



Town Hall Meeting Planning Guide

INTRODUCTION

Town Hall Meetings

Town hall meetings, or child health forums, can be effective advocacy tools. Town hall meetings create an excellent opportunity to gather candidates, community members and involved organizations for the exchange of ideas and information on issues of importance to the public; in this case – child health.

In recent campaign cycles, AAP chapters have held successful town hall meetings or child health forums with state and federal candidates. One way to attract candidates to your forum is to invite a wide range of audience members including chapter members, health and medical professionals, other children’s health advocates, parents, the media, and other interested individuals.

This guide includes instructions for how to go about planning your town hall meeting, as well as some possible questions for candidates that you may want to use at your candidate forum. Since “all politics is local,” you should include questions specific to your local political environment as well.

501(c)(3) chapters must make sure that they do not appear to favor one candidate for a public office over another. If they do, they will endanger their tax-exempt status.

Therefore, 501(c)(3) chapters must invite candidates from all major parties in order to avoid this appearance.

501(c)(6) chapters may participate in partisan political campaign activities. However, the Internal Revenue Code disallows a business expense deduction for that portion of dues attributable to “participation in or intervention in, any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.” Although incorporated trade or professional associations are generally prohibited by the Federal Elections Campaign Act under the sanction of a criminal offense from directly or indirectly making political campaign contributions or expenditures to any federal political candidate, they may establish a political action committee (or PAC) through which to solicit campaign contributions from their members.

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GETTING STARTED

Create a Work Group

The working group will plan and organize your town hall meeting. It should be comprised of existing coalitions, affiliate national and state organizations, local hospital officials (if available), and other willing volunteers with ties to the community. Consider reaching out to and including families with uninsured children or those covered by SCHIP or Medicaid, health care consumer advocates, business leaders, teachers or other school officials, youth service organizations, labor organizations, religious leaders, or health insurance industry representatives.

The Work Group:

- Identifies and secures a venue for the event, and determines where and when it will take place.
- Helps engage leaders from business, labor, health care and religious communities and identify media spokespersons.
- Encourages their members and coalition partners to attend and participate in the event.
- Publicizes the town hall event through communication channels as well as in the community (e-mail listservs / flyers / announcements / public radio public service announcements / workplace postings / etc.).
- Engages public relations staff to help engage local media in the community forum. If you don't have a PR staff, contact the AAP or the Press Room at www.aap.org/moc for help.
- Determines resource allocation or secures in-kind and other donations. If resources are an issue, partner with enough groups to minimize the financial responsibility.

Note: Do not be afraid to delegate responsibilities and possibly create subcommittees.

Selecting a Time and Date

It's important to select a time and date for your town hall meeting that will avoid scheduling conflicts and achieve your goals. If possible, give yourself a month to plan your town hall meeting to ensure you have ample time to properly plan and prepare for the event.

To Determine Time/Date:

- **TIME:** When are participants most likely to attend the event? Before work begins, at lunch time, after work? Should you avoid rush hour traffic times? Are participants more likely to attend on a Saturday or Sunday than a weekday? Are there certain days of the week that you need to avoid because they are traditionally reserved for certain local civic, organizational or faith meetings? If you are inviting national or state candidates, when will they, or their surrogates, be in your area?
- **LOCATION:** Is the location easily accessible via public transportation? Is there parking nearby? Is it in an area that most participants will be familiar with? Consider working with the local children's hospital in your community.
- **MEDIA:** Is the location convenient to local media? Will the date and time interfere with newspaper or television news deadlines? Will the television news be able to provide live news coverage for a broadcast, if available? Go to www.newslink.org to find helpful media information.

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Choose a Focus

Your town hall meeting might include a local, state and/or national focus depending on the issues you intend to discuss relevant to your community and the candidates you intend to reach out to. The focus of your questions for your candidates can change depending on whether they are running for federal, state or local office, and what child health policy solutions they can offer.

- Federal Focus – Discuss health care policies involving federal legislation, for example Medicaid and SCHIP. These discussions can include proposed changes to SCHIP and Medicaid that will have implications for how many children and adolescents are covered and the health care they receive.
- State – Each state has its own policies and regulations that influence children’s well-being, how children access health care coverage, how health care is delivered, and the pediatric profession. In some states, these policy and other state-level barriers need to be addressed. Your state may require a high-level children’s official, or a pediatrician at a high level in the state.
- Local – Cities and counties are often developing strategies to handle complex health care problems at the local level, such as access to health care and funding institutions to train future pediatricians. These local forums can focus on enhancing these activities, and whether state and federal policies are helping or hindering their efforts to promote these efforts.

Determine Outcomes

What do you and your partner organizations wish to get out of the town hall meeting?

- Gain insight into candidates’ policies and positions on issues of importance to children’s health and pediatricians, and inform the candidates about your organizations’ positions on these issues.
- Media coverage to highlight to the public that these issues are being discussed.
- Convening candidates, policy leaders and organizations to begin to find common ground towards solutions.
- Ensuring that candidates put—and keep—children’s health in their legislative agenda.

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THE AGENDA

Develop the Agenda

The agenda will set the stage for the event. There are five main components:

1. Introduction (5-10 minutes)
2. Organization Presentations (10 minutes) – Provide a brief introduction to the organizations hosting the event, and their stake in the upcoming elections. Present examples of how children and pediatricians are impacted by federal/state/local policies.
3. Candidate Welcome (10 minutes) – Give the candidates an opportunity to provide an opening statement.
4. Questions and Answers / Policy Discussion (30 minutes) – Present a list of questions for candidates and provide an opportunity for them to respond. Try to focus the discussion on one or two key policies, i.e. health care coverage, immunizations, disaster preparedness, etc. Use the following sample questionnaire as a guide in forming questions and discussion for the moderator and candidates.

Sample Questionnaire:

- What do you identify as the number one challenge facing children today and how do you propose to address it?
 - How do you propose to provide access to health insurance and coverage of each and every child?
 - Insurance coverage will not result in access to quality pediatric care unless significant numbers of pediatricians are willing to participate in the programs. Currently, payment for services provided under Medicaid and SCHIP by pediatricians often do not cover the costs of providing that service. How would you address this?
 - How would you work with national, state and local public health systems to guarantee we are prepared to treat the unique needs of children after a terrorist event or natural disaster?
 - How would you address emerging public health issues like rising rates of childhood obesity?
 - How would you improve children and adolescents' access to mental health services and oral health services?
 - What would be your top three public health priorities to improve the health and safety of children?
 - How would you encourage access to and adequate financing of immunizations for all children and adolescents?
 - What specific plans do you have to reduce child poverty?
 - How do you propose to address and improve the physical, mental and social health care needs of foster care children?
 - What would you do to strengthen the state's public health infrastructure?
5. Closing & Questions (15 minutes) – The opportunity for candidates to give closing statements and present any health care policy proposals not previously discussed. It is also the time for the moderator to thank the candidates for attending and to give the audience information on how they can get engaged in child health advocacy. If you choose to do so, this is also the appropriate time for candidates to take and remaining questions from the audience and members of the community. Media questions should be held for after the event has ended.

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Select a Moderator

The moderator's job is to remain neutral and keep the discussion fair, focused and on-time. This requires skill and preparation. The moderator must also understand the desired outcomes for the town hall meeting, the agenda, and his or her pivotal role in making the meeting the success.

Moderator Attributes:

- A respected and trusted civic or other leader in the community, as this individual will be “in charge” of the meeting.
- A recognizable individual whose participation will help attract media attention.
- An individual who does not hold strong, known views on the issue of health coverage, in order to create the perception of impartiality among participants.

Moderator options could include the dean of a local journalism school or a reporter from the local public television or radio station. Their participation may also help garner media coverage as a neutral moderator.

Moderator Preparation:

- Talk with meeting organizers and candidates or their staff prior to the meeting.
- Read all background materials provided.
- Speak with the media about why the meeting is important.
- Be willing to take a strong, impartial leadership role.
- Look at a draft agenda. A seasoned moderator should have insights into how to structure the agenda to ensure the meeting runs smoothly.

Moderator Do's and Don'ts:

- **Do** familiarize yourself with the speakers and prepare or use prepared questions.
- **Do** work with the meeting organizers to make sure speakers understand the “ground rules” in advance [e.g. time limits, describe solutions, treat other speakers and participants with courtesy and respect even when they disagree].
- **Do** review facts on the issue and key talking points in preparation for the meeting.
- **Do** ensure that the discussion focuses on both the pros and cons of each proposal, allow all viewpoints to be heard, and discourage interrupting.
- **Do** remain objective and impartial by not taking a position supporting one particular candidate or solution to a problem.
- **Do** avoid jargon and technical language and help explain complicated concepts in simple terms.
- **Do** be polite and attentive to both the candidates and the audience and encourage others to be courteous.
- **Do** control the discussion.
- **Do** end the meeting on time.
- **Do not** take a position supporting one candidate or one candidate's position over another.
- **Do not** let the discussion escalate into yelling or an argument.
- **Do not** let one candidate, organization or audience member dominate the discussion.

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PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION

Invite the Audience

The number and type of audience participants at your town hall meeting is a critical factor in its success. Getting the right people, and the right number of people, is sometimes a difficult challenge.

Who to Invite:

- Representatives of the organizations hosting the event, including AAP chapter members, and other pediatricians and residents from local institutions who may want to learn more about advocacy and the issues being discussed.
- Families and children.
- Formal and informal community opinion leaders.
- Representatives from different sectors, such as business and labor, insurers, consumer advocates, educators and faith leaders.
- Community representatives.
- Concerned citizens.
- Media.

Where to Publicize:

- Ask organizations sponsoring the town hall meeting to send a designated number of participants to the event.
- Ask community organizations, hospitals, businesses, faith communities, and other interested organizations to promote the event through their newsletters, meetings and e-mail listservs.
- Post or distribute flyers at well-traveled locations such as bus and train stops, stores, community health clinics, doctors' offices, hospitals, houses of worship and public libraries and schools.
- Publish notices through local television and radio news channels and newspapers.

Follow-Up

It is important to have an audience for your town hall meeting. Plan for an audience about one-third larger than the size of the meeting room to ensure you have a full house.

Asking individuals to RSVP will help gauge interest but will not ensure they will show up. Use an attendance working group to contact individuals and organizations days before the town hall meeting to call them and remind them to come. Consider back-up plans if you think your attendance might be low.

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PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION

Invite the Media

It is important to engage the media in your efforts to highlight the importance of the local, state and federal elections on children's health care through your town hall meeting.

Develop a Press List:

- Include local newspaper, television, radio reporters and bloggers who cover metro news, government (local, state and federal), health care, business and politics. Go to www.newslink.org for local media contact information.
- Invite columnists from your local newspapers.
- Contact the press secretaries of any candidates who will be participating in the town hall meeting, as well as the public relations staff of the organizations involved in planning the meeting for help refining the press list and pitching the event to the media.

Get on the Calendar:

- Promote the town hall meeting by sending the details to television, radio and newspaper community calendars. Include a short description of the event, the location, date and time, and contact information.
- One week prior to the event, fax or e-mail reporters on your press list a media advisory that describes who is participating, where and when it is and contact information (See *sample below*).
- Get the details of the town hall meeting on the appropriate Associated Press (AP) daybook. AP distributes the daybook through its wire service to journalists in a state or community. Newsroom managers, assignment editors and reporters from media outlets check the daybook for important events. A state-by-state listing of AP bureaus can be found at <http://www.ap.org/pages/contact/contact.html>. Fax or e-mail a copy of the media advisory to the appropriate bureau.

Sample Advisory:

MEDIA ALERT

(Candidate names) TO DISCUSS CHILD HEALTH POLICY AT TOWN HALL MEETING

What: The (State) Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and (other organizations) are hosting a town hall meeting and discussion with (Candidate names) on critical health issues facing children's health in our state. The candidates will answer questions about their positions on child health policy posed by the moderator, as well as questions from concerned community members in the audience.

Who: Confirmed Candidate Name (or surrogate)
Confirmed Candidate Name (or surrogate)
Moderator

When: Date and Time

Where: Address

Contact: To attend or arrange pre- or post-event interviews, contact (Name, phone, e-mail).

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PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION

Invite The Media (cont.)

Pitch the Event:

- Develop a news hook. For example, candidates for local, state or federal office (or their surrogates), are discussing an issue of importance to the community – children’s health care – with a variety of community stakeholders.
- Supplement your news hook with important information that can help reporters tell the story:
 1. Provide state data and/or research on the topic. Go to <http://www.aap.org/advocacy.html> for state-by-state fact sheets on Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP).
 2. Prepare organizational and community spokespeople who are willing to discuss the issues with reporters.
 3. Offer reporters the opportunity to talk to families and children or other individuals, personally affected by health policy decisions, who may be attending the town hall meeting. Telling their stories puts a human face on the issue.

Make a Press Kit:

- Agenda
- Brief biographies of speakers and the moderator
- A press release discussing the issues of importance to your organizations, and featuring quotes from the organizations who organized the town hall meeting. Also, distribute the press release to all the reporters on your press list at the time of the event.
- Fact sheets about child health in your state (The state-by-state Medicaid and SCHIP fact sheets mentioned above are good examples, and the Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Center -- <http://www.kidscount.org/datacenter/>).

Internet Outreach

Using the Internet to promote your event is a powerful way to reach even more advocates, community members and others.

Online Calendars:

- Action Without Borders – <http://www.idealists.org/if/idealists/en/Post/Simplified/default?item-type=Event>
- Independent Sector – <http://www.independentsector.org/members/events.asp>
- Yahoo Events – <http://upcoming.yahoo.com/>
- Google Calendar of Events – http://www.google.com/googlecalendar/event_publisher_guide.html
- Resources for Nonprofits – <http://www.neparentcenters.org/links.htm#event>
- PNNonline – <http://pnnonline.org/search.php?query=&topic=8>
- The Foundation Center – Philanthropy News Digest – <http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/>

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THE EVENT

Staff and Volunteers:

Assign jobs for staff and volunteers. They should be ready to arrive early to set-up, and prepared to stay late to break down and clean up following the meeting. They will be responsible for greeting people at the sign-in tables, ushering people to their seats, and assisting with any problems that may arise.

Materials:

- Chairs for the candidates, the moderator and the audience.
- Tables for a sign-in area for the audience.
- A specific table (and staff member) designated for press sign-in.
- Tables for organizational materials/hand-outs/forms to sign-up and get involved.
- Microphones for the candidates, the moderator and audience questions.
- Banners/materials from participating organizations to decorate the room.

Refreshments:

- Provide water on stage for the candidates and the moderator.
- If possible, it's helpful to provide light snacks and beverages for the participants and audience.

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EVENT FOLLOW-UP

It's important to utilize the momentum created from your town hall meeting, and follow-up with the candidates and audience who participated in your event.

Some follow-up tasks to consider include:

- Schedule a final meeting with the staff and working groups from the organizations who participated in the town hall meeting to celebrate.
- Discuss ways the group can continue to work together on child health policy issues.
- Send thank you letters to candidates who participated and the moderator. This is an opportunity to remind them about the importance of child health issues, tell them who and how many people attended, and what media coverage resulted from the event. Send them the media coverage that resulted.
- Follow up with interested individuals and organizations about any planned activities or continuing advocacy on child health issues.
- Issue a press release after the event highlighting what was said. Also consider posting video, pictures and/or a transcript of the event on your website.
- Follow up with reporters who came to the event and those who did not. Offer to send a press kit and the press release to reporters who did not make it. For reporters who attended the event, ask if they'd like to speak with any of the participants or if they need any additional information for their story.
- Following the election, contact the winning candidates to remain on their mailing lists and remain a resource to them and their staff on issues of importance to children and adolescence. Also, remind them of the commitments they made to child and adolescent health care.

FINALLY – Don't forget to tell the AAP Department of Federal Government Affairs and the Division of State Government Affairs about your town hall! Call 800-336-5475 to reach the Dept of Federal Affairs, or 800.433.9016 to reach the Division of State Government Affairs.

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TOWN HALL CHECKLIST

Use the checklist below before and after your event to help organize tasks.

Before the Event:

- Create work group
- Select time and date
- Identify local groups interested in issue and seek sponsorship
- Determine budget and resources
- Select venue
- Choose a topic/focus
- Decide type of forum: Candidate? Issue?
- Develop an agenda
- Do background research on the issue
- Determine who you want on the panel
- Invite the panelists
- Choose a moderator
- Brief the moderator
- Invite specific groups to attend as audience
- Develop media list
- Make a press kit
- Publicize the event to broaden the audience
- Invite media coverage
- Determine staff and volunteers for the event
- Assign staff and volunteer jobs
- Follow up with panelists to ensure attendance, brief on how the event will unfold
- Create hand-out materials
- Determine supply needs (chairs, microphones, index cards for audience questions, audio-visual equipment, recording equipment)
- Decorate the venue

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Use the checklist below before and after your event to help organize tasks.

After the event

- Send thank you notes to participants
- Debrief staff and volunteers
- Designate staff to follow up with candidates who need—or want to provide—more information
- Discuss ways to keep the spotlight on the issue
- Issue press release
- Post news, photos, audio, video of event on participating groups' web sites
- If it was an issues forum, provide resulting information to candidates, public
- If it was a candidates' forum, remind candidates after election of what they said/promises made