

NATIONAL JUVENILE JUSTICE NETWORK

Influencing Candidates for Office

TIP SHEET

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Election season is filled with commercials about experience, character, and charisma. As advocates, it's our job to make sure that the issues don't get buried in the noise. With candidates vying for votes and endorsements, youth justice advocates are uniquely positioned to educate and engage both the community and the candidates themselves on the need for reform.

As there is always competition to get on candidates' issue radar, this toolkit serves to arm you with everything you need, regardless of whether you are thinking of running a multi-policy justice campaign, or are looking to raise the profile of youth justice in your upcoming election.

Before You Begin

As with every successful initiative, it is imperative to understand the "rules of engagement" before planning your advocacy. There is no reason why non-profit organizations cannot engage in non-partisan, candidate education activities. Issue education open to all candidates is just good advocacy. Still, whether you are new to election advocacy or an old pro, it is crucial to become familiar with your organizations' obligations before planning your work.

[For a quick check list of allowable election activities, check out Bolder Advocacy's dos and don'ts.](#)

Got the basics down? Now is time to craft your plan. As with most things, there is no foolproof recipe for influencing candidates. There is a wide array of recommended activities that pack powerful impacts, so commit to the activities that make the most sense for your organization's goals and capacity. Want to influence the media and have money to spare? Paid issue commercials may be for you. Want to influence the media on a dime? Pose a thought-provoking question at a televised candidate town hall. Maybe building community connections is more important to your organization; if so, hold community forums and invite local candidates. (If

you're looking to build connections in the youth community, make that a Twitter forum.) You get the idea -- the possibilities are endless! But don't get overwhelmed. We've included some questions below to help guide your thinking as you begin planning your election advocacy.

Some things to consider when planning your strategy:

- What election/candidates do you want to influence?
 - Federal: House, Senate, Presidential
 - State: House, Senate, Gubernatorial, Attorney General, Judicial Seats
 - Local: City Council, Mayor
- What are your organizational goals?
 - Garner support for a particular piece of legislation.
 - Grow your media list.
 - Increase member engagement.
 - Expand your social media following.
 - Build community support.
 - Are there particular localities where you're looking to grow your supporters?
 - Is there a population whose voice you'd like to engage in the debate? Youth? Families? People of faith? Tea Partiers?
 - Increase or deepen your organizational partnerships.
- Are there potential partners?
- How much time does your organization have to devote to an election effort?
- How much funding can your organization commit?
- What other resources do you have? What others might you need?

Perhaps the biggest planning consideration is timing. Check out the sample candidate outreach timeline, below, to tailor your advocacy plans to the demands of the election cycle.

Candidate Outreach Timeline

May: Make Youth Justice Part of the Political Conversation

Voters are on candidates' minds at this time, but issue platforms are still being determined. Elevate youth justice as an issue affecting constituents.

- Begin developing a candidate's guide to the issues.
- Disseminate information about youth justice issues.
- Identify and educate community volunteers.
- Ask candidate staffers for candidate's personal schedules to begin researching dates for outreach activities.
- Begin discussing with partners and candidate staffers potential public events (forums/debates).
- Draft candidate surveys.

- Need inspiration? Check out [Texas' multi-issue Smart on Crime Coalition Candidate Questionnaire](#).

May-June: Access Attitudes

Candidates are already thinking of what support they will need to carry the ballot in November. Show them your issue is one that will make or break their success.

- Conduct public polls/surveys to gauge voter opinions.
 - Short on funds? Utilize our [national polling summary](#) to make the case for public support or join allies to add key polling questions to an existing mass surveys.
- Enlist allies to attend candidate events and ask questions about their positions on youth justice issues.
 - First timers? Read the [American Friends Service Committee guide](#) to boost your bird-dogging skills.
 - For sample questions from other NJJN member organizations, check out [Arkansas](#), [Wisconsin](#) and [Ohio](#).
- Organize events and meetings for parents, youth, and concerned citizens to continue the conversation and engage interested individuals in direct outreach.
- Distribute candidate surveys.

June-July: Build Momentum

Youth justice is now a buzzword in candidates' ears — build the momentum to make it an issue no one can ignore.

- Encourage editorial boards, community newspapers, and local media outlets to focus on youth justice as a key issue in this campaign.
 - Rusty on talking with editorial boards at newspapers? Review some tips on [how to set up and run a successful meeting with an editorial board](#).
- Continue to disseminate your information throughout the community and encourage community members to have in-person meetings with any local candidates.
 - Don't send community members in blind. Be sure to arm them with your policy priorities and brief them on how to meet with candidates.
- Register voters concerned with youth justice issues.
 - For more on get-out-the-vote efforts, check out [Nonprofit VOTE](#) for webinars, guidance manuals, and sample materials.

August: Soften the Ground

By now, candidates' calendars are filling up fast. Begin to position your issue as critical to the election and get on candidates' event radars.

- Remember that guide to youth justice you began developing for candidates back in May? Now is the time to email/mail it to candidates and key staffers.
- Include a letter in the mailing proposing ideas for debates, issue forums, and town halls with all the candidates.
 - Never hosted an event with candidates? Check out guidance from [Rock the Vote](#).

- Invite candidates to a public education event on youth justice.
- Continue to disseminate information and engage candidates and community via social media.
 - For social media novices looking to grow your following, check out M+R’s webinar with NJJN on how to [“Boost your Legislative Advocacy with Social Media.”](#)

September: Event Season

November is closer than you think. September is a critical activity window. By October, many minds are made up, so use September as a critical education month.

- Host youth justice education events.
 - Use events as a way to collect signatures for issue petitions, register attendees to vote, garner media attention, and educate on the issues.
 - Can’t find a location where all your supporters can attend? Take to social media for a Twitter Town Hall or candidate forum.
- Meet the press.
 - September is all about positioning youth justice to be a priority for candidates. So keep the pressure up by meeting with newspaper editorial boards, prepping media spokespeople, placing high profile op-eds (editorials) and letters to the editor.
 - Don’t forget social media is an effective press tool. Tweet reporters and candidates directly, to increase the conversation’s profile.
- Continue to meet with candidates and their staff.
 - The field is likely winnowing, making September a great time for in-person meetings.

October: Keep it up!

October is the last stretch before Election Day. Hang in there and keep up the great work.

- Your get-out-the-vote effort should be in full swing. You’ve educated voters on the issue; now, make sure they take their voice to the polls.
- Media is your friend. Make sure youth justice is on people’s mind in the voting booth.

November: Mobilize

The hard work has almost paid off! Remind your youth justice voters to go to the polls and make their voices heard.

December: Welcome New Legislators

You thought your work was done, but the fun is just beginning! Be sure to welcome legislators, gearing them up to be strong youth advocates come session.

Making the Case for Youth Justice

Do you have a plan already, but you're looking for some background materials to strengthen your case to candidates that youth justice matters to voters? Still tweaking your message to the media? Check out the resources below to prepare your strongest argument yet.

Presidential Candidates:

- [Open Letter to Presidential Candidates on Youth Justice Reform](#)

Federal Legislators:

The following websites have helpful information on national juvenile justice issues:

- [Act 4 Juvenile Justice](#)
- [National Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Coalition](#) (NJJJPC)

See these resources for further information on national juvenile justice issues:

- [Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention \(JJJPA\) Snapshot](#)
- [#JJJPA Matters Action Center](#)
- [NJJJPC Recommendations for the 115th Congress \(2017\)](#)
- [NJJJPC Transition Letter to the Administration \(2017\)](#)

State Resources:

- [Sample State Candidate Questions from Ohio JJC](#) (2010)
- [Texas Smart on Crime Coalition Candidate Questionnaire](#) (2016)
- Multi-issue organization candidate guides: [Arkansas](#) (2012) and [Wisconsin](#)
- Legislative scorecards for sitting legislators: [Nebraska](#) (2014)
- [National Skills Coalition Toolkit for Influencing Gubernatorial Candidates](#) (2014)

Public Opinion Polling:

- [Youth First! National Poll](#) (2016)
- [Polling on Public Attitudes, Fact Sheet](#) (2016)

Messaging Guides:

- [Frameworks' Shifting Gears on Juvenile Justice](#)
- [Right on Crime Statement of Principles](#)