



# NO-BLAME PROBLEM SOLVING

## 10 KEY STEPS TO GET RESULTS ©

### **STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR ISSUE FOCUS**

#### **DRILL DOWN TO A SPECIFIC WORKABLE PROBLEM**

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- Engage in bottom-up conversations with your fellow citizens to identify consensus passions.
- Prioritize identified issues. Considerations may include: internal support (within the group), expected external support (from community and/or administration), timing, difficulty of the problem, scope of problem, etc.
- Drill down the issue(s) to a discernable problem that you believe you can tackle with a doable solution.

### **STEP 2: SUBMIT AN OPRA REQUEST**

#### **FIND OUT HOW THE CURRENT POLICY WORKS**

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- First, investigate what your city is currently doing to address your priority issue by exploring the city's website, media coverage, or making phone calls to the office of the City Clerk.
- Dig deeper by preparing an OPRA (Open Public Records Act) request of documents creating the current policy for submission either to the City Clerk, or to the Secretary of the School Board. Remember that you are requesting *copies of existing records* (e.g. resolutions, ordinances, written policies and procedures), so be as specific as possible.
- Find and submit the OPRA Request form. Forms should be found on city websites; if not, call the City Clerk and have them email you a blank request form.

### **STEP 3: CONDUCT EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH**

#### **FIND PROVEN SUCCESSFUL POLICIES**

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- An internet search is the best place to start! Look up your priority issue to find policies with evidence of success in communities similar to your own. Look for news articles, policy papers, or websites on the topic.
- Dig deeper. Look into academic institutions, including university departments and centers that specialize in the issue area.

- Call or check websites of associations whose focus is local government (e.g. Urban Mayors Association) or who deal with your issue area (e.g. The New Jersey Association of Environmental Commissions).
- Review The Citizens Campaign's Menu of Solutions. The Menu of Solutions contains evidence-based solutions previously developed by other Citizens Campaign participants and the experts from its Law & Policy Task Force.

## **STEP 4: SHAPE YOUR SOLUTION**

### **TAILOR YOUR SOLUTIONS TO FIT LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND BUILD UPON THE CURRENT POLICY**

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- Dig deeper to determine what it took to implement your researched solution. How long did it take to put into effect? Were staff reassigned to implement it? Was any staff training required? Was the budget amended to reallocate funds for the new policy?
- Review the current policy that you seek to modify or replace and determine if there are any parts of it worth keeping as is or with slight modification.
- Consider any feedback or concerns expressed by elected officials or government staff about your proposed policy.
- Now shape your solution to address the information you've collected in the reviews referenced above. The more your solution fits with and positively builds on the current policy, and the more it takes into consideration the feedback of government officials and the hurdles of implementation, the better chance of it being adopted and successfully implemented.

## **STEP 5: MAKE SURE IT IS COST-EFFECTIVE**

### **A PRACTICAL SOLUTION IS BUDGET NEUTRAL – OR BETTER**

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- From evidence you gathered in your research, determine whether there will be costs involved in implementing your solution such as administrative costs, staff time, etc., or whether it will be cost-neutral (or better yet – cost saving).
- If there are costs involved, look at your city's budget to determine whether your solution would be covered by a particular line item, and if not, whether there are any other areas from which savings could be sufficient to offset the costs of your solution.

- If the solution is not covered by the city’s budget and you cannot find any offsetting budget cuts, come up with alternative funding sources. Look for grants, consider crowd funding, etc. This is especially important if there are start-up costs that will disappear or be offset by savings in future budgets.

## **STEP 6: DO THE DOABLE**

### **THE ART OF PHASING AND PILOTING**

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- It’s often better to start smaller and gain traction in order to build support and find funds for the overall solution.
- “Phasing” is a good tactic, especially when full funding is not available.
- “Pilot” projects are also useful when there is skepticism about your solution or when you need to show that start-up costs will be offset by savings in future budgets.

## **STEP 7: GET SUPPORT FROM OUR EXPERTS**

### **SUCCESSFUL PRACTITIONERS CAN PROVIDE LEGAL AND STRATEGIC ADVICE**

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- Submit your research to The Citizens Campaign in a brief report that includes: (1) the response to your OPRA request; (2) your proposed solution, evidence of its success, and how you think it can fit in your city; and (3) your cost analysis.
- After submitting the above research report, seek advice from The Citizens Campaign’s Law & Policy Task Force to assist with your analysis and the development of your proposal, including the preferred legal action for adoption. Options include ordinances, resolutions, executive orders, and administrative policies or procedures.
- Incorporate changes suggested by the expert(s) or conduct any suggested additional research.

## **STEP 8: PRESENT A READY-TO-ADOPT SOLUTION**

### **PRESENTING A DRAFT LAW CALLS FOR A VOTE**

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- Get a copy of the legal document that created your chosen successful solution. It is a good starting point for implementing the solution in your town.
- Work with a volunteer lawyer or your town’s attorney, if supportive, to incorporate your chosen solution into the preferred legal format. Options

include ordinances, resolutions, executive orders, and administrative policies or procedures.

- Make sure to include language recognizing the positive aspects of your town's existing policy and any recent, related initiatives, in the draft of the law to enact your solution.

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## **STEP 9: MAKE A RESPECTFUL PRESENTATION**

### **IF YOU GIVE RESPECT, YOU CAN COMMAND RESPECT**

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- Dress respectfully and address officials respectfully.
- Review your town's current policy and find what parts you agree with. Then come in complimenting the officials on that part(s) of the current policy and offer to build upon it.
- In any event, when presenting to the public body, compliment them on the progress they've made so far in your issue area.
- When speaking to the media, *do not criticize public officials* who disagree with your proposal. Be understanding of their positions and concerns and *express confidence that you can work things out.*

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## **STEP 10: RESPECTFUL PURSUIT**

### **HOW TO DIPLOMATICALLY PUSH FOR ADOPTION**

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- If your solution is deferred for further discussion or review by government committees or experts, say, "*Please, may I ask to whom is this proposal being referred and when can we expect a response from this public body?*"
- When meeting with an official who makes a commitment to do something to advance your solution, **always** ask what time frame they feel comfortable with for fulfilling the commitment.
- After meeting with an elected official, follow up with a written thank you note mentioning the commitments made by the official and the time frame they indicated they were comfortable with for fulfilling the commitment. If it's an elected official who indicates that a department head or other staff person will act on the commitment, copy that person on the thank you note.
- Ask the Law and Policy Task Force if there is a way to implement the solution without governmental approval.
- Keep your solution in the picture by using social media and conventional media and keep it "No blame."

- Ask for help from a person of influence in your community.**
- Seek a resolution, or other support recommending your solution, from an appropriate board or commission.**
- Try an Executive Order (if the Law and Policy Task Force decides it's legal) if there aren't enough votes for adopting an ordinance.**
- Seek support from a government employees' union.**
- Wait until election time and seek sponsorship from an incumbent who is a candidate (presidential and gubernatorial election times are preferable).**
- If you meet with continuing opposition from the decision-maker, offer a compromise, if possible, such as a pilot or phased-in approach.**
- Use Initiative and Referendum if the solution does not require a change to the zoning ordinance or an appropriation of funds. Initiative and Referendum should only be used as a last resort.**

