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# Constituent Town Hall Toolkit

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## Read this First!

**Indivisible Austin is a chapter of Indivisible Guide, which has a vast library of resources to get you started. Read Indivisible Guide's Town Hall Tip Sheet, which has great advice on Town Halls with your Member of Congress. Most of this guide applies to “mock” or “ghost” Town Halls that your MoC does *not* attend.**

## So You're Planning a Town Hall! Now What?

Congratulations on deciding to hold a town hall. We hope your member of Congress shows up, but even if they don't, you can still have a great event.

The resources in this toolkit are gleaned from the experience of the five Austin-area district groups that held “missing member” town halls in February 2017. This toolkit collects the best practices that made those town halls successful. No town hall will look exactly like another, so everything in this guide won't apply to your town hall. Take what works for your group, and leave the rest.

## Advance Planning

Consider your overall goals. Do you legitimately want your MoC to show up, or to send a delegate? If so, consider having an impartial moderator, and discourage cardboard cutouts and other props.

## Your Member of Congress

If you are pretty sure your MoC will *not* be there, think about what can be used as a stand-in. People need *something* to focus their attention on. For example:

1. Life-size cardboard cutout of your MoC
2. Have an actor portray your MoC
3. Have people ask questions, and then have the moderator do a real-time search of the MoC's social media accounts for their positions on the issue. Project their answers on a screen. If nothing is found, that sends the message that your MoC is not paying attention to that issue.
4. Have people ask questions, and then play recordings of crickets (chirp chirp!) as the answer.

## Invited Speakers and Other VIPs

A no-show town hall is an excellent opportunity for constituents to hear from local or state representatives who ARE willing to show up and speak with constituents. It's also prime time to hear from local organizations about how they're working on the issues that matter to us, from health care and women's health to immigration and the Muslim ban.

1. Identify prospective speakers and invite them as early as possible, especially elected officials.
2. Decide how officials and speakers will participate--will they respond to constituent questions in place of the MoC, or will they have a separate spot on the agenda?
3. Consider splitting event into two parts--traditional town hall format (with stand-in), followed by speakers, or even a panel discussion.
4. Offer representatives an opportunity to invite constituents to participate more directly with their projects and programs.

## Finding a Location

Town halls are an amazing opportunity for constituents to come together around issues they care about, whether the member of Congress is there or not. Finding a place that can accommodate your group can be a challenge, especially if it might be large, so enlist help from everyone you know to find a spot.

During the February 2017 recess, Austin-area Indivisible groups held town halls in creative (and often free or low-cost) locations:

- Restaurant event hall or private area (there may be a minimum drink/food order)
- Public park (permit may or may not be required)
- Local watering hole known for hosting political events (there maybe minimum drink/food order)
- House of worship (may even be available free of charge, or with nominal contribution and custodial fees)
- Community rec center

## Promoting the Town Hall

Promote your town hall as widely as you can, using social media, flyers and posters around the district, emails to your mailing list, outreach to community organizations and coalition partners, and by sending out a press release or media advisory.

1. Set up a public Facebook event associated with your group's public page (events created in private Facebook groups are not shareable)

2. If RSVPs are required, use Eventbrite, Action Network ([via the Indivisible Guide's event registration page](#)), or another online registration tool **AND promote that link in your Facebook event**
3. Be prepared to manage the space limits of your venue--as many as 50% of RSVPs don't show up, but it can vary from event to event
4. Send a media advisory to local press--every major news outlet in your community has a news desk and email address, such as news@ or tips@. If you haven't built a media list of individual reporters, send your release to the news desk.
5. See sample text for media advisory at the end of this toolkit.

## Volunteer Prep

Volunteers will help your event run smoothly, and Indivisible supporters are looking for opportunities to become more engaged with their groups, their districts, and other supporters.

1. Use social media as a recruiting tool for Town Hall volunteers
2. Identify specific volunteer needs
  - a. Set-up/tear-down
  - b. Greeters
  - c. Table check-in
  - d. Photographers/videographer/livestreamers
  - e. VIP/speaker wranglers, etc.
  - f. PR/media
  - g. Fundraising
3. Tell volunteers what time to get there, as opposed to a suggested time range
4. Conduct pre-meeting with volunteers 30 minutes before time of event to review the layout and what each person needs to do
5. Have a clear break down plan for volunteers so everyone knows who is taking what home, what we're recycling and what we want to collect, where to put the supplies, and what time everyone can leave

## Flow

Organize the traffic flow to move people, with big signs indicating where they are supposed to go. At minimum you need a sign-in table, where people who've RSVP'd can check in, and where you can capture information for walk-in attendees. If space allows, consider having other opportunities for people to engage, such as with a postcard writing station, a community groups info table, and voter registration.

## Sign In Table

Post big signs saying "Sign In Here" at each table.

1. Have quick sign-ins at the front, and then a designated "station" for each of those other things, also with a big sign that can be seen over the crowd. For example: "Submit a question here!" or "Send a postcard to Lamar!"
2. Ask first for just the most salient piece of data (name or email) and then offer a checkbox they can check if we already have the rest of their info. Email addresses take the longest to write down.
3. If you also have online signup, ask for just enough data to match the person to their digital record. This will make the line go faster.
4. At sign-in, have people sign a petition asking for a real town hall and deliver to your MoC
5. You need more clipboards and pens than you think you do.

## Postcard Table

1. If you're collecting donations, to defray cost of space, for example, Include a donation box at each station.
2. Have a sample postcard filled out for people to look at -- perhaps even blown up to poster-size. Some people get confused about where to put the address
3. It is legitimately hard to get 1) the rep's address, 2) the message, 3) the writer's name and zip code, and 4) space for a stamp on one of those little postcards

## Voter Registration Table

Have a volunteer deputy registrar staff a table with *lots* of registration forms, pens, and clipboards.

## Community Group Table

If space allows, and you have the volunteers for it, invite allied community groups to provide information about their programs and services

## A/V Considerations

Confirm that the venue in question has sufficient A/V equipment for your needs. Some general considerations include:

1. **PA System(s)**

- Ideally, the MC and the Question Askers will be able to talk at the same time without interference. Depending on setup, this may require 1 or 2 different PA systems.
- Some PA systems require (or work best with) stands to elevate speaker. Is this required for any of your PA systems?
- 2. **Microphone for MC**
  - If wireless, then less of an issue. If wired, do you have long enough cables for your desired setup.
- 3. **Microphone(s) (w/Stand) for Question Askers.**
  - If wireless, then less of an issue. If wired, do you have long enough cables for your desired setup.
- 4. **Projection Screen (or clear open wall) if needed**
  - If not already provided, insure that you have a clear floorplan to place the screen, and projector ~10-15 ft in front of the screen. (Assuming front-projection, given rear-projection is unlikely in this BYO projection screen scenario).
- 5. **Projector, if needed**
  - Double check the connectors needed, such as HDMI, VGA or Mini Display Port
  - How many people will need to connect to the Projector, do you have enough cables (and/or adapters) in the right spot(s)?
  - Podium for Laptop or Display Device connected to projector
- 6. **Gaffer's Tape** to tape down any cables/wires to reduce tripping hazards.
- 7. **Extension Cords** and **Power Strips** to connect all the devices.

## Remote Participation Technology Considerations

The enormous area covered by our gerrymandered Congressional districts means that most residents of your district won't be able to attend your live town hall. Live streaming and other remote participation opportunities can help connect constituents from miles away.

### Live Streaming

#### Facebook Live

One of the more popular tools for live streaming today. To pull this off with success, there are only a few things you need to double-check.

- **Internet Connectivity**
  - A strong WiFi signal connected to high-speed internet is preferred, or a strong LTE (or higher) signal on the streaming device.

- Note: Live streaming a long event will eat up your mobile data plan, so check your status to insure that you will not get cut-off or degraded performance mid-event.
  - Note: If less than 3GB of your data-plan remains, you may want to use a different device/phone or pre-pay to get more data coverage.
  - Recommended **at-least** 2-3Mbps speed regardless of WiFi/mobile service.
    - You can easily check this using a speed tool, such as [fast.com](http://fast.com).
  - **NOTE: If the WiFi at the event is public (or known/advertised password), then expect the WiFi performance to be degraded during the event.**
    - **Recommendation is to not use the same WiFi as participants.**
- **Live Stream Devices**
  - *Simple:* Use a mobile phone, tablet or other native devices that support Facebook Live Streaming. With regards to iPhones, I wouldn't go less than an iPhone 5/5s.
  - *Advanced:* Use broadcasting software, such as OBS or other paid alternatives to connect to Facebook Live.
    - <https://obsproject.com/forum/resources/how-to-stream-to-facebook-live.391/>
- **Live Stream Posting Destination**
  - Page (Recommended)
    - For discoverability and promotion purposes, it is recommended that official town-hall live stream events be posted to a Facebook Page.
    - To post to a page, you will need to download the **Facebook Pages (iOS / Android)** app on your device.
    - Note: If you deploy to a page, make sure that you set up permissions for moderators ahead of time, so they can act on any unwanted behavior.
  - Personal
    - Simply Open Facebook and Go-Live.
- **Audience Engagement**
  - It is VERY important to set expectations for remote audience participation (early and often) to keep them from becoming disenfranchised from the event.  
Some ideas include:
    - **Reactions** - Is there any specific way you want the remote audience to use the reaction options, such as Angry for Disagree and Love for Agree.

- **Comments** - If possible, have someone available to track comments for questions (or trolls), and send any good questions or feedback to the MC to incorporate into the event.
  - Since it's Facebook, we know the name easily...but asking the participants to prefix their zip code before any questions is good record-keeping.
  - A quick screenshot of the question messaged to the MC's device is an easy way to distill the comment stream.
  - If you are **NOT** going to have someone monitoring comments and incorporating into the event, then set those expectations, but remind people that their comments can help fuel a longer discussion after the event, so please comment on any questions you might have.

## Twitter Periscope

Less appropriate for a targeted set of people unless you have a disproportional number of Twitter followers compared to Facebook.

## Interactive Polling

This can be pretty easy to setup, but difficult to logistically execute. Everyone has a different temperament with technology.

### Best Practices

- Stay away from requiring participants to download extraneous software/apps. If possible stick to a web browser, or other app(s) that you know is already on their device.
- When possible, advertise the use of the app as early as possible to participants so they can try it out ahead of time to get familiar. Examples include:
  - Postcards handed out at sign-in table with steps to get started listed
  - Calling out the poll steps by the MC at the beginning of the event
  - Clearly displaying steps via presentation(s)

### Known Vendors

- sli.do
- [www.polleverywhere.com](http://www.polleverywhere.com)

## Sample Media Advisory

**## of [MoC's Name]'s Constituents to Hold Citizens' Town Hall to Make Their Voices Heard**



After several weeks of hundreds of calls to hold a public town hall event with no response, more than ## of [MoC's Name]'s constituents will hold a citizens' town hall to voice their concerns and discuss recent developments in Congress. [MoC Name] has been invited to attend [include more information on what kind of response you've gotten].

**What:** [MoC Name] Constituent Town Hall Who: Name of Your Group

Any notable attendees

Any other public speakers

**When:** [day of week], [date], [time]

**Where:** Location + rain plan if relevant

**Why:** A critical part of any member of Congress' job is to hear from the constituents s/he represents face-to-face. Since January, [MoC name] has received hundreds of calls, letters, and emails requesting a public forum for constituents to ask questions and voice their concerns to no avail.

For more information, contact Jane Doe at 222-222-2222 or jane@email.com.