Essential Advocacy Toolkit

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO EDUCATE, ORGANIZE, AND MOBILIZE.

Hold the United States accountable. Advocate for policies that advance human rights, peace, and social, environmental, and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean!
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INTRODUCTION

Human rights across Latin America and the Caribbean are at risk. And U.S. foreign and immigration policy has the power to tip the scales for better or worse.

U.S. policy at its best has encouraged Colombia’s historic peace accords and supported U.N. anti-corruption efforts in Guatemala. U.S. policy at its worst created and maintained the longstanding and unjust trade embargo and travel ban on Cuba and is promoting cruel immigration policies that jeopardize the rights of migrants and asylum seekers at our southern border. The United States has all too often overthrown elected governments, promoted dictators and war, and turned a blind eye to human rights violations in Latin America. But with concerted action by U.S. social movements and civil society groups, our country can do the right thing. That’s why we need dedicated activists, like you, to hold our country accountable by advocating for U.S. policies towards the region that advance human rights, peace, and social, environmental, and economic justice.

We created this toolkit to empower you to take action. We know you care about human rights in Latin America (that’s why you’re reading this!), and we want to help you channel that passion into effective advocacy.

This toolkit will provide suggestions for how you can educate, organize, and mobilize your community for just U.S. policies towards Latin America. You’ll learn best practices for local organizing, engaging your elected officials, and using social media to raise awareness. While this toolkit is created with a focus on human rights in Latin America, the tactics and techniques can be expanded to any policy issue, international or domestic.

Put this toolkit to work. Put your members of Congress to work to support human rights across Latin America and the world.
LOCAL ORGANIZING

You have the power to catalyze change from your hometown. By coordinating people and organizations in your communities, you can inspire others to join your cause and pressure your members of Congress to change U.S. policy towards Latin America for the better. Local organizing is critical to educating the people around you, as well as your elected officials. Policymakers should reflect the values of their constituents. That includes YOU.

So, whether you’re looking to form a new group or strengthen an already-established one, this section of the toolkit will give you ideas and tips on how to organize to spread awareness and communicate with your fellow constituents and Congress more effectively.

[If you’re an individual looking for ways to get involved by yourself, skip ahead to the Ideas for Action section!]

SHOULD I FORM A GROUP?

Before you pour all your energy into forming a new group, look around and see what’s already out there! If an activist group or network—say, your local faith group or immigrant-led organization—is already advocating and educating around human rights in U.S. foreign and immigration policy, there’s no need to start from scratch. Join those groups and help amplify their efforts.

If you really can’t find a group already focused on the issues you care about, take matters into your own hands! Keep in mind that depending on your representative’s district, it may make sense to have more than one activist group.

To start a group, you just need two things—a group of people who are nearby, ideally in your same congressional district, and a strong commitment from each person to devote time to the group’s efforts. That’s it! If you have these two things, or you think you can find them, go on to the next section.

There is no need to start from scratch!

There are plenty of pre-existing groups you can tap into to build up your own activist group.

Look around at what you’re already involved in—church ministries, workout groups, retirement homes, you name it—and see if that can be the foundation for your new subgroup.
How to Form a Group

So, you’ve decided to organize a group that’s committed to ensuring human rights in U.S. foreign and immigration policy. Congratulations! It is much needed work. Now, be resolute and committed. Understand the time and effort this long-term endeavor will take to make it a success and embrace it. And don’t feel like you have to work on all the issues at once. Pick one or two your group feels passionately about to start.

Your group may be a subgroup of an existing activist group or it might be a new effort—it really depends on your specific context. Start where people are: if you’re in a group with a lot of people who have similar interests, begin there. If not, find out where similarly-minded people are and go to them. The most important thing is that you are putting LOCAL pressure on your members of Congress. You represent the constituency that is going to hold them accountable on these important issues.

Get some help! Find cofounders

Leading a group is a big endeavor. And you don’t and shouldn’t have to do it alone. Identify a few additional co-founder who are interested in leading, participating, and recruiting others. Ideally, these are people in different social networks from you and with different backgrounds so that you can maximize your reach. Some good ways to find potential cofounders and members are by attending conferences, events, and activities hosted by groups or organizations with similar values or interests that overlap with yours.

Expand! Connect with potential members

Email and call your contacts. Post on social media and messaging boards. Say that you’re starting a group of constituents of Congressperson “X” that is dedicated to ensuring a human rights focus in U.S. foreign and immigration policy in Latin America. Ask people to contact you to sign up. Make sure you include next steps on how to get involved in your messages.

You could also post on your social media and have your network share the post to help you connect with new people. In addition, try posting flyers in places such as your local library, place of worship, community center, or coffee shop.

Meet! Hold an in-person kickoff meeting

Start with the basics. Collectively decide on a name, principles, roles for leadership, a way of consistently communicating, rules of engagement, and a strategy for your member of Congress. In general, converting interest into action can be difficult—only about 50 percent of the people who have said they are definitely coming will end up coming. So, aim high!
Stay focused! Manage the meeting

Keep the focus on your core issue—U.S. foreign and immigration policy towards Latin America. Other attendees may have other ideas or related concerns. And, while it is important to affirm those feelings, you don’t want to let the group spiral. Help them redirect their energy into the core focus of the group to develop a joint plan of action. A good way to do this is to have a printed agenda. As the last point on the agenda, always have dedicated time for members to bring up other issues, concerns, or comments. This will help you stay on track and steer the conversation.

Name it!

Good names include the geographic area of the group so that it is clear you are rooted in community. Good names also include buzzwords and tell the public what your focus is and what your group is all about. The key is to keep it simple, specific, and relevant.

Here are some examples:

- Rockford Rapid Response Network for Immigrants
- Twin Cities Cuba Engagement Crew
- Solidarity with Defensores, Bay Area Group

Delegate! Volunteer for roles

Figure out how to divide roles and responsibilities among members of your group. Assigning specific tasks to specific people creates a sense of accountability and helps ensure that no task gets overlooked or forgotten. It also makes members feel personally involved and makes them more likely to keep up their engagement. This can and should be adapted to your group’s own needs, but in general you probably want:

- One to two people in charge of overall group coordination
- A media/social media person
- One to two people tracking congressional offices’ schedules and events
- A fundraising person

In addition to the roles above, ask group members how they want to contribute to advocacy efforts. No contribution is too small. Examples of other tasks are:

- Attend events

TIP

People are more likely to help out if you ask them for something specific.

Don’t simply ask, “Can you help out?” Instead, try asking, “Can you drop flyers off at the community center?” or “Can you pick up the megaphone from Amy’s house?”
Record events
Ask questions
Make calls
Host meetings
Take notes
Table for your group
Engage on social media
Write a letter to the editor
Write letters and emails
Design flyers [See sample flyers in the Appendix!]

Communicate! Keep up the interactions

Do what works best for your group. If they prefer email, stick to email or make a Google Group, which is a forum that sends updates to your email. If they like social media, make a Facebook Group. There are also more secure or encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp or Signal that can easily be downloaded to a smartphone.

And, make sure it’s clear how often and for how long your group wants to meet. Make sure these time commitments are feasible with the scope of topics your group is trying to take on.

Throughout all of the group’s interactions, make sure there is a clear decision-making process and space for everyone to communicate their ideas and give feedback!

Expand! Make your group visible, make it bigger

You’ve got your core, but you can always use more! Recruit new members. There’s no reason to stop growing and strengthening your activist group once you’ve gotten it off the ground. Here are a few ways to reach more than just the immediate network of your members.

- **Displays.** In student centers, post offices, libraries, grocery stores, or community centers you can post bulletin board notices with information about your group, how to get involved, and general information about the issues you work on. Remember to put visible contact information on every flyer or display!
- **Social Media.** Create a Facebook Group or Page, Twitter profile, and accounts on other platforms. Social media is a great way to spread your work and message to a wider audience. [Go to the Social Media Activism section to learn more!]
- **Educational Events.** Organize talks, discussion forums, guest speakers, and video screenings. Advertise widely. Use these events as opportunities to share your message and mission as well as to recruit new members!
- **News Outlets.** Have your local or campus (if you live by a university) newspaper, magazine, radio, or news station do a piece on your group or an issue that your group works on. Maybe even consider taking out an ad. If you host a speaker at your group
meeting, make sure to alert local media outlets and invite a reporter to cover the event. Read the papers so that you can respond if a Latin America issue is covered, like letters to the editor. [See the Write a Letter to the Editor section!]

- **Tabling.** Table at community center events, student centers, farmers markets, or any other public gathering at your community. Your group can publicize its current work, announce upcoming events, recruit new members, and raise funds by tabling. Make sure volunteers have the information necessary to answer general questions about the organization’s work. Have banners, flyers, a sign-up sheet, and action opportunities available at the table. While you want to get your name and cause out there, be respectful of and understand that not everyone shares your views or may want to join your group.

**Adapt it! Find a variation that fits your community**

Here are some other types of communities that shouldn’t be overlooked:

**ONLINE GROUPS**

We’ve focused a lot on in-person organizing with nearby members of your community. **But what if you can’t seem to find others near you with the same values, goals, and commitment? Go online!** More and more, social media isn’t just a place for you to share a picture of your dog or what you ate for lunch—it’s a place becoming a hub for social movements and grassroots organizing. While there are many social media platforms, for beginners, we recommend using a Facebook Group. Why? Many people already have an account which makes it easy for them to click + Join and start getting involved ASAP. [See the Social Media Activism section for more information!]

**STUDENT GROUPS**

If your school or campus does not already have a student group that works for just and humane U.S. policies toward Latin America, now is the time to start one! Student organizations can host speakers, organize rallies and campaigns, and distribute information to the school and university community—efforts that help raise awareness of the issues and get others involved. College students also represent a significant, but often overlooked, voting base. Your group can organize visits with your members of Congress in their district or state offices, letter or email writing campaigns to representatives and senators, and other activities.

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**Some advertising, events, and ideas need a little seed money.**

And, while the purpose of your activist group is not to bring in the big bucks, you can see the Fundraise for Your Cause section for ideas. You can either adapt them or take a portion of the proceeds to fund the group’s activities.
Each university has its own set of rules and regulations—so make sure to check with yours. Many groups start out informally through grassroots organizing. If your university has a laborious process to become official, this may be the best way to start. At some schools, officially forming a group can be as simple as bringing together a few dedicated individuals and filling out a registration form. Others might require you to identify a professor as your group advisor for official recognition (and sometimes access to school funds). After that, you’re ready to start organizing!

You can follow many of these same pointers if you are a high school student. Reach out to a trusted teacher if you’d like their support and perhaps use their classroom to meet at lunch or after school. It’s also a good idea to engage with other pre-existing student groups to learn how they got started, find ways to collaborate, and raise your group’s profile.

FUNDRAISE FOR YOUR CAUSE

Some advertising, events, and ideas need a little seed money. And, while the purpose of your activist group is not to bring in the big bucks, here are some ways to fundraise:

- **Online.** Set up a fundraiser on sites like Facebook, GoFundMe, Indiegogo, or Bonfire.
- **Sales.** Raise money through car washes, dog-walking, face-painting, bake sale, or yard work in the community.
- **Merchandise.** Design a logo for your organization and sell t-shirts, mugs, buttons, bumper stickers, and magnets.
- **Auctions, Raffles, and Garage Sales.** Ask individuals and merchants to donate goods and services that can be auctioned, raffled, or sold at a community sale.
- **Local Businesses.** See if a local movie theater or popular restaurant will sponsor a night where a percentage of the profits are donated to your group’s cause.
- **Sporting Events.** Organize events such as bike races, marathons, tournaments, walk-a-thons, skate-a-thons, bowl-a-thons, and dance-a-thons. Charge an entrance fee and have prizes donated.
- **House Party.** Host a gathering at a member’s house to teach the community about your group. You can serve appetizers and charge an entrance fee.
**Ideas for Action**

Now that you’re ready to take action, this is the section for you!

First, determine exactly what you want and whom you need to pressure to achieve it. These are your “ask” and your target. Both should be specific and the focus of your action. For example, a clear “ask” would be identifying a specific city ordinance or state legislation you want your elected officials, the target, to pass (or to stop). An action for this example could be a letter-writing campaign directed to your city council members.

**Actions should not be one-off events** but rather part of a series and a bigger strategy towards achieving your “ask.” In the example above, rather than only planning a letter-writing campaign, create a multi-action plan. For example, you can organize a teach-in before the letter-writing campaign to introduce your community to the issue and inspire them to join your next action. After the letter-writing campaign, schedule a rally to increase public attention and intensify pressure on your target.

In this way, **actions build on each other’s momentum**. Every new action in your plan should step up the intensity from the previous action. And remember, the goal is to achieve your “ask,” not complete every step in your plan. So, if the city ordinance or state legislation is passed after the letter-writing campaign, there is no need to hold a rally. Instead, focus your attention on thanking the officials that helped you achieve your goal.

**Organize a Public Event**

**Bring Together a Team**

Consult with your friends or group to see if others are onboard and ready to help organize an event with you. Bring everyone together quickly—even if it’s just a group text or an email chain—and decide who is doing what. With just a few more hands, you can easily do all that’s needed before your action.

**Plan an Activity**

Here are some ideas:

**Hold a Vigil or Rally**

Create physical spaces for awareness and solidarity by organizing a peaceful rally or vigil. Publicly proclaim where you stand on an issue and that you will fight back against unjust policies!
HAVE A “TEACH-IN”

An effective way to get your community excited to work on the issues you are passionate about is by planning a “teach-in” or educational event. All you need is someone—perhaps a professor who focuses on Latin American issues or someone who recently returned from a trip to the region—who can volunteer to speak more about an issue you work on.

HOST A SPEAKER

Another great way to get people in your community engaged on the issues you care about is to host a speaker from the region. The personal connection that is established when people meet a visitor from Latin America and listen to their story is often what drives them to work for better U.S. policies toward the region. There are a number of groups who regularly bring human rights activists from Latin America to communities all across the United States. You can reach out to them and ask how to bring one of their speaking tours to your town.

ORGANIZE A CALL-IN OR LETTER-WRITING DAY

This technique is especially useful leading up to a major vote on legislation: members of your community can voice their concerns over a particular Latin America issue and ask their member of Congress to support a bill or amendment to help change the policy. To set up a call-in or letter-writing event, you’ll need the phone numbers and addresses of your members of Congress, and talking points on the issue for a phone call or letter. You may also want a sample script or letter to guide the callers or writers. [See the Calls and Emails section for tips!]

GATHER FOR ARTS AND CRAFTS

Get some poster papers, markers, and other art materials and invite your community to craft posters and display them in public spaces. Buy some blank postcards to send to your members of Congress. The possibilities are endless!

Find a Space

Look for a public space such as a park, classroom, community center, or place of worship. Ensure the location is:

- **Available** (reserve, acquire proper permits)
- **Appropriate** (given the size, atmosphere, electricity, sound equipment)
- **Accessible** (consider other’s disabilities, parking, public transportation)
Spread the Word

Once you have found a place and determined what you want to do, make sure you promote your event. Here are some ways to spread the word:

- Design and distribute a flyer. [See sample flyers in the Appendix!]
- Call your friends and ask them to show up and bring 2-3 friends along.
- Create a Facebook event and invite friends and others in your area.
- Send out reminders the day before via email, text, or Facebook.

If you’re planning a larger event and want to get even more publicity, you can:

- Invite local policymakers—their attendance will likely bring even more people.
- Inform the local press. [See sample press release in the Appendix!]

Follow Up

Once you successfully wrap up your event, make sure you:

- Post photos and videos on social media (e.g. on the Facebook Event).
- Send photos and videos to the local press.
- Invite participants to stay in touch via Facebook Groups or email lists. This one event can serve as the start for future events to raise awareness and solidarity!

TAP INTO YOUR COMMUNITY

Set Up Information Tables

A great way to introduce your wider community to your group and the issues you’re advocating for is by participating in local events. Set up an information table or have volunteers circulate with flyers and sign-up clipboards at regular community events such as farmers markets, flea markets, and street festivals. If you have a letter to a member of Congress or other urgent action, make sure to bring them so that people can take action on the spot. These are opportunities to engage the local community with your issue.

Give Presentations

Ask local activist groups that don’t deal directly with your issue if you can speak briefly at their next meeting. If you have local chapters of national and international organizations, local immigrant organizations, faith-based global mission groups, and other groups that could have an interest in your issue, see if you can come and speak to them about a specific action that you are working on. Most groups are more than happy to give other activists a few minutes to discuss a new topic.
START A PETITION

Petitions can show **consolidated, measurable, and concrete support** for your issue. They are easy for you to set up, and it is easy for people to take action.

While there’s nothing wrong with a good, old-fashioned paper petition, using **online platforms** such as MoveOn and Change.org makes it easier to expand the reach of your petition, organize its signers by constituency, and deliver it to your target.

Here are some **tips and tricks** to writing a successful petition. You can also check out MoveOn and Change.org’s websites for even more pointers. And take a look at one of LAWG’s petitions.

- Keep the text short and to the point.
- Identify a specific ask and target. [See the introduction of Ideas for Action section]
- Express urgency. Provide a clear timeline.
- Briefly describe the problem and then the solution.
- Make it personal. Tell signers why this matters to you and the individuals affected. Put your name (or the name of one of your group members) as the author.
- Set a goal for the number of signers. Adjust this as you get more signers onboard.
- Promote the petition on social media and in-person with flyers.
- Once you’ve closed the petition and sent it to your target, follow up with the signers to keep them in the loop and engaged in future actions.

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**What to Include**

- **An opening.** Address your letter to the editor of the newspaper (if you do not know their name, “Dear Editor,” is okay). Begin your letter with a provocative hook to grab your reader’s attention. Make sure your opening statement makes it clear what topic you are going to be discussing in your letter.
- **The issue.** Although you may have a lot of ideas that you want to discuss, it is extremely important that you focus on one topic. Briefly summarize the issue and explain its significance. You do not need to include every relevant fact on the issue. If you are responding to the actions or words of a specific elected official, be sure to clearly mention their name in your letter. This increases the chance they will see it.
- **Your position on the topic.** Don’t be afraid to voice your opinion and make it personal; the whole point of publishing a Letter to the Editor is to demonstrate various perspectives on a topic. Use persuasive language and feel free to mention any relevant qualifications or experiences that would help to legitimize your perspective on the issue.
- **Evidence.** Even though your opinions are the heart of the letter, it is critical that your ideas are backed up by evidence. Use facts, numerical statistics, quotes, etc. to support
your points. Don’t make any claims that can’t be supported, and make sure to reference the source for any facts you provide.

- **Your suggestion.** In order to use your letter to make an impact, it is important to offer up a suggestion. Your suggestion can be a proposed solution to the issue or it can take the form of a call to action, like asking readers to call their members of Congress.

- **A closing.** End your letter by briefly (1-2 sentences) summarizing your most important points. Sign it with your name.

- **Your contact information.** Make sure your email, phone number, and address are included at the top or bottom of the letter. The newspaper will not publish your complete contact information with the letter, but they will need it to verify your identity and contact you before publishing the letter.

### Increase your Chances of Getting Published

- **Look up the guidelines.** Each paper has instructions on how to format, write, and pitch a letter to the editor.

- **Keep it short, clear, and focused.** Center your article on one topic and only include information that is pertinent to that topic. When editing, make sure every sentence is coherent and serves a purpose. Do not let the letter exceed 300 words.

- **Make it original.** Try to provide a unique perspective on the issue; you are more likely to get published if your analysis or solution adds something new to the conversation.

- **Be specific.** Avoid generalizations and be accurate. Ensure that any statistics, quotes, etc. are factually correct and come from legitimate sources. State the full name if you are referencing a person, group, piece of legislation, etc.

- **Consider the timing.** If your letter is in regard to a general topic, try to wait until there is a related upcoming event, like a vote, before submitting it. However, if your letter is in response to a recent article or event, do not wait to send it in; if you don’t submit your letter within a few days, it is unlikely to get published.

- **Choose the right paper.** Remember that while bigger newspapers may seem more exciting, you have a much higher chance of getting your letter published in a smaller local newspaper. Consider your audience when writing and personalize it to them by demonstrating why they specifically should care. Make sure the language and tone of voice in your letter is appropriate for the paper’s readership. Before sitting down to write, look over previously published Letters to the Editor to give you a sense of what they’re looking for. Be sure to follow any specific instructions given by the paper about Letters to the Editor, such as the format, how to submit it, etc.

- **Reference a recent article or opinion piece** published in the newspaper to which you are responding. Don’t forget to cite the date, author, and title.

[See a sample Letter to the Editor in the Appendix!]
In this section, we cover the ins and outs of engaging with members of the U.S. Congress and their staffers. Many of these guidelines can be adapted and used at the state and local level too.

THINK LIKE YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Plain and simple: it’s important to know your audience. That way, you can target your message and actions in a way that is relatable and inspirational to them. In this case, your audiences are your members of Congress and the people that work within their offices.

Members of Congress are always either running for reelection or gearing up to run for reelection. In the House of Representatives, members run for office every two years. In the Senate, members run for office every six years. And, while elected officials are convicted in their beliefs, they also must keep getting elected to hold office and carry out those beliefs.

So what does this mean for you? You’re a constituent. You vote. You hold the power to keep them in office or to kick them out. This means that members of Congress are sensitive to their reputation in the district or state and will alter their behavior to gain a more favorable image.

Here’s how your members of Congress and their staffers think:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What They Care About</th>
<th>What They DON’T Care About</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>VERIFIED CONSTITUENTS FROM THEIR DISTRICT OR STATE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Remember, they want votes! That’s why when you call their offices or request a meeting, they’ll always ask if you’re a constituent. If they don’t ask, tell them anyways. They’re more likely to take that call or meeting.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OUT-OF-DISTRICT OR STATE INDIVIDUALS</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Remember, they’re looking for votes to stay in office, which means they need the support of constituents that can vote for them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADVOCACY THAT REQUIRES EFFORT</td>
<td>ADVOCACY THAT DOESN’T REQUIRE EFFORT</td>
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<tr>
<td>A lot of effort shows just how much you care. It also tells your member of Congress you want them to care too. Personal emails, calls, and in-person meetings or events show your member of Congress your dedication.</td>
<td>Why should your member of Congress devote hours to an issue if you aren’t willing to either? Copy-and-paste letters, re-tweets or Facebook shares with no personal caption, or any click-to-send forms don’t send a strong message about your dedication.</td>
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<tr>
<th>GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS THAT MAKE A BIG SPLASH</th>
<th>INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR LAUNDRY LIST</th>
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<tr>
<td>An interest group’s endorsement, an activist group, a locally famous individual, or big individual campaign donor. In addition, a diverse group that represents different interests and backgrounds is more likely to succeed in getting a meeting appointment. For example, join with humanitarian, faith, immigrant-led, labor, environmental, human rights, and other groups.</td>
<td>Members of Congress and their staffers are busy people. They’d rather feed two birds with one seed. They don’t have time to meet with every single constituent individually. And on that note, they don’t have time or bandwidth to sit with you as you run through a list of all the policies you’ve ever cared about.</td>
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<tr>
<th>WIDESPREAD ATTENTION</th>
<th>NEWS THAT DOESN’T REACH THEIR VOTERS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local press and editorials, even national news. When the light shines on a member of Congress, they want to make sure that they look good.</td>
<td>D.C.-based news and reports might not trickle down to their local constituency. Even less likely, ones that are wonky and use complicated policy lingo.</td>
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<tr>
<th>CONCRETE AND CONCISE ASKS</th>
<th>VAGUE, GENERAL, AND IMPOSSIBLE ASKS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t leave your member of Congress guessing! Tell them exactly the outcome you want—a vote for or against a bill, a public statement, etc.</td>
<td>Members of Congress shouldn’t be asking “So, what do we do now?” after your interaction with them. And make sure you’re not asking them to take action on things they have no control over.</td>
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So now you know what interests your members of Congress and what they don’t care about. Before you take any steps to put this knowledge into practice, you need to know where your elected officials already stand on an issue and what moves they’ve already made to address it.
Don’t walk into a meeting until you...

❖ **Know who they are.** Start with your senators. These are easy—each state has two and they both respond to you. Search for your senators here. Next, look up your representative. These are a bit harder—due to gerrymandering, districts can be oddly shaped and your neighbor down the street might have a different representative than you—so be sure to use your exact address when searching. Search for your representative here.

❖ **Get their updates.** Go on their website and sign up for their email updates, invites to local events, and other communications they send so that you’re up to date. Every member of Congress has an e-newsletter. Follow them on Twitter and Facebook.

❖ **Learn what they stand for.** Look at the issues that they highlight on their website and social media, especially as it relates to the issues you want to talk to them about. Review their voting history and their biggest campaign contributors. Lastly, see if they are on a committee such as the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of either the Foreign Affairs or Foreign Relations Committees (which handles U.S. relations with Latin American countries), the Homeland Security Committee (which handles immigration and border issues), or the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee (which handles foreign assistance).

❖ **Know what the media is saying.** Set up a Google News Alert—for example, “Rep. First Name Last Name”—to receive an email whenever your member of Congress is in the news. (Learn how here.) Research what local reporters have written about your member of Congress and who those reporters are. Follow those reporters on social media or build a rapport with them. Before you attend or plan an event, invite those reporters to it to help your group gain attention.
DIRECT ADVOCACY

Now you know what’s inside the minds of your elected officials and their staffs. Let’s put that knowledge to work with some in-person advocacy tactics! This list is by no means exhaustive but rather intends to introduce you to some of the most common methods.

Town Halls

Town halls are a great place to talk to your member of Congress because their purpose is just that—to serve as a public listening session.

We recommend taking the following steps to prepare:

❖ **Find one.** Sometimes, members of Congress announce them ahead of time. Other times, they are by invitation only. If you can’t find an announcement online (check the members’ websites or townhallproject.com), call the district office near you! Politely say you are a constituent searching for the next town hall forum. If they don’t have one scheduled yet, ask to be put on a list of people to be notified.

❖ **Prepare your group.** Once a town hall is on the books, tell your group and prepare them with voting records and questions to ask. Questions should be specific and fact-based, ideally including information on the member of Congress’ voting record and statements.

❖ **Be early, have a plan.** Meet with your group outside, hand out materials, and encourage people to ask the sample questions. Try to sit in the front half of the room and spread out! Sitting apart helps reinforce the impression of broad consensus.

❖ **Stick to what was prepared.** During the “Q & A” session, raise your hand and look friendly and neutral so that staff members are inclined to call on you. Then...
  ✦ **Ask a prepared question.** You can even read it directly off of the paper.
  ✦ **Be polite but persistent.** Don’t let your member of Congress do what they do best—deflect and talk around the question. Make sure you get real answers. And, if they tell you what you want to hear, thank them and promise to follow up. If their answer is less than ideal, state your intention to follow up.
  ✦ **Keep up the pressure.** After one member of the group finishes, everyone should raise their hand again. The next member of the group should ask a different question than one that’s already been asked from the list.

❖ **Support and reinforce the group’s message.** After one member of the group finishes, make sure to applaud to show support.

❖ **Record everything.** You can use something as simple as a smartphone to capture the member of Congress answering your group’s questions. Favorable exchanges will bolster support for your member of Congress while negative ones will harm them. You can livestream or post video clips on social media—a reporter could see it and amplify it.
Congressional Events

Use the guidelines listed above for attending town hall forums with just a few tweaks. Public events are not usually geared for the member of Congress to hear from their constituents. So in this case, you’ll need to create that space for yourself. Tactics may be more similar to that of a protest where you’re trying to shift attention from the scheduled event to your own message.

❖ **Make your group visible.** Here’s where you’ll want matching t-shirts (or coordinated colors) and posters, banners, or signs.

❖ **Insist on being heard.** Before the event, have the group form a simple message or chant. To have your message heard nonverbally, you can create posters and signs. This step can be a bit uncomfortable and difficult, but it sends a powerful message to your member of Congress.

❖ **Get media attention.** If you see a reporter, don’t be afraid to politely approach them. Stick to your simple message and tell the reporter that you are here to hold your member of Congress accountable for “X” issue.

Meet with your Members of Congress: District and D.C. Offices

Your member of Congress likely has multiple district offices and one D.C. office. These are public offices that you can visit. The advice below is applicable for both types of offices. We encourage you to build and maintain relationships with your district and the D.C. offices.

**BEFORE THE MEETING**

❖ **Make an appointment.** Simply call your congressional office and tell the staff member that you are a constituent and would like a meeting with your member of Congress. If the member isn’t available, ask to meet with the district director in a district office or the legislative director in the D.C. office (but do try to get the member first!). Insist on meeting with a staffer, not an intern. Tell them which issue you would like to discuss in person, and ask them when the staff person who works on the issue and/or the member would be available for a meeting.
Gather a delegation. A very effective tactic is to organize a meeting for a group of constituents who can speak from a variety of backgrounds on a specific issue. You will have a greater impact if you can demonstrate that not just a small segment of the population is sympathetic to your cause.

Establish your agenda and goals. Decide what kind of commitment you are asking for. Make a list of points and questions to be asked by each person in the group, just like you would for a town hall forum. Have an understanding of the member’s stance on the issue you will present during the meeting. Select a group leader to introduce your group and to help facilitate and keep the conversation on track.

Prepare materials. For greater impact, prepare a small packet for the meeting with materials such as: fact sheets from various organizations, supporting op-eds, editorials, letters to the editor, or other news items that illustrate your stance on the issue. Include the group leader’s name and phone number so that your representative or senator can contact them for more information.

**DO**

✓ Do learn members’ committee assignments and their specialties.
✓ Do learn the members’ voting records on the issue.
✓ Do identify the aide(s) that handle the issues and build a relationship with them.
✓ Do prepare a formal request letter to forward to the member’s scheduler.
✓ Do rehearse the questions you want to ask during the meeting.

**DON’T**

✗ Don’t take “no” for an answer when scheduling an appointment. The office should find a staffer to meet with you.
GETTING TO THE MEETING

- **Be punctual.** In Washington D.C., there are three Senate Office Buildings: Russell (SR), Dirksen (SD), and Hart (SH); and three House Office Buildings: Cannon (CHOB), Longworth (LHOB), and Rayburn (RHOB). Directories and maps can be found next to most elevators in all buildings.

**DO**

- Do ask a police officer, food and service staff, or custodial staff if you are having trouble finding your way.
- Do give yourself at least 15 minutes to get through security and navigate to the correct office. All D.C. offices and some district offices require security screenings.

**DON’T**

- Don’t be offended if you wind up waiting for your meeting—this happens frequently.

DURING THE MEETING

- **Be concise and diplomatic.** Keep your presentation short and to the point; name your issue, address the piece of legislation, and present supporting documents, if possible short fact-sheets, one or two pagers are better. Make clear exactly what action you wish for the member or staff to take—vote for or against a bill, co-sponsor a bill, or send a letter are some specific examples. Be prepared to explain the amendment briefly and ask if the member needs more information. Ask what the member’s position is on specific issues related to Latin America and the Caribbean and why.
- **Put a local and personal angle on the issue.** Stress why this issue concerns you and others the member represents. Cite local statistics, give examples of communities that will be most affected by this issue, and mention who supports your issue locally. It is important to be specific.
- **Speak from your experience.** If you are meeting with your member’s office on issues related to Latin America and the Caribbean and have traveled there, share your story and the story of those you interacted with. You do not have to be an expert; bring as many facts as you feel comfortable with to the table.
- **Press for a commitment.** Don’t let your member of Congress evade the issue or change the subject. Ask specifically for his or her position on the issue. If they agree with you, ask them to co-sponsor legislation, make a floor speech, or sign a “dear colleague” letter on the issue. If they do not agree, ask the member what they would need in order to do what you want with the issue—it is crucial to follow up with the member on these concerns. If the office does not have a position on your issue or proposed commitment, ask them to get back to you within the next two weeks with a clarification of their position. If they don’t call you, call them!
DO

✓ Do always assume that the person you are speaking with does not know about the issue.
✓ Do be specific on what you want the member to do.
✓ Do use reliable and factual information.
✓ Do show openness to knowledge of counterarguments.
✓ Do admit what you don’t know. Offer to find out and send information later.

DON’T

✗ Don’t overload a congressional lobby visit with too many issues—one or two topics maximum.
✗ Don’t confront, threaten, pressure, beg, or speak with a moralistic tone.
✗ Don’t be argumentative; speak with calmness and commitment.
✗ Don’t overstate the case or take too long—members and staff are very busy.
✗ Don’t expect members or their staff to be experts on your issue.

AFTER THE MEETING

✓ Thank your member of Congress, and/or the staff member(s) for their time. Summarize the key points you made during your visit and include any information you promised to provide in a thank-you note.
✓ Provide follow-up information. If your member asked questions, or was interested in a certain point, seize the opportunity and follow up with: a letter, fact sheet, phone call, or second meeting. If there is a vote, give your member feedback afterward—either thank them, or express your concerns if they voted against what you were supporting.
✓ Continue to build the relationship. A first visit should never be the end of contact. Make sure you or someone in your group stays in touch with the member and staff. Send them updates on the issues, what you’re doing about it, and what you want them to do.

DO

✓ Do keep in contact with the staffer as you receive new information or as votes approach.
✓ Do share the knowledge you learned on the member’s position with other groups and organizations.
✓ Do continue to send materials whenever you see something interesting.
✓ Do remind your member to take your opinions, as constituents, into account.

DON’T

✗ Don’t be afraid to follow up with additional information as soon as possible.
✗ Don’t simply push your own agenda. Provide useful information to elected officials.
 Calls and Emails

You have the constitutional right to contact your members of Congress at any time regarding any issue. And they are obligated to listen, even if you're not there in person. That makes calls and emails another great way to directly advocate for the issues you care about.

Before crucial votes in Congress, you can call your congressperson to urge them to vote a certain way. During other times of the year, it's still good to contact them because it helps to keep the issue you care about on their radar.

Follow these steps when making calls to your members’ offices:

- **Ask to speak with the staffer responsible** for the issue. On foreign policy issues, this will often be the foreign policy aide. On immigration, there is usually an aide who handles immigration issues. Give your name and tell them that you are a constituent.
- **Introduce yourself very briefly** to the staffer, explaining that you are a constituent and, if you belong to a local organization that's concerned about this issue, add that connection. If you have traveled to the region, state that now.
- **Be specific** about what you want your congressperson to do. Don’t just complain about an issue. Say you want them to vote for or sponsor a specific bill or amendment or take a particular action, such as signing a congressional “dear colleague” letter.
- **Ask what your legislator’s position is** on the issue. If the staffer doesn't know or won't say what their position is, have them ask their boss and get back to you.
- **Thank them** for their time.
- **Be prepared to leave a voicemail.** Before you call, prepare a brief 2-3 sentence summary of what you want to say. Make sure you state your name and contact information. You may want to ask them to call you back. If it’s right before a vote, leaving your "plug" for the vote without asking for a call back may be sufficient.

Here are some tips for sending emails to your legislators:

- **Emails do not need to be very long.** Your main goal is to talk briefly about your issue, express your concerns, and make a simple request.
- If you have lived or studied in the country or have met people from there (at speaking tours, etc.), mention it—**personal experiences lend more credibility** to your concerns.
- Make sure you include your concrete "ask" at the beginning and at the end of your email.
- **Don't assume** that your congressperson knows a lot about the issue— their job by nature makes them generalists. Don’t condescend, but raise specific, concrete points in your letter to strengthen your "ask."
SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

WHY SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media can be a powerful tool for advocacy. If used correctly, online platforms like Facebook and Twitter can help you introduce the causes you care about to people within your own social networks and beyond, and even inspire them to take action as well.

Through social media you can share accurate information directly with your friends, followers, and others—which is extremely important in this era of “fake news.” The reality is that people are more likely to trust and act on messages from people they know rather than from strangers. So, being present in the digital realm and building your online network can be useful for supporting the spread of reliable news, facts, and information.

Social media also can be a great way to encourage others to take action on the issues you care about. The same way that people are more likely to trust information shared by a friend, people are also more likely to do something if someone in their social network—not a complete stranger—is asking them to do it. Plus, if you’re posting on behalf of your group, it’s a great way to increase membership!

In reality, social media is not very effective alone. However, it is an excellent supplement to other existing advocacy strategies and its value should not be trivialized. Make sure that you post often and stay active online. This will highlight all the work you are doing and makes your followers feel more connected to your cause.

The following sections will give you some tips on how to use the most popular social media platforms—Facebook and Twitter—to take your activism into the digital realm!

FACEBOOK

Using Facebook can connect you with people who care about the same issues as you do. Whether you’re looking to get involved as an individual or if you want to share your group’s work with a broader audience, Facebook’s tools can be extremely helpful.

Groups

Facebook Groups provide a space to communicate about shared interests with certain people. You can find a Facebook Group by searching for keywords using the Facebook search bar. Once you find a group you’re interested in joining, click on + Join.
If you don’t find a group that quite fits your interests or your group’s, you can always create your own group. Facebook allows you to customize the group’s privacy settings depending on who you want to be able to join and see the group. By making your group private, people must be invited and accepted into the group to see the contents, enabling the group to freely talk about advocacy strategies and goals without the concern that others will see the conversations.

**Pages**

*Facebook Pages* are meant to be the public face of a group, organization, or business. Only administrators of the page can post content to the page. Followers of the page can only post comments.

You might want to create a Facebook Page if you have a more established advocacy group and wish to raise awareness not only of your cause, but also of your group’s work in your community to encourage others to join in the work.

**Events**

*Facebook Events* allow you to create a public page where you can share all the information related to an upcoming event.

We recommend you create a Facebook Event for any activity you are hosting or organizing to make sure others can easily find all the information they need to participate. The events you create can be either private or public.

**TWITTER**

Twitter is a *fast-updating platform* so don’t be afraid to post a message (or “tweet”) often and repeat content. Chances are that most of your followers won’t see a tweet that’s only sent out once, so you can aim to write 3-4 tweets for specific content you want everyone to notice. Interacting with your followers boosts overall engagement on your page—so go ahead and favorite (❤) tweets, reply to comments, and leave comments on other’s tweets!
Hashtags

Hashtags (#) help organize content within the social media world. Think of them as tabs within the gigantic filing cabinet that is Twitter. For example, if you’re writing a tweet about supporting Dreamers and TPS holders, you might want to include hashtags such as #TPS, #Dreamers, or #DACA in your tweet. This will allow other people who are interested in this issue to find your tweet!

Use hashtags strategically—focus on trending or popular hashtags, hashtags that you create for your own events, or hashtags created by others that work on causes that align with yours.

However, don’t overdo it! Tweets overloaded with hashtags look messy and are hard to read. Using more than 2-3 hashtags in a tweet can actually do more harm than good.

Tagging

Tagging other activists, groups, journalists, and public officials—including YOUR representative and senators—is another way to foster engagement. And it’s super simple!

Depending on where you type someone’s Twitter name (or handle), you’ll send that person either a mention or a reply. Mentions are public tweets, so they’re visible to everyone. Replies also appear on the recipient’s Mentions tab, but only people who follow both of you can see them.

To mention someone, type their Twitter handle (i.e. @twittername) anywhere within the tweet. To send someone a reply, enter the person’s Twitter handle at the beginning of the tweet. See the examples below to see the difference:

**MENTION**

@LAWGaction just put out a great report. Highly recommend it!

Check out this great report by @LAWGaction! Highly recommend it!

**REPLY**

@LAWGaction I really enjoyed your latest report. Thanks for sharing!

@LAWGaction I really enjoyed your latest report. Thanks for sharing!
CONCLUSION

We wrote this guide because civil activism can make a HUGE difference. After all, elected officials want to hear from YOU, the constituent. We hope that this toolkit gives you the skills and confidence to approach your members of Congress and demand they do their job—representing YOUR voice and your values in the halls of power.

This toolkit is not intended to stand alone! There are plenty more resources out there that you can (and should) consult as you navigate the complex foreign and immigration policies the United States maintains towards Latin America.

A big shout out to indivisible for their great sets of advocacy toolkits, which were our inspiration to create this one! And many thanks to the activists and organizations that reviewed earlier drafts of this toolkit.
SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:
John Doe, organization or group name
(555) 555-5555 | JohnDoe@email.com

August xx, 2019

Local Community Members Gather to Discuss Harmful U.S. Policy towards Cuba and Opportunities for Action

[City, State]—On [DATE], community members will gather at [EVENT LOCATION] to discuss the current state of U.S.-Cuba relations and what ordinary citizens can do to support further engagement between both countries.

With this purpose, members of our community gather to raise awareness and stand in solidarity with the Cuban people. The event includes an open conversation about community members’ recent trip to Cuba, the negative impacts of backwards U.S. policy towards the island country, and how we as a community can take action to change these policies.

[You could include a quote from one of your members in the press release, urging a change in U.S. policy toward Cuba.]

We urge our policymakers here in the United States to take concrete steps to dismantle the outdated and inhumane embargo against Cuba and end the travel ban once and for all.

Media attention is imperative in pressing our government to act. Join us.

Date: Saturday, August xx, 2018
Time: 0:00 pm to 0:00 pm
Place: [EVENT LOCATION], [full address]

###
The exploitation behind Valentine’s Day flowers

The Feb. 11 front-page article "In rose beds, money blooms," about the flower industry in Colombia, was obviously timely. While the article detailed the growth of the floriculture industry in Colombia as a legitimate alternative to narcotics trafficking, it didn’t relate the abysmal working conditions for Colombians in the industry.

With its presence in Colombia, my organization, Witness for Peace, monitors and highlights such issues. During the high season, many flower workers have to endure 12-to-22-hour shifts six days a week. Two-thirds of workers have health problems because of exposure to pesticides and toxins (many of which are prohibited in the United States). Women — 60 percent of the workforce — are often forced to take pregnancy tests and use birth control as conditions of employment. And workers can’t mobilize to address these problems because they’re denied the right to collectively organize, bargain and strike. This is all despite promises made under the United States-Colombia Free Trade Agreement that workers’ rights would be protected.

Congress should designate Feb. 14 as International Flower Workers’ Day and make the U.S. government ensure fulfillment of the free-trade agreement’s labor rights provisions, bringing the production of flowers for Valentine’s Day closer in line with the warmth and compassion the holiday evokes.
SAMPLE PROMOTIONAL FLYER

Want to create your own? Canva and Piktochart are free online design tools to get started.

Name of GROUP

DAY AND TIME THE GROUP MEETS.
PLACE THE GROUP MEETS.

Description of the group. Include information like what the group stands for, types of activities the group engages in, and which representative and senators the group advocates with.

LEARN MORE:  CONTACT:

[Social media icons]
Name of group leaders
Email address of group leaders

Contact information for how to get involved.
SAMPLE EVENT FLYER

Want to create your own? Canva and Piktochart are free online design tools to get started.

Name of EVENT

WHEN:

TIME:

WHERE:

Description of the event. Include information like what the event is about and what activities will be taking place. Also, include the name of the organizing group and a brief description of its work.

LEARN MORE:

CONTACT:

Social media info

Name of group leaders
Email address of group leaders
This toolkit was created and formatted by Andrea Fernández Aponte and Lily Folkerts.