

# Planning your public witness



- Find advocacy partners.** There is power in numbers, and you can increase the size and visibility of your public witness by partnering with others.
- Determine your message.** Get creative with the key messages that you want to share. Think of a recognizable theme or slogan that is relevant to your local situation and your group's mission.
- Decide on a time and place.** You should plan to have your public witness in a highly visible area or a symbolic site that will attract media attention, such as a government building, a detention center, or in front of a monument or landmark. You should pick a time when you can get as many people as possible to attend, such as the weekend or after 5:00 PM on weekdays.
- Acquire the necessary permits.** Depending on the location of your witness, you may need to acquire a permit from your city's officials – check in with them before you solidify your plans. *(See page 3 with more information from the ACLU about permits.)*
- Advertise your event.** This can be done in several ways. Using social media sites like Facebook and Instagram to share details about your public witness will provide you with the widest reach. You can also post flyers around town or contact your local newspaper, diocesan media, and radio stations to see if they can advertise the details of the event.
- Create signs, banners, and songs.** Work with your colleagues at a group meeting to create signs and banners with key slogans and hashtags. You can also add the name of your group or affiliated groups on your signs so you can raise awareness about who is participating.
- Prepare for the day of the event.** Many variables can affect your event: weather, length of time outside, distance traveled while marching, possible police presence, etc. At your public witness, you should have things such as your permit, an official ID card, a first aid kit, a cell phone, food and water, and appropriate clothing for the weather conditions. Speak with people in your advocacy groups to determine any other items you might need to bring on the day of the event.
- Prepare for communication with police/authorities.** Identify 1-2 people who will be available to speak to the police, show any necessary permits, answer questions, etc., during the event. Ideally this person might be an attorney and/or is comfortable dealing with authority figures.
- Capture the event in photos and/or video.** Identify 1-3 people who are prepared to take photos or videos throughout the event, who will then share a photo album with the other organizers who can then share on social media and in newsletters, etc.
- Write a report after the event.** Share any key details, the number of attendees, significant messages, and any worthwhile public interaction with your mailing list, including media sources.

## Before you demonstrate, know your rights

Everyone has the following human rights:

- **Freedom of expression and assembly.** Everyone has the right to carry their opinion to the streets. People have the right to organize peaceful demonstrations and to demonstrate free from intimidation, unnecessary or excessive force, and the threat of prosecution and detention
- **Protection of the right to freedom of assembly.** Law enforcement must facilitate and not restrict a peaceful public assembly. Where a minority tries to turn a peaceful assembly into a violent one, law enforcement should protect the peaceful demonstrators and not use the violent acts of a few as pretext to restrict or impede the exercise of fundamental rights of a majority.
- **Freedom from excessive use of force.** In the policing of nonviolent demonstrations, police must avoid the use of force. If it is unavoidable (for example to defend themselves or the public from an imminent risk of serious injury or death) they must use the minimum amount of force necessary. The type of equipment used to disperse crowds such as rubber bullets, tear gas, stun grenades can result in serious injury and even death and can only be used when necessary, proportional and lawful.
- **Right to medical assistance.** If you are injured you have a right to medical assistance without delay.
- **Freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention.** If you are arrested you have a right to be told of the reason for your arrest, you also have the right promptly after your arrest to have access to a lawyer and to your family. No person under any form of detention may be subject to torture, or to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.
- **Right to complain.** If your rights have been violated you have a right to file a complaint and to be provided information on how to do so. All violations of human rights by the police or other law enforcement personnel must be investigated fully, promptly and independently.

### From the ACLU:

- Your rights are strongest in what are known as “traditional public forums,” such as streets, sidewalks, and parks. You also likely have the right to speak out on other public property, like plazas in front of government buildings, as long as you are not blocking access to the government building or interfering with other purposes the property was designed for.
- Private property owners can set rules for speech on their property. The government may not restrict your speech if it is taking place on your own property or with the consent of the property owner.

- Counterprotesters also have free speech rights. Police must treat demonstrators and counterprotesters equally. Police are permitted to keep antagonistic groups separated but should allow them to be within sight and sound of one another.
- When you are lawfully present in any public space, you have the right to photograph anything in plain view, including federal buildings and the police. On private property, the owner may set rules related to photography or video.

### **Do I need a permit?**

- You don't need a permit to march in the streets or on sidewalks, as long as marchers don't obstruct car or pedestrian traffic. If you don't have a permit, police officers can ask you to move to the side of a street or sidewalk to let others pass or for safety reasons.
- Certain types of events may require permits. These include a march or parade that requires blocking traffic or street closure; a large rally requiring the use of sound amplifying devices; or a rally over a certain size at most parks or plazas.
- While certain permit procedures require submitting an application well in advance of the planned event, police can't use those procedures to prevent a demonstration in response to breaking news events.
- Restrictions on the route of a march or sound equipment might violate the First Amendment if they are unnecessary for traffic control or public safety, or if they interfere significantly with effective communication to the intended audience.
- A permit cannot be denied because the event is controversial or will express unpopular views.
- If the permit regulations that apply to your demonstration require a fee for a permit, they should allow a waiver for those who cannot afford the charge.

### **What to do if you believe your rights have been violated**

- When you can, write down everything you remember, including the officers' badge and patrol car numbers and the agency they work for.
- Get contact information for witnesses.
- Take photographs of any injuries.
- Once you have all of this information, you can file a written complaint with the agency's internal affairs division or civilian complaint board.