

## **BIRD-DOGGING 101:**

### **Use Your Voice to Get Answers from Policy Makers**

To win effective new policies and funding for people with HIV, we have to find the person who has the power to give us what we need and make our demands.

Often, we work very hard to reach decision makers through intermediaries like their staff or the media. We make phone calls or write letters that are (hopefully) answered by policy maker's secretary or legislative assistant or special advisor. Calls, letters and lobby visits to staff are very important and necessary work.

However, we should take every opportunity we have to **directly** reach policy makers, especially at public appearances like campaign events

*Bird-dogging is the name given to the activist tactic of attending public appearances in order to win new policies from politicians. This direct interaction between activists and decision makers rarely happens in Washington. It is easy to have a big impact through the simple act of bringing five people to an event, working together to raise your hands and ask questions that provoke an answer from the target politician.*

The ALARM list is an e-mail network used by over 1000 AIDS activists across the country who have been trained to "birddog" candidates to get the issues and voices of people with AIDS heard by decision makers. (Send a note to [pdavis@healthgap.org](mailto:pdavis@healthgap.org) to join this list.)

Bird-dogging takes a little planning - here's how to do it.

#### **1. Get an event.**

**CALENDARS:** Gathering information on where candidates and elected officials are going to be is important work - make it a priority.

You can learn about upcoming public events by getting on party and candidate e-mail lists, join the list serves of campus democrats and republicans, monitor the "political futures" column of "The Note" on ABCnews.com (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/TheNote>). Often, local media reports will be the first to learn of specific events.

**CALLS:** During campaign season, you can just call the campaign offices and say "Hi, I have a few friends and we are wondering what are the next 3-4 opportunities to see Senator So-and-so?"

**EVENT FORMAT:** Ask the event organizers about the event: how long is it, when do the doors open, do you need a ticket and where can you get one,

and, most importantly, is there a question and answer period. National groups will often be able to help with this work also.

ACCESS: Sometimes you need a ticket. These almost always go quickly. Other times, if the tickets are gone or the event is a fundraiser, you can volunteer for the event to get in for free. It is not illegal to ask questions or even shout questions at politicians - even if you are a volunteer!

THERE IS HELP!: Be ready to act quickly and on short notice - and be ready to reach out to C2EA AIDSVote, HealthGAP or the ALARM email list (see below) to get help.

## **2. Get a posse.**

It can be intimidating to go to a campaign appearance by yourself, no question. So bring a posse!

Every single person can have a big impact when you're bird-dogging. But five or six people armed with polite questions can completely alter the vibe of a question and answer period and win new commitments the target did not know they were going to make!

It is best to bring a group with you so you are better able to get your questions asked and answered and so that you can back each other up.

## **3. Get a plan.**

It is very important to make a plan in advance with your posse. You cannot wing it successfully, and you cannot really just tell your team what to do and expect them to do it.

A few important things: Write your questions in advance - even the most experienced birddoggers sometimes stumble over their questions when the mike is on and the cameras are pointing at you. Many regular folks who are just interested in issues and who are not working with a team to win something will write their questions before asking them. (See below for help on writing good questions).

A posse of five to ten activists might write just two or three questions and then be ready to follow up when and if the target gives an incomplete answer.

Birddoggers have been successful at large and small events simply by speaking with the decision maker on the way to the stage, or during the handshake line after the event. (See below for more on handshakes).

If the event is large, like a campaign rally with thousands of people, AIDS activists have been very successful by holding up medium-sized posterboards with clear, short questions they slipped behind their shirts and into their pants, and/or shouting a chant ten or fifteen times.

If you're going to chant, one person will need to volunteer to cue the chanting at the appropriate time, and the group will have determined in advance how long to chant.

**PRACTICE:** Especially if you will be chanting or shouting questions, it is very important to make sure you can make yourself heard. Even for simple questions, practice with team can make our efforts stronger and avoid mistakes.

#### **4. Get good seats.**

Good seats are as close as you can get to the very front row and/or near microphones placed in the aisles.

It is important to make eye contact with the decision maker and the staff who decide whether to call on you or hand you the mike. Applauding wildly and shouting supportive things during the speech can make it much more likely that you will be called on.

Arrive early - usually about an hour early. If there are several people in your team who are prepared to ask questions (and of course there are!) then spread out. People sitting next to each other will not be called on. This is part of why it is important to have a plan in advance and to practice.

#### **5. Get your hand up first and fast.**

Most people will wait for the second or third question to raise their hand, and some only raise their hand half way. These people will rarely get called on.

However, for some reason, if you are the first, fastest, highest person to get their hand in the air, you will almost always get called on! Raise your hand before questions are called for - raise your hand in the middle of the speech, and raise your hand before the candidate finishes asking for questions.

We have a job to do, which is to get an answer from the decision maker, and our mission requires us to get our questions asked. See below for help on constructing powerful questions.

#### **6. Get a handshake - and a photo!**

After the formal parts of an event, there is almost always a handshake line. Anticipate where the handshake line is going to be (usually near the stage) and try to bring your team to get a handshake.

The handshake line is another chance to ask the target a question, in public, and usually near reporters. One important tactic: don't let go of her hand until you have your answer! Politicians are used to this,

and they will never pull away. If there are a few of you, it can help to crowd around the candidate to prolong the handshake for as long as necessary until they have said "yes" to your team. If there are more than 4 or 5 in your team, you can get them twice!

Politicians - even the most powerful - are also suckers for posed photographs. Getting a photo of you and your posse with the target after the questions have been answered - or while the questioning is going on - is a good way to extend discussion and/or seal the deal.

## **7. Get quoted.**

After the event, Go up and talk to the press and get them to cover your questions and the politician's statement.

The press will not come to talk to you - you've got to go to them. But they will be interested in what you have to say. Prepare your quote just like you prepared your question.

Important: when you're talking with a reporter, you'll want to keep the discussion to what YOU want to say about your issue, and not on other, less important items.

If a reporter asks you, "What did you think about Senator so-and-so's speech on Social Security?" or "How do you like the Senator's new hairpiece?" it's perfectly appropriate to dodge the question completely and respond with your quote instead ("I think the important thing here today was that local groups won a clear commitment from the Senator to support \$650 million to hire new health care workers that will save the lives of people living with AIDS in Africa").

Reporters are accustomed to people ignoring questions, and they have some obligation to report on what the general public thinks at the campaign appearances, so be sure to give them only what you want your quote to say.

## **8. Get a report out.**

Birdoggers are networked across the country in many different states - but it only works if we keep each other appraised of our efforts and progress.

Our collective voices can be much more powerful if you know that someone will follow up on your question to a Senator or Representative three days later and ten states away. For example: "Senator Aimlow, in New Hampshire last week, you told a group of social workers that the Global AIDS Fund didn't need more money from Congress because other countries haven't paid. Were you saying that we should hold people with AIDS hostage in Africa because the U.S. hasn't paid our own fair-share? Will you lead a fight for \$1.2 billion for the Global Fund next year?"

After you birddog, send a note to the ALARM list so that activists can have each other's back, and track our progress towards victory.

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## **9. Repeat!**

## **Ingredients of a Good Question**

The goal of questions should be to pin the candidate down and make them give you a REAL answer rather than just rhetoric. We want the candidate feel like the best option is to meet your demands.

We should recognize that everyone in the room might not know much about global HIV/AIDS, and that reporters and candidates will need a little help.

A good question is

- about 15-25 seconds long
- constructed like a small narrative: problem, personal interest, solution and a demand
- accompanied by a specific closed-ended "yes" or "no" question.

The demand is the most important ingredient - a good question contains the answer!

EXAMPLE:

"Senator Amlow, there are 40 million people living with HIV worldwide.

When I visited Kenya with my church group last year, I was struck by how US AIDS programs are really struggling on the ground in that country because of the lack of trained health workers to meet the challenge of this horrible epidemic.

As you know Senator, experts estimate that we need serious new funding to adequately address the crisis shortage of health workers we need to fight AIDS in Africa -- at least \$650 million for a start now, scaling up to \$2 billion in 2011.

Will you lead a fight for \$650 million in the coming fiscal year?"

**A. The opening 'intro' should grab people and make them care about your question.**

\* AIDS facts: 40 million people with AIDS, 30-40% infection rates in some countries, a death every 10 seconds, and 1 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S.

**B. Include a personal sentence about why you care.**

\* My studies in Africa / I am living with HIV/AIDS; my relative or friend is living with or died of HIV/AIDS/ my church mission to Africa

**C. Make sure the answer to the question is in the question.**

\* Find and use supporting facts and external citations - i.e. "Experts from UNAIDS and the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health state that the US fair share of a credible response to global AIDS is \$30 billion by 2008."

\* These facts and citations are hints or prompts to the candidate about what they should answer.

**D. Choose closed-ended YES or NO questions when you want a definite answer.**

\* Make your question even more powerful by invoking or inviting comparisons to the opponent, i.e. the wrong answer is identified with the opponent, or implying that the candidate should do better than their opponent.

**E. Choose open-ended questions when you want to challenge a candidate or official to do better.**

Open-ended questions can engage both candidates in a race to see who will deliver the better results for people with AIDS by inviting them to challenge their rivals on specific AIDS policy failures or successes.

We should be careful not to let policy makers off easy, though!

\* Ask them about specifics of their AIDS plan and how it compares with their opponent's initiatives to fight AIDS.

\* Ask them to describe how their opponent's plan is a failure and how - specifically - theirs will be better.

*"Bird-dogging 101" was created by HealthGAP, which is a supporter of the Campaign to End AIDS and [www.aidsvote.org](http://www.aidsvote.org).*