

**The Medical Cannabis Advocate's Handbook**

# **ORGANIZING TURNOUT AT CIVIC MEETINGS**



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Civic meetings are an important venue for medical cannabis advocacy. We do a lot of work out of the public spotlight, but public meetings are a chance to articulate our message to elected officials and the community at large. Whether you are raising the issue on its own or chiming in on a legislative proposal, it is always a good idea to have a respectable showing at civic meetings. Turning out a crowd at City Council, Boards of Supervisors, or other public meetings is one of the most important strategies a grassroots organizer can use.

Public shows of support at civic meetings do not just happen spontaneously. If you have ever seen labor union members, parents, or housing advocates en masse at a meeting of the City Council or State Legislature, you can be sure that someone worked hard to make that happen. Grassroots organizers try to turn out crowds because it makes an impact. Elected officials and the media are more likely to take an issue seriously if they understand that a large number of community members care enough to come to a public meeting. This can have a dramatic impact on the decisions they make.

As a medical cannabis advocate, you will almost certainly need to organize or participate in turning out a crowd for a civic meeting at some point. It can be hard. Even those who believe in safe access have other priorities, including work and family obligations. You will also find that some potential supporters are reluctant to participate in public meetings because they fear reprisals. Sometimes you will change their minds. But

even if you do not, there are many people who are able and willing to be part of a crowd supporting medical cannabis.

There are some basic steps you can take to turn out a crowd for civic meetings. How many people you can motivate depends on the lead time you have, the number of supporters, and how easy you make it to participate in a meaningful way. The most important thing you can do to mobilize a crowd is to build a community of supporters. You may find kindred spirits in your friends, neighbors, church members, or social groups. You may also network with potential supporters by organizing or participating in grassroots political groups, especially local ASA chapters. And finally, you may turn to traditional and online media, including an array of social networking sites, to find people like you who will show up for public meetings.

When you are ready to mobilize a crowd to make a difference, follow these simple steps:

- 1. Find out when and where.** Check the agenda of your City Council, Board of Supervisors, State Legislators or other body to find out exactly when and where the meeting is happening. Participants will be discouraged if they have to dig for the time, date, and address themselves. Always clearly say what, when, and where in announcements about civic meetings. Think about special parking issues or other things people will need to know.
- 2. Determine exactly what is happening.** Medical cannabis may be a general topic of conversation at a civic meeting, or



there may be a specific question or vote before the group. Ask meeting organizers or staff if there is a specific agenda. Are they voting on a resolution, recommendation, policy, or ordinance? If so, get a copy of any printed materials so you can be clear if you support, oppose, or have general comments. Always speak to the specific issue being discussed at the meeting. Getting off topic wastes your time and frustrates listeners.

**3. Make an announcement or invitation for supporters.**

Write a short and clear event announcement. Be sure to include the specific what, when, and where information, and also be sure to tell those you are inviting why the event is important and what you want them to ask. Be ready with printed announcements to pass out in person and a digital version you can email and post online.

**4. Publicize the event.** Distribute announcements at medical cannabis facilities or other appropriate locations, post the information online, send emails, and use social networking sites to promote the event. Don't forget to publish the event in community calendars in local print and online media. And of course, recruit your like-minded friends to spread the word. Nothing is more effective than a face-to-face invite.

**5. Meet early.** Ask your supporters to meet early to plan the event—maybe even a day or two before the meeting. You can use this advance time to agree on talking points and messages. You may also want to discuss and prepare for other strategies. Will you all dress in the same color, wear ribbons, or carry signs? Be sure everyone is on the same page for maximum effect. Check with the organizers or staff in advance if you plan to take signs or any other visual aids to a public meeting. These are sometimes prohibited in government meetings.



**6. Bring handouts:** Many advocates may show up without a clear idea of what is on the agenda. Bring a handout that has information about what is on the agenda, sample talking points, and next steps (date and location of next ASA chapter meeting) .

**7. Arrive early.** It is important that you are there to organize and greet your supporters if you are part of the team organizing a turn out. Leave plenty of time for parking and finding the right room.

**8. Be friendly and respectful.** Others may disagree with you. Always be friendly and respectful to those with differing opinions and be careful to follow the meeting rules. You will alienate potential supporters if you are rude or disruptive. That is the opposite of what you are trying to accomplish!

**9. Collect contact information.** Have a sign-in sheet for those who support your position on medical cannabis. This will make follow up for future meetings easier. Get names, emails, addresses, and telephone numbers. Time permitting, you may also want to send a note or email thanking participants. This makes people feel good about their decision to participate and builds rapport among community members. Share this information with ASA so that we can help you build a strong local base of support.

Sometimes, you may have the opportunity to bring experts to your civic meetings. These could include doctors, scientists, legal experts, and other community leaders who may offer a unique and authoritative perspective on the topic being discussed. If you don't know experts, use online resources or coalition building tools to make these contacts. It is a good idea for you talk to these experts before the meeting to make sure they are on the same page as advocates. You may need to provide them with background materials in advance.

Do not be discouraged if turn out at your first civic meetings is not as big as you hoped. It takes time to build a grassroots base. Others will see your early efforts and jump on board for future events. Elected officials and others at civic meetings will notice, too. The voice of an individual advocate is valuable, but decision makers are often more easily influenced by many voices. They know that ten people at a civic meeting represent a much larger base of support that is not present. Imagine what they think when you turn out 100 supporters!

Turning out a crowd is a great step in advocating for medical cannabis, but remember that follow up is just as important. You can use the attention your group gets to suggest solutions for medical cannabis and build support in the community. Do not be afraid to talk with the media at and after a civic meeting or to engage community members who have questions or concerns. The goal is to influence people after all. Coupled with the other tools and skills in the book, you can use civic meetings as an important part of your

local medical cannabis campaign.

**Resources for Promoting a Civic Meeting:**

- Talk to friends, loved ones, church members, etc.
- Distribute invitations at medical cannabis facilities, etc.
- Join or start a local ASA chapter
- Use the ASA Discussion Forums—[www.AmericansForSafeAccess.org/punbb](http://www.AmericansForSafeAccess.org/punbb)
- Facebook.com, Twitter.com, MySpace.com, and other social networking sites
- Free calendars online or in newspapers
- Email your friends and ask them to spread the word
- Put up posters (with permission, of course)
- Call in to talk radio shows
- Pass out flyers in public places (get permission on private property)
- Ask to set up an information table at public events
- Use paid advertising, if possible
- Contact ASA at [info@safeaccessnow.org](mailto:info@safeaccessnow.org) or toll free (888) 929-4367