

Outreach to Candidates Running for Election in Your Community



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I. Why Local Elections are Important

- Local government decisions directly affect justice-involved youth in many ways. They influence:
 - The quality and culture of local schools, including policing and school discipline responses;
 - Policies and procedures for how police, schools, and courts respond to youth in conflict with the law;
 - Responses to public safety, including prevention, public health, and victims services;
 - Budgetary decisions that determine where critical resources are invested, including alternatives to incarceration;
 - Judicial and law enforcement training requirements; and
 - Data collection and transparency to ensure that best practices and evidence-based policies are implemented and that laws are implemented fairly.
- In addition to mayors, school boards, and city and county governments, there are many jurisdictions in which officials like prosecutors, sheriffs, and judges are also elected.
 - These officials make the day-to-day decisions such as which cases to pursue, what charges to bring against youth, which youth are charged as adults, and who gets a second chance with diversion instead of detention.
 - These officials also can determine how resources are expended, and whether resources are dedicated to serving children and families in communities or in the deep end of secure detention/incarceration.
 - Finally, there are many opportunities for prosecutors, sheriffs, and judges to mediate the disproportionate harm that falls on children and communities of color who come in contact with the law.



II. Why Outreach to Local Election Candidates is Important

- You learn where the candidate stands on key youth justice issues.
- The candidates get to know about your priorities and concerns as a constituent.
- It begins the establishment of a relationship that can be useful if or when those candidates are elected.





III. Ways to Reach Out to Local Election Candidates in Your Community

- Send out a survey to all candidates (across party lines) to ask them their position on important issues (*see below for resources on lobbying and restrictions for 501(c)(3) organizations).
- Submit a question at a candidate forum or town hall.
- Organize a candidate forum on your issue (again, invite all candidates running).

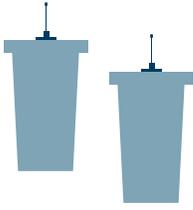


IV. Surveying Local Election Candidates in Your Community

(for more information, see [Youth First's Electoral Toolkit](#))

- Ask around to see if any of your allies are already planning to send a candidate survey.
- Mail surveys in the summer soon after the primaries are over so that you can get answers back by September.
- Ask open-ended questions in the survey.
- Publicize the results, keeping in mind the legal restrictions on appearing to support or oppose any particular candidate (*see below).





V. Hosting a Candidate Forum

(for much more information, see this guide from [Advocacy and Communications Solutions, LLC](#))

Candidate forums at the local level are helpful to get issues surfaced that are important to you and your community. Those featuring youth and first-time voters often garner positive responses from candidates running for local office. Locally-operated chapters of organizations like the League of Women Voters, as well as youth civic participation organizations, are great to partner with for these events. Consider hosting a candidate forum at your local detention center or jail. Here are some tips to help you get started:

Find Partners, Candidates, and other Participants

- Who do you want to partner with on this forum and what will they do?
 - Partnering with like-minded organizations will lead to reaching a larger audience (e.g., groups like the League of Women Voters have significant experience with candidate forums).
 - It is also critical to hold the event in a place where the community has access, and where those most impacted by the justice system can get to (e.g. near public transportation, at a school, church, etc.).
- Who do you need to participate in the forum?
 - Moderator
 - Timekeeper
 - Audience
 - Candidates; be sure to invite ALL candidates for a particular office (*see below)

Determine Potential Dates and Locations

- You should begin planning at least 12 weeks before the event is to take place.
- Before finalizing your date, check with the campaign staff to make sure that your candidates do not have any conflicting events.

Finalize Date, Time, and Location



Invite Participants

- Send a formal invitation to the moderator and all of the participants.
- Don't forget to ask for an RSVP.

Recruit Volunteers

- You need enough to set up, run, and break down the event.
- Don't forget that you can go outside of your organization for volunteers.

Promote the Forum

- Promote your event via social media, newsletters, online, and to the media.
- Focus on outlets that are relevant to your targeted audience.

Determine Set Up, Volunteer Tasks, and Day-Of Logistics

- Make sure you have all of the logistics for the day:
 - Confirm attendance;
 - Write talking points for the moderator;
 - Take care of any technology needs;
 - Have water for the participants; and
 - Set up with a seating area for participants and the audience.

Host a Successful Forum!

Don't Forget to Follow up

- Send all of the participants a thank you note.
- Write an op-ed to the newspaper, and keep the conversation going among stakeholders and the community by posting on social media.





VI. Sample Questions

Whether sending out a candidate survey, or attending or organizing a candidate forum, here are some sample questions about youth justice to ask candidates for local elective offices:

Note: Brackets are added that focus on children charged and sentenced as adults. For questions about children retained under the youth justice system, the questions can be read without brackets.

- What needs to change about how we treat youth in trouble with the law? How would you go about making that change?
- Where is it most important to invest public resources: incarceration and detention facilities, or community-based alternatives to incarceration?
- What can be done to address the extreme racial and ethnic disparities in the treatment of youth in the [adult criminal] justice system?
- What changes do you support that would reduce the number of children transferred to the adult criminal justice system? (e.g. raising the age of criminal responsibility; removal from adult jails; transfer reform; returning decision making authority to judges; ending extreme sentences).
- What actions will you take as [LOCAL OFFICIAL (e.g. district attorney, county commissioner, mayor, etc.)] to reduce the number of children in the juvenile justice system or transferred to the adult criminal justice system?
- Are you concerned about the harmful effects to public safety and children when charging, incarcerating, and sentencing youth [as adults]? If so, what will you do to change that?
- Do you believe that it is better for public safety and reduced recidivism rates to punish children [as adults] or provide them with rehabilitation in the juvenile justice system?
- What steps will you take to ensure that children are not subjected to trauma and abuse by being incarcerated [with adult prisoners]?
- Do you believe children should ever be transferred to the adult criminal justice system? If so, who should make the decision to transfer a child to the adult criminal justice system: a judge, a prosecutor, or the legislature?
- Studies show that youth in adult jails and prisons are more likely than their peers in the juvenile system to suffer abuse, experience solitary confinement, be deprived of their education, and commit suicide; if you were elected, would you support a ban on placing youth in adult facilities?





VII. *Laws About Nonprofits and Electoral Politics

When organizations are designated 501(c)(3) under the IRS code they are prohibited from directly or indirectly supporting any campaign for an elected office at the local, state, or federal level.

Nonprofits are allowed to engage in nonpartisan electoral activities such as:

- Registering voters; educating candidates about issues; sponsoring candidate debates and forums; distributing nonpartisan questionnaires; and providing election information such as voting locations, hours, and the types of identification they will need

Nonprofits cannot:

- Rate candidates on their support for the nonprofit's issues; publicize which candidates share the nonprofit's views; ask a candidate to pledge support for a cause; compare and contrast candidates' responses to the nonprofit's views; and plan activities with a single candidate, campaign, or political party

When designated 501(c)(4), nonprofits are able to engage in both nonpartisan and partisan activities, such as endorsing candidates, highlighting differences between candidates with relation to an issue you advocate for, and asking candidates to sign a pledge on a particular issue.

Disclaimer: The information contained in this document and related material on electoral advocacy is not intended to provide specific legal advice on election law. Nothing in this publication should be considered a substitute for expert legal, tax, or other professional advice as it relates to an individual's or organization's specific circumstances, and may not be relied upon for the purposes of avoiding any penalties that may be imposed under the Internal Revenue Code.



