WHAT IS A MOVEMENT?

Where there is a sufficient social movement of self-reliant communities, there can be political change. There must be political change. —Jerry Brown

You have almost certainly heard the phrase "medical cannabis movement," but have you stopped to consider what a movement is? And what it means to be a part of a "grassroots" movement? In terms of community organizing, a movement is simply a group of people who come together consciously, at their own cost, to accomplish a goal. The definition we use at ASA is that a movement is a group of people who come together to change outdated laws concerning medical cannabis, while providing support for those who are harmed by existing law.

A strong and healthy movement must be led from the ground up. The term "grassroots" refers to a movement that is created and driven by the concerns of a community. This differs from political movements orchestrated from the top-down by politicians, political parties, or special interest groups. At ASA, we see ourselves not necessarily as leaders of the grassroots medical cannabis movement, but more as the custodians of the movement.

Everything we do, from our support programs and publications to our networks and trainings, is geared to help build the movement and accomplish its goals.

Some people say that a movement is not a movement until others outside the group know it exists. This is a good point. The goal of organizing is to change minds and laws, so grassroots movements must reach out to the broader public. But all movements start small and local. There is a growing national movement for medical cannabis, but there may not be any sign of it in your community. It is up to you and your like-minded neighbors to plant the seeds and grow the movement locally.

Don't be discouraged. It only takes one passionate and committed grassroots activist to get the ball rolling.

Joining or starting a local ASA Chapter is an important step in building your local movement. ASA has tools to help you be effective at the local and national level. If you work with another closely-related organization already, you may decide instead to become an ASA Affiliate. Affiliates are other organizations that partner with ASA to achieve common goals. These could be local chapters of drug policy reform groups, condition-based advocacy organizations, or other groups concerned about medical cannabis (see the "Working with ASA" section of this chapter for more information).

WHAT DOES A MOVEMENT LOOK LIKE?

A genuine grassroots movement springs from the community and the most important thing that distinguishes it from traditional, top-down politics is that the values, goals, and ultimate authority come from the participants of the movement. Unlike political parties, movements are member-driven and highly democratic. Movement leaders do not tell the grassroots organizers what to do or believe. Instead, they listen to the community and look to the members for solutions.

Having a bottom-up focus will protect the integrity of the grassroots medical cannabis movement. If custodians like ASA are accountable to their grassroots base, we will be less likely to tolerate politically-expedient compromises that do not address patients' needs. After all, the medical cannabis movement

Social movements are at once the symptoms and the instruments of progress. Ignore them and statesmanship is irrelevant; fail to use them and it is weak. —Walter Lippmann

For more information, see www.AmericansForSafeAccess.org or contact the ASA office at 1-888-929-4367 or 510-251-1856.
exists to get medicine to patients and support the victims of bad laws. A clear focus on that mission helps us set priorities and make decisions not governed by politics, public relations, or economics.

Because a grassroots movement springs from the community, it also looks like the community. Members should mirror the community at large in age, gender, ethnic background, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc. Diversity matters if the movement hopes to speak for all medical cannabis patients in the community. We need everyone’s input to get across the big picture. Unfortunately, not everyone has the time, resources, or background to participate equally. Grassroots organizers must be aware of how their movement looks in relation to the community, and reach out to under-represented populations whenever possible.

The impact of the criminal justice system on our community creates another level of responsibility for our movement. We have brothers and sisters who are not only suffering because of a lack of access, but also entangled in the judicial system at every level. It is our responsibility as a movement to keep the national spotlight on these individuals as well as offer emotional support. This is why we organize raid responses, court support, and POW support campaigns (see the "Being A Movement" chapter).

And finally, a grassroots movement looks civil. Your behavior to one another and the community at large is what will distinguish a movement from a mob. Resist the temptation to be exclusionary or hostile. Welcome those who share your core beliefs and want to work in goodwill with you. You do not have to agree about everything inside a movement. But infighting, accusations, and rivalries will bring unwanted negative attention, splinter medical cannabis supporters, and make everyone weaker.

Part of your work as a medical cannabis activist will be to build and work with the grassroots movement in your community and nationwide. As custodians, ASA can help provide you with the tools you need to build the powerful grassroots base that will foster real change. You have a role in being sure that this grassroots movement grows, stays true to its roots, and acts like a mature social change movement.

There’s something I know about you that you may not know about yourself. You have within you more resources of energy than have ever been tapped; more talent than has ever been exploited; more strength than has ever been tested; and more to give than you have ever given. —John Gardner

For more information, see www.AmericansForSafeAccess.org or contact the ASA office at 1-888-929-4367 or 510-251-1856.