

STARTING A GROUP

If you live in an area where there is no animal advocacy organization or you feel the existing organization does not focus on the same priorities as you would like to – or maybe you are a high school or college student and want to have a group at school – you might consider beginning your own organization. Starting your own local or student group is one of the most effective ways to educate the public about animal exploitation. A community organization gives you recognition with the media, government officials and the public. It also shows that you and your group are a strong, committed force for the animals.

The size of the group does not matter; two motivated people can really make a difference. However, the more people you reach in your area, the more people will want to get involved.

Choosing a name is important. Take time and care to pick a name that conveys your group's mission. Do you want to run an animal rights group, welfare group, or do rescue work? Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to have a group that does all three. Limited time, money and energy make it difficult to do them all thoroughly. In most communities, there are usually designated agencies that handle cruelty cases and rescue groups that deal with adoptions to which you can refer individuals.

BE ACCESSIBLE

It is especially important for a new group to have a phone number, mailing and e-mail address and even a web site, if possible, so that you can be reached by potential members, the media, the public and other animal groups.

Get an answering machine or a voice mail box. You do not need an actual phone to have a voice mail box. Record a brief message about your group on the message (for example: "While we do not handle animal rescue or adoptions, we do have information that can help you. If you are witnessing animal cruelty, please call your local sheriff's department. The number is..."). Also, be sure to announce the date, time and location of your next meeting, as well as what you will be discussing. If there are any other events coming up, make sure to mention them too. When returning calls, make a point to sound enthusiastic that people have called – the more interested you sound to them, the more likely people will be to participate – and remember – another voice for the animals!

Get a post office box at a local post office or a place like Mailboxes, Etc. These boxes are usually reasonably priced and allow you to protect your privacy at home.

Have letterhead made with your group's name, address, phone number and logo. It can be easily printed off your computer!

OUTREACH

There are different ways to reach out to your members.

E-mail List: You might want to have 2 e-mail lists, one for people who are involved in making the decisions about the organization, deciding events, etc., and another for people who attend events and who are generally more interested in participating. Obviously, if an individual is taking on real responsibility with the group they can easily be added on to

the smaller list. This just helps keep the general membership getting information that is relevant to them.

Phone tree: Yes, phones are still useful and can be a helpful way to give people some personal contact and to hear a friendly voice. If you develop a phone tree – be sure to create one where one person is not left making all the calls for meetings or important actions. (A phone tree is a system in which you call one person and that person then makes several calls, and so on).

Avoid feeling compelled to produce newsletters. While they can be a great fundraising tool and help keep members informed and motivated to participate in events, they often take away limited time and money from actual activism. Do a newsletter only if you feel it will not be a drain on your time and resources.

A simple and inexpensive way to inform people about your meetings is to distribute flyers. A flyer might say something like, "Do You Want to Help Stop Animal Suffering? If so, join Action for Animals at 7p.m. on the second Tuesday of every month at Oak Brook Library. For more information call..." Copy your flyers onto brightly colored paper and post them at universities, health food stores, and other stores likely to attract a sympathetic audience. (Suggestion: To help save paper and copy costs, you can design your flyer to fit two on a sheet.)

Some weekly papers have an area where you can have your group listed weekly and others where you can submit information to their calendar section about events. Also, check sites like Craigslist that allows you to post information for free.

MEETINGS

Decide how often you want to meet. Will it be once a month or only when planning an action? Again, core members of your organization might need to meet more frequently. Try to meet on a regular day and time and, if possible, at the same location. This will make it easier for people to remember the meetings.

Libraries can provide meeting rooms that are usually free or fairly inexpensive – also try local universities. If these don't work, try to find a public space that is cheap. Sometimes if you pass the hat at the meeting you might be able to cover the cost of the meeting room (say for \$20). Avoid meeting at a restaurant or someone's house. These places are great for social events, but tend to be distracting when used for public meetings.

It is essential to have an agenda for your meeting. If meetings are too disorganized or not well planned, people will become irritated and leave early or not come back. Though some of us don't mind spending 24 hours a day working for the animals – some people only set aside a few hours for interests outside of their jobs or family.

One way to come up with an agenda is to have a summary of your group's activities in the past month. This will get new and existing members excited by what the group is doing and motivate them to brainstorm for "next time." Next, list upcoming events and pass around a sign-up sheet to solicit those who are interested in working on that project or event. At the end of the meeting, distribute information about calls that need to be made or letters that need to be written and provide background information on topics covered.

It is important to have something for people to do after they leave the meeting because it makes them feel like a valuable part of the team. This can be as simple as making a phone call or writing a letter.

The moderator of the group does not need to be the group organizer. However, the person running the meeting must understand what the group represents, be familiar with what the group does and comfortable deferring questions that he or she is not the most familiar with. You do not want your moderator to say something like, "Some animal research is necessary" or "fish don't really feel."

It is up to the moderator to keep the meetings on track. During a meeting is not the time for people to tell stories about their companion animals. The moderator should politely remind the "storyteller" that while everyone would love to hear the story, there is a lot to cover in the meeting. It is also not the time for long-time activists to discuss sensitive issues.

Make sure your meetings are friendly and positive. No one wants the moderator at a meeting to simply preach and complain; they want someone motivated to make changes for the animals. So keep an upbeat tone! More than likely your group is doing exciting things for the animals and that needs to come through in your meetings.

USING VIDEOS

For meetings

Videos are useful if you find there are some members of a group who are new to the movement or who don't completely understand the concepts of what happens to animals in a factory farm, slaughterhouse or animal experiments. Videos can coincide with an upcoming event or simply be used to educate your members. Videos help to remind people why it is important to keep fighting so hard.

For longstanding activists, or those who don't need to see graphic images to fully comprehend animal exploitation, you might want to show videos at the beginning or end of your meeting, so that people can choose whether or not to watch them and not miss the meeting.

For outreach

Videos are also an excellent way to educate the general public. This can be done either in the form of street education or a public event.

Many groups now have a TV/VCR combination that they can use at tabling events, protests or even just leafleting. This provides a perfect way to show people exactly what we are talking about. It also draws people over where you can answer questions and hand them information. Some groups are also lucky enough to have large vans that can be driven around that show these images. These are more costly.

You may consider having a public event where you show videos, such as "The Witness" or "A Cow At My Table" (and you can even combine a shorter animal rights video). Both of these films have won documentary awards and promoting your event that way is an excellent way to draw in many people. Serving some delicious vegan desserts at the end is a great way to add to their education!

DELEGATION

It is really important to keep your group busy! Members will come and go, but you want to use everyone's talents where they will be most effective. Artistic people can help with making posters; writers can help develop brochures or write letters to the editor; students can help recruit new members (maybe have their student group join in on local events); and activists in video or photography classes can help get a show on cable access or document your group's activities with photos.

Make a point of finding out what skills your members have and when they are available to help. Not only do people generally enjoy doing things that they are good at, but you may find a talented graphic artist in your group who can help with flyers, banners or brochures.

Some groups may want to form small committees that focus on specific issues (animals killed for food, research, etc), while others may choose to create committees based on upcoming events. This way, people are working on issues that interest them and all of the responsibility is not left to one person.

TACKLING SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Some people may complain that there are not enough social events. What is your focus? If it is just activism, remind them that when there is a limited amount of time and resources, we need to focus on what we are here to accomplish.

This is not to say that groups should not get together and enjoy each other's company, but you do not want meetings to turn into social gatherings. If someone wants to have a party or a potluck dinner, let her or him organize it, but keep it separate from your meetings. Instead, try to have focused parties (e.g., poster making) that provide food and time for people to get to know each other. Sometimes having video showings or even a meeting (with snacks) can encourage people to come who might be intimidated to just show up to a protest without knowing anyone.

Beware of those who always feel you are not doing enough. Constructive criticism is important, and every group should constantly try to improve. However, some people are never satisfied. Listen to these people, remind them about all you are doing as a volunteer and ask them if they are interested in taking on the issue they feel the group should be addressing.

Also, beware of people who want to make decisions but are not there when the time comes to do the work. Usually it is unwise to make serious organizational or planning decisions at public meetings. This may not be very popular, but you don't want to have a group of people vote on work that only a few people must carry out.

CHOOSING ACTIVITIES

Always brainstorm with other group members about what you can do regarding a certain event or campaign to ensure a broad spectrum of ideas.

Most groups focus on seasonal or upcoming events, public education and long-term campaigns.

Seasonal and upcoming events will include leafleting, tabling and protests in response to a certain issue, such as a circus coming to town or World Farmed Animals Day.

Public Education includes disseminating informational literature, working with the media or any other way in which you can educate the public about animal issues and at the same time promote your organization. This may include general outreach on a particular issue such as veganism and doing general outreach & events.

Long-term campaigns usually address a local issue that the group has chosen to focus on until a victory is achieved. For example, you may want to stop factory farms from coming into your area or you might want to protest a particular vivisection at a local university.

For more assistance, information, literature and other campaign materials contact:

Viva! P.O. Box 4398 Davis, CA 95617 530/759-8482

www.vivausa.org info@vivausa.org ACT@vivausa.org (for teens)

The logo for Viva! is written in a large, bold, black, cursive-style font. The word "Viva!" is slanted to the right and has a thick, expressive feel.