

Community Meetings: Turning Education Into Advocacy



In community meetings, a link is made between community education and advocacy. Meetings serve to educate immigrants about laws and policies that affect them and their communities, elicit their concerns, ideas and involvement in advocacy about the issue, and focus the message the community wants to communicate about the issue. They serve as a community's first step in developing and beginning to implement strategies to respond to issues that concern them. It is particularly effective when an immigrant service organization that provides education on immigration issues can partner with a community-based organizing organization that can get people involved. The family unification campaign ILRC conducted in partnership with the Sacramento Valley Organizing Project (SVOC) was initiated in response to feedback from community meetings in rural communities around Sacramento, California.

Potential clients will come to meetings that promise updates and explanations of high impact immigration provisions and free consultations with immigration attorneys. Utilizing a one-page screening sheet by attorneys and trained paralegals quick and accurate consultations can be provided at community meetings. A tool such as the screening sheet, will make it possible for many more legal workers to provide many more consultations, thus making it possible for organizations to sponsor more community meetings, which in turn:

- Are where advocates learn what issues are important to the communities they serve, and how the community believes they should be addressed;
- Provide opportunities for immigrants to tell their concerns and ideas and have them respected by their neighbors and advocates;
- Provide a critical mass of people thinking about an issue, which can energize them;
- Build working relationships between the community and organizations that participate;
- Offer many levels and types of involvement, making participation accessible as well as compelling;
- Bring together hundreds of people who might not otherwise be exposed to information and ideas conveyed there, because they respond to a real thirst in immigrant and refugee communities for information about laws and policies that affect them;
- Is the first step in building immigrant-based committees to address the community's concerns.

The basic elements of an effective community meeting include:

- Finding effective ways to encourage community members to attend, including:
 - Arranging and advertising free consultations with immigration attorneys;
 - Working to plan, publicize, host and conduct the meeting with potential community partners like sympathetic organizations, churches and other community leaders;
 - Outreach with compelling messages in places and media outlets that reach immigrants. Any meeting that provides information about current, high-impact immigration provisions, particularly about uniting families, is sure to draw many people.
- Reporting good news that resulted from a community advocacy effort;
- Telling immigrants about their rights;
- Publicizing an issue, law or policy that is important to the community, like a new immigration provision that benefits or burdens some community members;

- Encouraging community members to tell about how a law or policy affects them, their families, and/or their community;
- Determining with community members whether an issue, law or policy is important to the community, including whether it's important to publicize a new immigration benefit or whether a policy needs to be changed to benefit the community;
- Eliciting ideas about how to bring about a change in a law or policy;
- Emphasizing the importance of immigrants' role in the process of change;
- Building support for a campaign to publicize or advocate change in a law or policy;
- Determining with community members a range of concrete activities that participants can do to further the goals decided at the meeting, including letter writing, gathering petition signatures, making phone calls to decision makers, and participating in press conferences or delegations;
- Inspiring community members to participate in these concrete activities.
- Encouraging organizers and leaders in the community to help with a campaign;
- Enlisting a group of community members who will help get a campaign started, including planning a follow up meeting;
- Laying the groundwork to start an immigrant committee to address this issue and others that affect the community.

Elements of effective follow up meetings include:

- Key roles for community members and leaders;
- Training in key skills needed for a campaign, including writing a press release and planning and presenting a press conference, public speaking and organizing, holding a community meeting and negotiating.
- Clarifying issues and planning campaign.
- Planning future schedule of community meetings.

Some results from community meetings include:

- Successful, well-attended follow up meetings without the drawing power provided by legal consultations.
- The establishment of community- and parish-based organizing committees.
- Thousands of participants at events organized to address issues identified at community meetings.
- Meetings set up with local INS to address community concerns.
- Working relationships established with religious leaders.
- Thousands of letters and petition signatures gathered to address issues identified at community meetings.