

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP TODAY

Getting Community Support

Government

Government is supposed to resolve problems in the community. You'll find government officials, committees, boards, and departments at work on community problems.

What government offers:

- ▶ **Laws and administrative acts.** If you want a particular policy enacted or changed or enforced, government has the power to do this. If, for example, you support a ban on smoking in certain public areas, the city could pass such a law. If a law against speeding on residential streets is not enforced, the police could step up enforcement efforts.
- ▶ **Government services.** The government provides many services—you might want to get the government to improve or provide certain services. If, for example, you want cleaner parks, the parks department could work to clean them up. If you want a traffic light on an intersection, the transportation department could put one in.
- ▶ **Expertise.** Since government officials, committees, and departments work on solving community problems, they may have expertise about your problem—its causes, its effects, who it affects, policies addressing it, and even ideas for projects. Because they work on so many community problems, they have connections with people throughout the community.
- ▶ **Resources.** The government has vast resources: Some of them can be put at your disposal. Departments may provide you with meeting rooms or conference sites; officials may give you letters of support that will help you make contacts with others in the community; the mayor may issue a proclamation that will draw attention to what your group is doing; the city may provide buses to transport your group; a department may even have some funds to help your project.

Who to contact:

- ▶ **Elected officials,** such as the mayor, city council persons, and county supervisors. Much of your contact with elected officials will be through their aides.
- ▶ **Department heads and supervisors.** These people run the various departments in the government. Most of the people who work in these departments are civil servants. They stay on the job no matter who is elected. Heads of departments may have been appointed by elected officials.

Why your project might appeal to contact persons:

- ▶ **It may fit their agenda or priorities.** Most elected officials have their own special issues or interests. If, for example, a city council member ran as an environmentalist and your project helps protect the environment, then supporting your project will advance what the council member wants. Most elected officials have brochures that tell of their accomplishments and goals. See if your project fits their goals and approach them accordingly.
- ▶ **It improves the community.** The purpose of serving in government is to help the community. If you can persuade the official that your project will help the community, you may get support.
- ▶ **The public supports it.** Elected officials have to face voters from time to time. If you can show that the community supports your project, the elected official probably will support it.
- ▶ **It will enhance their image.** To get elected, politicians need a good public image. This comes from favorable publicity. What could be better publicity than helping students who want to improve their community? Make sure anyone who helps you gets publicity.

Business

Business has many resources. If you get business interested in your project, it may donate some of these resources.

What business offers:

- ▶ **Volunteers.** Many business people donate their time to civic causes. If your project gets their interest, you might get some volunteers.
- ▶ **Office space.** You might need a place to meet, work, or use a computer. You might even ask for office supplies and photocopying. Businesses might provide them.
- ▶ **Expertise.** Business people pride themselves on their ability to get things done. You might be able to use some of this know-how on your project.
- ▶ **Money.** Ask businesses to sponsor your project.
- ▶ **Goods and services.** Instead of money, ask businesses for in-kind donations—goods or services. For example, ask a print shop if it can print a program or flier for free. Or ask a fast-food restaurant to provide a meal at a conference.

Who to contact:

- ▶ **Chamber of Commerce and business associations.** These are non-profit membership groups that most businesses belong to. They perform much civic-improvement and volunteer work.
- ▶ **Owners of small businesses.** These are the decision makers for small business. If you want a small business to do something, ask its owner.
- ▶ **For large corporations: department of community relations, department of consumer affairs, or CEOs.** The owners of many large corporations are shareholders who have little influence over the day-to-day running of the company. Management, presided over by the chief executive officer (CEO), runs the company. You will probably never personally meet a CEO, but you should direct your letters to the CEO if you are asking for a major decision. Otherwise, contact the corporation's department of community relations (for anything relating to your community) or its department of consumer affairs (for anything about a product).

Why your project might appeal to contact persons:

- ▶ **It improves the community.** Business people live in the community and they want it to be a pleasant place. If you can show that your project will help the community, they may help you.
- ▶ **It tackles a problem that hurts business.** Many problems directly affect business—shoplifting, graffiti, violence, homelessness. If your project links into a concern of business, you may get a lot of help.
- ▶ **It uses volunteers.** The business community often strongly favors volunteerism over government programs that cost tax dollars. Here is your group, all volunteers and members of the next generation. Can business afford not to help you?
- ▶ **It gives the business good publicity.** Businesses spend lots of money on advertising and creating goodwill in the community. What could be better publicity than helping a group of young people improve the community? Make sure anyone who helps you gets publicity.

Media

The media—radio, television, newspapers—are businesses, but businesses with the special power to inform and influence the public.

What the media offer:

- ▶ **Publicity.** Almost every project can benefit from publicity. It can bring attention to your problem, attract volunteers, advertise an event, and put pressure on officials to work on the problem.

Who to contact:

- ▶ **Reporters.** All media have reporters. If you have a good story for them, they're interested. If you've already written it for them in a news release, so much the better.
- ▶ **News directors.** TV and radio stations have news directors. They determine what stories go on the air and which stories reporters pursue.
- ▶ **City editors.** Editors determine what stories appear in the newspaper and what stories reporters go after. City editors run the city desk, which handles the local news.
- ▶ **DJs.** The audience you want to reach may not even listen to the news. Most music stations have a target audience—usually different age groups—and DJs reach out to that audience. If your project appeals to that audience, DJs may want to tell about it on the air.

Why your project might appeal to contact persons:

- ▶ **It would make a good story.** One of the most common stories in the media is of young people doing something wrong: “Juvenile steals car.” “16-year-old arrested for drunk driving.” You have a different story—young people taking on community problems. Use this angle to sell your story.
- ▶ **It has useful information.** Radio stations often broadcast public service announcements (PSAs). If you have something that would interest the public, a station might read your PSA. Also many stations and newspapers have community calendars that announce events.

Non-Profits

These groups cover the wide realm of organizations that are neither government nor business. Non-profit organizations range from advocacy and interest groups, to service and volunteer groups, to fraternal organizations, to educational organizations. These are very different groups, but many may offer resources that can help your project.

What non-profits offer:

- ▶ **Expertise.** You have probably found non-profits that work in your problem area. Staffs of these organizations know a lot about the problem, because they deal with it day in and day out. They'll have ideas about how to work on the problem, and they even may have ideas about projects for your group.

- ▶ **Meeting space.** If you need a space to hold large meetings, many non-profits, such as unions and fraternal organizations, have meeting halls you might be able to use.
- ▶ **Office space.** You might need a place to work or use a computer.
- ▶ **Tax deductions.** If your group plans on soliciting a lot of donations, try to get a non-profit to sponsor your effort. This will let donors deduct their donations from their taxes because they are giving to a tax-exempt organization, the non-profit. People might give more if it's tax deductible.

Who to contact:

- ▶ **Volunteer coordinator.** This person recruits volunteers and organizes the non-profit's volunteer program.
- ▶ **Executive director.** This is who runs the non-profit.
- ▶ **Project director.** This person heads a particular program. If you call and ask for the project director, the operator will ask, "Which project?" Call ahead and have the non-profit send you its annual report. This will tell you about all the projects.

Why your project might appeal to contact persons:

- ▶ **It supports the purpose of the non-profit.** Most non-profits have a mission statement, which states its goals. For example, a non-profit's goal may be to feed the homeless. Another's may be to educate people about drug abuse. Still another's may be to promote the interests of its members. If your project touches on a non-profit's goal, the non-profit will be interested in it.
- ▶ **It supports a particular project.** If, for example, a non-profit runs a blood bank and your group wants to start a drive to get more blood donors, the non-profit will be interested.
- ▶ **It might bring more volunteers into the non-profit.** Most non-profits suffer from a shortage of volunteers. If your project might bring more volunteers to the non-profit, the non-profit will be interested.

Community Members

One of your goals should be to involve community members. Start your community outreach efforts close to home—with your natural allies—and stretch out from there. With more community members, your project will have more impact.

What community members offer:

- ▶ **Volunteers.** Community members can help you with your project. They will bring a variety of skills and interests. If people say they're interested in helping but don't have the time, hit them up for donations.
- ▶ **Donations.** Aside from business, your main source of outside funding will be community members who participate in your fund raisers. If they show interest, you may ask them to volunteer.
- ▶ **Community support.** If you have widespread support in the community, others will take notice and your project will be more likely to succeed.

Who to contact:

- ▶ **Your natural allies.** These can be your friends, family, teachers, clergy—people who you automatically turn to for help. Don't overlook these important people in your life.
- ▶ **Individuals and groups.** When you meet people who show interest, take down their names, addresses, and telephone numbers. You may want to get back to them.

Why your project might appeal to contact persons:

- ▶ **It improves the community.** Everyone wants a good place to live. If you can show that your project will improve the community, people may support it.
- ▶ **It works on a problem they care about.** Many people don't get involved in their community unless a problem touches them directly. If you can personalize the problem and show them how it touches them, people will more likely support your project.