



# Fact Sheet

## Handles for Organizing a Healthy Community

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# Handles for Organizing a Healthy Community

In general, a handle is something to grab on to. In community organizing, a handle is the same thing: something that an organization can “grab on to” to help it move its agenda forward. In the case of community health organizing, a handle is a decision making process, event, or piece of information that gives an organization the leverage it needs to improve the health status or access to services in its community. Some common handles for community health organizing include:

- A change in the status quo, such as a hospital merger or conversion or the elimination of a service
- A dramatic event or story that highlights a problem and gets people angry enough to take action
- A report that gives new and compelling evidence of a problem

A change in the status quo may create new problems but it may also create a handle, or opportunity, to tackle a longstanding problem. For example: a community may have a longstanding need for more primary care doctors but have had no luck persuading the existing hospital administration to beef up this service. However, when the hospital seeks to merge with another hospital, and suddenly needs approval from regulators, there is a handle. In order to win the support of the community for the change, the new hospital management may be much more willing to meet community demands.

In Lynn, Massachusetts, community outrage led to reopening discussions about health access with the local hospital after a man bled to death outside the locked doors of the local urgent care center.

In Chicago, a community organization forced managed care companies to change their marketing practices after local consumers documented numerous deceptive and unethical activities.

“Problems,”  
“Issues,”  
and Handles

There are many health problems in any community, but not all of them make good issues around which to organize. Some problems are simply too big for the community to tackle alone. A handle makes a problem into a good issue.

Community groups generally need two types of handles: process handles and substance handles. Substance handles help you make the case for the change you are seeking. Process handles, offer you a forum to make that case. When thinking about handles, it may help to keep in mind that you are trying to persuade somebody who has the authority to make a decision to give you what you want. Then you can think of handles as being the answers to two types of questions:

*Substance handles answer the question, “Why will this person give me what I want?”*

Some examples include:

**Precedent:** “Give us what we want because you have done the same for others.”

**Broken promises:** “Give us what we want because you have promised.” (There is an implied threat to embarrass the person publicly if he doesn’t comply.)

**Incidents/horror stories:** “Give us what we want because this situation is outrageous.” (Reports or exposés generally fall into this category too. They are meant to show the injustice of the current situation and win people’s support for change.)

**Moral high ground/obligation:** “You should give us what we want because it is your obligation/ job requirement/ what you exist to do.”

*Note:* these kinds of handles help convince group members that their demands are just and fair in addition to being used to persuade decision makers.

*Process handles answer the question, “Where can we get involved to influence this decision?”*

Process handles are things like legislative or regulatory hearings, board meetings or events of the organization you are trying to influence, elections, or events you create yourself, such as press conferences and speak-outs. In general, a process handle is some sort of meeting or event where decisions get discussed or made or where the decision makers are present. These meetings give the group an opportunity to press its agenda.

Some examples include: **Public hearings** held by the legislature or an administrative agency (sometimes when looking for a handle, you can persuade a sympathetic legislator or city councilor to schedule a hearing)

**Events** such as annual meetings, fundraisers, or the company picnic of the HMO manager who has been refusing to meet with you

*Note:* Sometimes there is no public hearing or defined process for decision making, or even an obvious way to insert your concerns into the decision making process. In that case, you can sometimes create your own handle by holding community speak-outs, press conferences, or other events that attract attention.

Some handles are both process and substance handles. For example an existing law that isn't being enforced is a substance handle because it answers the question: "Why should we get what we want?" ("Give us what we want because it is the law.") It is also a process handle because it answers the question "How can we influence the decision?" (often through a lawsuit).

## A Few Final Words About Handles

A good handle needs to be simple and easy to explain to group members, media, and the general public. But you need more than a good handle to win a campaign. There are many other things to think about, such as who might support or oppose your goal, how strongly each side feels, and what resources are needed and where they might come from. There are many general guides to community organizing that can help you plan a campaign to win improved access to health care in your community. Two good examples are:

### **Roots to Power**

by Lee Staples (Praeger)

### **Organizing for Social Change**

by Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max (Seven Locks Press)

Michael Miller from Health Care for All produced this fact sheet for The Access Project. We would also like to acknowledge the contribution of other staff from Health Care for All and Community Catalyst who worked on this fact sheet. Both groups are located in Boston.

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