Virtual Candidate Forum Toolkit
The purpose of this toolkit is to provide an overview of ways for communities to engage with candidates for elected office during the 2021 New Jersey elections that include social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The toolkit provides an overview of how to organize and host your own candidate forum. The upcoming 2021 elections include a gubernatorial race, every seat in the New Jersey Legislature and many county and local races. In the midst of this current national emergency, we must be creative to ensure that the civic rights of people are not compromised.

This toolkit contains the following sections: the purpose of a virtual candidate forum, important dates, an overview of how to organize and facilitate a virtual candidate forum, sample questions and sample invitation letters.
Important Dates

Primary Election Day: **June 8, 2021**
- Voter Registration Deadline: **May 18, 2021**

General Election Day: **Nov. 2, 2021**
- Voter Registration Deadline: **Oct. 12, 2021**

Why Host a Candidate Forum?

The goal of candidate forums is to educate your community on candidates’ positions on social justice issues that are important to your communities. From the ravaging of the coronavirus pandemic, to persistent violence by police against Black people, to disparities in wealth, health and criminal justice, we are seeing deeply embedded cracks of structural racism in our foundation erupt into earthquakes in Black communities. In some cases, your forum might be the only time a candidate addresses certain issues. This helps educate voters on candidates’ positions while also raising the profile of these issues in the community. Even in these difficult times, it is important to find ways for people to hold candidates accountable.
What Elections will be taking place during the 2021 NJ Election Cycle?

• New Jersey Gubernatorial Election
• New Jersey State Senate Elections
• New Jersey General Assembly Elections
• New Jersey County Elections
• New Jersey Municipal Elections
• New Jersey School Board Elections

Pros & Cons to Virtual Candidate Forums

Pros:

• Candidates are able to share their platforms with community members.
• Community members are able to engage with and ask important questions to candidates.
• Helps with voter engagement and can positively impact turnout as community members become more familiar with candidates.

Cons:

• Not every community member will have access to the virtual platform.
• Lose the impact of an in-person forum where community members would be able to interact more directly with candidates.
Turnout Strategy

- Frame this as a voter education and accountability event.
- Leverage partner organizations.
- Create flyer for social media outreach.
- Draft an invitation email.
  - Utilize your or partner organizations’ contact lists.
- Make calls inviting community members.
  - Utilize your or partner organizations’ contact lists.
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter), email communications, press release.
- Create an invitation with an RSVP function so you know how many to plan for.
- Continuously provide updates as it gets closer to the date.
- Reach out to local media.

Tips for a Virtual Candidate Forum

- For a phone virtual candidate forum, create a free account with FreeConference-Call.com.
  - Share the conference call number in a virtual candidate forum invitation email and via phone outreach.
  - Residents will be able to dial in from home.
  - Ask people that dial in to mute their phones.
  - Provide a five-minute introduction of the candidates, the position they are seeking and the importance of the virtual town hall.
  - Include an RSVP link in email.
  - Record and have someone take minutes of the virtual candidate forum.
**Tips for a Virtual Candidate Forum, continued.**

- For a videoconference virtual candidate forum, create a free account with Zoom, Google Hangout or Uber Conference.
  - Utilize a laptop or desktop computer that includes a web camera. After creating an account, review the website’s “getting started” information.
  - Schedule a video conference meeting and share the link with your listserv.
  - Ensure that all candidates have video conference capabilities and have access to the applications.
  - Participants will be able to join by utilizing their desktop computers, laptops or phone.
  - Before the candidate forum begins, ask all attendees to mute their microphones.
  - For the Q&A session, ask attendees to utilize chat box or submit questions beforehand via email.
    - Tips for Q&A session:
      - Have a moderator for the virtual candidate forum that will keep track of time and ensure that the program layout is followed in the right order.
      - Have a few prepared questions just in case of minimal responses from attendees.
      - Use Chat Box feature if you are utilizing video conference technology like Zoom or GoToMeeting.
    - Record videoconference virtual candidate forum and share with listserv at its conclusion.
- Keep it neutral; have an impartial moderator.
- Allow equal time for candidates’ introduction and platform presentation.
- Things to consider:
  - A few questions should be prepared (see sample question section), but the majority of the questions should come from attendees that call in.
  - Once candidates complete their presentation, the Q&A session should begin.
  - Two options for Q&A:
    - Have attendees that RSVP submit questions beforehand or give notice that they desire to raise a question.
    - Ask attendees to type questions in the chat box. The moderator will present these questions to the candidates.
  - Limit each candidate’s response to two-three minutes per question.
Tips for a Virtual Candidate Forum, continued.

- Consider co-hosting with another organization that aligns with your mission.
- Assure the candidates that it is non-partisan, as they will tend to avoid forums they think may be partisan.
- Candidate Outreach:
  - Make contact with candidates early on to gauge their interest and get their availability before you finalize the date and time.
  - Make sure the candidates know who else is invited, the phone conference format, what questions the moderator will be asking or at least the topics, that attendees will be asking questions and when they need to let you know whether or not they’re attending.

How to Stay Non-Partisan and Neutral

- Cover a broad range of issues.
- Allow each candidate equal time to present their views.
- Ensure the moderator stays neutral throughout the event.
- If you are a 501(c)(3), please remember that you cannot appear to endorse any specific candidate. As such, you should reach out to all candidates and offer them the opportunity to participate.

**Note:** This candidate forum toolkit created by the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, a 501c3 organization, is a guide for hosting nonpartisan candidate forums. The content of this toolkit is not for the purpose of supporting any particular political candidate or lobbying for any legislation. All organizations that use this toolkit should consult their own legal counsel to ensure compliance of state and federal law.
Possible Questions to Candidates for State Elections

The State Senate and Assembly consider legislation that directly impacts your life. Schools, minimum wage, voting rights, COVID-19 relief, climate change – the Legislature makes laws that affect it all.

Below are sample questions that can be asked during the virtual candidate forum.

What are your views on New Jersey’s youth justice system? Would you support closures of youth prisons?

In what ways do you hope to expand access to the ballot in New Jersey? Would you support New Jersey adopting same day registration?

How do you feel about the public transportation options currently available in our state? Do we have enough options? If not, what will you do to increase funding?

In light of Covid-19, what disparities were more apparent to you and how do you plan to address them?

What core issues will you focus on advocating for during the next legislative session?

New Jersey has some of the worst economic racial disparities in the nation; would you support establishing a statewide guaranteed income program?

What steps do you think we should take to address police brutality against the Black community and other marginalized communities?

Mass incarceration is a national problem that continues to impact New Jersey. What is included in your criminal justice reform platform? Do you support investing more money into community-based systems of care?

What are your plans to address climate change and environmental issues in New Jersey?

With attacks on reproductive rights increasing across the country, how do you plan to further protect reproductive rights in New Jersey?
Possible Questions to Candidates for County Elections

County officials are in charge of county parks, libraries, the county public transportation system and jails – including the conditions of them all.

Below are sample questions that provide a framework of the type of questions to be asked during a local election candidate forum:

- What are your views on the needs of children in our county and what specific steps would you take to address these needs?
- Do you support investing more of the county’s budget into more community-based programs like education support and employment services?
- What are your plans to address increasing maintenance and construction of county roads and bridges?
- How do you plan to make sure that residents in county jail have access to the ballot during elections?
- How do you plan to address and assist members in our community that are facing housing and food insecurity?
- Why did you decide to run for office and what do you hope to accomplish if given a term?
- What one part of county government would receive more attention if you were elected?
- Would you support the creation of a county based guaranteed income program?
- In what ways do you plan to address systemic issues in our county without relying on punitive actions such as incarceration or arrest?
- How do you plan to expand homeownership programs for communities that have been impacted by redlining?
Possible Questions to Candidates for Municipal Elections

Municipal officials control the state of local streets, trash pickup, snow removal, how much parking is available, police and school board budgets and affordable housing development.

Below are sample questions that provide a framework of the type of questions to be asked during a local election candidate forum:

What are your views on the needs of children and what specific steps would you take to address these needs?

How do you plan to assist the children in our town that are currently living in food insecure households?

In what ways would you address the issue of poverty and work toward getting more necessities to your constituents in need? Would you support a guaranteed income program?

What do you propose of improving our sanitation services and trash pickup?

Why did you decide to run for office and what do you hope to accomplish if given a term?

Would you support a resolution that would establish a civilian complaint review board?

How do you plan to address homelessness in our municipality?

How will you work to ensure that constituents are more involved in your decision process on issues that will significantly impact them?

In what ways do you plan to address systemic issues in our city without relying on punitive actions such as incarceration or arrest?

How do you plan to improve our snow removal service during the winter?

Would you support increasing funding for our municipality to fix our roads?

How will you work to improve street lighting for all communities in our municipality?
Dear (Candidate's Name):

On behalf of (Organization’s name), we would like to invite you to our upcoming virtual candidates’ forum. This non-partisan forum will provide an opportunity for candidates running for (enter office) to engage with community members. All candidates participating will be able to share their platform and then participate in Q&A with attendees.

(Insert information about your organization’s mission, issues you desire to be covered by the candidates, issues that are currently impacting the community.)

Include format for the call:

- Time:
- Free Conference Call Number or Video Conference information:
- Five minute introduction per candidates
- Two-three minute response per conference call

(Encourage candidates to share information about the virtual candidate forum on their social media platforms and list serve.)

[If applicable] As a 501(c)3 organization, (organization name) does not support nor oppose candidates.

Please respond to confirm if you will be joining us for this important community event by notifying (me/name, no later than [date]). If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (phone) or by email at (email address).

Sincerely,
Dear (Name),

Please join (organization name) on (date and time) via conference call for an event with candidates running for (name of office). In partnership with (names of partner organizations), we are extending an opportunity for all candidates for (name of office) to introduce themselves to the attendees, share their values and positions and answer questions about issues of vital importance to our community including (priority issues/main focuses of the event). This virtual candidate forum is extremely important for accountability and to ensure the needs of the community are heard by each candidate seeking office. Accountability and the inclusion of the community perspective are key components of the electoral process.

[Include a note about how attendees will be able to ask questions.]

Include format for the call:

- Time:
- Free Conference Call Number or Video Conference Information:
- Five minute introduction per candidates
- Two-three minute response per conference call

[If applicable] As a 501(c)3 organization, (organization name) does not support nor oppose candidates.

All candidates for the office are being invited to participate.

Please RSVP by email or clicking this (link). If you have any questions, please reach out (Insert Name/Phone Number).

Sincerely,