

# 2012.STOP.AIDS

## Birddogging 101: Getting real answers from policy makers

Many of us have at one point written a letter to our Member of Congress, and some of us have even called their office in Washington. These are all important parts of a campaign to win new policies, because we are communicating our demand (and sometimes our strength in numbers) to decision makers- the people who have the power to give us what we want. But sometimes, when phone calls and letters aren't enough, directly interacting with the decision maker is a way to ensure that our demands are translated quickly into effective new policies and funding for people with HIV. All of these tactics can and should be used to win policy victories.

The 08.Stop.AIDS Campaign is working across the country to ensure that our next President enacts bold new policies that benefit people living with HIV/AIDS in the US and around the world. We're doing this through a comprehensive strategy that involves a broad diversity of tactics, including birddogging- a tactic where we directly reach policy makers, at public appearances like campaign events or town meetings, when the people we need to say "yes" to our demands for policy change are outside of the protective bubbles they surround themselves with when they are in Washington.



A birddogger asks a question at a town hall forum

Public events are especially valuable since activists can often gain direct access and get an answer in front of members of the public and media, so we can hold politicians accountable for their promises.

***Bird-dogging is the name given to the activist tactic of attending public appearances in order to win new policies from politicians. This direct interaction between activists and decision makers rarely happens in Washington. It is easy to have a big impact through the simple act of bringing five people to an event, working together to raise your hands and ask questions that provoke an answer from the target politician.***

The 2012.STOP.AIDS list is an e-mail network used by over 1500 AIDS activists across the country who have been trained to "birddog" candidates to get the issues and voices of people with AIDS heard by decision makers. (Send a note to [Guaylupo@housingworks.org](mailto:Guaylupo@housingworks.org) to join this list.)

Bird-dogging takes a little planning - here's how to do it.

### 1. Get an event.

**CALENDARS:** Gathering information on where candidates and elected officials are going to be is important work-make it a priority. Groups working with the 2012.Stop.AIDS project will try to gather as much of this intel as possible for the 2012.Stop.AIDS list, but we don't catch nearly everything. Help us out!

You can learn about upcoming public events by getting on party and candidate e-mail lists, join the lists of campus democrats and republicans, and monitor the "political futures" columns on ABC and MSNBC pages: [abcnews.go.com/Politics/TheNote/story?id=140388](http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/TheNote/story?id=140388) and [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14708421/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14708421/) . Keep your eye on local press, though--often, local reports will be the first to announce specific events.

**CALLS:** During campaign season, call the campaign offices and say "Hi, I have a few friends who were wondering what the next couple of opportunities are to see Senator so-and-so?"

**EVENT FORMAT:** Ask the event organizers about the event: when do the doors open, do you need a ticket and where can you get one, and, most importantly, is there a question and answer period. National groups will often be able to help with this work also.

**ACCESS:** Sometimes you need a ticket. These almost always go quickly. Sometimes you just need to print a ticket off of the candidate's website. If the tickets are gone or the event is a fundraiser, you can volunteer for the event to get in for free. It is perfectly fine to ask questions or even shout questions at politicians - even if you are a volunteer!

**THERE IS HELP!:** Be ready to act quickly and on short notice - and you can always reach out to other people and groups on the 08.STOP.AIDS email list (see above) to get help

## 2. Get a posse.

It can be intimidating to go to a campaign appearance by yourself, no question. So bring a posse - just as simple as collecting a few friends will strengthen your effort a lot.

Every single person can have a big impact when you're bird-dogging. But four or five polite people armed with effective questions can completely alter the vibe of a question-and-answer period and win new commitments from the candidate!

It is best to bring a group with you so you are better able to get your questions asked and answered and so that you can back each other up.



Birddoggers in Ames pose for a photo with a candidate to get

## 3. Get a plan together with your crew.

It is very important to make a plan in advance with your posse. Truthfully, it never works to 'wing it', nor can we really just tell our team what to do and expect them to do it.

Important: Write your questions in advance-even the most experienced birddoggers sometimes stumble over their questions when the microphone is on and the cameras are pointing at them. Many regular folks who are interested in issues and who are *not* working with a team to win something will write their questions before asking them. (See below for help on good questions).

A posse of five-to-ten activists might write just two or three questions and then be ready to follow up when and if the target gives an incomplete answer. Be sure to follow up on each other's questions.

Birddoggers have been successful at large and small events simply by speaking with the decision maker on the



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way to the stage, or during the handshake line after the event. (See below for more on handshakes).

If the event is large, like a rally with thousands of people, AIDS activists have gotten the candidates attention by getting up to the front and holding up 11x17 posters with clear, short questions or statements they slipped into their pockets, and/or shouting a chant ten or fifteen times. If you're going to chant, one person will need to cue the chanting at the appropriate time, and the group will have determined in advance how long to chant. It's easy to run out of steam when all the cameras are pointing, but getting heard is the goal, right?

Your classic town

**PRACTICE:** Especially if you'll be chanting or shouting questions, it is very important to make sure you can be heard. In even a medium rally, you will need to be louder than you ever knew you could be! Even for simple Q&A sessions, practice with your teammates strengthen everyone's efforts and avoids mistakes.

**4. Get good seats - which means arriving early!**

Good seats are in or near the very front row and/or near microphones placed in the aisles. Most of the time, unless you have secured special tickets, there will be some sort of VIP area. Don't worry; clever activists can almost always slip into these areas to get to the front. Just walk in like you know what you're doing, and you will almost never get stopped. On the off chance that you do get stopped, just wait for the VIP section to open up to the general public - it always will!



An outdoor meet-and-greet with a Presidential Candidate

**Arrive early**-around an hour early for a small meeting, half an hour early for a very small gathering at a coffee shop, and as much as two hours before the doors open for a big rally or town hall with a front-runner candidate. If there are several people in your team, spread out. People sitting next to each other will not be called on. This is part of why it is important to have a plan in advance and to practice. **Make eye contact with the candidate or the staff** who decide whether to call on you or hand you the mic. Sit where the target can hear you, and see you (right in front of the podium if you can)! Applauding wildly and shouting supportive things during the speech can make it much more likely you will be called on.

**5. Get your hand up first, fast and high.**



**This sounds simple, but it is the most important thing to do to get called on!** Most people will wait for the second or third question to raise their hand, and some only raise their hand half way. These people will rarely get called on. However, for some reason, **if you are the first, fastest, highest person to get their hand in the air, you will almost always get called on!** Raise you hand *before* questions are called for-like before the candidate finishes inviting questions. Raise your hand even if there is not supposed to be a Q&A period-if you are in the font and have been applauding, the target will often spontaneously decide to give you a question.

*Keep in mind-* we are on a mission! Our job is to get an answer from the candidate, and our mission requires us to get heard. below for help on constructing powerful questions.

**6. Get a handshake - and a photo, and an autograph - and AN ANSWER!**

handshake line is another chance to ask the target a

Birddoggers ask Rep. Murphy to support generic drugs



A birddogger in Davenport talks with Sen. Edwards about

See The

question, in public, and usually near reporters. After the formal parts of an event, there is almost always a handshake line. Anticipate where the handshake is going to be (usually near the stage) and quickly bring your team forward, even before the Q&A section is done (but only if you've gotten your question answered). Squish right up next to the rope, don't lose your spot in front, and wait for the candidate to come to you! One important tactic: don't let go of her hand until you have your answer! Politicians are used to this, and they will rarely pull away. If there are a few of you, it can help to crowd around the candidate to prolong the handshake for as long as necessary until they have said "yes" to your team. If there are more than 4 in your team, you can get them twice!

Another way to get their attention, when grabbing their hand, is to simply say "Sen/Gov/Mayor \_\_\_\_, can I ask you a question?". Remember that even in the best situations, you only have a few seconds to ask your question, so make it short (just one sentence) and PRACTICE since you won't be able to read off a piece of paper!

Politicians—even the most powerful—are suckers for posed photographs. Getting a photo of you and your posse one at a time with the target while the questioning is going on – is a good way to extend discussion and/or seal the deal. They also like to autograph signs, clothing books or whatever you have.

### **7. Get quoted.**

After the event, talk to the press and get them to cover your questions and the politician's statement. The press will not come to talk to you – you've got to go to them. But they will be interested in what you have to say. Prepare your quote just like you prepared your question.

Important: when you're talking with a reporter, you'll want to keep the discussion to what YOU want to say about your issue, and not on other, less important items. You only have to answer the question you should have been asked!

If a reporter asks you, "What did you think about Senator so-and-so's speech on Social Security?" or "How do you like the Senator's new hairpiece?" it's perfectly appropriate to dodge the question completely and respond with your quote instead ("The important thing here today was that the Senator made a clear commitment to support \$8 billion over 5 years to hire new health care workers that will save the lives of people living with AIDS in Africa").

Reporters are accustomed to people ignoring questions, and they have some obligation to report on what the public thinks at campaign appearances, so be sure to give them *only* what you want your quote to say—otherwise your quote might end at the point that you have filled in the blank in the story the reporter already has written in their head.

### **8. Get a report out.**

Birddoggers are networked across the country in many different states—but it only works if we keep each other apprised of our efforts and progress.

Our collective voices can be much more powerful if you know that someone will follow up on your question to a Senator or Representative three days later and ten states away. For example: "Senator Aimlow, in New Hampshire last week, you told a group of social workers that the Global AIDS Fund didn't need more money from Congress because other countries haven't paid. Were you saying that we should hold people with AIDS hostage in Africa because the U.S. hasn't paid our own fair-share? Will you lead a fight for \$50 billion for to fight AIDS by 2013?"

After you birddog, send a note to the 08.STOP.AIDS list so that activists can have each other's back, and track our progress towards victory. Let us know what you did, what you said, and how the candidate responded.

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**9. Repeat!**



A corn boil at a ballpark in Iowa is a nice place to bump into a candidate for President, and if you're lucky, maybe more.

## Ingredients of a Good Question:

The goal of questions should be to pin the candidate down and make them give you a REAL answer rather than just rhetoric. We want the candidate feel like the best option is to meet your demands.

We should recognize that everyone in the room might not know much about global HIV/AIDS, and that reporters and candidates will need a little help.

*A good question is ...*

- about 10-20 seconds long
- constructed like a small narrative: problem, personal interest, solution and a demand
- accompanied by a specific closed-ended "yes" or "no" question.

The demand is the most important ingredient - a good question contains the answer!

A. FACTS: The opening 'intro' should grab people and make them care about your question, and include one or two facts.

• *AIDS facts: 40 million people with AIDS, 30-40% infection rates in some countries, a death every 10 seconds, and 1 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S.*

B. Include a personal sentence about why you care.

• During my studies in Africa; I am living with HIV/AIDS; my relative or friend is living with HIV/AIDS; my church mission to Africa; As a medical student; In my class on HIV...

C. IMPORTANT: Make sure the answer to the question is in the question.

• Find and use supporting facts and external citations - i.e. "Over 400 individuals and organizations, including many distinguished public health officials, have supported \$8 billion over 5 years in new money from the US for healthcare workers in Africa"

• These facts and citations are hints or prompts to the candidate about what they should answer.

D. Reference the candidate's opponent or their speech.

• If you know what the person the candidate is running against has said on the issue, use it to push the candidate with whom you're speaking to do more.

• If the candidate said something in their speech that relates to your question ("I think that all people are equal"), use that in your question to justify why they should support you.

E. Choose closed-ended YES or NO questions when you want a definite answer.

• Make your question even more powerful by invoking or inviting comparisons to the opponent—the wrong answer is identified with the opponent, or, asking if the candidate that can do better than their opponent.

F. Choose open-ended questions when you want to challenge an official to do better.

Open-ended questions can engage both candidates in a race to see who will deliver the better results for people with AIDS by explicitly inviting them to challenge their rivals on specific AIDS policies.

We should be careful not to let policy makers off easy, though!

- Ask them about specifics of their AIDS plan and how it compares with their opponent's initiatives.

- Ask them to describe how their opponent's plan is a failure and how--specifically--theirs will be better.

Sample:

On my church's trip to Africa, we met people who cannot see a doctor because there just aren't enough doctors and nurses in Africa. The shortage is so dire that in some countries, there are as few as 3 doctors per 100,000 people. The US share of what the World Health Organization says it will take to address this shortage is \$8 billion over 5 years. If you're elected, will you commit to funding the \$8 billion needed to train and retrain health workers in Africa?