

Forums in a Box

A Toolkit for Local Organizers

Planning and Conducting Candidate and Issue Forums in Conjunction with the League of Women Voters



League of Women Voters of Maine



Acknowledgements

The *Forums in a Box Toolkit for Local Organizers* has been developed to help community organizations partner with the League of Women Voters to conduct candidate and issue forums in local communities.

As we blocked out the *Forum in a Box Toolkit* we identified two distinct roles. Not all candidates or issues forums will have these separate roles, but we wanted to provide a tool that highlighted the varying roles that individuals and organizations often play in creating such public events.

- The League of Women Voters provides the expertise of conducting the event and provides the moderator.
- A local organization takes on the responsibilities for the logistics of a local forum or candidates night.

Building on excellent resources developed in other states, most notably Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, and those of the League of Women Voters United States, this handbook provides a basic outline of the process and helpful hints to plan and conduct successful forums.

We hope this *Forums in a Box Toolkit* will help the League of Women Voters of Maine to bring alive political candidate and issue campaigns to benefit communities all over the state.

Anne B. Schink
2012



Forum in a Box Toolkit for Local Organizers

Acknowledgements	2
Table of Contents	3
Guidelines for Forums in a Box	4
Expectations for Local Organizers	5 - 6
Tips for Time Keepers	7
Tips for Question Sorters	8
Candidate/Issue Forum Checklist for Local Organizers	9
Writing a Press Release	10
Sample Press Release	11
Ground Rules for Candidates and Issues Forums	12
Sample Time Signs	



Guidelines for Forums in a Box

This toolkit is designed for groups who want to sponsor local forums for candidates and on public policy issues.

- For issue forums, the format is designed so that the League of Women Voters arranges for the speaker on a topic, the suggested ground rules, and a sample format. The League of Women Voters also provides names of moderators.
- For candidate events, the League of Women Voters will contact the candidates, provide a moderator, suggested ground rules and sample formats.

The local organization is responsible for the logistics of the actual event. The local organization is responsible for arranging for the site, inviting the audience, and contacting the press. The desired length of a forum is 60 to 90 minutes for each race or issue.

The League of Women Voters will provide:

- Contact with Speaker(s) or Presenter(s) for issue forums or Candidates for candidate forums
- Moderator
- Format
- Ground rules
- Sample questions

The Local Organizing Committee will provide:

- Location
- Audience
- Publicity

The success of any candidate or issue forum depends largely on the perception and implementation of a public event conducted with fairness and even-handedness. Even in cases where the League of Women Voters has a position supporting or opposing a particular issue, any event sponsored or supported by the League of Women Voters will be conducted with the utmost respect for neutrality and nonpartisanship.

Expectations for Local Organizers or Co-Sponsoring Organizations



Planning in Advance

Planning in Advance

Establish a budget

- Develop a realistic budget to include all potential costs, such as facility rental, audio visual equipment, materials, travel reimbursements, and security.
- Determine which organization is responsible for which costs and for raising the money.

Logistics

- The size and location of an appropriate site will depend on your community, your organization, and the politics of a particular issue.
- Clarify with the site owner whether insurance is required for your event.
- Identify and contract with appropriate meeting site.
 - Check the site regarding meeting set-up. A physical site visit is always a good idea, whether or not the site and other sponsors indicate that it is a good choice.
 - Clarify arrangement of speakers' table/podium, adequate lighting and audio system (microphone), if necessary.
 - Ensure an adequate number of chairs in lecture style or circle.

Designing a public relations campaign

- Invite the audience
 - Announce the event to members of sponsoring organizations and the public
- Announce the event in the press and on social networking sites
 - Inform the newspapers. Start early. Send an announcement to any large daily newspaper, but also include the small regional weeklies and free newspapers serving local communities.
 - Put it on Facebook and websites of sponsoring organizations
- Inform members of sponsoring organizations in the area where the Forum will be held.
- Inform community leaders, as well as state and federal legislators who live in the area.
- Place a notice on public community bulletin board (such as MPBN).
- Notify other organizations that maintain community calendars, such as radio and television stations.

Conducting the forum

- Identify who is doing introductions—a representative of the League of Women Voters, the moderator, or someone representing a sponsoring organization.
- Provide water for the speakers.

Screening and organizing questions

- Arrange for volunteers to collect and collate questions.
- Arrange for timekeepers.

At the Event



At the Event

Logistics

- Arrange with building security the procedures for opening and closing the building, or responding to security issues.
- Provide directional signs to the meeting room from parking lot and building entrance.
- Display organizational banner or identifying poster.
- Bring recruitment and informational materials from sponsoring organization.
- Set up table at the entrance to the room:
 - Display materials from organizations and presenters
- Ensure that microphones (if used) are live and working properly.
- Provide water for speakers (no ice because it sometimes affects the voice of the speaker).
- Supply two timekeepers. Make sure the timers know how long speakers have to speak and respond. Provide the time keepers with a meeting agenda.
 - One timekeeper keeps track of the time with a timer or stop watch and a second person holds up the cards. White for 1 minute; yellow for 30 seconds left; red for stop.

Screening and organizing questions

- Arrange for volunteers to collect and collate questions.
- Arrange for a system for getting the questions from the sorters in the back of the room to the moderator in the front of the room. It is one good reason to have the moderator placed at the side of the room, rather than in the center of the presenter table.

Wrap up and conclusion

- Close up the event (clearing the room, ensuring that tables and chairs are returned to their proper places, and that materials are removed from the room).

Tips for Time Keepers

For sponsors to provide to Timekeepers



The League of Women Voters prides itself on nonpartisanship and fairness, so we have a strong desire to provide an equitable platform where candidates and speakers can feel respected and supported.

- Make sure that timekeepers have a copy of the agenda with the timing for the individual segments. Timekeepers need to know if introductory and closing statements are being made, because the timing of these elements may be different from the questions segments.
- Time keepers are a critical element in the success of any candidates or issue forum. The time keepers are at the event to watch the clock, not to follow the discussion.
- Keeping exact time and strict observance of equal time for all presenters or candidates is strictly enforced, especially when the event is televised or recorded for use on radio. In those events, the time keeping may also involve someone from the television or radio station.
- Most candidates and speakers expect to pay strict attention to time limits. **Do not hesitate to raise the cards at the appropriate time.** General courtesy allows a speaker to finish a sentence. Do not worry about interrupting a candidate when the time is up. Interrupting a speaker is the role of the moderator.
- Having two time keepers simplifies the task considerably. One person watches the clock or stop watch, while the other handles the cards that indicate the candidate or speaker that they have one minute remaining (usually a white card), then 30 seconds (usually a yellow card), then time to stop (red card).
- Make sure that the time keepers are sitting in a location that is visible at all times to the candidates or speakers, as well as the moderator. They are all counting on the time keepers to keep them on track.
- Remember that you are there as much to help the moderator keep time of the whole event as to keep the candidates or presenters within the time limits of the questions or statements.
- If a time keeper makes a mistake, keep moving. The timing will usually even out from one question segment to another.



Tips for Question Sorters For Sponsors to provide to Questions Sorters

- Sort out any questions that are personal attacks or otherwise inappropriate.
- Do not drop or discard any questions. Keep all questions and pass them to the moderator.
- Group the questions by topic or common themes.
- Sort them in terms of importance to the audience.
- While it is the responsibility of the volunteers to collect and sort the questions, it is the role of the moderator to decide on the sequence of asking the questions.



Candidate or Issue Forum Checklist

For local organizers

General Planning (2-3 months ahead)

- ✓ Select choice of dates, times and facilities.
- ✓ Identify the media in your area: contact person, address, and phone number.

Arrangements (2 months ahead)

- ✓ Determine date and time of meeting.
- ✓ Check proposed facilities for adequate size, cost, location, parking, podium, microphone, and other equipment.
- ✓ Confirm arrangements with facility in writing.
- ✓ Recruit people to host the event, sort questions, and act as timekeepers.
- ✓ Confirm arrangements with cosponsors.

Publicity (4 weeks ahead)

- ✓ Send letters of invitation to media.
- ✓ Arrange for newspaper photographer.
- ✓ Announce meeting in organization's newsletter.
- ✓ Draft press release; include League contact phone number.
- ✓ Print and distribute flyers.
- ✓ Arrange for League banner, signs, decorations, and flag.
- ✓ Invite local luminaries.
- ✓ Clip newspaper articles related to meeting.

Preparation (2-3 weeks ahead)

- ✓ Release pre-meeting publicity promoting attendance and encouraging citizens to vote.
- ✓ Confirm all arrangements.

Hospitality (2 weeks ahead)

- ✓ Arrange appropriate refreshments and necessary supplies.
- ✓ Arrange water glasses, paper and pencils for candidates.
- ✓ Also prepare front tables, if used: tablecloths.
- ✓ Arrange press section and credentials.

At the Meeting

- ✓ Arrive one hour early. Check to see that arrangements are as requested.
- ✓ Hang banners and posters.
- ✓ Check audio and lighting.
- ✓ Greet League personnel, candidates, and press.
- ✓ See that the meeting begins on time.
- ✓ Thank all those involved for a successful candidates' night.

After the Meeting

- ✓ Collect vouchers and receipts for reimbursement for expenses agreed upon in advance of the event.



Writing a Press Release

A press release is only one page — one double-spaced side of an 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of paper. Edit the text until it fits. Most newspapers require that press releases be emailed. It is a good idea to attach a Word document and copy the contents into the body of the email in case the attachment fails to open.

Include the following information at the top of the page:

- **(Upper right corner)** Contact Information: include the name, phone number, and e-mail address of the person who can be contacted by reporters for more information.
- **(Upper left corner)** Date and time for the story's release (e.g., "For Release at 9:00 a.m., October 1, 2011" or "For Immediate Release").
- A powerful headline that describes the content. "League of Women Voters to sponsor Candidates Forum." The headline is ninety percent of your release — use it to draw attention to your event.

Apply the inverted pyramid format to your content. A press release must put the important information at the top. Someone reading it will know from the first sentence what the event is about. The inverted pyramid style used the following format:

- *Lead:* One to three sentences answering the questions who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- *Bridge:* Connects the lead to more detailed information to follow. This section may give more "how" and "why" information not included in the lead.
- *Body:* This is your chance to customize and expand on the initial statement. If you use direction quotations (that always attracts attention) use the person's name, title and connection to the project.
- *Call to action:* Tell the reader what you want them to do. Remember, the purpose of the press release is to get attention. You may want to generate an audience or to attract the press to cover your event: "For more information or to volunteer at the forum, call the League of Women Voters at 207-xxx-xxxx" or .email at xxx@lwvme.org"
- Include boilerplate language about the sponsoring organizations and the League of Women Voters.
- End the press release with ### to indicate the end of the text.

Remember: The goal of a press release is simply to convey information in a clear, inviting, and interesting format.

Submit your press release to a wide media list, including newspapers, such as the large daily newspaper that serves the community, and smaller local weeklies or free newspapers that serve a particular target audience. Today no media strategy is complete without considering radio, television, and social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, or My Space.



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
[Insert date of release]

Contact: [Insert Name]
[Insert Organization]
207.XXX-XXXX
[Email address](#)

***LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE AND [Insert Name of Organization]
COSPONSOR FORUM ON REFERENDUM ISSUES
[Insert titles of questions to be discussed [Insert Date]***

ANYTOWN, ME – On [Insert date], the League of Women of Maine and the [Name of Co-Sponsoring Organization] will present an Issues Forum on referendum questions facing Maine voters in the upcoming election. The program will be held at the [Insert location], [Insert times] p.m. [Insert Name of Moderator], of the League of Women Voters of Maine, will moderate.

Question 1 – [Insert title of question] – will begin at X:XX. A representative to be named from [Insert Name of Presenter and Organization] will support the referendum. [Insert Name of Presenter and Organization], will represent a coalition opposed to the referendum.

Question 2 – [Insert questions title] – will be discussed first beginning at X:XX p.m. Presenting their views on Question 2 will be: [Insert Name of Presenter and Organization], an organization supporting the referendum; and [Insert Name of Presenter and Organization], a coalition opposed to the referendum.

The forum is open to the public. Light refreshments will be provided, and audience members will have a chance to submit questions of their own to speakers.

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

The [Insert Name of Organization and their mission]

####



Standard Ground Rules for Candidate and Issue Forums

- All participants use neutral language to describe people and issues.
- All participants refrain from personal attacks and focus on the issues.
- Candidates/presenters will observe time limits.
- The moderator asks the questions.
- The moderator may interrupt candidates/presenters who go over the time limits.

- Each candidate/presenter has XX minutes for an opening statement. They draw lots for the order in which they speak. After the opening statements, candidates take questions and alternate speaking first.
- Each candidate/presenter is given XX minutes to present a closing statement. Once again, they have drawn for the order in which they speak.

- Some questions have been prepared in advance by the League of Women Voters.
- Candidate/presenter responses are timed by volunteers.
- Questions must be submitted on 3x5 cards to volunteers who collate them for duplications and eliminate any that include personal attacks.
- Questions are consolidated by volunteers and presented by the Moderator.
- A question may be posed to a single candidate/presenter, but the other candidate/presenter are given an opportunity to comment or respond.
- Responses to these questions are limited to XX minutes.

- Informational literature may be placed on a table at the back of the room which may be taken by attendees who are interested.
- No literature may be distributed to the audience by candidates or their agents.
- Banners or signs that support or oppose either candidates or issues are not allowed in the meeting room.