

## Cutting your issue: An interactive process you can use with your group

(100 minutes)

### Session goals:

- Develop group criteria for issue development
- Practice choosing an issue and refining issues into an advocacy initiative
- Practice setting initiative goals by group consensus

### ⚙ Overview: Defining An Issue (10 minutes)

You've gathered information from your community and you've identified assets and challenges to help inform your group's strategy. Now, you must take all that information and choose the best *issue* to work on. An issue is defined as a broad problem area -- like alcohol and tobacco billboards or teen pregnancy. There are always lots of issues to choose from. The best way to choose is from a criteria developed by group consensus that takes into account group and/or community values and interests (i.e., what's important).

Community values and interests are the ideal visions and the down-to-earth concerns we carry in our daily lives. They range from dreams of a safe, green world for all families to fears that the wrong kind of neighbors will move in. Advocates must factor in sentiment from both sides of the spectrum in order to identify issues that have meaning for the people with whom we work.

*Real vs. Ideal Interests.* Interests are usually divided into two categories: real interests and ideal interests. Ideal interests are usually articulated in lofty vision statements like, "a great future for all children." Real interests are those issues that have an impact on our daily lives. They are the company bottom line, our property values, our own children or jobs, to name just a few. Advocates often focus on ideal interests and pay little attention to real interests when choosing issues and framing their initiatives. A good issue provides your group with opportunities to encourage community visioning but is grounded in the real interests and concerns of people where they are.


**Trigger question:** If anyone in the group has experienced opposition in their advocacy work, did the opposition rely on arguments focused on real interests or ideal interests? What did you do?

*Other considerations in developing criteria.* All advocacy must operate within the framework of your organization's purpose and long range goals. It's important to compare your organization's goals with the goal for your issue. In your assessment you should ask yourself: what constitutes victory? How will this effort address the problem/have an impact on the quality of life of your clients/members and/or community?


Another important consideration is your organizational health and survival. Can you win? Or perhaps more importantly, can your organization afford to lose? Advocacy campaigns can strengthen organizations by building a sense of team spirit, expanding the leadership base, deepening the leadership's level of experience and expanding an organization's membership and contact base. Of course, your organization must bring something to the campaign in the first

place (i.e., membership, staff, money, reputation, facilities, press contacts, allies, etc.). Make a careful assessment of your assets as well as any liabilities you bring to the effort.

Exercise: Brainstorming Criteria (15 minutes)

 **Facilitator's Note:** Ask participants to brainstorm a criteria for choosing an issue. Trigger questions for brainstorming: What would get you to volunteer to work on an issue? What interests would a good issue address? What would an organization want to get out of working on an issue?

Record responses on chart paper and then quickly debrief responses to see what criteria emerged. If necessary refer to the sample criteria at the end of this section for additional ideas.

 **Overview:** Distilling an issue into an advocacy initiative (15 minutes)

Once you've identified the issue, you must refine that issue into an *initiative*. An initiative is a planned set of activities, with clear goals and objectives, that your group will undertake to address some part of the issue. No initiative can address an entire issue, but it should be well-defined, doable and have a clear impact on your issue.

An initiative plan has three main parts:

*Goal or what we want to accomplish.* The goal should be easily understood and should meet as much of a group's criteria as possible. A good goal requires cutting or shaping the issue into effective, doable action that engages community interest and support.

*Target or decisionmaking body with the power to enact the action sought.* The difference between education and advocacy efforts is that advocacy seeks concrete institutional changes. Having broad segments of the community as target populations are fine for outreach and health education, it simply doesn't work as well in advocacy initiatives. Every initiative must identify a clear target or decisionmaking body that can enact the institutional change required to achieve the goal. For example, when developing an initiative to ban alcohol and tobacco billboards near schools, the group must identify who best to make this happen. City council zoning ordinance? Billboard company policy? State law? Each potential decisionmaking body or target will mean different organizing strategies. Identifying the target is central to initiative planning because it focuses the rest of the outreach toward moving the target to action.

**Note:** Don't confuse target and allies you need in order to win. Primary targets are always the individuals or decisionmaking body that ultimately have the power to grant group goals. There are lots of folk to work with and convince along the way, but they are not targets. (See materials on assessing targets in the back of this section for more information).

*Objectives necessary to achieve the goal.* Once the group has identified the goal and target, they are ready to develop an action plan or set of objectives and timeline to make it happen.

Another example of adept "issue cutting" is found in the Baltimore Citywide Liquor Coalition's (BCLC) efforts to ban alcohol and tobacco billboards in most areas of Baltimore. Here again, themes emphasizing youth targeting and race and class exploitation proved effective in mobilizing communities -- with a local twist. The coalition successfully transcended apathy around tobacco control by linking billboards to "bread and butter" issues of neighborhood blight, bias and economic development.

When the Baltimore coalition chooses an issue they employ the WRIST test. For every initiative they consider, they ask is it:

Winnable?  
 Real?  
 Immediate?  
 Specific?  
 Tangible?

According to BCLC organizer Kevin Jordan, issue development is one of the most important steps in developing media and organizing strategy. It will determine your allies, your target and your power base. In fact, organizers who use the WRIST criteria have a saying that illustrates its importance: "If you want to make a fist, you've got to have a WRIST."

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## SAMPLE CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING AN ISSUE

- It will result in real improvement
  - Winnable and/or We build and are stronger even if we "lose"
- Something must be done and we are best positioned to do it
  - Specific and/or local
  - Short term victory possible
  - Community is concerned about it
- It will shift the balance of power for the better
  - It aligns with our goals and vision
  - We have the resources to see it through
- It will help build/strengthen our organization
  - It affects people's real interests
- It will open up opportunities/possibilities for more hope, better ideas
  - Brings us closer to our vision
  - It will help us fundraise
- It will help build leadership in our ranks

### **BONUS: Exercise: Identifying initiative goals (60 minutes)**

*Facilitators Note:* Ask participants to brainstorm issues on which they'd like to work. Let them know that they will vote on which group they will join. Set a minimum number for small group size so that the number of small groups will not exceed scheduling and facilitation capacity. If there's one facilitator and the time prescribed in this curriculum outline, there should be no more than five groups. In a large group of 30-40 people, minimum group size should be set at five people per group as small groups will vary according to interest.

(Other ways to develop small groups: Some facilitators avoid this part of the exercise all together by choosing four or five issues from participants' previous work and assigning participants into groups. Others ask participants to select issues in advance.)

Record the list of issues legibly on chart paper. After a few minutes of brainstorming, let participants know that it will take five (or other number) to make a group. Read all of the issues through once before the vote to make sure everyone understands each issue. Participants will vote once for the issue of their choice with a show of hands. Issues that have the minimum support required to be a group are set. Issues with no support are crossed out. Issues with less than five supporters go into the negotiation round.

In the negotiation round, review only those groups that have votes, but not enough to become a group. Anyone in a set group (with enough support) can not move except to move from a group that has more than enough support to a group in need of more members -- if they choose. Two groups with similar issues can combine, as long as combining helps them to meet the minimum support requirements. Others can simply opt to leave a "too small" group for a "set" group.

Once groups are set (and some exceptions can be made for the sake of time), groups will meet to develop an initiative goal for their issue. Each group should have a recorder. Groups are to develop a clear goal that is 25 words or less; has a clear target (i.e., institutional decisionmaking body or individual) and is easily understood. They have 25 minutes.

After small group time is up, participants should report out their initiative goal and target. Make sure to avoid cross talk and criticism between groups and keep questions focused on clarification. After all of the goals and targets are reported, take a few minutes to debrief, synthesize and land. This may take an additional

**BONUS: Assessing your targets**

List who/what institutions has/have the power to solve the problem and grant your demands? When possible, list specific names. Identify which is the most important target for achieving your policy goal.

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Who must you get to first before those listed above? Be specific:

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List strengths and weaknesses of each target:

Target	Strengths	Weaknesses

Assessing Your Targets (Continued)

Which targets are appointed? Elected?

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How do you have power/influence with them (as voters, consumers, taxpayers, etc.)?

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What is the self-interest of each?

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**Who would have jurisdiction if you redefined the issue (e.g., turned a tobacco advertising issue into a fair business practice issue)? Does this help you?**

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