

## Candidate Forums

An introduction to getting involved

Elections are a great time to get the word about school-based health centers (SBHCs) into the public dialogue. There are opportunities to participate in candidate forums for federal, state, and local offices. Getting involved in a candidate forum can advance the goals of SBHC policy at all levels with a number of audiences:

### Partner organizations

Candidate forums are often organized by a number of sponsoring organizations. Becoming part of one in your community can bridge new or deepen existing relationships with partner organizations.

### Candidates for elected office

One of the candidates at the forum will become the next elected official who will have the power to make decisions on the advancement of SBHCs. Your presence at the event will place SBHCs in the dialogue of the candidates' issues. Ultimately you can get the candidates to 'go on record' with support of SBHCs. Once they are in office, this support can be leveraged for positive policy change.

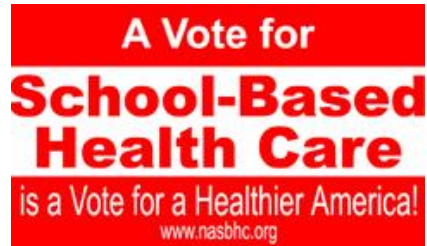
### Community members and media

Candidate forums are attended by members of the partner organizations—people just like you—and members of the press. When SBHCs are part of the dialogue and potentially covered in the press, the broader community can become aware of, and ultimately supportive of, SBHCs.

### SBHC supporters

Candidate forums have large numbers of people and positive energy. They can be an inspirational venue to gather SBHC consumers, teachers, and supporters to come together and speak out. Organizing a strong presence of people from your SBHC at the candidate forum provides opportunities to build leadership and investment in the policy work for future activities and projects.





## Candidates Forums

### Steps for involvement

#### **Identify a forum:**

Research other groups that are sponsoring candidate forums. First, contact leading health and education groups. Otherwise, pick a forum that is sponsored by a broad-based community organization or sponsored by an allied organization. You can also find out when forums are taking place by contacting the candidates' offices.

#### **Co-Sponsor the Forum**

Consider co-sponsoring the forum with other groups. As a co-sponsor you may have more influence in the format and questions to be asked. This will also promote your organization or SBHCs and position and/or strengthen your group as a community leader. Depending on the forum structure, co-sponsoring could require a simple placement of your name on the promotional materials, turning-out attendees or assisting with logistics. This varies from organization to organization. Once you learn the 'rules', decide if you have the capacity to co-sponsor. Co-sponsoring is a great way to build new relationships and deepen existing ones.

#### **Find out the format**

Find out if there is an opportunity for questions from the audience or if the questions are pre-determined by the sponsoring group. If questions from the audience are allowed, find out how long the Q&A period will last. This may determine how many questions you can expect to ask.

If the sponsor is determining the questions in advance, ask if they will include a question about school-based health care. Provide them with reasons why including them are important and the wording for the question.

It is important to find out how the moderators are controlling the response of the candidates. Will all candidates be expected to answer every question? Will you be able to ask an individual candidate specific questions? How much time will they have to respond? It is important to know this when preparing your constituents to ask questions.

#### **Build relationships with the candidates**

Get familiar with your Member of Congress and the other candidates. You can find candidate information on their websites and for Members of Congress on [www.congressmerge.com](http://www.congressmerge.com). You can request bio and background information on candidates at their campaign headquarters.

Make sure that the candidates are familiar with SBHCs before the forum. Send campaigns information about SBHCs in advance with your contact information. Their familiarity will give SBHCs more credibility and they will appreciate your outreach in helping with their preparation. You may want to let the candidates and/or their campaign managers know you will be raising questions about SBHCs at the meeting. Don't provide the exact questions. However, if you call one candidate, you

must call all of them. You cannot show candidate preference. This is also a good opportunity to meet and develop a relationship with the campaign managers.

### **Recruit your constituents**

Determine how many people you want to attend the forum. This is a great opportunity for consumers, school faculty, and other supporters to get involved in supporting SBHCs in public dialogue. It also may be appropriate for just a few people from your SBHC community to attend.

If you decide to recruit a number of people, develop a plan to maximize their presence at the forum. Follow-up with reminders. Provide childcare and other support if needed.

This is also a great opportunity for students. Contact the government teacher and find out if students could get extra credit for attending. Having students provide testimonials is also very effective. It educates the community about the direct benefits and educates the students about local government at its basic level.

### **Show up at the Forum**

Wear buttons or stickers identifying all of you as an organized group. If possible, travel together to the forum as a group. There is often mingle time with the candidates. Plan to arrive early to take advantage of this and prepare your group to stay later if the opportunity to meet candidates arises.

### **Ask the tough questions**

Plan, in advance, what questions you want to have answered. If the format has pre-determined questions, this will be done in advance of the forum.

In the event of an open question and answer period, prioritize questions and get everyone on the same page about asking the one or two top questions. If you plan to ask multiple questions, it is a good idea for your group to spread out around the room. This will increase your chances of having multiple questions asked.

There should also be a mingle time at the Forum. Your members, or pairs of members, can “adopt” a candidate and seek them out individually to have the question answered. Candidates and other organizations will be impressed by your organization and focus.

Remain confident, considerate, and persistent about getting an answer to your questions. **Stay on message.** Don't get distracted or angry if you don't get a detailed answer. Be forceful in repeating the question and asking for an appropriate response.

### **Debrief**

Have a scheduled time to talk with your participants about what they learned about the candidates and the political process. Reinforce the ways your group expects to advance its goals through participation in the electoral process. Use the momentum and interest generated by the forum as an opportunity to sign people up for the next activity. This can be the easiest step to skip in the process and yet is the most important in continuing to build your leadership and power.

### **Maintain good records**

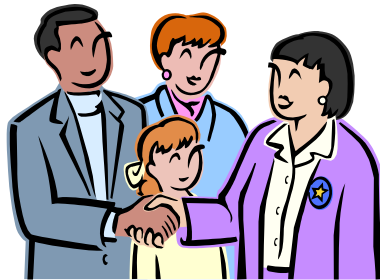
Keep track of names and contact information for everyone who participated from your group so you can include them in future efforts. Have someone take notes on what the candidates say for future accountability sessions.

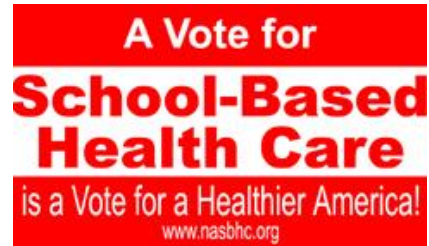
### **Follow up with the candidates**

Be sure that the candidates hear from you after the event. If you are able to talk to them or their staff immediately after the Forum, give them brochures and fact sheets from your SBHC. For sitting Members of Congress, make sure to add NASBHC materials as their focus will often be both local and national. If you are not able to get materials in their hands, send them to their campaign office the following day.

### **Maximize the Media**

Reporters often attend candidate forums. Identify a member or members of your team to locate the media contacts at the Forum and provide them with information on SBHCs. Find out their names and contact information. Follow-up with them the day after to see if they need any additional information. Even if you don't get coverage of SBHCs in the media for the forum, you are establishing important relationships with the members of the media. This will be helpful for future stories and activities.





## **Candidate Forums**

### **Timeline for successful involvement**

#### **6 weeks before the forum**

Send letters to the candidates  
Contact the sponsoring organization(s)

#### **5 weeks before the forum**

Determine your goals for turnout  
Create a list of people to recruit  
Identify leaders to help with recruitment

#### **4 weeks before the forum**

Send email notices  
Post fliers in the SBHC  
Determine the questions you want to ask  
Call candidates offices to confirm they got the letter and inform them that you will be at the Forum  
Decide materials to create and/or bring to forum

#### **3 weeks before the forum**

Finalize logistics plan for getting volunteers to the forum  
Finalize floor plan for forum  
Recruitment phone calls to potential attendees  
Determine who will ask the questions (if appropriate to forum structure)

#### **2 weeks before the forum**

Recruitment phone calls to potential attendees  
Prepare materials to bring to forum

#### **1 week before the forum**

Confirm all logistics needs (cars, buttons, signs, etc)  
Rehearse with people asking questions (if appropriate to forum structure)  
Reminder email to all committed attendees

#### **Day before the forum**

Reminder phone calls to all committed attendees



## Candidate Forums

### Asking the questions

#### Sample SBHC Question:

Research indicates that children and adolescents with access to primary health and mental health services are more ready to learn and are more academically successful than their peers without such access. Additionally, it is also undisputed that children who have access to health and mental health services in **their** community are much less likely to utilize the emergency for basic health care needs, a costly and inefficient alternative. Knowing that school-based health centers have been proven to provide this critical access to care, I would like to know from each of you (1) what you will do to support these centers and (2) what actions will you take to guarantee the expansion of these centers to all communities?

#### Tips for drafting additional questions:

**(1) *Draft a number of questions***

Develop a variety of questions that approach your question from different angles, in case your first question is asked by someone else.

**(2) *Keep questions brief and to the point***

Make sure questions are short, concise, and actually ask for something very specific. Avoid speeches “dressed up” as questions. In crafting your questions, you may want to acknowledge a party’s, or a candidate’s, previous work in support of SBHC issues. Be careful not to appear politically partisan.

**(3) *Personalize your questions***

Questioners should identify the districts where they live, but remain neutral on candidates. Questions should refer to a local issue or personal anecdote. Media and politicians respond well to personal stories — but they also need to hear how systemic change can help an entire group of people including the person in the story. For example, the moving story of teenager Joe Smith who received vital treatment from his SBHC for diabetes. The story itself is powerful, but we need to make the point that by investing in SBHC, we can help thousands of teens like Joe. That’s why it’s vital to support federal legislation to fund SBHC, etc.

**(4) *Use local, state, and national data***

All politics are local — so while it helps to talk about, say, how many American kids are uninsured, the national statistic is made more powerful if it is localized. For example, to a Chicago audience: There are over 8 million uninsured kids and teens in America today – that’s the equivalent of three Chicago’s or 202 Wrigley Fields.

**(5) *Anticipate the ‘waffle’ response***

A candidate may respond to your question with a “filler” answer such as “of course health care for all children is important”, or “we spend a great deal of money on uninsured children” Don’t get sidetracked! If you get the opportunity, respond by reiterating the real question and asking for a real answer.