



Town Hall Meetings: Grassroots Organizing Guide

Town hall meetings are large events designed for public education and political pressure. A town hall meeting can be planned on any topic, but is most effective when it addresses a relevant such as an upcoming vote on a policy.

Town hall meetings are an ideal tactic to **mass-educate people** in your community (particularly if the issue is hot), **engage and pressure a local politician**, **earn media for your issue**, and **empower people to take action** in their communities to help forge the policy solutions we need to address climate change and build a clean energy economy.

This guide provides step-by-step instructions on how to plan a great event. Most of the steps are based on ensuring high turnout, which will have the biggest influence on any given targeted decision-maker.

To be as helpful as possible, this guide is detailed enough for someone to follow who has never organized an event like this before. If you have experience or other ideas, please feel free to modify. Thanks again for taking on this important task!

Location and Logistics

Your organizing committee will focus most closely on recruiting people to attend or participate in the town hall. However, before you can start inviting anyone, you need to set the basic logistical details, including the time and the location of the event. There are a couple of important things to take into consideration before settling on a location.

I. Finding a Location

1. **Consider the type of location:** Consider what a location will say about your campaign or what message it will convey to community members and to the delegate. For instance, if the delegate is from a more moderate or conservative district, you may not want to have the town hall in what is perceived as a more “liberal” location, such as a local activist group or well-known, left-leaning church or institution.
2. **Logistical Concerns** – Make sure to look for places that are large enough to accommodate the crowd you are hoping to draw, that there is adequate parking nearby, and that it is preferably accessible by public transportation.

3. **Make a List of Locations:** Keeping these things in mind, sit down and make a list of places in your elected official's district that meet the necessary criteria. Then decide on your preferred times and dates for the THM and call each location to see if they are available on those dates/times. Unless you have to put down a deposit, reserve all that are available – good spaces fill up fast!
4. **Do location walk-throughs:** After you've narrowed down your list to a few final candidates, make sure to visit the locations to make sure they fit your logistical needs before you settle on one.

II. Other Logistical Considerations

Once you've nailed down your location, your logistical team should turn its attention to other important details including supplies you'll need, the look and layout of the event, and volunteer roles. Brainstorm and make a list of these details, divide the list up with a partner, and set deadlines addressing these details. Here's a list of things you should consider:

1. **Visuals** – Big banners, model wind turbines, a clean energy mural by local school kids, American flags, anything that will make a good, photo worthy backdrop for the speakers.
2. **Food and Drinks** – Contact local restaurants, or supermarkets to see if they can donate food and drinks for the event. Do this several weeks in advance. Supermarkets often donate gift certificates to tax-deductible organizations.
3. **Campaign Literature** – Think of putting together a campaign info kit with campaign brochures, and other related educational materials.
4. **Directional Signs** – to direct people from the parking lot to the event room
5. **Other Miscellaneous materials** – Sign in sheets, petitions, clipboards, scissors, tape, string, pens, 3x5 cards (for audience Q&A), paper plates, napkins, name tags

Speaker and Co-Sponsor Recruitment

Once you've set your location it's time to start sending out invitations to speakers and co-sponsors. By this time, you will already have decided on the primary message of your meeting, which should inform your choice of speakers and co-sponsors. Speakers will do the primary job of successfully articulating the theme or message of your town hall to the press and attendees, while the co-sponsors will help to demonstrate broad-based community support for that message. Here are some criteria to use for choosing which speakers and co-sponsors to invite.

I. Speaker and Co-Sponsor Criteria

A. Speaker Criteria:

- a. **Public Appeal:** Your speakers are the main attractions of the meeting, so make sure that they will in fact attract people to your meeting.

- b. **Credibility:** As one goal of a town hall is to educate, your speakers should be credible authorities on the issues you are discussing (e.g. experts, politicians, or people personally affected by the issue etc.)
- c. **Influence on Target:** Will the speaker create added pressure on your target. (I.e. are they influential in the community – celebrity, activist – or do they represent a key constituency – faith leader, business leader etc.)
- d. **Message Control:** Will the speaker be someone who will stay on message (i.e. support your message) or potential go off message and undermine it? For example, utility representatives and solar business owners might both know about energy, but which would be more likely to advocate for clean energy options?

B. Co-Sponsor Criteria:

- a. **Impact on Publicity:** Co-sponsoring basically means helping publicize the meeting. There is no money involved. We want cosponsors because it shows that we have a broad coalition, which influences the target. Also, it boosts attendance at the town hall meeting.
- b. **Diversity:** Think broadly! Possible co-sponsors should include environmental groups, but also contact churches and other faith groups, women’s groups, anyone who represents children’s rights, elderly groups, civic groups, labor unions, businesses, ethnic and heritage groups, health groups, outdoors groups, local doctors. The object is to build a big coalition that demonstrates broad support for your cause.
- c. **Influence on Target:** Prioritize sponsors that will have the biggest impact on your target. Research your community and your target. For instance, find out what drives the local economy. The perspective of locally important industries will undoubtedly be of concern to your local elected officials.

II. Speaker and Co-Sponsor List

Once you’ve decided what kinds of speakers and co-sponsors will fit the necessary criteria for an impactful town hall, start putting together a list of potential candidates to contact. Here are some tips on how to do that:

- A. **Set Recruitment Goals:** A good goal might be 3 speakers and 5-10 co-sponsor groups. To further guide the selection process, break you list down by categories – i.e. 2 faith groups, 3 businesses etc. Make your work easier by identifying co-sponsors that could also double as speakers – i.e. a local green business owner that who could speak and sign his business up as a co-sponsor. Your contact list should always be several times as big as your goal. So if you want to recruit 10 co-sponsors, you might want to make a list of 20 or 30 potentials.
- B. **Make a Tracking Document:** Keep track of all of the speakers and co-sponsors that you intend to contact in a spreadsheet. Google has an application called Google Documents

that is perfect for this, because your whole team can edit the same document on line. Categorize different types of speakers or co-sponsors, and track all essential information including email addresses, phone numbers, names of individual contacts (i.e. the owner), dates contacted, info on responses to invitations etc. Divide up the list with your teammates and ID who is contacting who.

III. Sending out Invites

Now comes the easy part: sending out the invites. Here is a breakdown of the simple steps to take to invite potential speakers and co-sponsors:

1. **Create adaptable email templates:** To save yourself time, write up several generic invite emails that you can quickly edit with personal details. Have a sponsor-invite email, a speaker-invite email, a speaker/co sponsor email, an elected official email.

Be very clear about what you are asking of your speakers or co-sponsors. All we want most co-sponsors to do is put up some flyers, advertize the meetings in bulletins or newsletters, and send out notices to their email lists. We also want to put their name down as a cosponsor. Make it clear in the email that we are not asking for very much.

2. **Personalize the emails as necessary:** Make the town hall appeal to your speakers' and co-sponsors' particular interests. For example, play up the moral angle to religious groups, or the economic angle to businesses.
3. **Set a deadline for sending out your first round of emails.** Send out invites as soon as possible. Try to send out your first invites one month in advance, and set a deadline for invites to keep the work of you team on schedule.

IV. Follow-up calls

- A. **The importance of Follow-up calls:** Follow up calls are necessary to make sure that your co-sponsors and speakers are aware of your invite. Don't assume people have read your email; be prepared to explain in detail what you are calling about. You can prevent this by making calls just before sending your emails, to find out exactly who you should send the email to, and to make sure that person knows to expect your email.

- B. **Making the Calls:** Follow these simple steps for successful follow up calls:

- a. **Have a call script:** A script will help you quickly explain what you're calling about and clearly specify what you are asking the contact to do.
- b. **Keep track of Call Details:** Use your Google tracking spreadsheet to record the following information about each call.
 - i. **Name of people you spoke with**

- ii. **Time and date of the call** – even if you didn't get through and only left a voice message take note of the date and time so that you can know when you should call back, or if you should give them more time.
- iii. **Be persistent** – If a group decision is required it may need to wait until an upcoming meeting. So be patient but persistent. If your contact tells you to call back on a certain date, be sure to make a note of it and call back then.
- iv. **Prioritize by level of interest** – Give priority to your most interested contacts. Sometimes people will say they will help publicize it, although they don't want to be listed as a co- sponsor. That is still good. Send them information. But don't spend a lot of time calling and recalling speakers or co-sponsors that seem to be giving you the run around or lack interest in the town hall.
- v. **Set, Specify and Stick to Deadlines** – though it's important to be patient with your contacts, be sure to let them know when you need a final response to your invitation. When you call specify an RSVP date. Your top priority is getting your speaker and co-sponsor slots filled in time to allow for publicity and other preparations.

V. Contact local politicians

Your guest of honor and keynote speaker should be the local elected official your town hall is targeting. When inviting local politicians, just follow the above steps for inviting other speakers including sending invites and doing regular follow up calls. Be sure to contact politicians as soon as possible, as their schedules book up weeks to months in advance.

You can find contact information for your member of Congress at:

<http://www.congressmerge.com/onlinedb/index.htm>. Call your local congressional district office, ask to speak to the scheduler, and send him/her a follow-up letter inviting your member to your town hall.

You can find contact information for your Maryland Assembly delegates or senators at:

<http://mlis.state.md.us/mgaweb/mail32.aspx>. Call your delegate's local or Annapolis office, ask to speak to the scheduler, and send him/her a follow-up email inviting your member to your town hall.

Outreach and Publicity

There are a number of ways to spread the word about your event to ensure a good turnout. Below is a list of some of the most tried and true outreach and publicity methods for boosting event attendance. Make use of all of them to make sure that you hit your turnout goals!

I. Setting Goals

Set an attendance goal for your town hall. Be reasonable, taking in to consideration how much time you have for promotion and how many people you'll really need to have a successful event.

You can gauge what your turnout will be by tracking the number of RSVPs you get from people in the community. We can set up a professional looking RSVP website for you. Generally your final event attendance will be half of the number of RSVPs that you get. Therefore, you should set an RSVP goal that is twice as big as your attendance goal, and your outreach efforts should primarily focus on getting that number of RSVPs.

II. Phonebanking

Asking people to come to your event via a phone call is the single most effective method for getting RSVPs and assuring a good turnout. Emails, posters and flyers are great ways of getting the word out far and wide, but they're easy to ignore, so plan to get most of your RSVPs by "phone-banking." Organizing and running a phonebank is easy. CCAN will send you a handy guide on how to make yours a success. For now, here are some simple steps for setting up your phonebank:

1. **Find a Location:** It's best to call as part of a team in a central location. You can hold your phonebank at a spot like an office with a lot of phones, or ask everyone to use their cell phones and meet at a house on a weekend or weeknight.
2. **Timing:** Evenings between (6:30 and 9) are the best times for calling. You should have your phonebanks during the two weeks preceding the event. Each phonebank should run for 2 hours with 30 added minutes for training.
3. **Recruit a Phonebank Team:** Aim to recruit 5-10 people to each phonebank. Attract volunteers by billing it as a fun recruitment party with food and drinks. Tell folks that you'll provide a script, a call list, and training. Have your team lined up at least one week before each phonebank. Call everyone on the team the night before the phonebank to confirm they're coming.

III. Outreach/Petitioning Events

Build buzz around your town hall by doing outreach events in your community at places like churches, local organic markets, or local events. Make arrangements to go there with other volunteers to pass out information, talk to people about the event, and get people to sign a campaign petition. Here are some simple tips on setting up an outreach event.

1. **Set goals:** your outreach events should be set around a goal like collecting a certain number of petition signatures. Most people can get about 15-20 petition signatures an hour, so if you want 100 petition signatures, plan to set up 3, 2-hour events with 2 people at each event.
2. **Finding Locations:**

- a. Get a map of the legislative district
- b. Make a list of cities and towns in the district
- c. Use Google to search for churches, schools, organic markets etc. in those cities or towns
- d. Check the events calendar of towns or local papers online to find upcoming events
- e. List the locations/events and associated phone numbers and emails on a spreadsheet
- f. Call and email the locations, event organizers to arrange to have an information table.
 - i. Tell them a little bit about the campaign, that you're promoting a town hall and that you want to collect petition signatures.
 - ii. You can assign this job to one person or split up the contacts with a few volunteers

3. Scheduling Events

- a. Spread the outreach events out over several weekends
- b. Make sure that all your outreach events are completed at least 1 to 2 weeks before the town hall.

4. Recruit Volunteers for Each Event

- a. Sign up 3-4 volunteers for each outreach event, ensuring you'll have at least 2 there.
- b. Share the list of events with each volunteer and ask them which they would like to go to.
- c. Keep track of who is going to which location on your event spreadsheet
- d. Follow up with volunteers a few days before each event to confirm they are going, give them a short training over the phone if you won't be joining them, provide logistical details, and email them any necessary materials they may need – i.e. petitions etc.

5. Prepare Materials

- a. Materials you will need include
 - i. Petitions
 - ii. Clipboards
 - iii. Pens
 - iv. Literature on the Campaign
 - v. Event flyers
 - vi. A banner or poster for your table (if you have a table)

For help gathering materials and additional tips on doing outreach events, contact CCAN organizer Keith Harrington (keith@chesapeakeclimate.org).

IV. Emails, Flyers, Posters, and Online Notices

Once you have all the details (who, what, where, when, why) of your event nailed down, publicize it as far and wide as possible by email, flyers, posters, and notices on online community and event calendars. Here are a few details on each approach:

1. **Emails:** A number of weeks before the event, CCAN will send out an email invitation to hundreds of local supporters. You can help by forwarding the email on to your own contact lists. Ask any co-sponsors of the event to send out a copy of the invite email to their lists as well.
2. **Flyers and Posters:** Put up posters and leave flyers in local shops, restaurants, community centers churches, offices – anywhere where you can grab people’s attention. You can also find volunteers to help you hand out flyers on well-trafficked street corners or metro stops.
3. **Online Notices:** Local papers or city websites often have community event calendars. Write an event blurb with the Who, What, Where, When and Why details and post them on the event calendars, or create an event page of Facebook and share it with your friends to make it go viral!

Staying Organized

I. Weekly Check in Calls

Make sure that the work of your team is proceeding smoothly and on schedule by having weekly check in calls. On the calls, you may want to have “sub-committees” for various tasks like outreach, speaker recruitment, and logistics report on what they accomplished during the last week, and their action items for the coming week. Have someone take minutes for the call, and circulate them afterwards.

II. Final Check in Call

You should have your final check-in call a day or two before the event. On this call you should go over a checklist of final logistical concerns, and specify and assign volunteer roles for the event itself. In addition, do a run-through of the event, reviewing the agenda, and identifying any snags you may need to address.

The Town Hall Meeting!

Have an awesome event! Here are some sample volunteer roles to make the event go smoothly:

1. Greeters for public - to sign-in attendees so you can follow up with them after the event
2. Greeters for media – to sign them in and to give out the Press Packet
3. Greeters for speakers – so they feel welcome and know where to go

4. M.C. – someone to introduce all the speakers and help keep the ball rolling
5. Time Keeper – to keep the speakers on time, preferably with cue cards (e.g. 5 min Left)
6. Set up and clean-up crew – to put out information and set up chairs, etc.

Additional Support and Resources

While this provides most of the essential information that you'll need to organize a great town hall it is by no means exhaustive. As you prepare for your town hall, CCAN's experienced staff of professional organizers will be there every step of the way to provide you with all the additional resources, advice and assistance you need to make your town hall a success. Feel free to contact CCAN Maryland/DC Field Organizer, Keith Harrington (keith@chesapeakeclimate.org; 240-396-1985) any time with any questions, concerns or needs.