

## Creating Allies: Some Basics in Community Organizing

As physicians in training who are invested in leadership and advocacy, we build communities to strengthen our work for cultural, social, legislative, and non-legislative policy change. Community organizing is not a skill that is taught in medical schools, but it is one that AMSA values; we hope to provide you a foundation for lifelong improvement in organizing. The following framework is intended to guide you as you strive for a better health care system. It does not have a lot of the nuts and bolts, step by step action – more materials will come out on that later. This is just to start the process of strategic thinking.

Though there are some major differences in the way we build alliances with individuals versus other established organizations and groups, most points below address both.

### What is your goal?

It is worth taking a moment to identify what your largest, loftiest goal is. When you know what you are striving for (say single payer insurance, the election of a particular mayor, or a change in hospital policy to improve patient safety) you can identify potential allies and begin the fact-finding portion of your advocacy.

As medical students, there is a good chance we are new to advocacy on a particular issue, or at least new to the region in which we are hoping to advocate. By meeting with existing stakeholders, we not only improve our own expertise on the issue, but we build credibility with other stakeholders whom we have yet to meet (including legislators). We learn the importance of name-dropping not to show off, but to demonstrate that we have invested ourselves in the cause. By telling a legislator or an organization president "I met with the Medical Director of the State Department of Health," you are not bragging, but rather inviting them to take your plans and goals more seriously.

## Who makes up your desired community? Who are your potential allies?

Who is it that shares your values? Who would have the same goal? Who has experienced this problem? Who has resources you are lacking (time, money, greater numbers of people)? Some of these folks are obvious. Uninsured people may want single payer insurance. A certain political party may support your mayoral candidate. Local patients may want improved safety practices. Some may be less obvious. Maybe a local environmental group loves community gardens and your mayoral opponent wants to build parking lots. Perhaps an administrator at your hospital is really invested in patient safety, even if others are reluctant to change.

Identifying your opposition may also help you identify allies while giving you something to rally against. Consider that just as your plans may have unexpected allies, there may also be unexpected opposition. For example, a proposal to require nutrition changes in schools may find allies among agriculture (i.e. farm-to-school proponents), but it may also trigger intense opposition from unions of school principals who stand to lose revenues from contracts with less healthy brand-name food providers. Stakeholders who have been involved in the fight for several years can help you to identify such opposition.



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Considering different allies means you must also consider different ways to approach them. They are different audiences and need a different pitch. Consider the kinds of language/terminology the potential ally uses to describe their values (as alluded to above). If it is not your exact language, try to frame your commonalities in their language.

#### Possible allies include:

- Medical students individuals, clubs/member organizations
- Medical school at large students, staff and administrators, faculty, residents
- Your entire hospital staff, patients, departments, everyone
- Local community groups the internet is your friend, networking is your friend do not be afraid to ask
  contacts you what other people/groups you should be in touch with. Again, these groups can be
  explicitly in agreement ("Treehugging Hippy Party supports Dave as Mayor") or not so much (Mom's
  Who Are Sick of Their Kids Having Asthma, Inc. who would greatly benefit from Mayor Dave's policies,
  though they might not know that yet)
- Unions and professional organizations
- Local clinics and hospitals
- The people who live in your neighborhood/city

### Who is the best person to talk to in your community?

There are usually leaders within the community you would like to work with who have more power and credibility with that population. Leaders will know the wants and needs of their community and be able to connect you to people with similar interests or advertise for you more effectively. It is often easier and more effective to approach identified formal or informal leaders than to speak to every other member in the community.

Make sure to be respectful and open minded when approaching another leader. Dress professionally, bring a notepad, and know this likely not the last encounter you will have, so you do not have to accomplish all pre-determined goals. Try to get to know the individual as a person and also get a better understanding of whom they represent.

## What is the value in building a particular coalition or community group?

As you approach your work or a potential partner, you should have specific ideas about what you would like from them (time, money, some particular action). While you want to enter the meeting open-minded, there will usually come a point where it's time for you to demonstrate your own agency, ideas and initiative. Be prepared for this moment, because it can pass you by quickly if you're not. Equally, you should brainstorm about what you are able/willing to offer in exchange. Of course, you always have the option of meeting with someone who represents a group you feel might be in alignment with your ideals to explore together what goals you may have, but it is often best to have some ideas in the back of your head, know they might not all be possible, and be open to new ideas.



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At the end of the day, creating allies and coalitions is about relationships. It requires time and perseverance. Always celebrate small victories and do little things to take care of yourself and avoid burnout.

Some suggested reading:
<a href="Rules for Radicals">Rules for Radicals</a> by Saul Alinsky
<a href="Stirit Up">Stirit Up</a> by Rinku Sen

Additional resources at the AMSA Grassroots Website http://amsa.org/AMSA/Homepage/About/Committees/Grassroots.aspx

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\*Sonia intends to identify/write/make available more specific resources on this and other topics in organizing as the year progresses. Please be in touch if you are interested.