

Virtual Candidate Forum Toolkit



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Purpose

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide an overview of how to provide opportunities for communities to engage with candidates for elected offices through hosting candidate forums, during an election season that includes social distancing.

The toolkit provides information for hosting virtual candidate forums for upcoming school board and municipal elections by featuring: the purpose of a virtual candidate forum, overview of how to organize and facilitate a virtual candidate forum, election information, and sample invitation letters. This should serve as a guide for coordinating virtual candidate forums for the 2020 election cycle.

In the midst of this current national emergency, we must be creative to ensure that the civic rights of people are not compromised. So far, the June primary has been moved to July 7th and the school board elections have been moved to May 12th. In light of these Election Day changes, it is imperative to educate voters and encourage turnout for local elections.

Why Host a Candidate Forum?

The goal of candidate forums is to educate your community on candidates' positions on important social justice issues that are important to your 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.

Important Note About May 12 Elections:

In light of the COVID-19 public health crisis, on March 19, 2020, Governor Murphy signed Executive Order 105. This Order postponed all elections remaining in March 2020 and in April 2020 to May 12, 2020. As such, on May 12, 2020, 32 municipalities throughout the state (list provided below) will hold school board, nonpartisan municipal, and/or special elections. All elections taking place on May 12, 2020, shall be conducted solely via vote-by-mail ballots, which will be sent to all registered voters without the need for an application. Postage will be prepaid. There will be no polling places for the May 12, 2020 election. The voter registration deadline for the May 12 elections will be April 21, 2020. This is extremely important to share with your network.

Possible Questions for Candidates of Local Elections

Below are sample questions that can be asked during the virtual candidate forum. In your invitation, encourage participants to submit questions that center on issues that impact their prospective communities.

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

What are your plans to help improve the classroom experience for students and teacher?

How do you plan to assist the students in our school district that currently live in food insecure households?

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

How do you plan to involve residents in the decision making process in our town?

If you received a \$2 million grant to use for the city, what would you do with it and why?

In light of COVID-19, what are your plans to help our city recover from the public health and economic damage caused by the pandemic?

What neighborhood do you live in? Why? Where are your favorite places to spend time in our town?

Which community initiatives or organizations were you involved in prior to running for office?

What more does the city need to do to fund affordable housing?

How will you balance the increasing funding needed for schools with, what many view, are too high property taxes?

What is your position on constructing and/or ensuring more affordable housing options?

Sample Candidate Invitation Email

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:
- 5 minute introduction per candidates
- 2-3 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,

Sample Turnout Email

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:
- 5 minute introduction per candidates
- 2-3 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,