

how to effectively organize a candidate forum

Hosting a candidate forum is a key component of any non-profit electoral strategy. Candidate forums are designed to meet several goals. First, candidate forums provide voters with an opportunity to hear candidates discuss important children's issues and to illustrate the difference between the candidates. Candidate forums also provide advocates with the opportunity to make candidates aware of and educate them about children's issues. Finally, candidate forums allow child advocates to show candidates there is a public constituency in their district who is willing to speak out and take action on behalf of children and youth.

Before you get started there are a couple of key points and helpful tips you may want to remember if your organization wants to host a candidate forum:

Getting Started—Key Points to Remember

#1

All candidates must be treated fairly and impartially. Not only is it *necessary* for all non-profits, but it also encourages broader participation by the media, the public, and the candidates themselves. Candidates will avoid events where they think they could be ganged up on, especially if the media is expected to be there.

- ✓ Invite all candidates to attend.
- ✓ Make an equal attempt to get them to attend.
- ✓ Each candidate should be given equal time to present his or her view on the issues being discussed.
- ✓ The moderator must stay neutral and does not imply approval or disapproval of candidates.
- ✓ Make sure the forum covers a broad range of issues.

#2

Partner with a well known and well respected non-profit. The candidates are more likely to attend a forum if a non-profit has had a successful forum in the past.

#3

Generate a large audience. To increase your chances of getting a candidate to attend your event, make sure you focus on generating large turnout. Candidates can't attend every event they are invited to, so they want to make sure that when they do choose to attend an event there will be a large crowd. Make sure you tell the candidates how many people you expect to attend.

Candidate Forum To-Do List

#1

Choose a Format

- **Equal Time Format:** An impartial moderator asks questions and candidates are given equal amounts of time to respond to the questions. Organizers should decide beforehand how much time each candidate will get to respond to the questions. In an equal time format, organizers may decide upon a set of questions to ask of each candidate, or may just open the forum up to questions from the audience. In addition, if you decide to use an equal time format, you may ask the same questions or different questions of the candidates.
- **Prepared Forum:** Candidates receive questions prior to debate and elicit specific responses.
- **Follow-up Q&A:** The moderator and panelists ask questions of the candidates. Follow-up questions are permitted.
- **Discourse Debate:** Moderator asks questions, candidates discuss issues. A strong, nonpartisan moderator is a must for this type of forum.

No matter what format you choose, candidates should be given approximately 5-10 minutes to make opening remarks. The audience should always be given time to ask questions of the candidates. In order to eliminate attacks on candidates, questions should be screened beforehand. Volunteers can make note cards available for the audience to write on and then select and prioritize the questions.

Choose a Forum Facilitator

#2

Your committee should select a forum coordinator who will do the following:

- √ Develop a forum timeline
- √ Facilitate meetings
- √ Serve as a liaison to all involved organizations
- √ Serve as the designated point person for participating candidates
- √ Maintain adherence to deadlines
- √ Ensure attention to legal guidelines
- √ Document all activities for evaluation and future forums

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#3

Choose a Site

Choose a site that encompasses the following characteristics:

- ✓ Convenient access for persons with disabilities
- ✓ Public transportation and accessible parking
- ✓ Adequate electrical capacity, seating and sound system
- ✓ Comfortable areas for press, cameras and audience

Select a Moderator

#4

- ✓ Select someone who can be non-partisan
- ✓ Find someone who is well-respected in your community, i.e. a journalist
- ✓ Prepare this person in advance

Invite Candidates

#5

- ✓ Send out personal letters inviting candidates as soon as the date and location are determined.
- ✓ Emphasize this is required to be non-partisan because of legal requirements
- ✓ Emphasize the impact nonprofit organizations have in the district
- ✓ Follow-up with candidates each month using different methods of contact, i.e. phone, email, face-to-face.
- ✓ Develop materials on your issues to brief the candidate before the event. Remember this may be the first time the candidate has been made aware of children's issues in your community.
- ✓ If you are going to ask specific questions, give them to the candidates beforehand.

#6

Get Media

- ✓ Send out a media advisory about 3 days prior to the forum. The media advisory should have the date, location, format, moderator, context, sponsoring organizations and a list of candidates.
- ✓ Send out a press release to the same media outlets the day of the event. Follow-up the press release with personal phone calls.

Candidate Forum To-Do Checklist

- Form a committee with members of the local nonprofit community
- Select a forum coordinator
- Set date, time, and place for event
- Decide on forum format
- Develop a forum budget
- Send invitations to forum
- Recruit volunteers for event including, moderator, timekeeper and other personnel if needed
- Design a media plan
- Design a community outreach plan
- Send thank-you letters

Day of Event Check—List

- Complete Set-Up at Forum
- Have appropriate sign-in materials
- Name badges, table tents – if applicable
- Have volunteers to greet attendees
- Have information table for partners to display materials
- Have a head table with the appropriate audio equipment
- Welcome
- Forum Rules
- Have Q&A after the forum

Tips for Developing Questions

However you use the questions, it is extremely important to get the candidate's response recorded. You should designate 1 or 2 individuals whose specific job will be to listen and write down what the candidate says. This allows you to follow up with him/her if the candidate is elected or re-elected to hold them to their word. You can also issue news releases, op/ed pieces or letters to the editor when votes arise that are related to candidate's promises during the election.

Crafting the questions:

Here are some things to consider as you develop questions for the candidates. To provide a context for your questions, lead with a relevant fact about the issue, and then ask your question. For example:

"Eight percent of children in Missouri are without health insurance. What is your plan to ensure that children receive the health care services they need?"

Make sure your questions are to the point and focused. Consider a yes/no question followed by an open-ended question. This will improve the chance of receiving a substantive answer from the candidate, and help avoid generic platitudes about kids. For example:

"Many parents who work full time do not earn enough money to be able to pay for quality child care. This is true of single parents and married couples. Do you support increasing the eligibility level for subsidized child care? What is the state's responsibility in supporting low income working families?"

Sample Questions

- 1.** According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Missouri will face a budget shortfall in FY 2010. Because of past budget crises, programs that support vulnerable children and low-income families have been susceptible to budget cuts. What is your perception of the looming budget crisis? Should advocates brace themselves for another round of cuts to programs and services that serve children? Would you advocate for any alternative strategies that put kids and families first? If so, how would you address a budget shortfall?
- 2.** In your opinion, what are the most pressing issues facing children in Missouri? What would you do to address these issues?
- 3.** Research shows that 90% of a child's brain develops before the age of 5. Quality early care and education experiences improve school readiness, increase K-12 educational outcomes, and better prepare our next generation for the challenges of a 21st century global economy. Yet Missouri's investments in quality early childhood programs trail behind most of our neighboring states. What can Missouri do to close the educational achievement gap that begins even before children enter the kindergarten classroom? How does early childhood education fit into your broader priorities for education in the state?
- 4.** In spite of Missouri's generous eligibility for the State Children's Health Insurance Program, over 127,000 children remain uninsured in Missouri. How should Missouri address the problem of children and families who lack access to health care?
- 5.** In Missouri, foster parents open their hearts, their homes and their pocketbooks to children placed in their care by the state. The US Department of Agriculture publishes a yearly report that estimates the cost of raising a child in 5 different regions. The USDA monthly cost to support a Missouri child, 9-11 years of age, is \$652. Foster parents in Missouri receive a monthly maintenance payment of \$377 for a child this age. If elected, would you support raising the reimbursement to foster families to the USDA estimate? What else would you do to support foster parents?

Sample Letter to the Candidate

Preferably on letterhead
Your Organization's name
Address

Date

Candidate _____
Address

Dear (full name of candidate):

(Organization name) is interested in your views on issues relating to children and families. As an organization based in district (#), (organization name) would like to invite you to a candidate forum on (date) at (location). Our organization serves the constituents in (such and such a way) and would like to hear the positions of the candidates for office in District (#).

We would be happy to send you the list of questions we plan to ask prior to the forum. Please call (contact name) at (phone number) by (date) to RSVP or with questions.

Thank you for running for public office and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

(contact person)

(If more than one organization is sponsoring be sure to list them all. It is hard to refuse a number of organizations together)

Sample Program

Date:

Time Expected to Run:

Candidate Names and parties

7:00 – 7:10 (Sponsoring Organization spokesperson)

Welcome and setting the stage

Introduction of candidates and moderator

7:10 - 7:25 (moderator)

Rules and Format

7:15 – 7:25 (candidates)

Candidates' opening remarks

7:25 – 8:00 (moderator and candidates)

Questions prepared by sponsoring organizations

8:00 – 8:25 (moderator and candidates)

Questions from the audience (via cards turned in to designated areas)

8:25 – 8:30 (candidates)

Closing remarks

8:30 – 9:00 (everyone)

refreshments and a chance to chat with the candidates

This forum was sponsored by:

Sample Press Release

Local News Release for Candidate Forums

Send on your organization's letterhead, with contact information, including name, phone number and e-mail (if available)

Candidates Will Meet at (Location Name) to Discuss Issues

Candidates for the (Name of District) Missouri (House/Senate) race will meet in a voter information forum to discuss issues and answer questions.

Participants will include (candidates' names and party affiliation in alphabetical order), who will oppose each other in November's general election.

The candidates will discuss several issues relating to children and youth, including the state's budget crisis, health care, education, early child care and youth development. In addition to questions from a moderator, the candidates also will be asked to respond to written questions from the audience.

The forum will be held at (Time and Date) at (Location and Address) in (City). (Moderator Name and Job Title) will serve as moderator.

The forum will be sponsored by (Name of your organization first, followed by other participants in alphabetical order). These are non-partisan groups working within the area to hold a series of candidate and voter education opportunities during this election cycle.

The forum is free and open to the public.

#

Sample Media Advisory

MEDIA ADVISORY

Title of Media Advisory: (Name of County or District) Candidates to Discuss Children and Youth Issues

(Name of Sponsoring Organization First, then co-sponsors in alphabetical order) are sponsoring a forum in the *(District)* to find out where the candidates stand on critical issues facing children and youth.

What: Candidate Forum

When: Day, Date, Time

Where: Name of Location
City, State, Zip

Who: List the candidates attending

For more information call: list local contact, organization, telephone number and email address