



## ACLU-NC Activist Toolkit: Hosting a Community Forum

Whether you are an experienced activist or someone taking action for the first time, the [ACLU of Northern California](http://www.aclunc.org) is here to help every step of the way. Visit our Web site at [www.aclunc.org](http://www.aclunc.org).

The [ACLU-NC Action Center](http://www.aclunc.org/action/activist_toolkit) contains many resources for activists, including this Activist Toolkit with detailed instructions on everything an activist needs. Download instructions and tips on these topics from [www.aclunc.org/action/activist\\_toolkit](http://www.aclunc.org/action/activist_toolkit):

- Running an effective meeting
- Tabling at community events
- Writing an advocacy letter
- Hosting an event for your friends and neighbors
- Publicizing an event
- Planning a campaign

This part of the toolkit will teach you how to host a community forum or house party, with helpful information on these important topics.

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Community forums—house parties, video screenings, presentations, and debates—are great ways to provide information, motivate activists, bring allies together, increase awareness of the ACLU in your community, and celebrate victories.

Here are tips and tools you will need to make your forum a success. You'll find guides for planning your event, outlines of how to mobilize and utilize volunteers, suggested formats, and plans for follow-up. We've even included templates you can adapt for guest registration, opening remarks, email invitations and public notices.

## **Planning Your Forum**

### **Set your goal**

What is the goal of your event? Is it to provide information, motivate people for a specific action, increase membership, raise awareness of the ACLU in your community, or to celebrate a victory?

State your goal clearly: "Gain 25 new members" or "Produce 35 hand-written letters to our elected representative." All other decisions about your event should be made with this goal in mind.

### **Speaker, panel or AV presentation**

There are many different formats for a successful forum. The choice of format depends, in part, whether your goal is to educate or motivate. If your goal is to educate, a debate or a panel discussion is an engaging way to provide information. A single focused speaker or a screening of an ACLU video allows for an emotionally resonant presentation that will motivate your audience.

Utilize available audio-visual resources, such as the ACLU's 12-minute "Stop the Abuse of Power" DVD or an episode of "The ACLU Freedom Files."

If you decide on a speaker(s), possibilities include chapter members with expertise in a given subject area, local or community leaders, ACLU of Northern California staff, local college or university professors, elected officials, or individuals who have been personally affected by an issue (for example, exonerees talking about the death penalty and the criminal justice system).

### **Co-hosts/co-sponsors**

Working with another organization, organizations, to co-host or co-sponsor your forum offers several advantages. Collaboration provides a bigger pool for resources and potential attendees. It can result in a more balanced or diverse perspective, which is especially important for a debate. Furthermore, working with other organizations represents a great opportunity to build and maintain coalitions, presenting a united front. The Event Co-Sponsors section below includes suggestions for possible co-host organizations.

### **Location**

Choosing the right location for your event depends on who you'd like to attend and the particular environment you want to create.

Where do people in your community already gather? If you are promoting the event to the public, think about a place where people of any race, religion, or sexual identity would feel

comfortable. If you want to encourage your local public officials or other community leaders to attend, select a location that would be appropriate and convenient for them.

Find a space that is big enough for your guests to be comfortable, but not so large that it is difficult for people to see the presentation or participate in a group discussion. Other factors to consider when selecting a space include parking, access to public transportation, and the distance your guests must travel to get there. Make sure the space you select is wheelchair accessible.

Location possibilities for your community forum are virtually endless.

- Reserve a room in your local library or community center
- Incorporate the forum into the regularly scheduled meeting of a local club or organization
- Use space available at your church, mosque, synagogue, or temple
- Ask a local coffee shop, pub, restaurant or other business if you can use their space
- Hold the forum on a school or university campus--in a classroom, student center or dorm lobby
- If you are showing a film or video, find out if a local independent movie theater will host your forum

## **Volunteers**

Planning and running a successful event takes time and energy. You will need many volunteers to make the event run smoothly. The number of volunteers you will need depends on the size and scope of your forum. The following tasks are usually managed by volunteers:

**Publicity:** For this key task, volunteers must create and send advisory notices to local media venues, create and post flyers, make copies, send emails, place phone calls, and generally coordinate event publicity.

**Set-up and clean-up:** There will be tables and chairs to set up, food to arrange, copies to make, nametags to prepare, and a multitude of other logistical details to address before, during, and after your event.

**Greeting and registration:** Station one or two volunteers at the door to greet guests and route them to the appropriate room. Have one or two other people handle registration, asking people to sign in and answering any questions attendees may have.

**Technical set-up:** Are you showing a DVD or other audio-visual material? You may need assistance locating and setting up the appropriate equipment for your presentation. Find someone who is skilled at operating electronic equipment and troubleshooting technical problems. *Make sure the AV equipment works properly before the event begins!*

**Photographer:** Have someone take pictures at your event. Be sure they capture one overview of the room to show how many people attended your event! Let your guests know that photos from the event may be posted on an ACLU website, and allow them not to be in a photo if they so choose.

## Delegating

Once you have your volunteers, make sure you clearly explain each of their tasks to them. Allow them to ask questions before the event so that they know what to do on the day of your forum. At the event, if you notice that they don't have enough to do, give them another job. If your volunteers become overwhelmed with too many tasks, try to quickly locate a sympathetic guest willing to help out. Most importantly, don't forget to thank your volunteers after the event is over!

## Promoting Your Forum

Getting people to your event is just as important as planning the program. Promotional techniques depend upon your goals.

If you are hosting a small event for a group of friends and neighbors, send personal emails and make phone calls. If you are focusing on a large group, such as members of your local ACLU-NC chapter, doing a mailing or phone banking may be sufficient. If you are trying to reach out to the general public, you will want to use local media and community outreach strategies.

## The Essentials

There are three essential pieces of information to include in any of the promotional strategies listed below:

- **Date, Time, and Location**
- **Describe the Event:** A basic, brief description, as simple as “A screening of the *Youth Speak* episode of *The ACLU Freedom Files*, with a presentation by Professor Linda Jones of the University Political Science Department.”
- **Host Name(s):** Your group or ACLU-NC chapter name, or the names of all hosting organizations, plus a phone number and email address where the contact organizer can be reached

## Publicity Strategies

**Email Invitation:** As long as you have an email address, sending an email can be the cheapest, quickest and easiest way to circulate news about your event. The tone and content of your email depends on who will receive it. If you are sending to your own circle of friends and acquaintances, the format can be fairly personal. You can also draft an email to send to members of organizations you know of or belong to, or to distribute through email listservs. To expand

your outreach, *ask people who receive your email to forward it to their own friends and contacts.*

**Mail:** You can send paper invitations, if time allows and your budget covers the cost of postage.

**Phone Calls:** Like email, phone calls can be personalized for family and friends. You might also decide to use the phone to reach the people on a list of community contacts and activists or the roster of another organization. Divide the list up among volunteers since calling a long list of people can be time-consuming.

## **Event Co-Sponsors**

One of the best and easiest ways to expand your guest list, and to build momentum and excitement, is to partner with another organization. By enlisting an existing group as a co-sponsor for your forum, you add that organization's members to your own pool of potential participants and gain the benefit of whatever public exposure or media attention the other group, or groups, may already have.

Some groups you might consider as potential partners include:

- A community college, university, law school or academic department
- A local chapter of a civil rights organization, or other community-based organizations
- A political club
- A local branch of an environmental, women's, minority, LGBT, or other activist organization
- The ACLU club on your campus or other student organizations
- Your church, mosque, synagogue or temple, or one in your community
- A bar association or other legal organization
- A local meetup.org group
- The local library or library association
- Other groups that meet in your community

## **Local Media**

It is helpful to have your event featured in the events listing section of local media.

Find out the publication schedule of the local newspaper (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly), and ensure you forward the advisory *one week before deadline* for the issue prior to the event. For local radio outlets or daily newspapers, you can send your advisory twice: about a week before the event, and a second time one day before the event.

Fax and email your advisory to local TV, radio and newspapers. Try to send it directly to reporters who cover civil liberties issues, politics or local civic gatherings. You can find the appropriate contact information by visiting the Web site for each media outlet or by calling their office directly.

To make your event advisory effective, follow up with phone calls to make sure they received the fax or email, and to answer any questions they may have. You should also send the advisory to local advocacy organizations and other places you think people might be interested in hearing about your event.

**Community Event Listings:** Send details about your forum to the community event listings, including local Web-based bulletin boards, public broadcast stations, and local newspapers. Although procedures vary, you are usually required to submit information about your event at least two weeks in advance and may have to pay a small fee.

**Event Flyer:** You can post flyers in strategic spots in your community. Your flyer should contain the same key information as in your event advisory, including contact information and logistics, but also be visually appealing enough to grab someone's attention.

Make copies of the flyer on colorful paper and post them in places visited by members of your target audience. Tape flyers on bulletin boards at the library and grocery store, in college student centers and other places on campus, at work or your place of worship, and in cafes, restaurants and stores. Make enough copies for friends and volunteers to post as well.

## **At Your Forum**

Careful preparation on the day of your Community Forum will result in a smooth-running event. Between the time your guests arrive and when the formal proceedings begin, you should set the stage for the remainder of the event.

### **Registration**

Be sure to keep track of who attends your forum so that you can contact them again for future activities. The simplest way to do this is to have a sign-up sheet with space for the most important information: name, address, phone numbers, and email. Have a couple of pens or pencils on hand. It's a good idea to designate a volunteer to personally ask each attendee if they have had a chance to sign in.

### **Nametags**

If your guests won't know each other, encourage them to wear nametags. Make them beforehand if you know who is attending, or put out blank name badges or stickers along with a few markers and ask guests to create their own. Nametags will make it easier for guests to learn each other's names and will allow you to call on people during the group discussion.

## Refreshments

While not absolutely necessary, guests always appreciate refreshments. You can keep it as simple as coffee and sodas, with store-bought cookies or pastries. If you hold your forum at a local coffee shop or restaurant, owners may donate some drinks and snacks.

## Introductions and opening remarks

As your guests get settled, before the presentation begins, take the opportunity to welcome them. Introduce yourself—who your organization is and why you are holding a community forum—with a few brief comments reminding attendees of the importance of defending civil liberties.

If the group is small enough, you might go around the room and invite each person to say their name and what brings them to the event. If you notice any local elected officials, community leaders or other key individuals in the room, introduce them and thank them for their attendance.

In your opening remarks, briefly explain the format of the event so that people know what to expect and how long they might be there. Invite your guests to become ACLU members. (You can print [membership forms](#) directly from the ACLU-NC web site at <http://www.aclunc.org/support>.) Also, suggest that your guests write down questions, comments, or ideas they have during the presentation to bring up during group discussion.

Consider having a volunteer take pictures over the course of the evening. Let your guests know that photos from the event may be posted on the ACLU or Web site. (Of course, allow them the opportunity not to be in a photo if they choose.)

## Educational Materials

Have current ACLU materials, including membership brochures and email sign-up cards, available at the sign-in table for your guests to take home. You might also pass them out after the event ends or place them on a table near the exit. The ACLU-NC has materials available for you. Just [contact us](mailto:organizing@aclunc.org) at [organizing@aclunc.org](mailto:organizing@aclunc.org).

## Sample Programs

To give you some ideas on how to structure your presentation, we've included two sample agendas: one for a one-hour event and another for a two-hour event.

### 1-hour program

- 8:00 – 8:10** Welcome and introductions
- 8:10 – 8:40** Panel presentation, debate, speaker, or screening of video
- 8:40 – 9:00** Take individual action (letter writing, phone banking, etc.) and planning for continued action

## 2-hour program

- 7:30 – 7:45** Guests arrive, sign in, enjoy refreshments
- 7:45 – 8:00** Host welcomes guests, makes introductions, explains agenda for event
- 8:00 – 8:30** Panel presentation, debate, speaker, or screening of video
- 8:30 – 9:00** Group discussion, comments, and individual action—letter writing, phone banking, etc.
- 9:00 – 9:30** Plans for next meeting and continuing actions

## **Group Discussion**

An important part of the evening will be the time when individuals can share ideas and actually take action, such as writing letters, sending emails, making phone calls and organizing for continuing activities. Leave ample time for group discussion and suggestions for individual action to follow the screening.

Some tips for the discussion portion of the event:

- ***Have a few pre-planned topics or questions.*** If everyone in the room seems to have something to contribute, you can scale back their ambitions to focus on a few central points and one or two urgent actions. On the other hand, you can use a question or idea as a way to elicit a response.
- ***Call on people.*** Give each person a chance to speak and graciously limit the length of their comments.
- ***Stick to a time limit.*** If you hit your time limit and the group is still talking, ask for one last question. If people wish to continue the discussion, they can do so outside or after other people have the chance to leave.

The [ACLU-NC web site](http://www.aclunc.org), [www.aclunc.org](http://www.aclunc.org), has detailed information about numerous civil liberties issues that can help prepare you to lead the discussion. You can share key pieces of information and breaking news and be better prepared to answer questions.

If someone asks a question and you don't know the answer, it's OK to say you don't know. Simply offer to find out the information and get back to them later.

## **After Your Forum**

### **Sustain and utilize your activist base**

The sign-in sheet from your forum becomes one of your most valuable organizing tools. That list contains the names of people you already knew were inspired to become activists, or someone you met whom you had not worked with before, or a key leader in your community or an organization who you can ally with in the future.

The next time you plan an action in your community, the people on your sign-in sheet will be the first people you invite. For your next event, invite them and ask them to bring a friend!

Follow up with your guests in some way before too much time passes. If it was a small event, give everyone on your list a call or send an email or note. If you had a large event, choose a select number of people to contact, or ask volunteers to help contact people on the list.

Tell attendees how glad you are that they participated. Ask for feedback on the event. (Be ready for constructive criticism or tips for next time.)

If you already have plans for another event, give them a heads-up now and ask if they will commit to being there. Ask for names and contact information for any friends they think might like to be added to your list.

### **Share your news**

Your forum is powerful because it inspires people in your community. You can share news about your event with your community. Draft an article about your forum, including the number of people who attended and any plans for future action. Suggest ways that people can get involved and provide a way for them to get in touch with you. Send your article as a letter-to-the-editor to your local or neighborhood newspaper or submit it for publication in a community newsletter.

The [ACLU-NC Field department](#) would love to see pictures from your event! Send photos to [organizing@aclunc.org](mailto:organizing@aclunc.org). Please identify the name of the photographer and the names of the individuals pictured. Please let your guests know that photos from the event may be posted on the ACLU-NC Web site. If you did not have a chance to let your guests know that photos may be posted, please let us know.

### **Organize for action**

Capitalize on the success of your event. It is a springboard to concrete action. With your new network of community activists, you can plan a range of activities and events:

- Submit letters-to-the-editor to your local newspaper
- Plan a day of outreach and education to spread the message in the community
- Organize a public rally

## Sample Planning Timeline

### *2-4 weeks before the event*

- Plot your general program timeline
- Select location, make necessary arrangements, set event date and time
- Decide on intended audience and ideal number of guests
- Secure co-sponsor/s
- Announce the event to your friends, neighbors, and associates
- Seek out volunteers
- Determine appropriate promotion strategies
- [Contact](mailto:organizing@aclunc.org) the ACLU-NC at [organizing@aclunc.org](mailto:organizing@aclunc.org) to get materials for your event

### *1 – 2 weeks before the event*

- Submit advisory notices and information to local media and community event listings
- Send emails and place phone calls
- Post flyers
- Prepare checklist of items necessary (refreshments, handouts, sign-in sheet, nametags, etc.) and begin gathering them
- Familiarize yourself with the topic from ACLU-NC resource materials and the website

### *2 days before your event*

- Send follow-up emails to media and attendees
- Make follow-up phone calls to media and attendees
- Finish gathering all necessary items, including food and supplies
- Confirm the date and time of your event with outside venue
- Draft and practice your opening remarks
- Plan a few items for the group discussion
- Confirm final tasks with volunteers
- Test your technology, especially if showing a video
- Print handouts and materials for guests

### *1 day before your event*

- Send second advisory notice to local daily media venues

### *Two hours before your event*

- Set up all technical devices and test your technology!
- Set up chairs and tables
- Set out handouts, sign-in sheet, pens, and nametags
- Arrange refreshments
- Answer last-minute questions from volunteers

As a community forum host, you are an integral part of the ACLU-NC educational and activist mission.