



## Non-Profit Candidate Forum Ground Rules

Hosting a candidate forum is a great opportunity to engage candidates and talk to them about key policy issues related to mental health services and supports in your community. Below are some ground rules to make sure your event is effective and follows non-partisan guidelines.

- 1. Always keep it nonpartisan.** NAMI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. We take stances on policy issues, not parties or politicians. Invite all candidates for the position (and that means not just Democrats and Republicans, if Independents or candidates from other parties are running). You must have more than one party participate to hold the event.
- 2. Diversify the content and invite partners.** You must ask questions on a broad range of issues that are not biased for or against any one candidate. To diversify the topics you are asking about, invite partners in your community to cohost the event. This could be groups focused on housing and homelessness, veterans' mental health or other natural partners. This helps generate a larger audience, which helps guarantee more candidates accept your invitation, as well.
- 3. Select a format that works for you – and gives equal time to all candidates.** Many forums will have an impartial moderator ask candidates questions and give them equal response time. Candidates are typically unaware of the exact questions but know the focus of the event. Other forums may have a town hall set-up, where attendees ask questions. Caution: An open Q&A often gets off-topic, so questions should be screened by a staff member or lead volunteer to avoid any partisan questions and keep the discussion focused on mental health.
- 4. Attract a large audience.** Candidates want a large audience. As the election gets closer, their schedule is more packed. An event with a large audience of possible constituents is a good use of their time. You may also consider streaming the event via Facebook or posting it on your website (without comment on the candidates' performance). Another consideration is timing that will help make it easier for your members to attend and whether you can offer childcare services at the event.
- 5. Keep politicking out of it.** No campaign banners, signs, handouts or related paraphernalia should be allowed in the forum hall. You can provide equal space provided for each candidate to place campaign materials outside of the main event space. Also, remind your leaders and volunteers not to wear any pins, t-shirts or other materials that indicate support of a candidate or political party. The moderator should also ask audience members to refrain from applauding or showing support/non-support for a candidate during the event.
- 6. Give candidates time to meet with voters.** Allow candidates time after the forum to speak with voters and shake hands. You can note this opportunity in your invitation.
- 7. Stay organized – and recruit plenty of volunteers.** There are many activities to cover in the lead-up to and during the candidate forum. This includes following up with campaigns, contacting media outlets, day-of set-up, day-of greeters to welcome both the audience and candidates, timekeepers, and so on. Identify trusted volunteers that can help cover these tasks.

*For more tips on how to host a candidate forum as a non-profit organization, visit [www.nonprofitvote.org](http://www.nonprofitvote.org).*