

# WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

## HOW TO:

## WRITE EDITORIALS, OP-ED PIECES & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### GOALS

- Get free public media attention to your issues, told your way
- Provide detailed explanation of your organizations' position in a way that wins public support

### KEY TECHNIQUES

- Prepare ample supporting evidence for your views
- Work with a group to identify best arguments and spokespeople
- Be familiar with other points of view on your issue and prepared to refute those positions

### Editorials:

Editorials are columns that express the newspaper's point of view. You cannot write an editorial for a newspaper, but you can ask the editorial board to publish an editorial supporting your position. Use editorials to influence a vote or decision to be made soon.

#### When seeking an editorial:

- Identify 2-4 members of your group who are the most knowledgeable about various aspects of the issue to participate in a meeting with the editorial board.
- Prepare a one page summary of the issue and arguments on behalf of your position to present with your request to meet the editorial board.
- If someone from your organization or committee has a relationship with the editorial board, have that person request the meeting, otherwise anyone can request the meeting.

#### During the meeting with the editorial board:

- Present your position clearly and concisely.
- Paint a picture of why this issue matters to the community and why your solution is the right one to benefit the community.
- Use well-researched facts to support your case.

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- Explain how soon the decision is being made and why now is the right time to move forward.
- Be prepared to answer questions.
- Present each member of the Board a media kit including:
  - › Summary of your issue and arguments
  - › Organizations supporting your side, with names of spokespeople and contact information
  - › Fact sheet with relevant background data
  - › Maps and copies of relevant public documents
- Before ending the meeting, ask how and when you can follow up with them.
- Thank them for their time.

## Opinion Editorials

Opinion editorials – op-eds – are columns that express the point of view of an individual. A community leader, newspaper staff writer or a syndicated columnist can write an op-ed.

Although most newspapers keep an open mind in deciding on op-eds, some papers may be more open to your coalition's issue than others. Research the newspaper to understand what kinds of editorials it publishes and what issues their news stories cover. Also research the paper's word limit and how often they print op-eds (daily, weekly, etc.).

As with editorials, newspapers generally will not print an op-ed if there is not a relevant decision to influence. Remember, it needs to be news-related and it needs to be current.

**When seeking to publish an op-ed:**

- Consider who would be the best person to name as the author, such as a respected business leader, a well-known faith leader or community leader.
- Plan the message for the column with the broadest possible appeal.
- Contact the opinion page editor and share your idea for an op-ed, either in person or over the phone. If you set up a meeting, think about who the right messenger is and make sure all who attend understand their role in the meeting.
- Once the paper agrees to publish your op-ed, make sure you get the details on length and deadlines. Newspaper deadlines are serious – don't miss them!
- If the op-ed does get published, write a thank you note to the editor and keep in touch with them as the campaign moves forward.

**When writing the op-ed:**

- Give a concise but thorough background on the issue and why it matters. Remember, most people reading the story may not have an understanding of the issue.

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- **Keep your target audience in mind** while writing the piece. Your target audience is people – residents and elected officials - that are open to the solutions you are proposing. You want to convince them this solution can improve their lives and their community and to show elected officials that community leaders feel strongly about this issue.
- **Don't focus on your opposition** and don't worry about trying to convince people that are totally opposed.
- **Keep it local.** The readers will want to know how your solution will improve their community and their lives. Refer to developments, neighborhoods and streets that people are familiar with. For example, describe how building new homes and shops near transit will make their lives more convenient and allow them to get around without a car.

## Letters to the Editor

A letter to the editor is a short response to an article in the paper that is published in a later issue. In some smaller communities, letters to the editor can also be in response to events that have happened.

**When trying to get letters to the editor published:**

- **Limit the letter to 200 words or less.**
- **Include the title and date of the article if you are writing in response.**
- **Consider having many supporters send letters to the editor** to help ensure publication of one. Develop a sample letter template and ask people to use it to create a personalized letter. If volunteers send letters via email, ask them to **NOT** copy you on the email, but send you a separate email of their letter.
- **Always include full name and a phone number** where the signer can be reached during the day.
- **Do not engage in debates in the editorial pages;** simply focus on the needs and benefits of the affordable housing proposed for development.

**Responding to Editorials:**

When you see an editorial on your issue area, call the paper, get the Editorial Department, and find out who wrote the editorial. Ask to speak to them. Tell them if they misrepresented your issue or thank them if they are supporters. Use this as an opportunity to build a relationship. Offer to be a resource for them on the issue. Tell them about related issues that you'd like the paper to endorse.