

OXFAM TOOLKITS

# HOW TO TAKE ACTION ORGANIZING IN YOUR COMMUNITY



## OXFAM TOOLKITS

In keeping with Oxfam's belief that everyone has a part to play in the fight against poverty and injustice, Oxfam Toolkits are designed for individuals and groups looking for a hands-on way to join the effort. These practical how-to guides collect ideas and advice from Oxfam's experts as well as supporters around the country. Oxfam Toolkits represent an entry point into the world of activism—building a grass-roots movement for change, one person at a time.

### TOOLKITS AVAILABLE:

#### HOW TO GET STARTED

A MENU OF IDEAS

#### HOW TO HOST AN OXFAM AMERICA HUNGER BANQUET®

DIRECTIONS AND TOOLS

#### HOW TO FUNDRAISE FOR OXFAM

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### HOW TO HOST A HOUSE PARTY

#### HOW TO TAKE ACTION

ORGANIZING IN YOUR COMMUNITY

#### HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE ON CAMPUS

All toolkits are available for download at [oxfamamerica.org/toolkits](http://oxfamamerica.org/toolkits), or email [actfast@oxfamamerica.org](mailto:actfast@oxfamamerica.org) to request free copies.

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## DEAR FRIENDS,

What moves you to action?

Maybe it's speaking up on behalf of people who are living through conflict and crisis. Maybe it's raising awareness about issues that affect millions of people around the world. Or maybe it's simply the knowledge that through our efforts, we can help others overcome hunger and poverty.

Whatever moves you, Oxfam America welcomes you to the effort to right the wrongs of poverty, hunger, and injustice. As one of 17 members of the international Oxfam confederation, we work with people in more than 90 countries to create lasting solutions. Oxfam saves lives, develops long-term solutions to poverty, and campaigns for social change.

When you take action in your community, you're making a significant contribution to Oxfam's efforts. You're helping us get the word out; educating others about the issues; and showing your friends and neighbors that they, too, have the power to make a difference. Spreading knowledge spreads awareness; awareness leads to action, and action leads to change. This is how grassroots movements are built—one person at a time.

This guide includes all the tools you need to get started. We've also included some suggestions for creative ways to get the word out. And we encourage you to come up with your own ideas, too.

But if you have more questions—or just want some advice—contact us at [actfast@oxfamamerica.org](mailto:actfast@oxfamamerica.org). We're eager to help.

Good luck! We look forward to hearing from you.



**NANCY DELANEY**  
**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MANAGER, OXFAM AMERICA**

# THE BASICS OF ORGANIZING

It's easy to make organizing a part of your everyday life. And once you do, you'll find that it can be a powerful, transformative experience. You'll get to work with others committed to social justice. You'll raise awareness about issues that affect poor communities. And you just might find yourself learning something new in the process.

Not sure how to begin? Don't worry. Here are a few simple ways to take your concern about global hunger and poverty to the next level:

## DO YOUR HOMEWORK.

Before you begin educating others, educate yourself by making sure that you have the proper resources and background. Go to [oxfamamerica.org](http://oxfamamerica.org) to learn about issues and to read stories from affected people and communities. You'll also find our fact sheets, toolkits, posters, and other free materials you can download or order.

## TAP INTO YOUR COMMUNITY.

You are part of an intricate web of relationships. Be the catalyst of change in your personal world. At family events, educate those you love about the issues that matter to you. While out to dinner with friends, start up a conversation about what's going on and why you care. Forward a news article you found online to friends and include your personal perspective. Strike up a conversation with your neighbor or a colleague at work. The opportunities are endless!

## USE EXISTING EVENTS, MEETINGS, AND GATHERINGS.

Keep an eye out for opportunities to educate groups of people in your community. Often existing clubs and other gatherings are looking for interesting presenters and new content. Volunteer to present at a meeting in your church, synagogue, or other faith community. At your book club meeting, pick a book on the issue and then talk about ways you can all get more involved. Going to a potluck? Choose a dish from an area of the world you'd like to discuss—it will provide you with a great opening to talk about your issue.

## GET THE ISSUES ON THE TABLE.

Going to a concert, festival, or campus function? Find out if you can set up an informational table about your issue. "Tabling" is one of the easiest and most versatile ways to spread the word at a public event. When you host a table, you can reach a large number of people, ask them to take a specific action (such as signing a petition), and give them an opportunity to learn more. All you need is a table and chairs; some Oxfam materials (which you can order from our web site); and a helping hand from your friends, family, or fellow activists.

**"We host a lot of [informational] tables about Oxfam at farmers' markets and music festivals. At one festival, we invited people to decorate postcards or to write or draw a message to share with their legislators. When we brought the cards to our next meeting with representatives, they paid attention. Signatures are great, but a handwritten note or picture feels more personal."**

—Amy, Oxfam volunteer

## THINK BIGGER.

Use your network of contacts to explore new opportunities. Know someone who's in the Rotary Club? Urge them to have a speaker come in to discuss a specific topic. Is someone you know on the board of directors of a company? Encourage them to organize an officewide *Oxfam America Hunger Banquet*. Or organize an Oxfam benefit—such as an auction, dance, concert, art show, or athletic event—where your friends can show off their talents for a good cause.

For more organizing ideas, see page 13 of this guide or visit us online at [oxfamamerica.org/act](http://oxfamamerica.org/act).

## HOW TO TALK TO LAWMAKERS

As a world leader, the US plays an important role in the global fight against hunger and poverty. Our laws and practices can help to protect people against injustice, provide much-needed aid, or open up new economic opportunities. That's why it's important to show our leaders that a growing number of Americans care about these issues. We can do this by directly engaging our legislators when we have the chance and by educating other voters to do the same.

Emailing legislators or signing online petitions are great ways to make your voice heard. But to make an even bigger impact, try these three ways to talk to lawmakers about the issues that matter. Remember, your elected officials work for you—and they want to hear what you think.

### WRITE YOUR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Ask your members of Congress where they stand on the issues by sending them handwritten letters. They'll pay close attention to personal notes from constituents.

1. **Get the format right.** Address your letter to the member of Congress in this way:  
The Honorable [Jimmy Stewart]  
In-district address  
Dear Senator/Representative [Stewart],
2. **Begin with your "ask."** Your ask is your primary request of your member of Congress. Be specific about the issue, and emphasize how the US can help. For example, you might begin with this: "As a constituent in your district, I am concerned about the thousands of innocent people caught up in the continuing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I'm writing to ask that you support US funding for a continued peacekeeping presence in Congo to reduce threats to civilians."
3. **Be concise.** Lay out your arguments in two or three paragraphs.
4. **Make it personal.** Make sure your letter reflects your views. Talk about the big picture, and then connect it back to your own concerns as a constituent. For example, "As a socially responsible citizen and an energy consumer, I believe that oil, gas, and mining companies must come clean about the payments they make to governments in the countries where they operate."
5. **Mention that you are a voter.** Remind your member of Congress of your power.
6. **End with a clear request.** For example, "I urge you to support legislation that helps fight hunger with more aid and smarter policies. As a world leader, the US has a responsibility to help the one billion people worldwide who suffer from hunger."
7. **Get your friends and family to write letters.** Show them how easy it is to get involved.

### CALL YOUR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Exercise your power by organizing a group call-in.

1. **Plan ahead.** Do some research in advance about the piece of legislation that you want your member of Congress to support or vote against. Your calls will have the greatest impact if you are timely and specific about your request. To set up the call-in, gather clipboards and cell phones, and pick a location. Make sure you're calling during business hours when your member of Congress's office will be open. Host the call-in at your apartment or house, during a club meeting on campus, or after a service at your place of worship. Gather together friends or family. Or pick a public location and recruit participants.
2. **Prepare your location.** Set up tables with information. Make signs. Gather resources for participants to take away in case they want to learn more. (Visit [oxfamamerica.org/act](http://oxfamamerica.org/act) for fact sheets, toolkits, posters, and other free materials you can download or order.)
3. **Find the number.** Call the Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121—or go to [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) or [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)—to find the phone number of your member of Congress. Save the number in your cell phone so it's readily available when other people want to call.
4. **Staff accordingly.** If you are in a public space, work in shifts of at least four so there are always people available to recruit participants or help callers. Let them know that they will probably end up speaking with a Congressional staff person.
5. **Know what to say.** Before you call, familiarize yourself with the suggested key messages and help others understand the issues. When calling your member of Congress, ask for the staffer who handles your particular issue.
  - Begin by telling the staffer your name and where you live or go to school to stress that you are the member's constituent.

- Tell the staffer you're calling to ask the member of Congress to support or vote against a specific piece of legislation, and briefly explain why it matters to you. Refer back to Oxfam's key messages on the issue.
- Don't feel as if you have to cover everything. It's best to discuss what you understand and feel comfortable talking about.

## VISIT YOUR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Better in person? Then schedule a meeting with your members of Congress. You can do the same with a legislative assistant who works on global issues, or the appropriate staff member.

1. **Schedule a meeting.** To schedule a visit with your member of Congress, call his or her district or Washington, DC, office. For visits to the local office, seek appointments during Congressional recess periods when your member of Congress returns to your district. After you schedule your meeting, send a confirmation letter that includes a list of those who will attend the meeting as well as your contact information.
2. **Prepare for the meeting.** Meetings generally last about 20–30 minutes. Use the following suggestions as a road map for planning purposes.
  - Research your member of Congress. You can use the online Congressional directories—[www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) or [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)—to find biographical information, committee and subcommittee assignments, and key issues of concern for your member of Congress. Review the voting record of your member of Congress and any publicly stated views or opinions. If your member has not made any public comments on the subject, make a note to ask him or her to do so.
  - Determine your agenda and goals for the meeting. Remember to focus your agenda on just one priority issue; from there, plan to mention only the two or three points that you see as most important. Don't try to cover everything.
  - If you are meeting in a group, practice your talking points ahead of time. Have different people cover different points, but have one person act as the facilitator for the discussion and deliver the bulk of your message. Be certain everyone agrees on the central message and what will be asked of the member of Congress.
  - Prepare an information packet to leave with your member of Congress. This packet should include information on your organization, including the group's contact information, as well as a description of your objectives. If you have a business card, you should leave it with the appropriate legislative staffer. You should also include recent articles or reports that you think are relevant.
3. **Hold the meeting.** After introducing yourself and thanking the member of Congress for meeting with you, get right to the point.
  - Get your member of Congress talking; ask the member how much he or she knows about the issue. Listen well! You will hear occasional indications of his or her actual views, and you should take those opportunities to provide good information.
  - Ask about his or her positions. How will your member of Congress vote?
  - Do party leaders have positions on the issue?
  - What is his or her influence likely to be?
  - Is the office hearing from people who oppose your views? If so, what are their arguments and what groups are involved?
  - Does the member of Congress know any other key representatives or senators who should be contacted to get favorable action on the issue?
  - Is your member of Congress willing to facilitate contact for further lobby activities?
  - Make sure that when it's your turn to speak, you give personal testimony about why this issue is important to you, as a voter and a constituent. Use the key messages to support your statements.
  - Get your member of Congress to commit to a particular task. Tell him or her you will follow up. Thank the member of Congress or legislative staffer.
4. **Follow up.** Make sure you get the contact information of any legislative staffers who attend your meeting. Even if no commitments were made, follow up with all attendees via email to thank them for their time, answer any further questions, and provide additional information.

**“Remember that you are going in to meet legislators as a constituent, not a paid lobbyist. You're there by choice, because you care about these issues. And there's a lot of value in that. Don't worry about not having as much experience; what sets you apart is that you're a volunteer.”**

—Adam, Oxfam volunteer

# HOW TO MAKE NEWS

Your local newspaper—whether it’s large or small—can be a great forum for generating dialogue in your community. When you share your views in the paper, you’re educating an audience of thousands, from your next-door neighbor to your member of Congress. Here are three simple ways to get your message out to the press.

## WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The letter to the editor or opinion page is one of the most-read sections of a newspaper because it’s where the opinions and views of the community are shared and debated.

- 1. Understand why it’s important.**
  - Letters help editors decide which stories to cover.
  - Members of Congress closely monitor letters to gauge the opinions of their constituents.
  - Letters encourage a public dialogue.
- 2. Prep yourself.**
  - Check your newspaper for guidelines by looking at the opinion section of its website and the other letters it publishes. Most newspapers have information on their websites about how to submit letters to the editor, including email addresses and length or style preferences.
  - You can submit your letter via email or fax.
  - Include your contact information (name, email, and phone).
- 3. Be timely.**
  - Your letter is much more likely to be published if it refutes, contributes to, or corrects a recently published piece from a media outlet.
  - After you identify a story or editorial that needs a response, submit your letter as soon as possible—ideally within the same day the article ran, but no longer than three days after it was published. Don’t forget to reference the article.
- 4. Be short and sweet.**
  - Try to keep your letter under 200 words.
  - Stay on topic. Keep your letter brief and to the point. Focus on making one key point in two or three paragraphs, and use just a couple of key facts or statistics, or a very brief story, to support your argument.
  - Present your experience. Add a personal touch.
- 5. Feel free to praise.** Every letter doesn’t have to be critical. If a newspaper positively covers the issue you’re working on, write a letter praising or thanking the media outlet for this coverage or support.
- 6. Think it through.** Organize your letter logically.
  - Address the issue.
  - Make your statement.
  - Present solid evidence. You can refer to the key messages on the issue.
  - Keep it positive.
  - Demonstrate your reach (e.g., there are X supporters of improved food aid legislation in this community).
  - Close by recapping (i.e., restate your position, make your recommendation, and don’t forget the call to action).
- 7. Before you finish ...**
  - Double-check your facts, figures, and all quotations.
  - Proofread your letter carefully for spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
  - Get feedback on your letter from friends, family, or colleagues.
- 8. Make it count.**
  - If you want to catch the attention of your members of Congress, mention them by name.
  - If relevant, explain the need for a particular piece of legislation.
  - Use your credentials. If you have personal experience or expertise in the subject area, mention it. This gives credence and authority to your statements.
- 9. Follow up.** Call to make sure the paper received your letter, and then call a few days later to find out if it will be printed.

## WRITE AN OP-ED

If you're good with words, try writing an *op-ed*. The term refers to the section opposite the editorial page in a newspaper, which features signed articles expressing readers' personal opinions. A well-written op-ed can be a powerful way to convince others to see your point of view.

1. **Choose your outlet.** Large, regional newspapers have a higher readership, but given the high number of submissions they receive each day, their editors can publish just a few op-ed pieces. Smaller newspapers don't reach as broad an audience but are more likely to print your submission.
2. **Prep yourself.**
  - Most newspapers have information on their websites about how to submit opinion pieces, including email addresses and length or style preferences.
  - You can submit your op-ed via email or fax.
  - Be sure to include your contact information (name, email, and phone).
3. **Know the format.**
  - Op-eds are short, guest pieces printed in the editorial section of a newspaper. They are typically 700–750 words long, and they outline three ideas: the problem, the solution, and the call to action. This action should be tailored to your target audience (for example, asking constituents in your district to contact their members of Congress about a piece of legislation).
  - Read the op-eds that appear in the paper you're targeting so you can get a better sense of the appropriate style and audience.
4. **Organize your thoughts.** Try the following outline:
  - Start with a personal anecdote. For example, you could talk about a person you've met in the course of your organizing work, or a place you visited that had a particular impact.
  - Make your main point in the second paragraph.
  - Begin to elaborate on two, at most three, supporting points in the following paragraphs. Make sure your paragraphs are short and contain one main idea each.
  - Use facts, statistics, and studies (with documentation) and your own experiences to support your arguments.
  - Conclude with a paragraph that draws the piece together and links to your opening anecdote.

5. **Maximize impact.** Follow these writing tips to get the most out of your op-ed:

- **Be succinct.** Use short, simple sentences and avoid jargon. Be careful to avoid writing a slowly unfolding essay. Get to the point.
  - **Don't equivocate.** Remember your call to action and be sure to state it clearly.
  - **Personalize it.** Provide an anecdote from your own experience. Write informally, in your own voice.
  - **Be timely.** Try to link your op-ed with a hook, such as the timeliness of the legislation you are writing about.
6. **Think locally.** Don't forget to link your op-ed to the interests of the readership in your community. For example, if you're talking about the global food crisis, cite some statistics showing how many people in your city are suffering from hunger.
  7. **Follow up.** As with a letter to the editor, call to make sure the paper received your op-ed, and then call a few days later to find out if it will be printed.

## WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

You can encourage your local paper to cover your organizing work by creating a standard written statement known as a press release. Press releases are a great way of getting reporters' attention and can often lead to more in-depth coverage of your issue.

1. **Pick a subject.** A press release can announce a range of news items: upcoming or past events, awards, benefits, fund raisers, and more. For the best results, choose events that are local (i.e., taking place within the geographic area covered by the paper) and timely (i.e., taking place no more than a week earlier or later than the date of the release).
2. **Follow the format.** Use this outline to create a standard press release:
  - Print the words "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" (in all caps) in the top left-hand corner of an electronic document. Follow this with your contact information: name, title, address, phone number, and email address.
  - Create a headline. This should be brief, clear, and to the point. The first word in the headline should be capitalized, as should all proper nouns. Do not capitalize every word.
  - Add a dateline. The first line in the body of your press release should include the city where the release is generated and the date (e.g., Boston, MA – Jan. 1, 2009).

- In the first paragraph, sum up the press release in two to three clear, concise sentences. Remember, journalists won't read the entire press release if the first paragraph doesn't capture their interest.
- The body of the press release should communicate the essentials of your event: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Make sure you use double space throughout the document, and don't use paragraph indentations.
- Conclude the last paragraph with a "for additional information" line with your name, phone number, and email address so that the reporter knows where to go to find more information.
- End the press release by inserting three # symbols (###) and centering them directly under the last line.

### 3. Set the tone.

- As you write, think of your audience. What makes your event news? Why should it matter to members of your community? Structure your headline and your first paragraph accordingly.
- Write simply and clearly. Avoid using long sentences, repetition, or jargon.
- Keep the tone of your release all business; don't go into too much personal detail.
- Keep it short: one to two double-spaced pages.

### 4. Be available.

Make sure you include your full contact information on the release, and be prepared to speak with the reporter or editor if he or she calls back. If the paper decides to cover the story, it's very likely the reporter will want more detail, including a quote from you or a spokesperson.

### 5. Find the right person.

Find out the name of the reporter at the paper who covers a related subject area, such as international issues or education. If you can obtain this person's contact information, send the release directly to him or her via email or fax.

### 6. Follow up.

If possible, call the reporter a day or two later to make sure he or she received your release, and to see if he or she has any questions. Often a follow-up call can help develop a press release into a full story.

# MORE WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

## GO ONLINE

While nothing replaces face-to-face interaction, online organizing can be a great way to reach out to others, share stories, and build community. Here are a few tips for using the web to promote your cause.

**Connect with us.** Follow [@oxfamamerica](#) on Twitter or like us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/oxfamamerica](#) to get the latest updates.

**Spread the word.** Use the “tell a friend” feature to send Oxfam alerts to your email contacts; add a message to personally urge them to take action. Or create your own email newsletter or alert and send it to other volunteers and friends.

**Blog about it.** Think about starting a blog to educate others on the issues you care about. Or look for other blogs that write about the issues, and post a comment about your point of view. For inspiration, visit Oxfam’s blogs at [oxfamamerica.org](#).

**Share your events.** Make sure you post your upcoming events on online calendars and listservs, including Oxfam’s at [oxfamamerica.org/events](#). Did you take photos during your event? Post them to a photo-sharing site or email them to us at [actfast@oxfamamerica.org](#).

## HOST AN EVENT

You may want to design your own community event, but here are a couple of our time-tested ideas to get you started. For more event ideas, visit [oxfamamerica.org/act](#).

**Host a house party.** A house party is a fun, informal gathering where you get your friends and family together to take action. You can use a house party to contact your legislators, hold a film screening and discussion, build a support network, or educate others on important issues.

Go to [oxfamamerica.org/organize](#) to find out more about the house party and other events.

**Go hungry.** Consider hosting an *Oxfam America Hunger Banquet* event at your school, community event, faith congregation, or business. Unique and memorable, an *Oxfam America Hunger Banquet* event allows organizers and participants alike to experience firsthand how our decisions affect others in the world. For more information, including a step-by-step guide to hosting your event, visit [oxfamamerica.org/hungerbanquet](#).

## CONTACT OXFAM AMERICA

Got a good story to tell about your organizing work? Have questions?

### EMAIL

[actfast@oxfamamerica.org](mailto:actfast@oxfamamerica.org)

### ONLINE

[oxfamamerica.org/act](http://oxfamamerica.org/act)

### MAIL

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### PHONE

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