

Organizing Toolbox 2000

Turn Problems Into Issues

There are many problems in Virginia - problems with schools, property taxes, low wages, transportation, affordable housing, forestry and discrimination on the basis of race, sex and sexual orientation to name some.

Community groups have no lack of problems to work on, but it's important to move beyond describing the problems to finding solutions.

A problem is simply a statement of what is wrong or what needs to be changed. An issue is a solution, or at least a partial solution, to the problem. The Virginia Organizing Project works on issues, or solutions to problems Virginians face by organizing people to act together to change public laws, policies and practices that are at the root of community problems.

Analyze the Problem to Find the Issue

To turn your community problem into an issue, get together a few people who are concerned about the problem and ask yourselves the following questions:

1. What would really improve the situation?

The answer (or answers) to this question becomes your goal. For example, if the lack of affordable housing is the problem, building 100 new units of affordable housing in your community would improve the situation. It's a solution, or partial solution, to the problem.

Keep your statement of the solution simple, so that it's easily understood throughout the community. You may develop very detailed descriptions of the 100 new housing units, where they will be located, and how they will be managed or financed. But for the purposes of communicating about your goal, it should be easy for anyone in the community to understand and talk about what the goal is.

2. Who has the power to bring about the improvement?

The answer to this question becomes your target, or the person(s) you meet with to make your solution a reality. For example, your local housing and community development authority may have the power to build 100 new units of affordable housing. But it's not enough to know the name of the public agency that has the power to implement your solution. People, not agencies, make decisions. The actual people who have the power to make the decision are your targets.

If you can't find a clear target, you really don't have an issue, since there is no solution to a problem if there is no one with the power to resolve it.

Community groups need to be very specific about who their targets are. For example, writing to your congressional representative or talking to a lawyer might be good things to do in general, but unless the Congressperson or lawyer has the power to build 100 units of affordable housing, they're not your targets. Groups often waste a lot of time trying to educate a variety of people about the problem without first identifying the people who can bring about a solution.

3. How important is this issue?

A small but deeply committed group of people needs to care about the issue enough to stick with it, possibly for a few years, in order to see it through. Even more importantly, a much larger number of people needs to care about the issue enough to support it and work on it over the long-term as well.

Community groups need to ask themselves if there are enough people who care enough about the issue to make it worthwhile to take on. Since there are so many problems, there are many possible issues to work on. Actively ask people how much they care about an issue before making a commitment to work on it. Ask if they'd be willing to attend a public meeting about the issue, if they'd be willing to make phone calls, if they'd be willing to get their friends and family to write letters of support.

People may think the issue is a good idea, but if they're not willing to put some time and effort into it, the issue really isn't that important to them. Community groups need to know in advance whether an issue is just a good idea, or something that is important enough to people to get them to put time and effort into working on it.

4. Is the issue winnable?

If you have a clear goal, a specific target, and wide community support, the next question to ask is how likely it is, with the support you have, to be successful in reaching your goal. There is no point in going public on an issue that you have no chance of winning. On the other hand, community groups shouldn't shy away from taking on an issue that is of deep concern and has wide support just because the targets say it can't be done.

The whole point of community organizing is to get decision-makers to use their power to bring about improvements the community wants. We do this by getting the community to assert its own power in holding decision-makers accountable for meeting needs defined by the community.

If you can define a clear goal, identify specific targets, and have a substantial number of people who care enough about a problem to put some time into working on it, you have a pretty good chance of turning a general community problem into an issue - and achieving the improvements you want. Your next step is to develop a strategy for reaching your goal, the topic of the next [virginia.organizing](http://virginia.organizing.org) toolbox.

What It Takes to Be a Leader in a Diverse Statewide Multi-Issue Organization

Step 1: Stand Up

Recognize that the issues of concern to you are of concern to others, too, and make a commitment to connect with the people around you.

Step 2: Stand With Others

Go beyond your personal network of family and friends to intentionally meet other people for the purpose of building public relationships with them. This means carving an hour a week out of your many tasks and responsibilities to listen, face-to-face, to what another person in your community cares about and share what you care about with the other person. Not all of your one-to-one conversations will lead to specific actions on an issue. But if you meet a wide variety of people over a period of time and genuinely listen, you will build a network of relationships and enhance your ability over the long-term to move people into action on a wide range of issues.

Step 3: Build Bridges

Develop your ability to connect with and understand people who are different from you. Approach people of different races, religions, occupations, economic circumstances, family structures and sexual orientations and ask them what they see as the biggest challenges in the community. Try to see the world from their point of view as well as your own. Participate in VOP workshops on racism and sexual orientation to develop strategies for bringing diverse groups of people together.

Step 4: Learn and Practice the Practical Skills of Public Life

Be able to describe how power is distributed in your community and the state, and how it works in terms of the issues you care about. Learn how to find and sift through information to identify the key points that will help you move people into action. Too often, activists become so bogged down in the specific details of an issue that they scare other people away. Sift and refine your information so that anyone can understand it. Learn how to speak clearly in public, to raise funds by asking people for contributions, and to communicate with the media and public officials. Learn how to break a big job down into small tasks and ask others to help with them, and never stop asking new people to get involved.

Step 5: Be Strategic

Leadership takes commitment and hard work. Don't exhaust yourself by trying to do it alone. Work with others to develop a long-term plan for change in your community so you don't get constantly distracted by every issue that comes up. Forge relationships with like-minded people beyond your local area to build the power needed for major improvements in the quality of our common life.

Voter Registration

Anyone active in groups working on community issues eventually comes face-to-face with elected or appointed government officials.

Local, state and federal government provide public services - roads, schools, sewers, fire and police protection - and determine policies that shape private practices - zoning, industrial and residential development, and employment practices, to name a few. Elected officials, and those appointed by elected officials, make decisions that affect our personal lives and the general well-being of our communities.

Even though government shapes so much of our lives, most people don't vote.

Joy Johnson, chairperson of PHAR (Public Housing Association of Residents), a VOP affiliate in Charlottesville, says that the biggest challenge to encouraging people to register to vote is connecting the act of voting to people's real lives.

"It's easier to find information on how to play the lottery than it is to find out what voting has to do with the things you care about in your life. Television and radio tell you over and over again what you stand to win if you buy a lottery ticket; how many times have you seen an ad that says if you want to save affordable housing in your neighborhood, improve the schools, or increase the minimum wage, you need to vote? I've seen city council meetings and committee meetings in the General Assembly where the votes of two or three elected officials make all the difference in whether a proposal passes or gets killed. Any effort to register voters needs to include education on how the people we elect determine the outcome on schools, economics, jobs, affordable housing, and the other things real people care about in our everyday lives."

PHAR began last year to educate public housing residents in Charlottesville on how electoral politics has a direct impact on their lives, and to register people to vote.

"If you want to do a voter registration drive, call your local Registrar of Voters and get the applications and other information you need. The League of Women Voters will train your members to register people if you need help. But plan to do education work, too, because most unregistered people aren't automatically going to want to fill out applications or vote," said Joy.

Most people think that politicians don't care about them, and the complicated rules of party politics serve to exclude many people from participating in partisan politics. But non-partisan voter participation - encouraging people to register, questioning candidates from all parties on where they stand on issues you care about, and getting people to go to the polls, can make a difference. Both the outcome of local elections and the actions of candidates once they are elected can be shaped by new voters holding candidates accountable for their positions and actions on issues.

Joy recommends the following steps for a local group that wants to begin a non-partisan voter registration drive:

1. Do some advertising first.

Put up posters or send flyers in your community letting people know how voting is connected with things they care about in their own lives - affordable housing, schools, jobs, road construction, etc. Announce your voter registration drive.

2. Get registration forms and other materials from the local Registrar of Voters.

Application forms need to be filled out completely and accurately, or the Registrar can't enter the registration. So be prepared to help anyone who has trouble completing the form, and check applications to see they are complete before turning them in to the Registrar. Local Registrars can also provide you with brochures with information on registration and voting procedures, or you can obtain them directly from the State Board of Elections in Richmond (1-800-552-9745). People can register to vote at any time during the year, but in order to vote in an upcoming election, you must register at least 29 days before the election. Voters must be U.S. citizens, residents of Virginia, and at least 18 years old; 17-year-olds can register if they will be 18 by the next general election.

People who have been convicted of felonies must have their voting rights restored by the Governor before they can register. Contact the Secretary of the Commonwealth, P.O. Box 2454, Richmond, VA 23201-2454 to apply. People who have been judged mentally incompetent by a circuit court must apply to the court for reinstatement of competency before being able to register.

3. Hold a training session for your members who will commit to registering voters.

Walk people through the steps of registering people (the League of Women Voters is usually willing to help with this if you need it.)

Ask members to practice talking about how voting connects with what is going on in the community - talk about the local political arena and how it affects both personal and community life. Members will have to talk to unregistered people and help them see that registering and voting can make a difference, so practice (role-play) having conversations with people who don't see what difference it makes. Try to connect the need to vote to a long-term view of history. Joy said, "Martin Luther King encouraged people to vote. What difference did it make then? What kinds of changes came about during the Civil Rights Movement? What kinds of things do we need to change now? How can exercising our right to vote have an impact on jobs, housing, education?"

4. Use a two-pronged approach to reach unregistered voters.

a. Go door-to-door in pairs contacting unregistered voters. Leave an application and come back later to pick it up; check to make sure the application is complete.

b. Hold an event - a social event like a picnic or pizza party - where people can register and talk to each other at the same time. It's also possible to set up a voter registration table at community events - after church services on Sunday, high school sporting events, etc. Contact the church or organization sponsoring the event to make arrangements.

5. Evaluate what you learned in doing the voter registration drive and consider future efforts.

Ask members to reflect on what they learned from their efforts to register voters. What worked best and what needs to be improved? How else can the group encourage people to participate in electing public officials? Some groups hold non-partisan candidate forums during election season to ask candidates where they stand on issues of concern to their members. Others hold accountability sessions with elected officials at various times during the year to ask them to account for how they've acted on community concerns. Some groups call all the people they registered just before the next election to remind them to go to the polls and vote for the candidates of their choice.

Non-profit tax-exempt groups must be non-partisan

Non-profit organizations exempt from taxes under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code cannot endorse or contribute to campaigns for candidates for office, and cannot work for specific candidates or groups of candidates. A good manual for organizations exempt under Sections 501(c) (3) or 501(c)(4) of

the tax code is: *Playing by the Rules: Handbook on Voter Participation and Education Work for 501(c)(3) Organizations*. It's available from the Independent Sector, 1828 L Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, (888) 860-8118.

As individuals, people can of course support any candidate they choose. The point of non-partisan voter participation is not to endorse specific candidates, but to hold all candidates and elected officials accountable to what Joy calls "the real needs in real people's lives."

Choosing Tactics

Tactics are specific actions that a community group takes to move toward its goals on an issue.

If the group has done a good job of developing a strategy, choosing tactics and carrying them out can be a fun and creative process. Tactics should build and reinforce a sound general strategy.

In choosing tactics, keep your goal in mind. For example, if you want decision-makers to change a law or policy, you will eventually need to meet and talk with them.

The tactics you choose should make it more likely, rather than less likely, that you'll be able to meet and discuss your issue with them from a position of strength and mutual respect.

If the simple, straightforward tactic of requesting a meeting works, the members of your group need to think through how to conduct that meeting so that your group can make its key points, hear the decision-maker's point of view, and come out with a very clear agreement about what the decision-maker will do and what the group will do as a result of the meeting.

Often, community groups waste meeting time by doing all of the talking. They prepare so much background information to present that they don't allow enough time for real interaction and negotiation with the decision-maker. The decision-maker sits and nods his or her head as the group members go on and on, then notices that time is up and ends the meeting without making a clear agreement to do something or scheduling a future time to talk.

At other times, decision-makers are the ones who take up all of the time in a meeting. They talk at length and distract the group from its point by asking unrelated questions.

A group needs to plan for meetings with decision-makers so that actual time for discussion and negotiation — real give-and-take — leads the group closer to its goal.

Agreeing as a group that the last five minutes of the meeting will be devoted to summarizing what was discussed and getting clear agreement on decisions made is critical to making sure that the meeting is actually a step forward in the process of working toward your goal. Don't wait until the meeting is over and you're out in the hall to realize that you didn't get a clear agreement.

It is also a good idea for the group to plan to end the meeting early. For example, if the meeting is scheduled for 30 minutes, try to conclude your business within 20 minutes. Have a schedule for what you will cover in the meeting and who will speak.

Sometimes, the simple tactic of asking a decision-maker to meet and negotiate with your group just doesn't work. If your group is small and new, the decision-maker may feel that he or she doesn't have to meet with you.

Again, if the group did its strategy work well, building up the credibility and name-recognition of the group is part of your plan. Asking your supporters and allies who know the decision-maker to set up the meeting for you is one option.

Another is to make a public statement that you want a meeting with the decision-maker. For example, you can inform a reporter that you have been trying to meet with the decision-maker but have been unable to. Or you can have group members and supporters telephone, send letters, and e-mail the decision-maker, asking him or her to meet with the group.

The group needs to think together carefully about how to pressure a decision-maker to agree to a meeting.

Make sure you actually have the support and resources to do what you want to do. If you have the ability to generate 50 phone calls, or 100 phone calls, that should make an impression on the decision-maker. But if you only generate five phone calls, you won't make much of an impression, other than to reinforce the decision-maker's view that you don't have much support.

The word "tactics" often conjures up visions of marches, rallies and picket lines. These events are tactics that community groups often use. It is important to use them for a specific purpose.

In order to achieve your goal on an issue, you're going to have to get one or more people with the power to change what you want to agree with you. Public events like rallies and marches can make your issue more visible to the general public and build public support. Increased public support can influence decision-makers to take the action you want them to take. But small or sloppy marches and rallies can work against you.

If you plan one, make sure you have a solid turnout plan so that people actually show up and participate. Be sure that you get any necessary permits, and put in extra effort to attract media coverage. Big public events can be great fun. In fact, one rule is to make them as much fun as possible. Music, costumes, and street theatre all attract attention and can raise the spirits of the group.

One of the most effective tactics used by community groups are large public meetings with decision-makers. Group members present the changes they want the decision-maker to make and the decision-maker responds to the group's requests while a large number of members and supporters looks on.

The advantage of these types of meetings is that they are conducted in public, and the decision-maker must give a response to the group's requests in public.

The disadvantage is that complex proposals are difficult to negotiate in large public meetings.

Decision-makers may feel trapped by the idea of responding while dozens or even hundreds of people watch, and refuse to attend. So tactics for getting the decision-maker to show up are often needed, and the group needs a considerable amount of power and support in the community in order to motivate the decision-maker to show up.

The group should also expect that smaller follow-up meetings will be needed to hammer out the details of a decision-maker's response at a large public meeting.

Another kind of tactic focuses on withholding something the decision-maker wants or needs in order to get the decision-maker to agree to changes. A strike is probably the most well-known of these tactics.

Workers refuse to work unless the employer agrees to the changes the workers want — better working conditions, pay, benefits.

Renters sometimes put their rent payments into an escrow account and withhold it from the landlord until the landlord makes needed repairs.

Parents may keep their children out of school until school officials agree to changes the parents want.

These are all forms of strikes, and are probably the most difficult of all tactics to use effectively. It is difficult to get people to stay together in a strike for long periods of time, and it is also possible for decision-makers to break or weaken a strike.

For example, employers can hire replacement workers; landlords can evict tenants; school officials can report parents who don't send their school-aged children to school to law enforcement authorities.

The risks involved in using these tactics are usually great, and require a well-seasoned and committed group, as well as outside supporters, to be carried out for any length of time.

As your group thinks about the tactics it will use to bring about the changes you want, enjoy yourselves and think creatively.

Always choose tactics that the group as a whole will agree to participate in, and that are fun whenever possible.

Try to think of tactics that will move decision-makers to meet and negotiate with you in a spirit of mutual respect, and ask the allies and supporters of your group to use their influence to get decision-makers to do business with your group in good faith.

Make use of existing resources, like Virginia Organizing Project's action-alert system, to put state-wide pressure on decision-makers in your community, and to assist other community groups around the state in their efforts.