

HOW TO ...

Collaborate with Community Advocates

Grassroots movements are much more likely to be associated with community organizers than they are with attorneys, but that doesn't mean AILA members can't be outstanding activists. Thousands of our members are involved in pro-immigration advocacy at the grassroots level. They diligently send letters to congress through our online action center, participate in civic organizations, and look for opportunities to educate neighbors and colleagues about the urgent need for meaningful immigration reform. Hundreds of our more advanced grassroots activists work in coalition with business associations, community groups, and religious organizations to promote pro-immigrant and pro-immigration policies at the state and national level. These leaders have developed influential relationships with elected officials and their staff, members of the media, and community leaders.

Here is an example of how AILA Chapter leaders in Minnesota successfully worked with an existing state coalition to promote national comprehensive immigration reform to key legislators and community leaders in the Twin Cities.

CASE STUDY: THE MINNESOTA/DAKOTAS CHAPTER-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Minnesota is regarded as having a high level of activity at the grassroots level on immigration issues. An example of AILA's Minnesota/Dakotas Chapter's engagement is when they co-hosted a community forum that involved high-level community, religious and political leaders.

The Chapter's Chair and Vice Chair, Loan Huynh and Elizabeth Streefland, were determined to get involved in advocacy work and were looking for an opportunity to tap into the state's existing coalitions when the Governor of Minnesota announced new legislative proposals for local immigration enforcement. Loan and Elizabeth recognized the urgent need for AILA members to respond to the shortsighted proposals and so they introduced themselves to state organizations that had been involved in immigration advocacy for decades. The organizations included Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, Jewish Community Action, and the Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis.

Together, they established shared principles for their work and made decisions about how to address the state and national immigration policies at the same time. They used these: principles to guide the structure and objectives of their outreach work. These are their principles: "We affirm the contributions of immigrants to the United States. We celebrate the ways in which a multi-cultural society enriches and strengthens our country, and we reject efforts to scapegoat immigrants for political gain. We urge our elected officials at local, state and federal levels to acknowledge that immigration policies which recognize the dignity and value of all individuals are fully compatible with goals of economic progress and national security."

The new coalition coordinated a very well attended community forum on immigration reform. AILA leaders' participation included logistical planning for the event and facilitated emails among the groups involved. AILA members John Keller and Virgil Wiebe were involved in presenting highlights of federal immigration legislation and also providing substantive research to the presentations. Notable speakers included the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul (the two largest cities in MN), representatives of the police departments of both cities, a refugee immigrant telling her story, an AILA member who serves the Latino community as part of a non-profit organization, and a professor from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute who is versed in immigration policy and research. Many state senators, representatives and candidates were in the audience in addition to professional and student activists from a diverse group of community organizations.

In addition to the media coverage in the state's major and ethnic newspapers, the forum spurred a renewed public dialogue on immigration. The coalition went on to plan future forums in other parts of the state that also included a broader base of interest, especially business and employers.

15 STEPS TO WORKING IN COALITION

1. Talk to your Chapter Chair and members of your Chapter's Executive Committee about the benefits of getting involved in coalition work.
2. Find out which associations, organizations, and community groups are already engaged in immigration advocacy in your state.
3. Contact and introduce yourself to those groups and explain that you are interested in working together to advocate for progressive immigration reform.
4. Establish shared principles that you can use to guide your work and objectives.
5. Coordinate an event in your community.
6. Choose a location that is accessible for your intended audience. (The Minnesota Chapter actually made the decision to hold their forum at a community center instead of a downtown law firm.)
7. Invite speakers who can present different perspectives on the same problem and who are committed to the same solution.
8. Invite distinguished guests such as Members of Congress, their staff, and community leaders, with personalized invitations.
9. Promote the event in local newspaper calendars and community bulletins
10. Create and disseminate a press release.
11. Make sign-in sheets for all of the guests.
12. Make a separate sign-in sheet for members of the press.
13. Create an action that guests can take immediately after the event. (The Minnesota Chapter created pre-addressed post cards to Congressional offices for guests to sign. They also encouraged guests to endorse their shared principles.)
14. After the event, make yourself available to the press to answer questions.
15. Immediately follow up with elected officials and their staff.

PROMOTE YOUR STRENGTHS AS A CHAPTER

As you and your Chapter pursue relationships with other organizations and existing coalitions, it is important to be aware of the way you are perceived by other members of your community. Other groups may not be clear about the way that AILA Chapters can enhance collaborative advocacy efforts and they may be unfamiliar with the type of work you do for immigrant communities – beyond specific casework. Here is an example of how AILA's New England Chapter learned this lesson and how they overcame misconceptions about their advances into advocacy.

It started in the Fall of 2007 when workplace raids in New Bedford, Massachusetts shattered the lives of thousands in the small New England community. Immigrant and native-born residents alike were overwhelmed with fear the moment 500 ICE agents pushed their way into a small leather factory on the north side of town. Fear soon clouded with intense grief as more than 350 workers were arrested and provided no means of contacting their loved ones. Family members, separated and scared, were left questioning – How do I find my husband, my wife, my mommy, my daddy?

The answers to those questions were not easily found. Locating arrested workers and connecting them to their families required significant time, energy, and effort from a diverse group of non-profit, faith-based, and legal organizations. AILA's New England Chapter was one of many entities that responded to the raid first by locating individuals, and soon after by responding to media inquiries, providing legal advice, liaising with state government agencies and elected officials, and volunteering to help as the situation continued to unravel.

CASE STUDY: THE NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER: RAISING YOUR PROFILE IN THE ADVOCACY COMMUNITY

The Chapter's compassionate response and contribution to the collective advocacy work following the devastating raids in New Bedford raised its profile within the community. Non-profit, faith based, and legal entities recognized AILA attorneys as advocates for a common pro-immigrant agenda and also accepted them as new partners who could help advance the immigration social movement.

Two years prior to the raids, when the executive committee began seeking coalition partners in earnest, the New England Chapter made few inroads. They had a topical relationship with the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition that revolved around a campaign for state legislation that would allow public colleges and universities to offer in-state tuition to immigrant students. AILA attorneys were involved in writing letters to the editor, making calls and visits to the State House, identifying potential witnesses for hearings, and even testifying on the bill. Unfortunately, the positive reform was defeated during that session, but advocates remained hopeful that it would be reintroduced during a future legislative session. Punam Rogers, a Past President of the New England Chapter, remembered, "It was great to work with and learn from the MIRA Coalition the first time around. Now, with all of our

experience and new contacts from our work on the raids, we'll be prepared to give this fight all we've got." Punam later served as the Chapter's inaugural Community Based Organization Liaison, a new executive committee position dedicated to maintaining and fostering their burgeoning relationships with local groups.

No longer on the periphery after the raids, the New England Chapter is recognized by the local advocacy community as a knowledgeable and important voice in the debate. Groups like the ACLU and the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians frequently request AILA's endorsement of their letters and projects. They also invite attorneys to participate in meetings with legislators and speak at local conferences. The Chapter has also become a resource of information for reporters and opinion editors at the Boston Globe and Spanish language media outlets.

In turn, these new allies are participating in the Chapter's Pro-bono Project with Boston EOIR. It's a huge undertaking and AILA leaders are relieved to know that many of their new partners are volunteering to assist with coordinating and leading Know Your Rights trainings and presentations as well as arranging Bond Hearing training and representation.

Chapter members were able to establish new relationships with community groups simply by doing what they do best – practicing immigration law. The overwhelming response to the raids by AILA attorneys affirmatively raised their profile around the state. Through their good works they have grown their networks, become a go-to source for the media, and created fresh opportunities for the New England Chapter to advocate for fair and workable immigration law and policy.

FINDING NEW AND DIVERSE MESSENGERS

The social movement to reform our nation's immigration laws and policies is vast and diverse; advocates live in all parts of the country, are every age, race, and social position. It isn't hard to find people who believe that our immigration system is broken and in dire need of repair, but finding the right advocates to act as spokespeople can be a challenge. Because, for instance, a senator who was endorsed by the conservative Club for Growth is unlikely to be compelled by pro-immigration arguments from members of a labor union, it is important that we think strategically about who, and what, is most likely to influence a particular decision maker.

In addition to being a great messenger for immigration reform yourself AILA advocates are uniquely positioned to engage key spokespeople in the immigration movement. As attorneys, you regularly interact with individuals from different sectors of your community – maybe some of your clients are employers who have an interest in raising the cap on H-1Bs or they are hospitals that need more nurse, or perhaps you represent refugees and asylum seekers – you have access to individuals who have a valuable and possibly persuasive perspective on the way that U.S. immigration laws impact their lives.

Think about the person or people you want to convince to support immigration reform. Is it a State Senator from a rural part of your state, a U.S. Representative who cares deeply about education, or a County Executive with an eye toward economic development in the city? Who influences these decision makers and are they already a part of your personal or professional network? Here's an example of an AILA member who realized that if his U.S. Congressman was ever going to support immigration reform, the message was going to have to come from a business owner. Mid-South Chapter member Mario Ramos who lives in Tennessee met one key staff person from the Nashville Chamber of Commerce for coffee one time and introduced him to the issue of immigration. Two more meetings and two more months later, executive members of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce came to Washington, D.C. to lobby for comprehensive immigration reform.

CASE STUDY: MARIO RAMOS—ENGAGING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

This case study will provide you with a summary of Mario's outstanding advocacy work and a step-by-step plan for you to follow so that you can replicate his successful results.

Mario became more engaged with AILA Advocacy in May 2005 when he joined the national effort to oppose REAL ID. He worked in coalition with community leaders to mobilize advocates around the state to educate senators and representatives about the threats to civil liberties and due process imposed by the legislation. His enthusiasm for advocacy grew and Mario soon became determined to engage non-traditional immigration advocates in the pro-immigrant movement. He said, "My goal is to convert the unconverted, preaching to ethnic Chambers is preaching to the choir. I want to increase the pro-immigration reform network by focusing on mainstream Chambers." He intentionally targeted mainstream business-focused community groups that have an interest in employing foreign-born workers, and so he sought out professionals at the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce and the Middle Tennessee Homebuilders Association.

He evaluated the contacts in his personal network and wondered if any of them could help him find the right person at either of his targeted groups. In his search, Mario found the name and information of a prominent attorney and business executive in the Nashville area, whom he had met briefly during a leadership seminar a year or so before. That contact was recently hired by the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce to serve as the Senior Vice President of Government Relations and Community Improvement.

Once he realized the connection, Mario called his contact, and they set up a meeting to discuss the harmful impact that overly punitive, enforcement-only federal immigration legislation could have on local business. In his interview, Mario said, "I used their interests to guide their support of comprehensive immigration reform. I focused on business-related issues, i.e., their self-interest." After their initial conversation and coffee meeting, it was clear that the Chamber could be convinced to be key advocates for immigration reform in the state of Tennessee. Mario also realized he would need to promote the objectivity and specialized knowledge that AILA brings to the immigration debate.

Because Mario kept AILA Advocacy staff abreast of his outreach efforts, he was able to quickly provide his contact with updated legislative analysis of pending bills, fact sheets, position papers, and specific information about members of the national business community who publicly support comprehensive immigration reform. He also was able to arrange a breakout meeting with the Chamber executive and Jenny Levy, AILA's Manager of Grassroots Advocacy, who was in town for the Mid-South Chapter meeting.

As he worked to leverage his relationship with the Chamber of Commerce, Mario was contacted by some of the local immigrants' rights groups, churches, and individuals to work together to meet with members of the business community. Out of concern for alienating the Chamber before they had solidified their support for comprehensive immigration reform, he chose not to pursue this collective strategy.

He continued to pursue the Chamber and attended various local events such as forums and receptions to get to know more leadership and executives at the organization. While there, he continually talked about immigration in terms of economic development and the ways that foreign-born workers could contribute to the local economy. His work spurred the Chamber to include immigration reform as one of their five annual legislative priorities. When the Nashville Chamber's executive lobbying group visited Capitol Hill to meet with its state's senate and congressional delegations, the group made a special focus on immigration. Mario informed AILA National staff that the Nashville Chamber would be in D.C. so that staff could prepare the lobbying group to speak about current immigration legislation.

Because of Mario's outreach, the Chamber and other business groups in Nashville and the metro area, expressly seek AILA to help guide their efforts. He explained that “[t]hese groups have virtually no immigration knowledge and they seek our help [to teach them about the impact that immigration policy could have their business].”

For Mario, convincing diverse groups that comprehensive immigration reform is a non-partisan issue is easy if one considers the needs and interests of the target audience. “Going back to network theory, we need to join the interest of AILA to business networks. They seek our technical expertise and knowledge of immigration law.” AILA needs the support of the business community in order to win comprehensive immigration reform. Instead of telling the Chamber of Commerce why they should help AILA, Mario told the Nashville Chamber of Commerce why they need comprehensive immigration reform and that AILA can help them to achieve it.

“My goal is to convert the unconverted, preaching to ethnic Chambers is preaching to the choir. I want to increase the pro-immigration reform network by focusing on mainstream Chambers.”

—Mario Ramos

10 STEPS TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

1. Identify target association or organization
2. Do Your Research – Identify your target’s needs, interests, and motivation. Determine the value you bring to your target.
3. Determine a specific goal that you want your target to accomplish (e.g.: an in-district meeting with a Member of Congress, an event to attend, a op-ed to author)
4. Carefully consider your outreach strategy and identify which partners, if any, will enhance the message you share with your target audience.
5. Evaluate your personal and professional networks and determine which contacts can help you meet someone from your target
6. Have coffee or other meeting with your target.
7. Keep in touch with AILA staff and work together to reach your target audience and objective. Try to coordinate opportunities for AILA staff to meet directly with your contact.
8. Be visible in your target community by attending events they host. Build relationships with their leadership and decision makers.
9. Share your expertise with your target by alerting them to local articles or events that are of joint interest for you both.
10. Commit to maintaining the relationship so that you can jointly accomplish your predetermined goal.

USE THIS SAMPLE LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO REACH OUT TO BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS OR GROUPS IN YOUR COMMUNITY.



Re: Immigration Reform Partnerships

Dear _____ :

On behalf of the **[insert name of chapter]** Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), I am contacting you regarding the adverse effects of immigration-related policies confronting you and your coalition members. The dearth of willing native born workers combined with the limited number of visas for foreign workers has led to labor shortages in all sectors of the economy, including yours. While the American people recognize that our immigration system is broken and needs to be fixed, our national law makers have walked away from each legislative opportunity to initiate reform.

In the wake of their shortsighted actions, DHS has implemented a wide-spread enforcement plan throughout the country, conducted by Immigration Control and Enforcement, or "ICE". These raids and audits have the potential to destroy businesses, the economy and families. It is a tragedy in the making; one that Congress could have avoided. In fact, objective polls taken over the last 2 or 3 years consistently show that some 70% of the American public wants Congress to enact a reform bill that will provide legal status to essential workers in construction, landscaping, manufacturing, food processing and multiple other service industries.

Reflecting that broad consensus, many members of Congress from both parties have introduced workable proposals over the last several years, only to see their efforts frustrated by Congressional members who listen only to the small minority who endorse an "enforcement only" approach to this issue.

The purpose of this letter is not to review the irrational and reactionary nature of the "enforcement only" approach. Instead, we want to begin a dialogue between your organization and the **[insert name of chapter]** Chapter of AILA. We believe that our groups have much in common and that by working together we can:

- Help members connect with others in **[insert name of state]** and on a wider scale to share information and education on how to approach your members of Congress effectively and on a continuing basis;
- Assist each other in monitoring federal and state proposals affecting those we represent;
- Share Action Alerts and information on pressing issues and important developments;
- Identify members of Congress (and candidates in upcoming races) who are and will be willing to support sensible reform.

Many groups lobby Congress through paid lobbyists who make polished arguments. We believe that it is more effective for your members to make direct contacts with Congressional members, both as individuals and through your office. In fact, Congressional staffers regularly tell us that:

"My boss agrees with your position on immigration reform, but the calls and emails and letters from constituents are running 10 to 1 against the reform proposals. Until we hear from your clients and other groups who support reform, we only can assume that the majority of our constituents oppose it."

The polls we have seen do not support that kind of response, but until this point, the business community (i.e., your members) has been largely silent on this issue. Your members are busy running their businesses, and we do not criticize them for this. But we are in a crisis, and further inaction by Congress on this issue has the potential to damage and even destroy the economy. We cannot let that happen.

As a member of the AILA advocacy team, it is my job to identify business groups and related coalitions with an interest in immigration reform, and help educate their members about how to approach member of Congress effectively. I promise that we will do everything possible to support those contacts.

I will be calling you shortly to set up a short meeting at a convenient time and place to discuss these ideas further, and we look forward to working with you on this critical issue.

Thank you for your time and attention to my comments.

Sincerely yours,

