



ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

A guide for nonprofits to
**MEANINGFULLY
ENGAGE**
your
COMMUNITY

MAY 2019 | ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK

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ABOUT ONN

Organized in 2007 and incorporated as a nonprofit in 2014, the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) is the independent nonprofit network for the 585,000 nonprofits and charities in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen Ontario's nonprofit sector as a key pillar of our society and economy.

ONN works to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits and charities to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector, and channel the voices of our network to government, funders and other stakeholders.

OUR VISION

A Strong and Resilient Nonprofit Sector. Thriving Communities. A Dynamic Province.

OUR MISSION

To engage, advocate, and lead with—and for—nonprofit and charitable organizations that work for the public benefit in Ontario.

OUR VALUES

Courage to take risks and do things differently. **Diversity** of perspectives, creativity and expertise to get stuff done. **Optimism** and **determination**. **Solutions** created by the sector, with the sector, for the sector. **Celebrating** our successes and **learning** from our experiences. **Strength** that comes from working **together**.

THANK YOU

We are grateful to sector colleagues for reviewing this guide and sharing their resources, including John Beebe (Democratic Engagement Exchange, Ryerson University), Ilona Dougherty (University of Waterloo), Mark Frimpong (YMCA Ontario), and Nauman Khan (United Way Toronto & York Region).

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SECTION ONE ADVOCACY MATTERS

NONPROFITS HAVE A UNIQUE ROLE

Nonprofit advocacy and policy work is rooted in community experience.



Increase Awareness

Increase awareness and understanding of community challenges and opportunities and government actions.



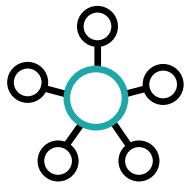
Listen to Patterns

Identify issues and opportunities across communities and regions.



Convene

Connect people and groups to create opportunities in communities.



Build Capacity

Share the knowledge and research nonprofits already have.



Demand Accountability

Hold government and decision makers accountable.



Strengthen Voices

Build confidence to speak up and say what communities care about.

Engaging on public policy provides meaningful opportunities for the public benefit nonprofit sector to engage communities and capture the attention of policy makers and civic leaders. The goal of engagement is to share the profound impact of nonprofits and charities on our communities and the issues we as a sector are working on across Ontario. Reaching out to elected officials and policy makers open dialogue and build a foundation for working together with the people we serve, government, opposition parties, and elected representatives and their staff.

→ Some nonprofits have a mission focused on serving their members, such as trade associations and private clubs. But **public benefit nonprofits** are different. Public benefit nonprofits—charities, nonprofit organizations and non-profit co-ops—have a mission to serve the public. They operate for the good of the public, they reinvest excess revenue back into meeting their mission, and they retain their assets in the public domain for the public good.

BUILD ON THE MOMENTUM

People will already be talking about the issues and the kinds of policies they hope to see. Build on the energy and conversations already happening in communities! This is a chance to connect to residents and work together on shared issues and opportunities so we can help deliver collective community impact. Our sector has the ability to harness insights and solutions from the community and share this knowledge and research.

There are many nonpartisan ways for your nonprofit to engage:

- Invite elected officials and policy makers to an event and/or a meeting
- Organize a town hall to hear from residents
- Meet with elected officials and policy makers
- Reach out to and share stories through media or social media
- Encourage civic engagement, especially for those facing barriers to getting involved

NONPROFITS STEP UP!

Nonprofits play a vital role in bringing the voices of communities to public discourse, especially those voices from marginalized communities. Hearing from diverse groups of people helps elected officials better serve their constituents. See more in our [infographic: “Nonprofits Step Up!”](#)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE NONPARTISAN?

Unlike those who seek to influence public policy for private gain or corporate profit, **public benefit nonprofits** share and amplify nonpartisan information—information about issues that do not favour or criticize a specific political party or candidate—and foster discussion about issues important to communities. It’s important to be aware of the rules around partisanship ([see our Rules section](#)), but don’t let these hinder your enthusiasm or participation.

Strengthening what currently works, changing broken systems, and building better ones are all part of the public policy process. This means engaging with governments—and future governments—on policy and programs that build communities where people, especially those who are marginalized, aren't left behind.

A recent survey of Canadians found that 61% of people don't think current politicians have the solutions to address challenges in communities ([2017 Edelman Trust Barometer – Canadian results](#)). So who does? Community!

And this role will likely become even more central. According to one former Canadian politician, the future role of politicians won't be to create policy on their own in a vacuum, but to empower the voices of their constituents and enlist them to shape policy ([IRPP, John Milloy, 2017](#)).

GET OUT OF YOUR ECHO CHAMBER

Populist politics and silos of thinking and listening are dangerous and damaging to a vibrant democracy. As part of how we work, public benefit nonprofits identify issues and opportunities, connect and convene different groups of people, and strengthen voices. However, nonprofits can also get caught in their own echo chambers, only hearing voices similar to their own, with similar thinking on key issues. It's essential to break out of these chambers and hear different perspectives from a diverse cross-section of people in communities. See "[How to break out of an echo chamber](#)."

GET PLANNING

It's good to be prepared for whatever opportunity comes up so that you can share a compelling [story](#) or captivating data of how your organization and the communities you work with are creating vibrant, resilient places to live and work.

- For more information, visit ONN's resources section theonn.ca/resources
- Let's influence public policy through advocacy. Get inspired: Video "[2018 A Year of Elections: Advocacy Stories from the Trenches](#), ONN Conference 2017"

Questions, comments, or tips to share? Share with us at info@theonn.ca.

THE VALUE PROPOSITION OF ONTARIO'S NONPROFIT SECTOR

So, what's our collective story and impact?

We've created a [slideshow](#) to tell the story of what Ontario's nonprofit sector means to the economy, to democracy, to government and public policy, and to communities and the people in them.

Use the messaging to help tell your story and promote your work. Parties and elected officials will be eager for great ideas and ways of doing things differently, and hearing success stories. Use this opportunity to share the impact you're having. Talk about the issues your nonprofit and community care about. Let's not be humble. We are facing complex changes in Ontario and the rest of the country, and the nonprofit sector is the launching pad for connecting, mobilizing, and creating positive change.

You don't have to use the messaging word for word. Take what resonates with your organization and the people you work with. Cut and paste and adapt it to make it your own. **The key is to tell your story, and how together we are the sector that brings people and groups together to create opportunities and solutions for thriving communities.**

YOUR TURN: SHOW YOUR NONPROFIT PRIDE

What is the impact of your nonprofit and subsector
(e.g. childcare, housing)?
How do you serve and support your community?

BIG DATA
about your
sector

STATISTICS
about your
organization

**STORIES
AND
MORE**

Share local data on the impact of *your* nonprofit/ the sector to better engage elected officials and media

Remind elected officials: The nonprofit sector contributes more to the province's economy than the automobile and construction industries combined! The sector has an economic impact of \$50 billion and employs over one million people.

CREATING YOUR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Thanks to [Beyond the Cause: The Art & Science of Advocacy](#) for the five approaches essential to successful advocacy. We've added some points of our own here.

1. Sustain a laser-like focus on long-term goals

- What is the outcome(s) you want to see?
- Is there one major ask/goal you can focus on that is measurable and evidence-backed that you can use to gauge the effectiveness of your advocacy efforts?
- Think in 5-, 10-, 20-, or 25-year time frames
- Work backwards from your long-term goal.

2. Prioritize “building” the elements for an effective advocacy campaign

- Invest in building relationships.
- They include:
 - Conducting research: data analysis and lived experience voices
 - Developing policy solutions
 - Building relationships with allies
 - Test key messages with target audiences
 - Building out grassroots and grass-tops contacts (opinion leaders and people with connections to elected officials)
 - Deeply understanding the priorities of public officials

3. Consider the motivations of public officials

- Consider whether an issue should be brought to elected officials or to public bureaucrats.
- Research the backgrounds of public officials, including their family histories, connections, and priorities of constituencies.

- Ask, What activity is most likely to motivate this particular public official?

4. Galvanize coalitions to achieve short-term goals

- Research showed that coalitions were most successful when they formed around a specific issue at a given moment in time and disbanded once their goal had been achieved.
- Strong leadership, a shared vision, clear decision-making structures, and members who brought complementary assets to the table and who put some “skin in the game” were the cornerstones of effective coalitions.
- Don't be afraid to take leadership. It can be more effective to build a coalition around one issue and invite others to join and let you know what they can commit to.
- Set up a “secretariat” for your movement to be the hub of administrative activity, setting up meetings, making calls, preparing documents, etc.

5. Ensure strong, high-integrity leadership

- Common characteristics of high-integrity leadership include having high integrity and transparency; being an honest broker of information; having strong relationships with stakeholders; and having the ability to articulate a compelling vision and mobilize people behind it.

FRAMING YOUR “ASK”

Every engagement strategy needs a focus. What is the objective? What is the ask to elected officials or political parties?

It's essential to be strategic about what policy change you want to see happen. Avoid the usual broad asks without specific actions and solutions and those that focus only on funding requests.

[Learn more about developing your “ask”.](#)

There will always be competing priorities for governments, so identify what makes your organization or sector different and what strengths you bring to the table.

What's the issue or solution? What would you like to see addressed?

Why should elected officials care? What's the alignment with what they're focused on and can, or want, to make happen?

What solution are you proposing to support Ontarians and make communities stronger?

What's your value proposition? Also think about the overall value proposition of the Ontario nonprofit sector.

CONSIDER

Who is going to support your ask? Who may oppose your ask, and why?

If available, include the cost-benefit analysis of your solution, gathered from independent research. To get the data, check with academics in that field, a research organization, or a social planning council to see if they have supporting research.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TACTIC

There are a number of ways in which your organization can engage in the public policy process. These tactics of engagement can include everything from simply raising awareness and sharing information, articles, and social media posts, to organizing meetings with elected officials or hosting community events or discussions. Whatever tactic or combination of tactics you go with, it is important to identify at the start what your objectives are and how each tactic can help you to achieve those objectives.

THIS GUIDE PROVIDES ADVICE ON HOW TO ENGAGE VIA:

- Individual meetings with elected officials
- Forums or town hall meetings
- Community or organization events
- Online campaigns using traditional media or social media
- Nonpartisan community engagement

Communities face many issues, so groups will be working hard to get their issues heard, and as a result elected officials will often be inundated with requests to address concerns, or attend events or discussions. It is important to consider the issues you are trying to advocate for, as well as the capacity of your organization to take on different activities. The following are some helpful starter questions that can be useful in determining which tactics might best suit your organization.

How well informed is the public on this issue? Is this issue something that appears often in the media?

If the issue is already quite topical, it may be easier to get elected officials to address it, or attend a community event, or a one-on-one meeting about it.

How well informed are elected officials on this issue?

A one-on-one meeting may be a useful tactic to raise awareness. For instance, if an elected official has a different opinion than yours, a one-on-one meeting may be helpful to let them know that there is an opposing and organized viewpoint he or she should be aware of. A larger forum may be a better tactic if you want to convince the elected official that the issue has widespread support or concern.

How much capacity does my organization have?

If your organization has limited staff time and resources, organizing a large event may prove to be too much. Using social media and connecting with other organizations to potentially share messaging or to collaborate on an event may be a better option.

What does the event calendar look like?

Local newspapers and the websites and social media channels of elected officials will often have information about where officials will be speaking and what events they have committed to. If there are events that have been organized by other groups, it may be worthwhile to consider attending those or working with them to get on their agendas with a question instead of undertaking your own event. Alternatively, knowing what other events are out there can be helpful in identifying a date and time for your own event.

ORGANIZING THROUGH NETWORKS

Engagement is a great opportunity to activate and build your networks. Consider using a network approach to engage people.

A network approach can help identify common causes and support alignment of messaging by different organizations and groups. This approach distributes power and resources to involve many people in amplifying your work. It can help mobilize leadership, expanding opportunities for people to step into leadership positions, and it can increase inclusion by engaging new people who know the opportunities you're advocating for, from their lived experience, or who will be affected by decisions. Get more tips and resources in our network guide:

ONN's Networks + Action Guide

<http://theonnc.ca/resources/networks>

PUTTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FIRST

Bringing people and communities together and gathering and amplifying voices is a major strength of the public benefit nonprofit sector. Don't forget: we're stronger working together! Whatever your strategy and tactics, there are best practices for putting good community engagement into action. Here are 10 great tips from **Apathy is Boring**.

- **1. Build trust** - Let people get to know you and your organization; involve the people, give them something to do; ask them for advice; celebrate their involvement; and ask them to share their experiences.
- **2. Set out clear expectations and honest limitations** - People need realistic timelines and clearly defined responsibilities. Be honest about the time and resources that your organization has available. Voices must be included, participation must be recognized, and work that people do must be attributed to them.
- **3. Encourage creativity and diversity** - When setting up partnerships, organizations need to take into account the reality of different cultures, demographics, and lifestyles. Regardless of appearance or personal style and skills, everyone needs to be respected for their abilities, their knowledge, and the diversity that they bring to the process.

- **4. Create safe spaces to deal with concerns** - Organizations must ensure that there are effective mechanisms in place to deal with concerns or difficulties that people may have. It is crucial to empower people to speak out and provide a safe environment when they encounter discrimination within your organization.
- **5. Flexibility is key** - Remember that people often have other commitments and responsibilities. They might not be able to participate because of personal or financial constraints.
- **6. Good communication** - This means being patient and listening to all of what someone has to say, even if you don't agree. People must feel that their opinions and contributions count. That means actively listening to them, treating them as equals, and allowing their ideas and suggestions to lead to action. Good communication also includes following up after the fact. This helps everyone understand the link between input and outcomes.
- **7. Digital strategy can't replace personal connections** - Make info accessible online via social media, email, and a well-organized website. These are necessary to reach out to people and keep them informed, but remember that even the best digital strategy can't replace the personal connections that come from face-to-face conversations.
- **8. Create a buddy system** - Recruiting people in groups, as well as allowing friends to volunteer and participate together, results in more resilient and longer-term commitments.
- **9. Make connections between generations** - Partnerships work best when connections are made between different generations who have parallel experiences, interests, resources, and networks to share. Youth and adults have different skills to bring to the table, and it is important that the two recognize the assets in each other. Once youth and adults are engaged in a true partnership, understanding and empathy develop.
- **10. Peer-to-peer contact** - The most effective recruitment strategy is a direct, in-person request. Research has shown that peer-to-peer contact is the best method for mobilization, and the more personalized and authentic the message, the more effective it becomes. Studies have also found that personal appeals and pressures coming from people we actually know has a greater effect on deciding to get involved.

“We can't assume what residents want. We need to ask what are the three main issues they are facing and if resources were not an issue, what solutions would they want to implement?”

– Sarah Ali, Etobicoke Community Council, presenting at ONN's Nonprofit Driven 2017

SOME DOS AND DON'TS WHEN ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

✓ DO

- **Keep it nonpartisan**
Provide equal opportunity by talking with all elected officials and policy makers relevant to your issue.
- **Organize & be inclusive**
A well-organized meeting where everyone is welcome will enhance the profile of local organizations and the nonprofit sector in general. Think about what people with barriers to participation need: interpreters, child care, transit tokens, or a ride to the event.
- **Prepare**
Do your homework and talk about issues and opportunities that are likely to be of interest to your community.
- **Raise the profile of your events through social media**
- Like Facebook posts and live tweeting.
- After a meeting or event, **send thank-you letters**, including a contact person for further questions.
- Get **feedback** from attendees through surveys and feedback forms

X DON'T

- Advocate for any political party or assume how a party will react before engaging them. Every elected official should have all of their constituents in mind and be encouraged to support them.
- Instruct or influence constituents as to which candidate or party to support.
- Ask for priorities that are outside the scope of that level of government (federal, provincial, or municipal governments handle different issues). See "[How Government Works](#)" in Resources.
- Make partisan statements or endorse a party, for example by posting their photos on your website.

ONN POLICY PRIORITIES

We've posted our policy priorities for the nonprofit sector and the communities it serves on our website: <https://theonncanada.ca/our-work/>. These policy areas range from funding reform to decent work, to access to public lands and community wealth building. Nonprofits can share and use these policy proposals that will help us all have greater impact in our communities. Include the ones that resonate for your organization in your own advocacy asks!

ADVOCACY RULES

Don't be intimidated by rules and regulations about how charities and nonprofits can advocate. Charities and nonprofits are fully entitled to play an active role in shaping public policy. Get informed! Charities and nonprofits should be aware of these laws that regulate activities in public policy dialogue and development.

Note: Some of these rules may not apply to your nonprofit, depending on whether you have paid staff, whether you're a charity, and if you're spending on election-related activities. Check first!

→ **Lobbyist Registration Act [Ontario]**

Note: If your organization is volunteer led and run, this does not apply to you. Lobbyists are paid staff. You only need to consider registering if your organization has paid employees (or consultants) who engage in lobbying (as defined in the Lobbyist Registration Act).

This Act requires lobbyists to report their activity to the Integrity Commissioner.

A change to the Lobbyists Registration Act (LRA) went into effect in July 2016 that reduced the registration threshold to 50 hours a year spent on lobbying activity across an organization. It also gave the Integrity Commissioner investigative powers and created penalties for noncompliance. Given the significant changes and new enforcement powers, many charities and nonprofits will have to review their practices and record-keeping to determine how many hours they are spending on lobbying.

Tip: You may want to keep a record of how many hours your organization spends on lobbying.

50 HOURS

Nonprofits that interact 50 hours a year or more with the government in their work may need to register (**that's less than an hour a week**).

The definition of lobbying is "activities intended to influence a public office holder with respect to changes to legislation, regulations, programs, privatization, and awarding of grants, contributions or financial benefits."

At the same time, this is not lobbying under the LRA: “Submissions made with respect to the enforcement, interpretation, or application of any act, policy, program, directive, or guideline.”

Registration is not required for submissions to legislative committees that are a matter of public record, submissions regarding the implementation or administration of any act, policy, program, directive or guideline, or if responding to the government’s request for advice or comment.

Track your organization’s lobbying hours and register once you hit 50 hours in one year.

Learn more:

1. Read ONN’s [briefing note](#) and [issues paper](#) that outlines the issues and what you need to know.
2. The Office of the Integrity Commissioner of Ontario explains the process of how to register your organization. [Download the webinar slides here](#)
3. [Visit the Ontario Lobbyists Registration webpage](#) to register your organization.

Note that the federal government and some municipalities also have lobbyist registration requirements. Check your local government website for details.

→ **If you are doing advocacy during an election period*, take note:
Election Finances Statute Law Amendment Act, 2016 (Bill 2) [Ontario]**

Bill 2 updates the rules on third-party spenders in provincial elections.

The bill includes not only partisan but also issue-based nonpartisan advocacy in its definition of political advertising. This has the potential to create unintended consequences for nonprofits that participate in democratic debate during election campaigns.

If your organization spends money advocating for or against a policy that a candidate or party takes a position on, even if your advocacy is nonpartisan, you may need to register as a third-party advertiser. The rules apply to the election period itself, and the six-month period before general election periods. Check with [Elections Ontario](#) for clarification.

\$500

Nonprofits are required to register as third-party political advertisers if they spend over \$500 engaging in public policy debate on issues that a candidate happens to address during the prescribed election period. There are also new financial tracking and reporting requirements.

The definition of political advertising not only includes billboards and newspaper ads, but also “other media” such as flyers, buttons, and e-newsletters. Any communication from a nonprofit to an audience that goes beyond an organization’s staff and membership list that has a cost falls under this definition. This would apply to many issues, including child care, affordable housing, arts and recreation funding, and climate change — issues candidates routinely take a position on.

Learn more:

1. [Read our blog post](#) that outlines the issues with Bill 2 and its potential effects on the nonprofit sector
2. [Visit the Elections Ontario website](#) to read up on “Third Parties” and how to register

*There are federal rules during federal elections, and an Ontario provincial act for municipal elections. Check with the level of government for more information.

→ **Canada Revenue Agency (CRA)**

Note: These rules apply only to registered charities.

Political activities

With the passage of Bill 2 in 2018, the federal government has introduced a new set of rules to govern charities’ public policy advocacy. The rules say your organization would be able to engage without limitation in public policy dialogue and development activities (formerly called “political activities”) as long as those activities further your charitable purposes and are nonpartisan. These activities can involve research, convening discussions and conferences, and attempts to inform the public and shape public opinion. They can also involve trying to influence the laws, policies or decisions of a government.

Partisan activity still prohibited

Partisan political activity is the direct or indirect promotion of a political candidate or party, or the direct or indirect opposition to a political party or candidate. Partisan political activity by charities is explicitly banned.

Keeping track of resources used for public policy advocacy

The so called 10% rule will no longer be applied. There will be minimal reporting to the CRA, with a narrative summary only, and tracking of money and time spent on public policy advocacy will no longer be necessary.

Learn more:

1. [New federal rules for charities](#): What the proposed rules mean for your organization and what they mean for the charitable sector
2. Government of Canada, [Bill C-86, Budget Implementation Act, 2018, No. 2](#)
3. Guidance on issues such as what “direct vs. indirect” promotion means can be found on the CRA website.

SECTION TWO

DIGGING INTO TACTICS



There are multiple ways to reach out to elected officials and share your impact, and support community input and engagement.

Individual meetings

Forums or town halls

Community events

Traditional media

Social media

Community engagement

MEET WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS OR THEIR STAFF

+ PROS

- Provide an opportunity for more focused and in-depth conversations.
- Gauge the interest of elected officials and potential response to asks more readily.
- Easier to organize than events.
- Build deeper relationships that could be leveraged during and after election periods.

- CONS

- Not public events so no opportunity for broader messaging or media coverage.
- Could be harder to hold elected officials to promises if they are not made in public.
- Could mean multiple meetings.

QUICK TIPS

Consider organizing sessions as part of an existing community network or team up with like-minded organizations.



ASK

Ask in person, call, email, or send a letter to each local elected official briefly outlining your organization's work, your key messages, and your asks. Request a meeting to discuss these items. Elected officials often have staff dedicated to engaging with constituents on issues.



SCHEDULE

Follow up with a phone call or visit to the constituency office. Negotiate a date, time, and location for the meeting. Let the staff know how much time you would like and be prepared to shorten the session if need be.



PREPARE

Once the meeting is confirmed, put together a team to attend the meeting. The larger the team, the more organized you'll need to be at the meeting. It's helpful to have a mix of staff, board members and, if possible, beneficiaries of your service or activities who can provide personal stories of how key issues impact them and how solutions are supporting or will support people. Elected officials are sometimes more interested in hearing from the people who live in the area than paid staff of organizations. Create a quick facts binder of key points about the organization and your impact to use at all meetings.

As a group, fine-tune the points that you will raise (your asks), organize them into an agenda, and decide who will chair the session and who will speak to which item. The size of the group will guide how long individuals can speak. In general, keep the individual presentations to a maximum of **three minutes each**. More experienced members can help others to organize what they will say. Ask for a volunteer to write up the meeting notes when it's over so everyone has the results of the meeting on paper.



INFORM

Tell the staff who will attend the meeting.



MEET

Arrive on time and go in as a team.

Have the chair open the meeting, thank the elected official and briefly outline the purpose of the meeting and the agenda. All participants should introduce themselves. From there, the chair should manage the agenda, making way for the speaker for each item. The official or campaign staff may ask questions of individual speakers and the chair should be able to subtly keep the agenda on track.

Be prepared to be flexible. The official may not have time or want to go through the full agenda. The chair should be able to cut to the chase so that the most important items are discussed.

Finish by thanking the elected official and providing a contact person for further questions or information.

HERE'S A GREAT IDEA TO CONSIDER: **TAKE YOUR MPP TO WORK**

The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) has invited political party leaders to join registered nurses during a workday to get a first-hand account of the work that nurses do.

Beginning in 2001, the event has grown to an annual popular political engagement tool for RNAO members and MPPs alike.

Learn more: <http://rnao.ca/policy/political-action/take-your-mpp-work>

HOST A FORUM OR TOWN HALL MEETING ON A CRITICAL ISSUE

PROS

- Public meetings with larger audiences mean more attention to the issues and more community involvement in issues that matter.
- Opportunity for community members to get informed and participate in the public policy process.
- Opportunity for community networks or organizations to work together on a project.
- Potential opportunity to bring elected officials to meet with the community to address the issue.

CONS

- Can be time consuming and it can be difficult to schedule logistics and speakers.
- Can be costly. Venues need to be booked, refreshments, AV, and other supplies may need to be rented or purchased as well.
- Spontaneity at a large public event can lead to unanticipated results.
- Elected officials may be noncommittal or refuse to attend



START EARLY

You will need strong organization. It can take time to get speakers and book elected officials, promote the event, secure a location, and find a moderator. There will also be lots of groups who will be vying for community attention, media, and elected officials' time. Keep in mind that media and public interest tends to increase when the issue is a big news item, so you may have a bigger audience if you are able to secure the event while the issue is still in the headlines.



COLLABORATE

Put together a team to organize the forum. Although one organization can organize the event, an existing community network, representatives from like-minded organizations, or like-minded individuals are often more effective to share tasks to be done. Learn from other local organizations that have experience with this type of event.



QUICK TIP

Assign a committee chair to help ensure that the event is well organized and well run.



ROLES

Team members will:

- **Book speakers or facilitators.** You will want someone with expertise to provide information and answer questions on the issue.
- **Develop a key theme** for the event. This could be related to social policy issues, economic development, or other, broader issues. How will issues be presented and how will community members give their input on the issues and their effect? What can people take away as an action item or next step so they leave feeling empowered?
- **Develop a communications plan**, including community outreach and media relations.
- **Liaise with speakers** to negotiate the date, time and length of the event, their role, and how the event will proceed (e.g., order of speakers, maximum speaking time, managing a question & answer period).
- **Develop a budget** and plan for any expenses.
- **Invite media** to cover the event.
- **Find a location and organize logistics** (e.g., accessible venue, seating, stage or front of room set-up, podium, AV equipment, checking all logistics early on the day of the event).
- **Create a post-event plan** for follow-up.
- **Approve all event materials**, including media releases.
- **Maintain contact with speakers** and update them as the event develops. At the event, meet the speakers at the door and escort them to the stage or speaking area.



QUICK TIP

Strong moderators are crucial! Finding an experienced moderator that all parties will trust is absolutely essential to keeping the event on track in a fair and nonpartisan manner and to deal with the unexpected. A moderator could be a well-known media personality, a community board member, or a city leader from a local school board or a post-secondary institution.



PREPARE

Designate specific team members who can act as media contacts and spokespeople at the event. This helps with clarity and consistent messaging. As part of their role, they will contact local media as soon as the date, time, and location are finalized. On behalf of the team, they will send out a media release the day before the event. On the day of the event, they will set up and staff a media table.

AT THE EVENT

Ensure that issues are clear and well- explained for the audience. Share handouts if they are helpful. Make sure there are opportunities for you, community partners, and audience members to outline the impacts of the issue on the community. Be solutions-oriented and have a clear ask.

Give any elected officials who attend an opportunity to outline their position, answer questions, and talk about how they will respond to the issue.

For audience questions, consider asking people to write their questions on paper ahead of the Q & A portion of the event. Have a team member collect and sort through the questions before passing them on to the moderator. And consider online forums (Twitter chats and more) to gather questions and increase engagement. This will help keep the event on time and ensure that more questions get asked.

Stay on time. Start and end the event as scheduled.

HOST A COMMUNITY OR ORGANIZATION EVENT

+ PROS

- Opportunity to invite the elected official to learn more about your work first-hand and meet board members, beneficiaries, and staff in an informal setting.
- Highlights your organization and the work that you do.
- Adds to an existing event, so it's relatively easy to organize.

- CONS

- The informal setting can mean less control over messaging and interactions with elected officials.
- People with language or socio-economic barriers may not feel comfortable speaking up in a public setting.
- Less focused time to discuss issues.



QUICK TIP

Piggyback an invitation to an elected official to an event you are already planning, such as a BBQ or a late afternoon drop-in.



INVITE

Write to the elected official briefly outlining your organization's work and a related issue you are working on, and invite them to drop into your event.



FOLLOW UP

Contact the elected official or their office to confirm whether they can attend and, if possible, their approximate time of arrival.



INFORM

If you intend to have a more formal part of the event (like, introducing the elected official to the crowd, presenting mementos such as children's art), let them know.



PREPARE

Assign board members, staff, or clients to meet the elected official on arrival. They should be able to give them a tour, introduce them to attendees, ensure they have food and drink if they choose, and make sure they get to their place.

ENGAGE THROUGH TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Pitching media stories

Follow journalists who cover stories and issues related to your mission and contact them with ideas for articles. Keep your pitch brief and look for a new angle you can provide.

Letters to the Editor or Op-Eds

These types of articles help raise awareness of key issues your organization is working on, and can get the attention of parties and candidates. While there is strong competition for space in larger media outlets, local media are often looking for good local content. Political parties set up media monitoring teams with a focus on local media.

- **Focus on making it local**
- **Make it relevant** and tie it to what's happening in the community, in the general news cycle, or to what's been published recently in that media outlet.
- **Present a different point of view** than what's already being said.
- **Keep it concise**
- **Use facts and figures** and don't be afraid to use a **compelling story** to make your point.

What if it's not published?

Don't be discouraged. Even if your letter is not published, the more letters an editor receives on a given topic, the better the chances are that the news outlet will recognize public interest in that topic and cover it in some way. It can be helpful to have a group of supporters write their own letters and send them in.

Turn it into a blog post or eblast to share with your networks and communities (that's what [Imagine Canada](#) did).

→ **Tips and tools**

→ [Writing letters to the editor of your local newspaper is easy and effective](#),

David Suzuki Foundation

→ [Write an Op-Ed](#), Queen's University

→ [I write letters to the editor because...](#), National Post

→ Lists of news outlets

→ [Community newspapers in Ontario](#)

→ [Ethnic press newspapers in Ontario](#)

ENGAGE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Share issues, stories of impact and voices of your community through social media. Amp up the social media channels your nonprofit already uses, and cross-promote with other organizations and groups. Create social media campaigns to share your messages creatively and consistently during and after election periods. Tag elected officials, parties and key organizations and people. And don't forget to include hashtags, ones you use for your organization or sector, ones you create for campaigns, and [general hashtags](#) to join bigger conversations (#ONpoli | #CDNpoli and cal policy and advocacy hashtags).

Use images and videos as these are key to getting the best engagement.

Don't have a design budget? Here are some free tools to create your own visual assets:

→ [Canva](#): for nondesigners to create great social media cards, brochures, papers and more

→ [Piktochart](#)

→ [Pixton Comic Maker](#)

→ [Powtoon animated video maker](#)

ENCOURAGE CIVIC LITERACY

As community-focused organizations governed by volunteers, nonprofits are uniquely positioned to connect to people and communities in ways that other sectors and organizations can't. Low civic literacy is a serious issue, and can lead to lack of participation in creating public policy and lack of representation, especially by marginalized groups. This, means a diversity of voices often go unheard. Public benefit nonprofits can help remove barriers and encourage knowledge of and participation in making change in communities.

Nonpartisanship is key! It's vital that people are empowered to use their democratic right to voice their opinion on policy and priorities for issues that matter to them.

There are many ways to support civic education, from how government works, to different ways to engage, to how elections work.

Here are some examples of nonprofit activity to increase civic literacy:

- [Civic engagement](#), North York Community House
- [Democracy Talks](#), Democratic Engagement Exchange, Ryerson University
- [What makes someone vote?](#), Apathy is Boring

SECTION THREE RESOURCES



WHO DOES WHAT IN THE ONTARIO GOVERNMENT

To help get you thinking about engagement at the provincial level, here is a refresher on the Ontario government. This is a general overview of how the Ontario legislature works and the key actors involved.

THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

The Legislative Assembly of Ontario (also called the House or Queen's Park) has 124 seats each aligned with an electoral district or riding, to which Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) are elected.

Currently, MPPs belong to one of four parties: the [Ontario Liberal Party](#), the [Ontario PC Party](#) (Progressive Conservatives), the [Ontario NDP](#) (New Democrat Party) and the [Green Party of Ontario](#). Independent MPPs do not belong to a political party.

Members of the opposition are: MPPs from the parties that do not form government.

The Legislative Assembly votes on legislation brought forward by a Cabinet Minister or by any MPP as a Private Members' Bill. It votes on the provincial budget. Members may be part of standing or special purpose legislative committees. During daily question period, opposition members hold the government to account by asking questions of the Premier and Cabinet members on government business or issues.

Want to dig into more terms? [See Glossary of the Legislative Assembly](#)

THE CABINET

The Executive Council, or Cabinet, makes the major decisions about government policies and priorities, including tabling provincial budgets. Cabinet members introduce government legislation (as opposed to private members' bills) for consideration in the House. The decisions made in Cabinet provide direction for policy development and implementation in the Ontario Public Service, the bureaucracy.

The Premier selects MPPs from the governing party to make up the Cabinet. They are called Ministers and each leads a ministry. Ministers are accountable to the Legislative Assembly and the public.

The Premier has the flexibility to change the number of Ministers and ministries as well as the MPPs who will serve as Ministers. This can take place in mid-term and virtually always happens when a party is elected or re-elected to form government.

<https://news.ontario.ca/cabinet/en>

CONTACT AN MPP:

If an issue or solution affects a particular community, it may be best to work with [the local MPP](#).

WHAT KIND OF PUBLIC POLICY AND ACTIVITIES HAPPEN AT THE PROVINCIAL LEVEL?

If an issue or solution has provincial implications, it is likely best to exert influence through the Minister responsible for that area.

[Ministries of the Ontario government](#)

INSPIRATION AND MORE RESOURCES FOR ENGAGEMENT

This is a list to help you get started. Let us know what resources you have created or recommend so we can add them!

Agincourt Community Services Association:
[Civic Awareness Project](#)

[Apathy is Boring](#)

- [Being Non-Partisan](#)
- [Election Readiness Toolkit Manual](#)
(Alberta examples)
- [Youth Engagement and Mobilization in the 2010 Toronto Municipal Election](#)

[The Art of the Possible](#), by Amanda Sussman

Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations:
[GR Tool Kit](#)

Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network:
[Advocacy and Social Justice: Measuring Impact](#)

[Campaign 2000](#)

Centre for Connected Communities:
[Building connected communities from the ground up and inside out](#)

Charity Village article: [Nonprofit advocacy during elections: Better to lie low or get active?](#)

City of Toronto: [Framework for Working with Community-based Not-for-Profit Organizations](#)

Civix: <http://civix.ca/main/> Student vote engaging youth in the electoral process

[Democratic Engagement Exchange](#),
Faculty of Arts, Ryerson University

[Don't think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate](#),
by George Lakoff

Elections Canada: [Inspire Democracy tools and resources](#)

[Elections Ontario](#)

- [Electoral districts](#)
- [Check, confirm or update voter registration information](#)

Independent Sector: [Beyond the Cause: The Art and Science of Advocacy](#)

Maytree: [How Government Works](#)

Minnesota Council of Nonprofits:
[Effective Advocacy](#)

Nonprofit VOTE: Engaging American nonprofits in voting and elections:
<http://www.nonprofitvote.org/>

National Council of Nonprofits: [Everyday Advocacy](#) and [Why Should Your Nonprofit Advocate](#)

North York Community House:
[Civic engagement](#)

ONN infographic: [Nonprofits Step Up](#)
• [More ONN infographics](#)

Ontario 4 All: [Take Action](#)

Samara Canada: [Vote Pop Up](#)
[Social planning councils](#)
[Social Planning Network of Ontario](#)

- [Social planning councils in Ontario](#)



WORKING TOGETHER TOWARDS

A STRONG AND RESILIENT NONPROFIT SECTOR

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