

PETITION DRIVES 101:
BUILDING OUR BASE, SHOWING OUR STRENGTH

Petition drives are a good way to move your message into the streets, community centers, faith groups and small businesses where your supporters live and work every day.

In every community that's been hit hard by the AIDS epidemic, there's a deep reservoir of concern and interest in making a difference.

While many folks may still take a step back when you talk to them about HIV/AIDS, most will take a step forward towards you when you explain to them that simple actions can save lives in their own neighborhood and around the world - and that it's possible to actually end AIDS.

Petition drives can help you and your group tap into this well of concern and interest to build your base of support and demonstrate to candidates for

Tools at AIDSVote.org can help you assemble materials, develop a simple message, hit the streets, and put together armloads of signed petitions that will help your candidate meetings and bird-dogging have a powerful impact and build your list of supporters for the future.

AND you can probably raise enough money to help pay for the whole thing by asking petition signers for a small donation to support the effort!

It's a five-step process:

1. Assemble your materials
2. Train your group & sharpen your rap
3. Hit the streets
4. Do your paperwork
5. Show your strength

Here's all the details:

1. Assemble your materials

PETITION BOOKS

The AIDSVote website (www.aidsvote.org) includes a "Petition Drives" section where you can find

- * a generic petition blank for use all over the country;
- * state-specific petition forms that include statistics on HIV and AIDS cases and death rates for your state.

And we're also available to help you design petitions for specific races - just drop an email to info@aidsvote.org.

Download the petition blanks and assemble them into books for your campaigners to take into the streets and events.

If you can afford ten or twenty dollars upfront (remember, you'll make money back when you hit the streets!), any copy shop or Kinko's can set you up with tape or wire binding and a hard back that will make the petitioning process easier.

You'll want to make books of about 50 pages each, with either staples or bindings on the left side or the top.

TABLE MATERIALS

One way to carry out petitioning at an event or on the street is to set up a table as a "home base" and have your group members fan out into the crowd around the table.

The "Rally-in-a-can" section of www.aidsvote.org has signs in English and Spanish you can download and print out at home, the office, or at a copy shop or Kinko's (they print best on 11" X 17" paper or card stock) to post up around your table.

And our website also has one-pager downloads of the AIDSVote platform, demands & C2EA/AIDSVote principles that will help folks who are interested learn more about the issues.

T-SHIRTS, PINS OR HATS

When you've got a group together for petitioning, it's really effective if your team looks like a team.

If you can all wear t-shirts from your AIDS group, community organization, LGBT or faith group, it will be clear to passers-by that there's a coordinated group of

activists working together on something that might be worth paying attention to.

Hats and buttons work, too. You can download t-shirt and button designs from the rally-in-a-can section of www.aidsvote.org if you're interested in printing your own.

COLLECTION BINS

Petition drives can 'live off the land' by raising small amounts of cash donations from supporters. Make sure you've got some coffee cans, juice pitchers, baskets, or other containers you can use to ask folks who have signed the petition for "a small donation to keep the effort going."

If you're part of a nonprofit group, check with your boss or accountants about how and whether you might need to keep track of small cash donations. For volunteer or activist groups - actually for most street petitioners - you won't really be offering folks complicated tax-deductible donation opportunities. Rather, you're just trying to stay current with the copy shop or pay yourself back for the first round of Xeroxing.

2. Train your group & sharpen your rap

If you and your group are going to hit the streets to deliver your message, you'll need to nail down the message and practice before you start.

Street petitioning is a great way to help newcomers and veteran activists both to sharpen and shorten their discussion of issues in a way that will help regular people connect to your campaign.

DISCUSS THE ISSUES

Talking to people on the street or at events about public issues isn't easy for everyone - but it's really important to do. It's important to have a talk about the issues in the AIDSVote platform with your group to prepare for petition drives.

For example: what's "Universal Access" and where does it come from?

Answer: the United States and every other member of the United Nations agreed to move towards "universal access to prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010" for everyone living with or at risk for HIV - no matter what country they live in.

The 2001 and 2006 UN declarations are available on the AIDSVote website - they're a promise that everyone who needs AIDS drugs, effective HIV prevention, health care and support services like housing and case management will get them. The entire AIDSVote campaign is an effort to get our elected officials to keep that promise.

Our AIDSVote state petitions include HIV/AIDS statistics from each state - and you and your campaigners know the reality behind the statistics. Talk about what people with HIV need to survive, and what people at risk for HIV need to protect ourselves and our communities. That's what you're asking candidates for elected office to make sure is available.

DEVELOP A RAP

Help each campaigner develop a 'rap' - a sharp simple way to approach people and help them connect with our issues.

Examples:

"Did you know there's half a million people in the U.S. that need AIDS drugs but can't get them? Help us get the government to do something -- take a minute to sign the petition."

"Did you know that the United States government has promised to get AIDS treatment and prevention to everyone who needs it? Help us make them keep their promise - take a minute to sign the petition."

"Did you know young people here in our neighborhood aren't getting the tools we need to protect ourselves from HIV infection? We need our leaders to take a stand - take a minute to sign the petition."

"I'm living with HIV but there's a waiting list for AIDS drugs in our state. Did you know the U.S. government promised to provide treatment for everyone who needs it? Sign this petition so we can make them keep the promise."

BE READY TO TALK IN GREATER DEPTH - AND USE THE WEBSITE

Some people will want to sign the petition right away. And some will want to talk about the issues - or even debate. When you're on the street, you're in the mix, and anything can happen! Be polite; be ready to discuss the issues and your experience. And don't pretend you know everything - it's fine to ask folks to "check out our website for the details on that" and hand them a one-pager (demands, platform, etc.).

FEEL COMFORTABLE ASKING FOR MONEY

When you're doing street petitioning, you should make asking for modest donations part of the discussion. Practice asking for money with a simple "would you like to make a small donation to keep this going?" while holding out the coffee can or pitcher. A dollar, a few quarters, it all adds up.

WILL YOU USE MY NAME FOR ANYTHING?

Well, that's for you and your group to decide. If you're working to build a list of supporters and possible new activists, it might be smart to keep a list of your petition signers in a database.

Figure out what, if anything, you're going to do with your list - and then be honest with people about it when they ask. Here's a few examples of what you and your group might choose to do:

"We'll send you one email in a few weeks asking if you want any more information - it's up to you to decide if you'd like to get information on our issue campaigns."

OR

"We'll send you an email or drop you a line only when there's an important issue coming up - and we'll never give your email or phone number to anyone else."

OR

"We're trying to build a list of people in our area who care about AIDS - it's really important to show the government that people DO care."

Choose the right option for your group and your community and make sure you stick to the rules you set up and that you told people.

IT'S FREE SPEECH - FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHT TO PETITION

Most public streets and public areas are "free-speech" zones where there's little or no restriction on respectful, non-disruptive advocacy efforts like street petitioning.

Shopping malls and private developments have different rules - find out what they are. And of course, if you're hoping to do petitioning or outreach at an event or inside a community center, AIDS group, faith institution or LGBT center, you'll want to ask about access and arrange permission or rent a booth.

Ask for any fees to set up a booth at fairs or events to be waived - it's for a good cause!

3. Hit the streets!

Getting your group out into the community is fun and important, and it can help build support for all your advocacy work.

It might be smart to choose a friendly, high-traffic location for most of your petitioning - especially the first few times your group goes out. Commercial strips, college or university neighborhoods, and areas where you've seen other street petitioning going on are likely to be good bets.

Make sure you've got access to water (and gum or breath mints!) for your crew. Plan to touch base regularly during your work. Sometimes it's fun to set up teams if you've got enough folks - compete to see who can get the most signatures - and that's complete and LEGIBLE signatures!

PRINT CLEARLY PLEASE!

Is there a nice way to say "write your name so I can read it"? Figure out how to make sure your supporters fill the petitions out clearly and cleanly.

HOW CAN I HELP SOME MORE? SIGN UP NEW SUPPORTERS!

Some folks will want to do more than sign a petition - they may be ready to join your group, participate in advocacy, or donate time and money to the cause.

Make sure your campaigners can walk a new supporter over to the "home base" and get them connected with the group. If they don't have time to chat, but want to get involved, mark their petition with a star or post-it note and follow up!

LOOK FOR COVERAGE FROM THE MEDIA

Once you've hit the streets a couple times, you might be ready to try to get a story in the local paper or on television or radio.

AIDSVote petitioning makes for a good, straightforward, simple story:

- our community is being hit hard by HIV/AIDS
- people here and all over the world need the same thing: universal access to prevention, treatment, care and support
- we're carrying out a petition drive in our town to make sure every candidate for elected office works to provide universal access
- it's non-partisan - we're reaching out to EVERY candidate
- interesting stories about why each person got involved (I'm positive, my family member or friend is positive or died of AIDS, my student or faith group is involved, etc.).

Call a reporter for the local paper, TV or radio station and urge them to come on down.

POST YOUR EVENT TO THE AIDSVOTE BLOG

You can let activists around the country know what you and your group have accomplished by posting a note on the "Blog to End AIDS" at www.aidsvote.org.

A short summary of what you and your group are doing as part of your petition drive -- and a picture of your posse -- will get the word out nationwide and help other activists get up the nerve to take action.

It's easy and simple to do -- once you check out the instructions on how to blog, you can even do it by email or from your phone or PDA at the event!

4. Do your paperwork

After you've hit the streets and you're back home or in the office, you'll need to

- enter names into a database program or keep a copy of the petition books for yourself and your group
- make enough copies of the petition books to send or deliver a full set to EVERY CANDIDATE in the races you're targeting.

NONPARTISAN MEANS EVERYONE

You've got to make sure you send or deliver copies of your petition to all the candidates from each major party, Republican and Democrat, and to larger alternative parties or high-profile independent candidates if there are some in the election campaigns you're targeting.

5. Show your strength!

Now it's time to deliver those petitions, baby!

MEDIA COVERAGE AGAIN?

If you've got a good number (stacks on a table always look good, and you're sending them to several candidates, right?) you might check in with the media again to get a second story on how many signatures you got and who they're going to.

IN-PERSON DELIVERY

You and your petition crew will want to make big plans for personal delivery of your petitions to the candidates' campaign offices.

It's fun to do petition delivery as part of a candidate meeting (see the "candidate outreach" section of www.aidsvote.org for details).

Or you could just do a photo-opportunity and deliver the petitions to the front door of a campaign office and post the pictures on the Blog to End AIDS at www.aidsvote.org.

REGULAR POSTAGE

If you're sending 'em through the mail, it could be kind of expensive - use a third-class "book" rate and make sure you get a return receipt. But make sure they get in well before Election Day!

For more information and to see what other groups around the country are doing to make HIV/AIDS a big issue in this year's elections, check out www.aidsvote.org and the AIDSVote "Blog to End AIDS"

"Petition Drives 101" was created by Housing Works, which is a supporter of the Campaign to End AIDS and www.aidsvote.org.