hope to build support for legislative action? You need everyone in the room to learn a few pointers about contacting their elected representatives.

Don't go into a public meeting without knowing what your objectives are. Having a meeting just to get media attention is not good enough. You are inviting the public. They come expecting to get something. You must deliver -- deliver information, motivation, and expectation of success. Build confidence in the public that you know what you're doing and they can count on you for leadership. Give people a sense of hope. They should feel good when they leave.

After 10 or 15 minutes of program that describes your mission and solicits helpers in the audience, again ask for questions. Announce your next event and then adjourn while inviting people to enjoy refreshments and take your literature.

### 3) Set-Up

In advance of your meeting, designate individuals who will be available at the end of the meeting to talk one-on-one with visitors who want more information. At the least, as you wind up the last part of your program, point out key people to the audience. "If you want to talk about fundraising, meet with so-and-so over at this side of the room." Or "If you have factual information about this issue or a personal experience, please meet with so-and-so over there." And so forth. Don't let people leave the meeting without having some personal contact and the opportunity to do something.

Set up at least two tables. One table should include some kind of refreshment. Even cut up apples and cookies are better than nothing. Try to keep it simple so you don't need to buy paper plates and eating utensils. Drinks can be messy, and they are not necessary. Be creative, but lay it out nicely with napkins.

The other table should have literature about your issue(s). Have at least six different reprinted articles in stacks of at least 20 copies each. The more material, the better. Also on this table should be your brochure and business cards, presented in nice professional displays. Visit your office supply store and buy what you need. Also use a plastic sign holder with a sheet of paper showing, in large letters, the name of your organization. Place that near your brochures and cards.

Prominently featured in front of your group sign should be sign-up slips. These can be cheaply produced three to a page. Only 20 copies and a cutting charge yields 60 slips. The sign-up slip should include a place for a person's name, address, city, state, zip, phone, email, and the date. There should be a checklist of three or four contribution amounts, such as \$30 Basic Support, \$50 Operational Support, \$100 Administrative Support, and \$250 Program Support. You should also have another item to check that says "I can only contribute \$\_\_\_." You can add a one sentence description after each support category. For example, "Basic Support. Allows us to send you regular mailings." or "Operational Support. Allows us to send mail-outs and have some leftover for printing, mailing, meetings, promos."

Also on the sign-up slip should be space for the person to check if he/she is interested in volunteering to help, with space to write down what, if any, particular interest they may have, or some special skill they might offer.

If you plan carefully, these same slips can serve double duty. Not only might a person complete one at a public meeting, but you might send them out in response to phone calls for more information. You can include space for a person to check if they want copies of literature “Designate how many \_\_brochures \_\_fact sheets.”

And when you progress to the point where you have items for sale, you can include that on the sign-up slip as well, for example – “T-shirt order. Cotton: \_\_ Tan shirt with Latin phrase Size M L XL XXL XXXL Enclose \$12 plus \$3 shipping for each shirt.” The shirts would be described in more detail in other literature.

At the bottom of the signup slip should be your mission statement, the name of the organization and its address, phone, email, website. If you are a political action group, you must put some statement according to state law. For example:

XYZ is a political action group. We are required by law to record contributions of \$99 or more and send such records to the state ethics commission. We can accept anonymous cash contributions up to \$50. Contributions are not tax deductible. Make your check payable to XYZ and mail to —.

If you are an educational group, your slip might state that contributions are tax deductible. But in order for this to be true, you will have to become a tax exempt organization under the codes of the IRS. Please see the section on the Pros and Cons of 501(c)3 status elsewhere in this booklet.

#### 4) Donations

On your literature table, right beside the sign of your group name and the brochures, etc., should be a container to accept cash contributions. A glass quart jar is best because you can “seed” the container with money before the meeting starts. People are more likely to add money to a jar that already has money in it. Stick a little sign on the jar that says something like, “Please contribute” or “Your contribution keeps us working.”

#### 5) Publicity

As soon as you plan the location and date of your meeting, you should begin the publicity. Print flyers with the location, date, and time. Make a feature line on the flyer that says something brief about the main focus of the meeting “Marijuana Decriminalization – Guest Speaker Joe Smith” Run copies of the flyer on colored paper and place them everywhere you can. Get permission from business owners before taping up flyers. It defeats your purpose if you leave flyers that make people angry.

Go back to your media list and contact each major media outlet to determine if they have a community calendar service. Your event qualifies for a public service announcement, or PSA. Usually, radio and television stations have a specific fax line they use for PSAs. Develop a list of PSA information, because you will use this again. Be sure to ask what kind of lead time they want for PSAs. Most media outlets want your notice 3 weeks ahead of the time that the PSA will actually run. They will then run the PSA for at least two or three weeks. Local cable access television stations will run notices the longest. Commercial television stations may not run it more than once or twice. Radio may

announce your event several times, depending on how many PSAs they have on the list for that time period. Newspapers will publish your event at least once in the community calendar. This is all free, but you have to follow the rules at each media outlet. It can be quite a challenge to get all the right information and get your material to the right people at the right time. But it pays off.

Press releases can go out up to three weeks ahead of the event, but be aware that most media probably won't do anything with it. Chalk this up to journalist education. You're making them aware of your event. They may start to plan on assigning a reporter to show up at your meeting. Your first press release may just be two or three paragraphs, enough to state the time, date, location, meeting program, and a little about your group. Your second press release, two weeks before the event, will have all the same info, but go into a little more detail about the meeting program and the goals of your group.

Your third press release, five days before the event, should repeat all the same stuff but with a little different language. Include a paragraph about the featured speaker, even if it is just a "regular" person. Accent the person's background that qualifies him/her to speak on this subject – "Joe Smith has studied marijuana decriminalization efforts in other states and nations, and has analyzed the potential benefit to (your community or state) that such a reform might produce. He will present specific information about the marijuana laws in adjacent states and compare those law enforcement and prison costs to ours." And so forth.

The third press release is the one most likely to see print, but don't count on it. Media news editors are not in the business to promote your event. They report on NEWS. Your meeting may constitute NEWS, so they may send reporters who will then include information from your press release in whatever story they write or broadcast after the meeting.

## 6) Signs

On the day of the meeting, put signs or more of your flyers at places to help guide people to the meeting place. At the very least, place one on the door or entry area of the meeting room.

## 7) Signup Sheet

Prepare a sheet of paper that people can write on as it is passed around the room during the meeting. Make headings such as Name, Address, City, Phone. Don't make it too complex. The basic idea is to get a list of everyone who comes with some information so that you can contact them later. Put it on a clipboard and include a clip-on pen. This will be circulated through the rows of people during your meeting.

## 8) Running the Meeting

Start the meeting on time. If people are still coming in the door, wait five minutes at the most. You'll be nervous, but get over it. Thank people for coming and remark on the momentous nature of the event. Start your signup sheet in circulation at this point. Follow your agenda. During question and answer periods, you are the host, so even if your guest

speaker is answering the questions, you should stand also and help control the flow. At the end of the meeting, thank everyone for coming, make your announcements, tell everyone they are welcome to have refreshments, and make a special plea that they make a contribution so that your work can move forward.

Be prepared to talk with reporters both before and after the meeting. You and the featured speaker will need to have a quiet corner of the room to answer reporters' questions and shoot video footage. This is the part that thousands will see on the evening newscast or read in the morning paper, so don't begrudge the reporters this time.

Be friendly to journalists. Learn their names. Ask what their normal beat is – are they there as a city news reporter? A political reporter? Their assignment may give you clues about the angle they want on your story. Assign various members of your group to watch for these reporters' stories when they are aired or printed. Send email or written thank you notes to reporters who do a good job.

Other members of your group should anticipate the fact that you and the guest speaker will be tied up with journalists. The other members should be working the crowd as they browse your literature table and sample your refreshments. They should make one-on-one contact with as many of the audience as possible, shaking their hands, thanking them for coming, and asking if they have questions or information to share. Remember that one group member may be waiting at one spot to talk with anyone interested in fund raising, and you will have announced this at the end of the meeting.

#### 9) Document, Document, Document

Like the minutes of organizational and planning meetings of your group, details of your public meetings should be documented on paper. This becomes part of the history of your organization. It might read like a news story and by all means keep any newspaper clippings that show up. At the least, you should document the date, time, place, who spoke and a brief summary of what was said, and a head count of people who attended. Also list which journalists attended and what media they worked for. Write down how many items of literature were taken and how much money was donated.

### **Your First Newsletter**

After your first meeting and some other activities are under your belt, you should produce a newsletter. Newsletters are an important way to promote your organization and its goals. Perhaps a member of your core group has some experience in producing newsletters.

Most word processing software include an pre-formatted guide for newsletters, with headers, divided pages, and a table of contents. But even if you are working the hard way with a typewriter, you can still produce a newsletter. Again, go the library and look at other newsletters so you know what looks good and what is the norm.

The first thing to consider about your newsletter is – Who is going to see it? By now you may have a list of several people who are involved in your efforts. You may have another list of names and addresses of people who came to the meeting. Some may have filled out sign-up slips and others may have only signed the sheet you passed around. If you and others in your group

have not already done so, now is the time to brainstorm lists of people who might be interested in seeing your newsletter – drag out the Rolodex and make a list of all those friends, family members, and acquaintances.

Don't be afraid to send your newsletter to community leaders and elected officials. They need to be educated and probably will consider it their civic duty to at least read what you send.

Who else might see the newsletter? What about leaving a stack of the newsletters at the local CD store? New age shop? Health food store? A popular coffee shop or newsstand? What about upcoming events like festivals where you might have a booth – you'll need newsletters to pass out to people there. Make some extras that you can keep on hand to send out to people who call for more information.

Once you've decided about how many newsletters you will circulate and the places and people who will see it, you can begin planning on what your feature headline will be. Perhaps it will be the same information that was featured in your public meeting program, including some new quotes from your guest speaker. Perhaps it will be news about a reform in another state that is similar to the reform you seek. Whatever your headline, only give half the front page to that story. Continue it on an inside page.

The rest of the front page should include at least two other headlines, so that people who aren't so interested in your feature story may still find something that attracts them. You might brag on the fact that you've received calls from many people in support of your issue. That could lead to a short article on polls that show what percentage of the national population support that reform. Or perhaps you write a short article on a personal story – feature someone with a tragic story to tell that illustrates the need for reform.

All newsletters should include a clip-out form that people can send in to you. Even if the person receiving your newsletter has already filled out a sign-up slip, he or she may share the newsletter with a friend who in turn needs to send you something in order to get involved.

The newsletter can include facts about your issue, information about your group and its goals, and cheery bits of news from other places where similar reforms have produced good results. The newsletter should include a mix of alarming and motivating information as well as reassuring and even humorous features.

Have a newsletter mailing party for all your new helpers. This is a good occasion for new helpers to invest and gain a sense of ownership.

It's fine to hand write the addresses for your first few mail-outs. At some happy point, your mailing list will be too large to do by hand and you'll need to invest in software that allows you to organize your supporter list. One of the best is MySoftware's My Deluxe MailList and Address Book. Each person's information is recorded on a separate card with space for date, contributions, and other information. These records can be sorted alphabetically if you want to print out a roster of all your people, or they can be formatted to fit sheets of mailing labels sorted by zip code, as well as other layouts.



## Promotion

In seeking ways to involve the public in work on your issue(s), you must constantly seek ways to be in contact with the public. Public meetings and newsletters are just two of the ways you can accomplish promotion. You may discover promotional opportunities unique to your location.

Some of the tried and true are:

- festivals and other public events where vendors set up booths. Planning for these events occurs two or three months ahead. Contact the event organizers (Chamber of Commerce, city or county government, etc.) and ask for an exhibitor's application. Generally, nonprofit organizations do not have to pay or pay less than commercial booths. Booth space is usually ten feet by ten feet. It's up to you to decide how to fill up that space. At the very least, have a literature table set up like you had at your public meeting.
- petitioning in public places. If you have a petition, you will have people on sidewalks in front of the post office, courthouse, and other high-traffic areas. Every passer-by should receive something, even if they don't wish to sign the petition. Give them a newsletter or a brochure or a business card or a small slip of paper that states your basic information.
- press releases. You don't have to hold a public event in order to send out press releases. You may wish to tie a local story to something that is breaking on the national or state level. Timing is critical if you are tying to another story, however. News isn't news if it comes three days after the story has already been out there. A press release can tell about a local person in some particular aspect of your issue, a local spin on national research or polls, any new information or research you may develop, or a new project you have started working on through your group.

For example, you may decide to supply copies of recent research to your local libraries. Your donation of these materials constitute news. Send out a press release that names the libraries, names your group, and lists the items you will contribute. This not only gets you news coverage, but it also lets the public know that if they want to read more of this material, they can find it at their local library.

- benefits. You can generate interest and contributions by hosting a benefit event. This is a tricky project. You could end up with very poor attendance. The key is to keep your costs at a bare minimum.

One popular benefit event is the concert. A respected musical group who will draw a crowd no matter when they play can be approached and asked if they would consider playing a benefit. Work with the band to determine their favorite place to play and ask them to help you request the benefit from the manager of that establishment. Usually a club or arena manager will be willing to work with you on this, providing that you allow him to keep all the money from the bar and/or food service. The band would play for free and you would keep the money people pay to get in.

At a benefit concert, you can set up a table with literature, etc., and enlist new helpers. You can sell T-shirts or other items. Publicity for the benefit includes flyers, PSAs, and press releases. Be sure to work with the band to include their logo on the flyers. They may have publicity ideas of their own.

It is not good publicity if you have a benefit concert that gets out of hand. This is not the time for your most radical supporters to show up and smoke marijuana in public. Police will be watching and you don't need headlines about such things. Keep your eyes open, put the word out in advance, and don't be afraid to educate such enthusiasts about the importance of building a good public image for your cause.

- Other benefit events might include bake sales, rummage sales, auctions, chili cook-offs, cooperative dinners, and raffles – some of the many types of benefit events that may be appropriate for you in your community. Each time such an event is held, you have news that will be interesting to local media. Be sure to capitalize on these events by using each press release, PSA, and flyer to say something important (yet brief) about your issue.

Fundraising in ways besides benefit events is a vast topic and is not within the scope of this writing. Many excellent materials are available that go into detail about fundraising. Try *“The Ultimate Guide to Planning and Producing Successful Special Events”* by Harry Freedman and Karen Smith, or *“The Grassroots Fundraising Book”* by Joan Flanagan.

Within the drug policy reform movement, an excellent (video) guide to fundraising, *“Making Connections: Raising Dollars for Drug Policy Causes,”* is available from the Lindesmith/Drug Policy Foundation.

## **In Summary**

Getting started in drug policy reform is a joyous enterprise. Finally, after all the years and all the fears, you're doing something. Don't let the details get in your way.

But never forget that as the organizer of a reform effort, you are starting a business, even if it is “not for profit.” You are becoming an administrator, a manager, a coordinator, a planner, and a lot of other things besides. You don't have to re-invent the wheel, though, so look for people and materials which can educate you quickly and (relatively) painlessly.

One of your most critical missions, subtle as it may be, is to make the community safe for others to speak out. You may be among the first to start saying “marijuana” out loud in polite company. If you are careful in organizing your effort, however, soon marijuana and how our nation handles it will be discussed at Rotary, between retired business women over lunch, and in junior high civics classes. People know our current policies cry out for reform and they want to talk, but like you they've been afraid.

For most average people today, talking about drug policy seems to indicate a person uses drugs. This idea, no doubt the stepchild of Nancy Reagan's brainless “Just Say No” slogan, insinuates that if you say “Yes” to talking, thinking, and promoting alternatives to current failed policies, you are saying “yes, people should abuse drugs.” Be aware of this undercurrent. Be sensitive to other people's comfort level. Don't force a conversation when someone is uneasy.

Frame your issue discussion as problems with new solutions. You're offering new solutions. You are optimistic. You are committed. Your group has a plan for the long haul.

In questionable situations, simply give someone your card and ask them if they would consider sitting down and talking about the issue sometime at their convenience.

Be patient.

In your materials and events, praise your helpers and supporters for donating money, for donating time, for writing letters to the editor, for showing up at meetings and events. Make your organization a healthy, happy family.

A great slogan: "Life is people. Handle with care."