

3. EDUCATING DECISION MAKERS

Educating decision makers, including organizations, businesses, and local lawmakers, is a central component to generating the public will needed to prevent and end homelessness. This toolkit focuses on this tactic, in part because this work is often seen as daunting or inaccessible. This is especially true for those who may see themselves lacking certain types of power or knowledge, or who may themselves experience injustices caused by homelessness or housing insecurity.

Meeting with decision makers can fit into many different parts of your work and movement building. Some questions to think about as you incorporate educating decision makers into your overall goals:

- What are you hoping to accomplish?
- Are you looking to begin to build a relationship by introducing your work and sharing the issues you see?
- Do you have a specific goal for the decision maker to accomplish?
- What materials do you need to educate the decision maker if they are unfamiliar with the issue? What if they are a strong supporter?

The [Midwest Academy's Strategy Development Chart](#) and the [Steps to Develop a Strategic Political Landscape Power Analysis](#) by SCOPE, which can both

be found in the Appendix as handouts, may be helpful in determining who you need to target in these conversations, and understanding the stake other players may have in the larger issue.

One helpful way to frame public engagement comes from the Miami Workers Center, whose organizers have developed a model called the Four Pillars of Social Justice Infrastructure, including Pillars of Policy, Consciousness, Service, and Power.¹³ In most movements or campaigns, organizers and stakeholders touch upon more than one of these pillars in their work. The “Pillar of Consciousness” involves getting a message to a broader audience, sometimes through social media or other public education work. The “Pillar of Service” revolves around doing direct service work and making sure that individuals in a given community have their basic needs met. The “Pillar of Power” is about base building and developing leadership. The “Pillar of Policy” is utilized in this toolkit, as it provides examples on creating change through educating decision-making bodies. Many other resources exist that can help your community develop a framework or campaign that is situated more within one of the other Pillars of Power, some of which appear in the Appendix of this toolkit.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

Within the broad goal of ensuring everyone in Washington has access to a safe, healthy, affordable home, more long-term goals and big-picture questions exist. Some examples of questions you might ask yourself and your community include:

- What are the most pressing issues your community faces?
- How do we talk about homelessness?
- Who is included when we talk about homelessness?
- What do we want to accomplish in the next month? The next year?

Identifying your organization's or community's understanding of the challenges it faces can be a helpful first step in articulating these needs to decision makers. As homelessness and affordable housing advocates, you have a powerful perspective about your local community's affordable housing needs.

Using stories and anecdotes from people you work with or your own experience is one of the most powerful ways to demonstrate the problems being faced.

When framing a given need, including statistics may be helpful, especially if you name, for example, how many people are experiencing a certain problem. However, using a specific example can help to paint a picture and personalize the challenge being faced.

Decision makers rely on information from knowledgeable constituents. For example, even if you don't have statistics about how many people are affected or the number of people arrested by laws that criminalize homelessness, being able to articulate a growing trend, or even an incident may clarify for a decision maker why there is a problem. Has something particularly unfair or egregious occurred? Has someone been particularly impacted by a certain instance of criminalization? One way to gather stories is to ask your community or coworkers to share their experiences.



TIP
Create a collection of stories in a saved document with your personal experiences or the experiences of people you work with. When you are meeting with a decision maker or putting together information, you have clear examples ready to go.

FRAMING YOUR MESSAGE

When talking about your issue(s) with decision makers, it's important to be aware of how you are delivering your issue statement or articulating the challenge being faced. Try asking yourself, or asking within your organization or community, questions that speak to the "frame" or scope of your work.

Consider, for example, how this statement sounds: "Government doesn't understand homelessness."

Compare it to this statement: "Service providers in our community know what works. We have the tools and experience to successfully house people instead of criminalizing them."

ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS

It's important to keep in mind that decision makers, like all of us, can be stressed, frustrated, or overwhelmed with a given problem. Responding to a negative statement or a myth about homelessness can be difficult. It may be helpful to go back to values-based talking points or a reframe that is action-oriented and says what can be accomplished versus statements that say what cannot be accomplished. Section 5 ([Putting It Into Practice: Myths and Facts of Homelessness](#)) addresses ways to respond when a decision maker or community member says something negative you don't believe is accurate.

QUICK GUIDE TO SHARING YOUR PERSONAL STORY

It has a lasting impact on decision makers when people who have experienced homelessness and criminalization share their personal stories. Here are the basic elements of a personal story that moves others into action.

- Share brief background information about your experiences that provides decision makers with the relevant *context* to understand the issue you are facing.
- Describe the *problem* you are facing and how it is affecting your life.
- Describe the specific *solutions* that would address the problem you are facing.
- Ask those hearing your story to commit to specific *action* that moves your community toward the solutions that are needed.

One of the most important jobs of an advocate is developing a relationship with a decision maker whom you don't always, or even rarely, agree with. If you develop a respectful relationship with someone whom you don't agree with, you lay the necessary groundwork to modify or outright change a decision maker's perspective or their voting. A key part of developing a relationship is respectfully addressing myths and stigmas stated during meetings. Ignoring a misinformed statement doesn't allow for honest dialogue. But the fundamental rule is to be respectful and to work toward ensuring future opportunities for education and dialogue.

RESIST ATTEMPTS TO PIT ISSUES AGAINST ONE ANOTHER

Occasionally, decision makers will ask tough questions that try to pit important issues against one another. For example, "We can only fund housing if we don't fund parks." Or, "what would you like us to cut in order to fund your program?" Instead of responding in a way that minimizes another issue (you never know, the one you pick could be that decision maker's pet program), continue to speak in favor of your issue and why it's so important.

ALWAYS HAVE AN ASK

It is important to have some kind of request or ask. It can be as soft as asking for the decision maker to attend a board

meeting of your organization or to tour an affordable housing complex. It could more directly relate to a position on an issue they will be asked to vote on or if they will work to protect or fund a program. It isn't enough for a decision maker to agree to meet, although a first meeting to introduce a complex issue may be warranted. Just ensure that the ask is to meet again soon to follow up on the possible solutions.

EDUCATING STATE LAWMAKERS

While this toolkit can apply to working with different types of decision makers, the following section will address the nuts and bolts of educating state lawmakers since they have a central decision making role over the policies and program funding that have profound impacts on homelessness.

There are 147 state lawmakers in the Washington State Legislature, including 49 members in the State Senate and 98 members in the State House of Representatives. One senator and two house members serve each of the 49 legislative districts. [Find your legislators](#)

Make sure your message and any asks of the lawmaker fit within the broader goals of your work. Does your advocacy help move your organization to where it wants to be?

TIP

[here](#). You can reach out to any legislator that you want—you are not limited to your district. However lawmakers are often most interested in meeting with people who live, work, or serve people in their home legislative districts. Even so, lawmakers are assigned to serve on legislative policy committees and are often interested in meeting with organizations or stakeholders who are knowledgeable on their policy focus. For example, if you are targeting decision makers on the state budget, you may seek out members of the [Senate Ways and Means Committee](#).

Additionally, be open to meeting with decision makers who are champions of the issues you are working on, as well as those who are new to the issues or have not been supporters in the past. Understanding your work as part of a movement requires long-term relationship building, which can require tough conversations.

See the Appendix for more information on researching the committee system and researching your state lawmaker.

Once you've decided to meet with a legislator, you'll need to make a meeting request. A request can be sent to your lawmaker's office. Although state lawmakers are generally very accessible to constituents, you should plan on requesting a meeting or sending an event

invitation four to six weeks in advance.

To schedule a meeting contact the lawmaker's legislative aid to coordinate.

[You can find their contact info here](#).

Generally, either an email or phone call (whichever is listed) will suffice. (See the Appendix for a sample email.) Don't get discouraged if you don't hear back right away. There are times, especially during the legislative session, when lawmakers are inundated with calls, emails, and meeting requests. Wait a couple days and then call or email back.

You should be prepared to tell the legislative aid what the meeting topic will be, who will be attending the meeting, and when and where you are able to meet the legislator. (For example, you could schedule a meeting in their home district or in Olympia.) Another option is to invite the lawmaker to an organizational event, such as an open house, member meeting, board meeting, groundbreaking for new affordable housing building, or another type of community event that showcases your work. Some decision makers may be less familiar with what affordable housing or other similar projects look like. Seeing these projects in their communities may be a helpful point of entry for talking about these issues, may allow for a longer meeting, and can be a great opportunity to leverage social media. See Section 4 ([Using Media to Elevate Your Message](#)) for ideas about using social media.

MATERIALS TO BRING TO YOUR MEETING

- A handout with your contact information or a business card.
- Meeting agenda, especially if this will be a large meeting.
- Policy background information, especially a one-pager that gives a clear and plain overview of your issue(s). Bringing the chart on the Cycle of Criminalization (pg. 13) may be a helpful way to give an overview of this issue. Also, the Housing Alliance has many helpful materials on our website: wliha.org.
- Information about your organization, such as a brochure.
- Data and local statistics. See the accompanying [County-by-County Fact Sheets on Housing Affordability in Washington State](#) in that will help you frame local need. Data on criminalization for your county or city can be helpful if available, as well.
- Success stories from those directly affected by criminalization or other issues.

TIP

Site visits where services are delivered can be a great place to bring decision makers who may be unfamiliar with what this looks like in action.

- For housing especially, materials that can help educate the decision maker about the intersections of federal, state, and local funding (see the Homeless Response System information in the Appendix for more information).
- Be sure to bring extra copies for the legislative assistant, another very important person to educate.

Meeting with a decision maker is very much worth your time! The Housing Alliance has heard from lawmakers over and over again how important it is to hear from those doing the work and from those who are directly affected by the policies and funding options before them. Strengthening relationships with elected officials at all levels of government is important. Even if you haven't done so before, we encourage you to try!

WHO SHOULD ATTEND A MEETING WITH A DECISION MAKER?

People who have direct experience

with homelessness and criminalization have unique and critical expertise to share with decision makers. Sharing your personal story about homelessness and experiences with criminalization can be incredibly effective.

Service providers and those working at all levels of an organization have valuable insight to share with decision makers. Naming the needs of clients and identifying the gaps that you see can be invaluable. Have you seen the effects that the criminalization of homelessness has had on those you work with? Are there local trends or emerging needs that you see? Sharing your insights can go a long way in educating decision makers.

Nonprofit board members can draw a direct line from public policy choices to the impact they have on your organization, the people you serve, and your ability to accomplish your mission.

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“Your knowledge and insight are so valuable to me, and truly help me be an effective advocate for the programs that are so important for residents across our state...The stories you tell put a face to the issues of affordable housing and homelessness.

They serve as an important reminder that the programs for which you advocate represent a lifeline for members of our communities—our neighbors or friends in need.”

—WASHINGTON SENATOR PATTY MURRAY¹⁴

TIP

The Housing Alliance is a great resource for help with planning a meeting with a lawmaker, especially if you have not done so before. Check out wliha.org.

Local elected officials representing city and county governments can be very effective messengers and can help increase the profile of your issue. In particular, local elected officials can speak to how homelessness and housing instability impacts other systems and resources in your community.

Community leaders can be great at speaking about the macro impact of homelessness and housing insecurity and larger cyclical problems criminalization can cause in communities.

Allies and unexpected messengers from outside of homelessness and affordable housing sectors can help make connections between these and

other issues. Think about bringing health care workers, teachers, those who work in emergency services or public safety, etc. Who might be able to speak to the effects of criminalization, for example? Unexpected messengers can help decision makers make connections and better understand the scope of the problem. (For example, an emergency worker who can speak to the long term effects of a person sleeping on the street and the cost of providing them with emergency services as opposed to providing housing.)

See the Appendix for more information on all the ways nonprofit organizations can connect with lawmakers.

ENSURE EVERYONE AGREES ON THE SAME MESSAGE AND THE SAME ASK

Once you have identified who will attend your meeting, it is critical to coordinate with each other prior to the meeting with the decision maker. You will want to make sure that everyone is on the same page regarding the goal of the meeting, everyone understands what their role is during the meeting (what they will speak about), how much time they have, and that everyone has all of the background materials they need. We highly encourage you to meet beforehand to prepare, coordinate, and practice what you will say. Consider writing out and practicing your talking points so you feel confident and cover everything you want to during the meeting.

See the Appendix for a [Checklist for Planning a Lawmaker Meeting](#).

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It is really important to share what you know about affordable housing and homelessness with decision-makers in your state. Unless we hear from people with first-hand knowledge, we end up making decisions with the best information available, but without the voice of people who really understand the day-to-day struggle of homelessness. Your voice, over and over again, is necessary to help us understand the best direction for policy. Don't give up. Keep telling your story to every decision maker you can. It will make a difference.” —**REPRESENTATIVE JUNE ROBINSON, 38th Legislative District**¹⁵