



Election-Year Advocacy Toolkit

**A Practical Guide for Elevating
Infant and Toddler Homelessness
and Housing Instability in Federal,
State, and Local Elections**



Contents

Introduction: How to Use This Toolkit	3
How to Talk About Infant and Toddler Homelessness.....	4
Setting Election-Year Advocacy Goals	6
Translating Goals into Action	8
Factors to Consider When Choosing Strategies and Tactics	10

Inside Game Strategies & Tactics

Making the Most of Grassroots Meetings	12
The Power of Grassroots Engagement with Candidates.....	15
Leveraging Briefings to Inform Candidates	17

Outside Game Strategies & Tactics

Getting Candidates and Elected Officials on the Record.....	19
Town Hall Engagement: Preparing Advocates, Coordinating Turnout, and Following Up.....	21
Bird Dogging: Raising Infant and Toddler Homelessness in Public and Informal Settings.....	24
Hosting a Policy Roundtable with Candidates or Elected Officials	27
Using Earned Media to Elevate Infant and Toddler Homelessness and Housing Instability	30
Activating Social Media Around Election-Year Advocacy	33

Appendix

Timeline Milestones for Candidate and Public Engagement	35
Tracking and Metrics for Election-Year Advocacy.....	37
Using Earned Media to Elevate Infant and Toddler Homelessness and Housing Instability: Template Letter to The Editor (LTE) and Opinion-Editorial (Op-ed)	39
Activating Social Media Around Elections: Sample Social Media Posts.....	42
Town Hall Engagement: Sample Questions on Infant and Toddler Homelessness and Housing Instability	44
Hosting a Policy Roundtable with Candidates or Elected Officials: Sample Policy Roundtable Run of Show	45
Bird Dogging: Sample Questions for Candidates.....	46
Customizable Companion Template: A Practical Planning Tool	47
Resources.....	47

Introduction: How to Use This Toolkit

Every baby needs a safe place to live, grow, and thrive. But too many infants and toddlers experience homelessness or housing instability during the most important years of development — often in ways not immediately visible to policymakers, like staying in motels, doubling up with other people, sleeping on couches, or moving from place to place.

Election season is a powerful moment to change that.

Candidates are listening to voters, defining priorities, and shaping their official policy agendas. Organizations that work on housing, homelessness, early childhood, health, and family support systems can use this moment to educate candidates, engage communities, and elevate solutions that ensure families stay housed and supported.

This toolkit offers practical, nonpartisan ways to:

- Elevate infant and toddler homelessness as an election-year issue.
- Ask candidates clear, nonpartisan, policy-based questions.
- Mobilize partners and community voices.
- Build relationships with current and future elected officials.

You do not need to use every tactic. Choose the goal, strategy, and actions that fit your capacity, relationships, and state or local context.

Important 501(c)(3) reminder: Nonprofit organizations cannot support or oppose candidates for public office. But they can educate candidates and the public, elevate policy solutions, encourage civic participation, and ask open-ended, nonpartisan questions about issues affecting expectant parents, infants, toddlers, and their families.

When engaging candidates, treat candidates equally, ask neutral questions, and avoid praising or criticizing any candidate.

How to Talk About Infant and Toddler Homelessness

Most people do not think of babies and toddlers when they think about homelessness. That makes infant and toddler homelessness easy for candidates, policymakers, and the public to miss — even when they are already talking about housing costs, family stability, child care, healthcare, or the cost of living.

Homelessness during pregnancy and the first years of life is not only a housing crisis: it is a health crisis. Without a safe, stable home, families face greater barriers to prenatal care, pediatric care, healthy development, and the stability babies need to thrive. Addressing infant and toddler homelessness requires housing, healthcare, homelessness, and early childhood systems to work together before instability becomes a deeper crisis.

That is why election-season matters. Candidates are defining their priorities, answering questions from voters, and shaping the agendas they may carry into office. If infant and toddler homelessness is not named clearly, families with the youngest children can be left out of the conversation — and out of the solutions.

Organizations and advocates can use this moment to make the issue visible, educate candidates, and ask clear, nonpartisan questions about how they would help expectant parents and families with infants and toddlers stay housed, stable, and supported.

The facts are clear and urgent:

- The [first three years of life](#) are when a child's brain develops fastest; homelessness and housing instability during this period can disrupt healthy development and harm long-term well-being.
- Most people do not think of babies and toddlers when they think about homelessness. Nevertheless, nearly [447,000 infants and toddlers](#) experienced homelessness or unstable housing in 2022-2023. Infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness [increased by 82,000](#), or 23%, from 2021 to 2023.
- Approximately [70,000 babies](#) were born to parents who experienced homelessness during pregnancy or within 12 months of giving birth.
- The lowest-income renters face [a shortage of 7.1 million](#) affordable and available rental homes.
- Only [1 in 4 families](#) who qualify for housing assistance receives it.
- [Families experiencing homelessness](#) may be staying in shelters, motels/hotels, temporarily with others, cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus/train stations, or similar settings.
- Among [children and youth identified as homeless](#) by public schools, 75% were staying temporarily with other people, 9% were in motels, 11% were in shelters/transitional housing, and 5% were unsheltered.
- Health, homelessness, housing, and early childhood services must be connected so families with infants and toddlers can get the [full range of support](#) they need.

ELECTORAL MESSAGE FRAME

Strong families start with a safe place to call home.

No matter who we are or where we come from, we all want babies to be healthy and safe, families to be stable, and communities to be strong. But too many families with infants and toddlers are being pushed into homelessness by rising housing costs, a shortage of affordable homes, and inaccessible support systems.

Families are not *failing*. They are *being failed* by systems that are not working together.

We know what helps: stable housing, safe shelter when families need it, early childhood supports, healthcare, and policies that reach families before crisis deepens. Now we need to ensure elected officials with the power to change policies are educated and empowered to act. When babies have stability, families thrive — and communities grow stronger.

Language to Use

- Infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness or housing instability
- Expectant parents and families with infants and toddlers
- Safe, stable housing
- Safe shelter when families need it
- Families being pushed into homelessness
- Systems that are not working together
- Policies that reach families before crisis deepens
- Strong families start with a safe place to call home

Language to Avoid

- Homeless babies
- Language that suggests parental failure
- Language that treats homelessness as a fixed identity
- Overly technical program language as the lead message
- Imagery or copy that sensationalizes hardship
- Questions that ask candidates to pledge support for a specific policy
- Indications that a candidate's positions are good or bad on an issue

Setting Election-Year Advocacy Goals

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH?

Start by choosing one clear goal. The strongest election-year outreach is focused, realistic, and tied to your organization's capacity. Your goal may be to elevate the issue in public conversation, educate candidates, mobilize partners, or build relationships with an eye toward governing.

Those goals may include:

- **Communications:** Elevate the issue. Make infant and toddler homelessness visible in election-year conversations in the press, on social media, and at community events.
 - *This goal is a strong fit if your organization has:*
 - ▶ Communications staff or media relationships
 - ▶ Strong storytellers or compelling local examples
 - ▶ Digital reach or newsletter capacity
 - ▶ Partners who can amplify messages consistently
 - *Success looks like:*
 - ▶ Infant and toddler homelessness and housing instability appearing in earned media and digital conversations.
 - ▶ Candidates are talking publicly about infant and toddler homelessness and the solutions families need.
 - ▶ Infant and toddler homelessness is framed as mainstream, widely relevant, and tied to shared values.

Bottom line: Election season is a moment to make the unseen reality of infant and toddler homelessness visible — and to help candidates understand that stable housing, early childhood supports, healthcare, and homelessness services all need to work together.



- **Policy:** Educate candidates. Help candidates understand what families are facing and the policy solutions elected officials can pursue.
 - *This goal is a strong fit if your organization has:*
 - ▶ Existing relationships (either at your organization or through coalition partners) with decision-makers
 - ▶ Policy expertise or strong briefing materials
 - ▶ Capacity for ongoing outreach and follow-up to all candidates
 - *Success looks like:*
 - ▶ Campaign staff know who you are and what you represent
 - ▶ Infant and toddler housing stability and homelessness are discussed in policy conversations
 - ▶ Candidates understand implementation realities and community needs
 - ▶ There is a clear pathway for post-election engagement
- **Mobilization:** Mobilize partners and allies to publicly demonstrate broad, cross-sector support for helping families with infants and toddlers stay housed.
 - *This goal is a strong fit if your organization has:*
 - ▶ Engaged parents, providers, or community members
 - ▶ Volunteers willing to show up and ask questions
 - ▶ Partners who can coordinate visible participation
 - ▶ Ability to organize turnout, story-sharing, or public engagement
 - *Success looks like:*
 - ▶ Candidates regularly hear from families and providers in public settings
 - ▶ Infant and toddler homelessness priorities show up consistently at town halls and forums
 - ▶ Community voices reinforce that infant and toddler homelessness matters

To determine which goal to prioritize, ask:

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Where do we already have influence? | • What aligns with our longer-term goals? |
| • What is most missing in this race? | • What would meaningfully move the needle in our state or community? |
| • Where do we have sustained capacity? | |

Translating Goals into Action

A **strategy** is *how* you will achieve your goal. Strategies should be specific and measurable.

Strategies are implemented through **tactics**, the concrete actions that move the strategy forward.

While goals provide direction, strategies and tactics should be concrete enough to track over time. Tracking tactics helps organizations understand whether their strategy is increasing visibility, strengthening relationships, or generating engagement from candidates and campaigns (i.e., achieving the goal).

Below is a simple framework for this structure:

GOAL <i>The outcome you want to achieve</i>	STRATEGY <i>The approach you will take to achieve it</i>	TACTICS <i>The specific activities that implement the strategy</i>
Elevate expectant parent, infant, and toddler homelessness and housing insecurity issues in the election-year conversation	Increase public understanding that babies and toddlers experience homelessness and housing instability — and that policy solutions exist	Place X number of LTEs or op-eds Post values-based content on social media with Y frequency Ask Z number of questions at forums
	Increase public engagement	Send A number of advocates to town halls Connect with B number of candidates via bird dogging Host policy roundtables with C candidates

MAKE TACTICS ACTIONABLE AND TRACKABLE

Once you have selected which tactics will support your strategies, translate them into clear benchmarks that allow you to track progress. For example:

Trackable communications tactics

Define who owns each benchmark and the deadline for completion.

- Publish four Letters To The Editor (LTEs) across key regions
- Secure two press mentions of infant and toddler homelessness and housing insecurity
- Reach 10,000 constituents through digital engagement with values-based messages about housing stability for families with babies

Trackable public engagement benchmarks

- Coordinate supporter turnout around infant and toddler homelessness and housing instability at three town halls
- Generate 10 constituent questions in public forums
- Recruit 20 new parent or provider advocates

REASSESS AND ADAPT

Campaigns are dynamic. Build in moments to evaluate:

- Is the list of candidates changing? Are there new candidates?? Dropouts?
- Are candidates responding?
- Is public visibility increasing?
- Are relationships deepening?
- Do tactics need to shift?

If something isn't moving, adjust the strategy, not just the volume of activity.

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES AND TACTICS LEGALLY

While section 501(c)(3) organizations are prohibited from supporting or opposing candidates, the IRS allows these nonprofits to engage in a wide variety of efforts to educate candidates and the public about policy issues. This work must follow some key guidelines:

- **Treat all candidates equally.** For example, when conducting candidate education outreach, send materials to all candidates for a given office, and offer to meet with each for an in-person briefing. If only one or a few of the candidates accept the offer of a meeting, that's fine; you can't force the others to meet with you, but at least you tried. Similarly, do not create new materials at the request of a particular candidate.
- **Ask open-ended, neutral questions.** When engaging in [bird dogging](#), or posing questions at a candidate town hall, ask candidates to discuss their positions, rather than asking pointed yes/no questions. Your question cannot indicate a bias or preference. A yes/no question — or asking a candidate to promise to take a particular action in office — will be viewed by the IRS as a tacit endorsement, because if you're showing which candidates agree or disagree with your organization, you're signaling which candidate(s) the audience should vote for.
- **Do not praise/thank/criticize candidates.** If a candidate adopts your policy proposals, or fails to do so, you cannot weigh in publicly about their policy decision.

Factors to Consider When Choosing Strategies and Tactics

Once you have identified your goal, the next step is deciding how to pursue it. Two factors can help guide those decisions:

1. Where your organization has influence
2. Where the campaign currently sits in its timeline

INFLUENCE: WHERE YOUR ORGANIZATION HAS STRENGTH

Selecting strategies that align with where your organization already has influence increases the likelihood that your engagement will shape candidates' awareness and understanding of infant and toddler homelessness.

Ask: Where do we have the most ability to influence candidates and campaigns?

In election-year advocacy, influence can flow through:

- Public visibility (media, debates, forums)
- Trusted validators and coalition partners
- Policy advisors and campaign staff
- Direct voter engagement moments
- Transition planning processes
- Key stakeholders: Partners, housing providers, homelessness service providers, and early childhood leaders

Your goal should align with a realistic pathway to influence. For example:

- If you have communications capacity, a **Public Narrative Strategy** may be your most credible lever.
- If you have strong policy credibility and the ability to reach out to all candidates in the race, a **Relationship and Influence Strategy** may yield the highest impact.
- If you have an activated base, a visible **Public Engagement Strategy** can shift campaign attention.



TIMELINE: WHERE THE CAMPAIGN STANDS

Campaign opportunities also depend on where the race is in its timeline.

During a primary, organizations can educate all candidates, share materials, and raise public awareness. During a general election, organizations may focus on ensuring final candidates understand the issue, answer questions publicly, and have access to policy resources. After Election Day, organizations can use relationships and public statements to inform transition planning and early governing priorities.

Some organizations choose to engage early to inform candidates during the primary. Others focus their efforts later in the race when the final candidates are honing their agendas for governing.

Campaigns also move through phases — from early announcements to active campaigning and eventually transition planning. Strategies and tactics may shift as the race evolves. A detailed overview of campaign milestones and engagement opportunities is provided in the [Appendix: Timeline Milestones for Candidate and Public Engagement](#).



Making the Most of Grassroots Meetings

When running for elected office, candidates know that it is vital to understand and discuss issues that are important to voters, otherwise known as their potential constituents. As an organization working to prevent and solve infant and toddler homelessness, you can help candidates understand how housing instability affects babies, expectant parents, families, providers, and communities. A critical role you can play in the election process is connecting candidates to directly impacted people in your state who would be supported by your policy solutions. There are many ways to do this, most of which are public-facing, but there is also a behind-the-scenes tactic that can be very effective: grassroots meetings with candidates.

If planning to conduct grassroots meetings with candidates, keep in mind that you must offer meetings to all candidates running for office. You can select different groups of constituents to meet with various candidates — picking people who will resonate with each candidate — but the opportunities being offered to each candidate must be equivalent.

WHY HOLD GRASSROOTS MEETINGS WITH CANDIDATES?

Grassroots meetings with candidates are an important tool that demonstrates to those running for office that infant and toddler homelessness is an issue impacting voters in your state or community, and that voters care and want to see action. When setting up grassroots meetings with candidates, have clear goals that align with the overarching goal. This can include using storytelling to educate candidates about the real impacts of your issues on people in your area and, as a result, increase their support for your issues.

Grassroots meetings can also serve as a back-door approach to elevate your issue as a part of the public narrative. When candidates are better informed about an issue, and especially when they have a voter's personal story to point to as an example, they are more likely to speak publicly about it.



HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF GRASSROOTS MEETINGS WITH CANDIDATES OR THEIR STAFF?

- **Do your homework.** To have an effective meeting, you must know where the candidate stands on your issues.
 - Have they made public statements or been endorsed by relevant organizations in your space? Are they or have they been an elected official, and if so, have they taken votes on your issues?
- **Identify your goal(s).** You may have both a primary and secondary goal for your grassroots meeting; your goal(s) should be clear and specific.
 - How knowledgeable is the candidate about your issue? Customize the issue education you provide to their level of knowledge and experience with your issues.
 - Although this is an educational meeting, you should prepare an “ask” for the meeting; for example, raising the importance of this issue publicly.
- **Select meeting participants.** Identify voters/potential constituents who are affected by your issues.
 - For grassroots meetings, you are looking to identify people who are personally impacted by your issues and willing to share their stories. This could include parents or caregivers with lived experience of homelessness or housing instability, Early Head Start or child care providers, home visitors, shelter or housing providers, pediatric health providers, doulas, or community-based partners who help families navigate housing and early childhood supports.
 - Decide on the most compelling stories/storytellers based on what you learned about where they stand on your issues.
- **Prepare in advance.** Build your meeting structure around your goal.
 - Identify who will run the meeting.
 - Ensure a clear speaking order.
 - Prepare an agenda with time allotments for each speaker.
- **Request a meeting.** Candidates have busy campaign schedules, especially if they are currently in office. When requesting a meeting, reach out to the campaign office and include:
 - Your name, organizational name, and that you are facilitating a meeting with people in your area impacted by the issue you work on.
 - What you want to talk about.

If a candidate’s schedule does not allow for a meeting, consider engaging with senior campaign staff, such as a policy director or campaign manager, who often help shape the candidate’s policy agenda.

When inviting people to share personal stories, avoid asking anyone to disclose more than they are comfortable sharing. Offer preparation, compensation when appropriate, and clear choices about how their story will be used. Stories should illustrate policy barriers and solutions without reducing families to hardship.

Please note: it’s important to reach out to their campaign office when discussing an issue in the context of their campaign, not their official office (i.e., not their governing office), if they are already in office.

- **Holding the meeting.**

- Be on time. Campaign schedules are busy, so the meeting could be as brief as 20-30 minutes.
- Be concise and follow the agenda. Because meetings can be brief, you want to make sure you have time to cover the most important points, the personal story, and your ask.
- Listen to their position and answer their questions. Once you have made your ask, listen to the candidate's response, which can indicate their level of support for your issue. Answer their questions to the best of your ability in the meeting, but don't be afraid to say that you'll get back to them promptly if necessary.
- Leave behind materials on your issues. At the end of the meeting, be sure to share a policy one-pager and potentially other materials that outline your issues.

Note: Do not publicize which candidates your organization does or does not meet with. Posting photos online, or telling reporters who accepted your invitation, will be viewed by the IRS as the organization's attempt to inform voters which candidates are good or bad on your issues. Similarly, if the candidate wants to take photos of the meeting, you must ask them not to post them, as the lack of context will make it appear that your organization is helping only that candidate.

Important Considerations

- As a 501(c)(3) organization, it is essential that your actions not be political or partisan in nature, meaning that your actions and communications cannot be reasonably viewed as favoring or opposing a candidate or political party.
- In practice, this means you can explain your organization's position on policy issues, provide candidates with materials on those issues, and pose questions about the candidate's position. Notably, you must offer to meet with and provide information to all candidates on an equal basis.
- Please note that organizations cannot praise or thank a candidate for adopting its policy position nor criticize a candidate for not doing so. Similarly, an organization cannot ask candidates to publicly pledge that they will implement the organization's policy if elected, as that would be tantamount to a tacit endorsement by the organization.

The Power of Grasstops Engagement with Candidates

While the overarching goal of grassroots and grasstops engagement with candidates is the same, the two tactics employ different strategies in service of that goal. Grassroots engagement demonstrates your narrative power through storytelling and people power showing that voters support your policy issues.

Grasstops engagement involves reaching candidates through influential individuals who have access to or credibility with them, such as major donors, business leaders, board members, faith leaders, or other respected community figures. It leverages trusted relationships to demonstrate influence and strengthen connections.

To use this tactic in a 501(c)(3) context, it is important to reach out to all candidates for a given office. For that reason, if trying to leverage grasstops engagement, it will be important to consider your organization's network broadly, to find pathways to each candidate.

Grasstops meetings are a key opportunity for your organization to establish connections with and build relationships with candidates.

- **Do your homework before grasstops engagement.** As always, learn where candidates stand on your issues. But in this case, that homework is research on the candidates as people and potential policymakers that will inform how you proceed with grasstops meetings — what are their priorities, who is in their circle of influence, and where is there overlap with your network?
 - **Utilize power mapping.** Power mapping is a tool for identifying, analyzing, and influencing key players to achieve a specific goal: increasing a candidate's knowledge of and support for your policy issues.
 - ▶ Identify the players. Who influences the candidate? (i.e., who are the key "players"?)
 - ▶ Map their influence and support for your issues.
 - ▶ Analyze relationships between the players and the candidate.
 - ▶ Look for overlap between the players and your network.
 - **Do your policy research before engaging candidates.** This doesn't only mean learning where candidates stand on your policy issues. It is equally, or arguably more, important to map the candidates' policy priorities and look for overlaps and connections between your priorities and theirs.
 - Sample questions to consider as you engage in power mapping and policy research.
 - ▶ Who are the lawmaker's top staff, advisors, and donors? Which campaign relationships do they appear to most closely maintain?
 - ▶ Who manages their communications and media relations?
 - ▶ Where does the lawmaker live? Are there child care centers or Head Start programs in their area?
 - ▶ Do they have personal or professional connections to housing, homelessness, early childhood development, healthcare, child welfare, family economic security, or caregiving?
 - ▶ What issues do they care most about? What do they talk about the most? What moves them?

For support power mapping, you can [find a worksheet here](#) to help you identify your pathways of influence and conduct in-depth research.

- **Identify your most effective grasstops supporters.** After power mapping, identify which of your key stakeholders have direct connections to the candidates. This shared connection will make their meeting on your issues more effective.
 - ❑ Do you and the candidates have any overlapping donors?
 - ❑ Is anyone on your board, staff, or in your organization's network close to them or those who influence them?
- **Prepare your grasstops supporters.** Your grasstops supporters, especially those connected to candidates, are strong advocates for your policy issues. To ensure they are as effective as possible in communicating the importance of your issues, provide them with relevant information to engage with the candidate. This includes:
 - ❑ Homework on the candidate's position on your issues
 - ❑ Organizational materials about the problems and policy solutions relevant to your issues
 - ❑ Approved key messages or talking points to help ensure supporters communicate consistent, accurate information about your issue
- **Use grasstops meetings with candidates to build relationships.** [Grasstops meetings](#) should largely follow the structure of grassroots meetings; however, they should also take the opportunity to build longer-term relationships on behalf of your organization.
 - ❑ Discuss their shared connection. Your grasstops supporters who also support the candidate are great ambassadors for your issues because they are coming from a trusted source.
 - ❑ Ask about any personal connections to your issues (e.g., is their partner a pediatrician? Do they have young children or grandchildren? Is a family at their child's school directly impacted by infant and/or toddler homelessness?). This information will be useful as you engage in your own relationship building.
- **Look for opportunities for grasstops engagement with candidates.** While grasstops engagement may occur in the context of a meeting, it is also valuable to look for opportunities where they might be in the same place for other reasons (e.g., campaign, donor, or organizational events). It is important to prepare your grasstops advocates early in the election cycle so that they are ready to seize spontaneous opportunities to engage with candidates, build the relationship, and grow the profile of your issue regardless of the setting.
- **Follow-up is essential.** Because grasstops engagement with candidates is part of a larger relationship-building strategy, it is important to debrief the meeting or interaction with your grasstops supporter and identify any next-step opportunities, such as those outlined below. Before moving forward with opportunities, ensure that you are offering information equally to all candidates in the race.
 - ❑ Follow up and offer a briefing on your policy agenda to both the candidate from this meeting and all remaining candidates in the race, to ensure you're offering the same opportunities to all candidates.
 - ❑ Work with the grasstops supporter to ensure your organization has opportunities to provide information and resources for all candidates they engage with.

To begin mapping relationships and connections between key stakeholders and members of your network, [try using this worksheet](#) to help build a personal relationships profile.

Leveraging Briefings to Inform Candidates

To elevate infant and toddler homelessness as a pressing issue during election season, it is vital to ensure candidates are informed about your policy issues and prepared to discuss the related problems and opportunities. Many leaders are underinformed about this issue, despite its prevalence, making education crucial to any goal your organization might have.

One strategy to achieve your goal is to demonstrate that you are an expert resource candidates can turn to for information, thereby allowing you to shape the narrative. A successful tactic to illustrate your expertise is offering all candidates a policy briefing on your issues, which allows you to demonstrate your expertise in real time and show, rather than tell, how you can be a resource to a newly elected leader.

As a 501(c)(3) organization, if you choose to do candidate briefings, you must offer them to all candidates. Accordingly, depending on the number of candidates in your federal, state, and local races, as well as your organizational capacity and relationships, you could choose to offer briefings before the primary or wait until after the primary.

CONDUCT POLICY RESEARCH

- Just as with any candidate meeting, your research will underpin how you approach the candidate engagement.
- Identify if candidates have a position on your issue, and if so, what? It is equally important to discover if they don't have a public position. A lack of a stated position is not necessarily a negative sign; it can present an opportunity for education.

You can find a worksheet with [questions and talking points here](#) to help you begin your policy research process and prepare to ask candidates smart questions.

DEVELOPING CANDIDATE BRIEFINGS

- **Send materials to all candidates.** Prepare a packet of materials on your issues (e.g., fact sheets, reports, polling memos) to send to all candidates, offering them the opportunity for an in-person briefing. That way, your organization can demonstrate legal compliance that all candidates had the same opportunity, and you'll educate even those candidates who do not take the time to meet with you.
- **Start from their baseline.** When preparing a policy briefing for a candidate, tailor it to meet them where they are. Use your research on the candidates to assess how much background information they need and, if they have a position on your issues, how it fits into your policy priorities.
 - Bottom line: what do they need to know to do what you are asking of them? If you are asking them to elevate the importance of your issue, they need sufficient baseline policy knowledge to be comfortable discussing this issue publicly and be prepared to answer questions about it. Specifically, they need to be able to articulate the problem and the solution.
- **Clearly outline the problem.** When educating candidates on policy issues, it is most effective to frame the impact in terms of voters (i.e., their potential constituents).
 - How many infants and toddlers in your state or community are experiencing homelessness or housing instability?
 - What forms does homelessness take locally, including shelters, motels, doubled-up housing, or temporary stays with family or friends?

- How does housing instability affect pregnancy, infant and toddler development, family stability, and access to early childhood programs?
- Where are families falling through the cracks?
- **Clearly outline the solution.** When proposing policy solutions to address the problems facing families with infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness, it is essential to include what role the elected official would play in those solutions.
 - What policies or investments can increase access to early childhood programs?
 - What can an elected official in this office do to help families with infants and toddlers stay housed?
 - What policies or investments would prevent homelessness before the crisis deepens?
 - How can housing, homelessness, health, and early childhood systems work together more effectively?
- **Make the ask.** While your organization's primary goal is the policy solution, you are engaging candidates as a 501(c)(3), so your ask is not to endorse a particular policy — instead, your role is to educate candidates. However, as a part of this briefing, you can and should ask the candidate to elevate the importance of infant and toddler homelessness — an ask that supports your goal to ensure these issues are a part of the broader campaign narrative.
- **Engage the candidate.** Conducting a candidate briefing is an opportunity to build your relationship with the candidate and their staff. Be sure to engage them in active conversation, learn about their relevant interests, and any potential personal connections to infant and toddler homelessness.
 - Keep good notes about their questions and comments to learn more about how they view your issues.
 - Learn if they have opinions about challenges facing families with infants and toddlers currently experiencing or being pushed into homelessness, ideas about policy solutions, and/or if they have connections to the issue.
 - Offer to be a continuing expert resource.

CONDUCTING CANDIDATE BRIEFINGS

- **Who briefs candidates?** Assess for both seniority and expertise when deciding who will brief the candidates.
 - You want your messenger to communicate to the candidate that your organization is all-in on this issue (e.g., the head of your organization) and that you are issue experts capable of handling tough questions (e.g., your head of research or policy director).
- **Setting up the briefing.** Reach out to the campaign's manager or policy director and offer to brief the candidate on your issues.
 - Be clear about why this will benefit the candidate (i.e., why should the candidate make time for this).
 - ▶ It is most effective to communicate that voters care and want to hear about this issue.
 - ▶ Do you have polling on this issue? If not, do you have other data about how many people this issue affects in your state or community?
 - Be clear about who will attend, and how much time you need (no more than 1 hour).
- **Follow up.** After the briefing, send a thank-you email and include related policy materials.
 - Continue to stay in touch with the candidate and staff who attended. Your goal is to build and maintain a strong relationship with whichever candidate takes office so that you are able to hit the ground running to move your policy issues forward.

Getting Candidates and Elected Officials on the Record

Candidates and elected officials want to understand the concerns shaping voters' lives. When they hear directly from families, providers, and community leaders that babies and toddlers are experiencing homelessness and housing instability, it makes an often-unseen issue visible.

This section outlines practical ways to ask questions, gather responses, and track engagement.

WHY GETTING LEADERS ON THE RECORD MATTERS

Public responses shape expectations. Getting candidates to publicly articulate their positions on infant and toddler homelessness increases visibility of the issue, clarifies where they stand, and creates a foundation for follow-up. When leaders speak directly to the needs of infants, toddlers, and families, it strengthens accountability and elevates the issue, signaling that it is an important part of the policy conversation.

Asking clear, focused questions also helps campaigns better understand what communities care about and where additional information may be needed.

Remember to keep engagement centered on issues and solutions — not support for or opposition to any candidate. Your questions must be broad enough to get the candidates talking about the issues without indicating a “right” or “wrong” position on the issues. For that reason, your questions should be open-ended rather than yes/no.

WHERE AND HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS

There are multiple ways to invite candidates to share their perspectives:

- Ask questions at town halls, forums, or public events
- Submit questions in advance when opportunities are offered
- Host candidate roundtables



- Raise questions during meetings or small group conversations
- Ask questions online
- If a coalition partner is already hosting a candidate event or forum, join that opportunity rather than creating a new one

The key is clarity. Well-structured questions are more likely to generate usable responses. Whenever possible, ask questions that prompt concrete actions or timelines, not just general values.

TRACK RESPONSES AND ENGAGEMENT

Tracking is what turns one interaction into an ongoing strategy. Document:

- Questions asked and where
- Verbatim or summarized responses
- Public statements about infant and toddler homelessness, housing stability, early childhood supports, or connected systems
- Areas of interest raised by campaign staff
- Requests for follow-up information
- Points of contact within the campaign
- Agreed-upon next steps

A simple shared tracker helps ensure conversations build over time and that coalition partners stay aligned.

FOLLOW UP WITH PURPOSE

Campaigns move quickly and often need reminders. Follow up to keep infant and toddler homelessness visible. Approach follow-up as part of a sustained relationship, not a one-time exchange.

- Send a short thank-you email after meetings or events
- Share concise resources tied directly to what was discussed
- Clarify next steps or timelines when possible
- Re-engage around key campaign moments

KEEP ENGAGEMENT ISSUES-FOCUSED

Center conversations on policies, community experiences, and solutions that support infants, toddlers, and families. Avoid framing that could be interpreted as endorsing or opposing a candidate. Clear, consistent, solutions-oriented engagement builds credibility — and makes it easier to continue the conversation after the election.

Town Hall Engagement: Preparing Advocates, Coordinating Turnout, and Following Up

Town halls and public forums are high-impact moments to focus candidates' attention on infant and toddler homelessness — publicly, directly, and in real time. Coordinated engagement can elevate the issues, demonstrate visible community support, and prompt candidates to address the issues facing infants, toddlers, and families.

This guidance outlines how organizations and partners can prepare advocates, coordinate participation, and follow up effectively in a respectful, issues-focused way. Because town halls and other public forums are high-stakes, high-visibility situations, you should select only experienced, trusted, carefully trained advocates for these events.

PREPARE ADVOCATES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

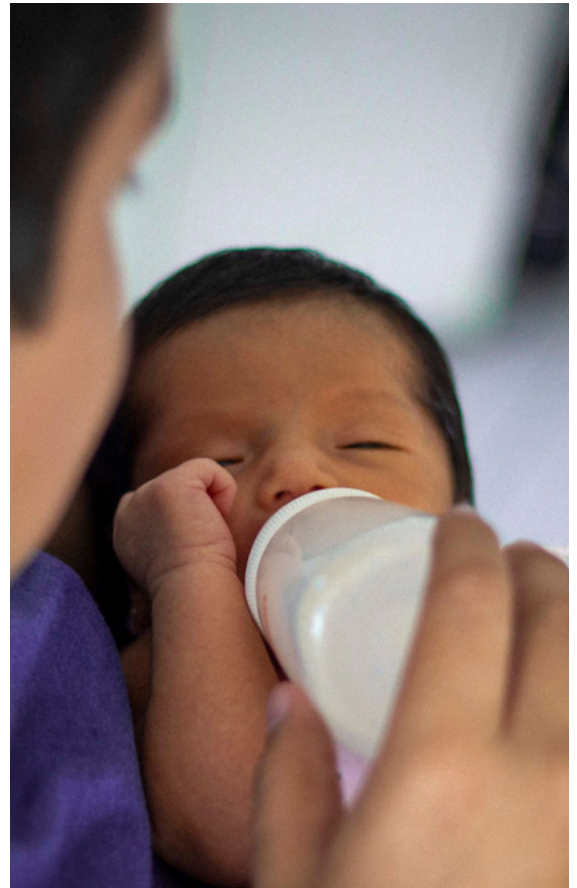
Before the event, decide what you want to get out of it: raise awareness, ask a specific question, build a relationship, or set up a follow-up conversation. Set participants up for success with:

- A short set of key housing security messages (plain language)
- Candidate and local context (what's happening in your state or community right now)
- One or two questions to prioritize
- Clear roles and coordination expectations

Give advocates one or two approved message anchors to use before asking a question:

Key Messages

- Strong families start with a safe place to call home.
- Families are not failing. They are being pushed into homelessness by rising costs and systems that are too hard to access.
- When babies have stability, families thrive and communities grow stronger.



Encourage advocates to bring [a brief story or example](#) (one minute or less) that ties policy to real life for families, providers, or communities, and to highlight that they are a voter whenever possible.

COORDINATE TURNOUT AND ROLES

Organized participation signals that infant and toddler homelessness and housing instability matters to the community. Designate a point person to:

- Invite parents, caregivers, providers, advocates, and partners
- Track who is attending and share logistics
- Assign who will ask which question, positioning only experienced, trusted volunteers to ask questions, and providing them with written questions that comply with the section 501(c)(3) rules
- Send day-of reminders and coordinate onsite
- If possible, wear organizational gear (i.e., a T-shirt, hat, or pin) that easily identifies you as an advocate for young children's housing needs

If attending with a group, consider spreading out in the room to increase the odds someone gets called on and to cover different Q&A lines or microphones.

POSITION TRUSTED ADVOCATES TO ASK THE QUESTION

Town halls often have limited time for audience questions. Planning ahead can increase the likelihood that your priorities are raised.

- Submit questions in advance when possible
- Arrive early to learn how questions will be collected
- Get in line early (or position near the aisle/mic)
- Make yourself visible: raise your hand confidently, make eye contact, be ready when called
- Keep the question short — the longer it is, the easier it is to dodge

If you have relationships with event organizers or hosts, use them to understand the format and how questions are selected.

ASK QUESTIONS THAT WILL LAND

Aim for questions that are clear, specific, and solutions-oriented.

Avoid framing questions in ways that could be interpreted as supporting or opposing a candidate, or that indicate there's a "right" or "wrong" answer. Instead, focus on getting candidates to speak broadly about issues and solutions.

You can find sample questions to adapt to your state or community context [in the appendix](#).

CAPTURE THE DISCUSSION

Have at least one person recording with a clear view and audio before questions begin. If you expect a quick interaction after the event (rope line, handshake), consider a second phone recording audio to ensure you capture the response.

Write down:

- The exact question asked
- The key points of the response
- Any commitment, follow-up offer, or staff contact

Please note: The recordings you made are for internal use and so you can accurately track what the candidate said. Do not share the video publicly during the campaign, because depending on the context, it may indicate unequal treatment of the candidates — that is, indicating which candidates are “good” or “bad” on your issues. But after Election Day, the video can be an important tool, holding the newly elected official accountable for adopting the policies they said they would enact if elected — and you certainly can make the video public if you need it after the election.

FOLLOW UP TO REINFORCE MOMENTUM

After the town hall, follow-up helps reinforce relationships and maintain momentum. Consider:

- Sending a thank-you email to the campaign or staff
- Sharing additional information or resources
- Documenting what was discussed and any commitments made
- Updating coalition partners
- Identifying next steps, such as meetings or briefings

If your question was not addressed due to time constraints, consider using social media to elevate the issue and invite further discussion. However, 501(c)(3) organizations must not imply that the candidate ignored the question, willingly or inadvertently.

For example:

- Post a photo from the event, ideally wearing organizational or advocacy-aligned attire that spotlights infant and toddler homelessness
- Tag the candidate and note that you appreciated the opportunity to attend
- Share the question you hoped to ask, and explain that time did not allow it to be addressed (e.g., “People in [STATE/CITY] had so many questions that we couldn’t possibly ask them all in the room. Sharing one here, instead: ...”)
- Express interest in continuing the conversation
- Reminder to identify yourself as a voter whenever applicable

CONNECTING TOWN HALLS TO BROADER ENGAGEMENT

Town halls work best as part of a larger plan — reinforcing other tactics such as meetings, social media engagement, and candidate education.

Keep engagement focused on issues and solutions, not support for or opposition to any candidate.

Bird Dogging: Raising Infant and Toddler Homelessness in Public and Informal Settings

Bird dogging is a strategy community members and advocates use to raise infant and toddler homelessness directly with candidates and elected officials. It involves asking well-prepared, direct questions to draw out specifics from a candidate on their policy position. It often happens at campaign stops, town halls, public forums, or local events, where participants ask well-prepared, direct questions about an issue.

The goal is not just to ask a question, but to prompt the candidate to speak publicly about the issue and clarify where they stand. These interactions help ensure leaders hear directly from families and those who work with young children, while also creating opportunities to secure clear commitments on policies that affect parents, young children, and families.

This guide outlines two complementary approaches:

1. Asking questions in public campaign spaces
2. Starting informal, respectful conversations in everyday settings

Both approaches focus on visibility, issue education, and encouraging thoughtful dialogue.

Because bird dogging requires asking pointed, carefully framed questions, you should select only advocates whom you trust and who are carefully trained.

WHY THIS APPROACH MATTERS

Candidates often hear from organized interest groups and campaign insiders. Hearing directly from parents, providers, and community members helps ground policy conversations in lived experience. When multiple people raise similar themes across events, it signals that supporting infants, toddlers, and families is broadly important — not niche or isolated.

1. ASKING QUESTIONS IN PUBLIC SETTINGS

The goal is to ask a clear, respectful question that invites the candidate to share their thinking.

This typically happens at:

- Town halls
- Candidate forums
- Community events
- Campaign events

Framing Effective Questions

Avoid long preambles or speeches. A focused question creates space for a substantive response. Include the following context in your questions:

- Briefly share who you are or your connection to children and families' housing security
- Reference a real experience or concern
- Invite the candidate to describe how they are thinking about solutions

Before the Event

Shorter questions are more likely to be heard and answered fully.

- Check how questions are selected
- Prepare a short question (under 20 seconds)
- Practice saying it out loud
- Coordinate with partners if others are attending

During the Event

- Ask your question clearly and respectfully
- Listen closely
- Take note of key themes or commitments

2. INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS "IN THE WILD"

Candidates frequently attend community gatherings, neighborhood events, or local businesses. These settings can offer opportunities for short, personal conversations.

How to Engage Informally

These moments are less about pressing for detail and more about visibility and relationship-building.

- Introduce yourself and your connection to young children or families
- Keep the interaction brief
- Share one concise experience or concern
- Ask an open-ended question
- Thank them for their time

You can find sample questions [in the appendix](#) of this toolkit.



Preparing Participants

Preparation helps participants feel confident and aligned. If organizing supporters to engage:

- Provide brief background on infant and toddler homelessness
- Share sample question structures
- Emphasize brevity and respectful tone
- Clarify that the goal is issue education and visibility
- Reinforce the organization's nonpartisan nature, and that advocates must not indicate support for, or opposition to, any candidates

After the Interaction

Over time, consistent presence across multiple venues reinforces that these issues matter to constituents. To connect these conversations to broader engagement:

- Share notes with coalition partners
- Track common themes across events
- Identify opportunities for follow-up conversations

KEEP ENGAGEMENT RESPECTFUL AND ISSUES-FOCUSED

Bird dogging in a 501(c)(3) context should center on issue education, lived experience, and thoughtful dialogue. Maintain a respectful tone and avoid framing interactions in ways that could be interpreted as supporting or opposing a candidate. When grounded in shared values and community experience, these conversations can help elevate the needs of infants, toddlers, and families in a constructive way.

Hosting a Policy Roundtable with Candidates or Elected Officials

Private policy roundtables bring leaders, community members, and partners together to discuss how to better support infants, toddlers, and families experiencing homelessness or housing instability. These roundtables are not public events and the media is not invited, which often means they are more intimate conversations that can build relationships and get clarity in a less formal space. When structured well, they strengthen relationships, surface practical insights, and help candidates or campaign staff better understand community realities.

Candidates should be participants in your roundtable, and you should host only one candidate per roundtable. However, you need to invite every candidate who is in the race. This means that, if multiple candidates accept your invitation, policy roundtables should be a tactic you repeat multiple times. Accordingly, consider whether your capacity permits this tactic during the primary or if you should wait until the general election.

WHY CONVENE A ROUNDTABLE

Roundtables create space to demonstrate expertise to the candidate and communicate challenges facing directly impacted people. They can:

- Elevate infant and toddler homelessness in a substantive setting
- Highlight lived experience and frontline expertise
- Help campaigns understand implementation realities
- Lay groundwork for post-election engagement

These conversations can also lay the groundwork for continued engagement during the campaign and into transition and governing. However, a well-run convening is less about presentations and more about listening.

CLARIFY YOUR PURPOSE

Before planning a roundtable, consider what you hope to accomplish. For example:

- Share community experiences tied to infant and toddler homelessness priorities with the candidate
- Learn about the candidate's experience and perspective on the issues
- Identify shared challenges or opportunities
- Generate insights to inform transition planning
- Inform future engagement or transition conversations

Clear objectives should shape the invite list, agenda, and follow-up.

RECRUIT THE RIGHT MIX OF PARTICIPANTS

A strong roundtable reflects different perspectives and roles, but also is small enough to have a true discussion, usually with six to eight participants. Invite cross-sector participants who can connect the dots across systems. Consider inviting:

- Candidate — only one candidate per roundtable (i.e., multiple roundtable events may be necessary based on candidate responses to invitations)
- Parents and caregivers of young children
- Housing and homelessness service providers
- Family support organizations
- Social workers
- Early childhood providers and educators
- Health professionals
- Community leaders
- Business representatives
- Advocates and coalition partners
- Individuals with lived experience

When inviting participants:

- Be clear about the purpose and format.
- Set expectations for participation and tone.
- Explain that because your organization is a section 501(c)(3) nonprofit, event participants cannot indicate support for, or opposition to, any candidate. This is not a forum for debating candidates whose policy views do not align with the organization's.
- Share logistics in advance.
- Encourage concise, experience-based contributions.

FACILITATION GUIDANCE

Strong facilitation determines whether a roundtable produces insight or drifts.

Before the event:

- Select a facilitator who is comfortable guiding discussions and managing time
- Provide the facilitator with talking points to use if any participants deviate from the event's nonpartisan 501(c)(3) rules
- Clarify the desired outcomes

During the discussion:

- Draw out quieter voices
- Prevent any one person from dominating
- Keep comments grounded in real experiences and practical considerations
- Gently redirect if the discussion becomes overly technical or off-topic, or veers into support for/opposition to candidates
- Capture key themes for follow-up

Reminder to prioritize listening over debate if candidates or staff are present.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS INTENTIONALLY

Roundtables are as much about trust as they are about content.

- Allow informal conversation before or after the session
- Make introductions between participants who should connect
- Identify opportunities for continued engagement

CONNECT TO TRANSITION AND NEXT STEPS

With an eye to the future for the candidate (i.e., potential transition into the role as an elected official), document what you hear. Capture:

- Key themes
- Repeated concerns
- Implementation challenges
- Opportunities for collaboration

Use this information to inform briefings, follow-up meetings, or transition outreach.

KEEP THE FOCUS ON ISSUES

Frame the roundtable around policies and community experience — not campaign positioning. Avoid language that signals support for or opposition to any candidate.

IF THE CONVERSATION BECOMES POLITICAL

Conversations can drift toward campaign messaging or partisan debate. Plan ahead so the facilitator is ready to redirect. If the discussion becomes political, the facilitator can:

- Acknowledge the comment and gently redirect to the purpose of the conversation (for example, “That’s helpful context — let’s bring us back to how this connects to the lives of infants, toddlers, and families experiencing housing instability or homelessness.”).
- Reiterate that the goal is to share perspectives and explore solutions, not to debate candidates or campaign positions.
- Refocus on lived experiences, community needs, or specific policy challenges.
- Invite other participants to share their perspectives to broaden the conversation.
- Suggest continuing campaign-specific discussions offline if needed.

Setting expectations at the beginning makes redirection easier, and maintaining a calm, respectful tone helps ensure the discussion remains productive and welcoming to participants across perspectives.

Using Earned Media to Elevate Infant and Toddler Homelessness and Housing Instability: Letters to The Editor and Opinion-Editorials

Letters to The Editor (LTEs) and opinion-editorials (op-eds) are practical tools for making infant and toddler homelessness visible, shaping public understanding, and signaling to candidates and decision-makers that constituents want action to help families stay housed.

This section covers how to write and place LTEs and op-eds, and the appendix includes [templates you can adapt](#).

WHY EARNED MEDIA MATTERS

Earned media helps put infant and toddler homelessness in front of the broader public and campaign teams. It's one way to show that infant and toddler homelessness is not a niche issue — it matters to voters across communities in the upcoming election.

Whenever possible, prioritize local voices when pitching LTEs and op-eds. Media outlets often prefer authors with a direct connection to their audience and to the issue. Even when writing about a statewide issue, it's best to select a spokesperson from the outlet's region. For example, if you are pitching an outlet in Kansas City, an Olathe-based author would typically be more appropriate than someone from St. Louis. A steady drumbeat of local voices can help shape what candidates feel expected to talk about on the campaign trail.

Additionally, keep in mind that LTEs and op-eds work best when they connect policy solutions to real experiences: what families are navigating, what providers see, and what communities need to support strong beginnings for children.

IDENTIFY YOUR GOALS AND AUDIENCE

Before drafting a piece, clarify what you hope to accomplish. Goals may include:

- Elevating infant and toddler homelessness in the public conversation
- Highlighting local challenges or progress (e.g., data, stories, policy discussions)
- Prompting candidates to address what they would do if elected
- Reinforcing shared values and common-sense solutions
- Building a broader understanding of how to reduce infant and toddler homelessness

Then choose the outlet based on who you want to reach (community members, local leaders, editorial boards, campaign staff) and the messenger based on what voice will land most credibly with that audience.

WRITING EFFECTIVE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (LTES)

LTes are short, timely, and often tied to a recent event (a candidate forum, a news story, a policy debate, a new report). Most outlets list word limits (often 150-250 words). Tight and specific beats broad and vague.

A strong LTE usually:

- Hooks or responds to something timely (one sentence)
- States why it matters for infants, toddlers, and families locally (one to two sentences)
- Names a practical priority or solution (one to two sentences)
- Closes with a forward-looking line that keeps the pressure on (one sentence)

In the appendix, you will find [a sample LTE](#) as a guide for how to approach your draft.

WRITING COMPELLING OP-EDS

Op-eds give you more room to tell a story and make the case. Many outlets run 500-750 words, but always follow the outlet's guidance.

A strong op-ed has three essentials:

1. A timely hook (i.e., why this, why now)
2. A credible messenger (i.e., lived experience or other expertise that fits the topic)
3. A clear call to action (i.e., what the reader or leaders should do next)

Effective op-eds often:

- Begin with a compelling story, example, or insight
- Clearly describe the challenge or opportunity
- Connect the issue to the broader community's well-being
- Highlight solutions and pathways forward
- Emphasize shared goals and constructive action

Messenger matters. A parent, provider, business leader, pediatrician, faith leader, or local official may be more persuasive depending on the audience and outlet. Pick the signer who will be most trusted by the readers you want to reach.

In the appendix, you will find [a sample op-ed](#) as a guide for how to approach your draft.

AMPLIFY IMPACT THROUGH COORDINATION

LTEs and op-eds get stronger when partners coordinate. Consider:

- Timing submissions around moments when candidates are paying attention (debates, forums, policy rollouts)
- Elevating different voices across regions and communities
- Sharing published pieces widely through newsletters and social channels
- Using coverage to support other tactics (event questions, meeting asks, briefings)

PITCHING AND SUBMISSION TIPS

Media outlets expect exclusivity, so LTEs and op-eds should be pitched to one outlet at a time rather than mass-sent to multiple outlets in the same market. Work backward from the date by which you hope the piece will publish and give yourself approximately ten business days to allow each outlet up to five business days with the piece before you send it to a new outlet. Send the piece to media outlets in order of preference. Often, your preferences are determined by your audience (e.g., whether a candidate is known to favor a specific media outlet or if one outlet has significantly greater reach than others in the state or city). When submitting an op-ed or LTE:

- Prioritize outlets that actually reach your target audience
- Follow submission rules exactly (format, word count, bio requirements)
- Keep the email short: topic, timeliness, author credibility, and the attached draft
- Make the ask clear (“Please consider for publication”)

If you don’t hear back, a short follow-up is appropriate. Editors are often juggling volume and deadlines.

AFTER PUBLICATION: USE IT!

Earned media is most valuable when it’s part of a steady pattern, not a one-off. Once a piece runs:

- Share it with partners, supporters, and stakeholders
- Amplify through social media and newsletters
- Send to campaign staff when appropriate (“Sharing in case helpful as you shape plans”)
- Track placements and themes so you can build a consistent narrative over time

CONNECTING EARNED MEDIA TO BROADER ENGAGEMENT

LTEs and op-eds can complement other activities such as town hall participation, coalition outreach, candidate briefings, and public education efforts. Together, these strategies help create an environment where infant and toddler homelessness is visible, understood, and considered.

Activating Social Media Around Election-Year Advocacy

Social media is one of the fastest ways to elevate infant and toddler homelessness during a campaign, especially when connected with broader advocacy efforts. Used intentionally, it can increase visibility, mobilize supporters, and reinforce that families with young children are paying attention and engaging in the conversation.

WHY DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Campaigns monitor what people are talking about. A steady stream of credible, values-driven content helps signal that infant and toddler homelessness is visible and matters as a top issue — it's not a niche issue or secondary consideration.

Digital engagement works best when it reinforces real-world activity: town halls, roundtables, meetings, earned media, and coalition moments.

SET CLEAR GOALS BEFORE POSTING

Start with a simple question: what are we trying to move? Your goal might be to:

- Raise awareness of infant and toddler homelessness
- Drive turnout to an event
- Elevate community voices
- Reinforce consistent coalition messaging
- Demonstrate visible community support from your organization and grassroots advocates for specific policy solutions

Clear goals lead to clearer content!

MOBILIZE SUPPORTERS WITH SIMPLE, CONCRETE ACTIONS

Digital engagement is strongest when supporters know exactly what to do. Make participation easy. Provide ready-to-use language, graphics, and hashtags so supporters don't have to start from scratch.

- Share a short story about why supporting infants and toddlers matters
- Post before or after attending a town hall
- Tag all of the candidates when asking a question publicly
- Invite others to learn more or stay engaged

BUILD A SIMPLE DIGITAL TOOLKIT

Share materials ahead of key moments so partners can plan their posts.

A basic toolkit can increase consistency and participation. You could include:

- Three to five key messages in plain language
- Sample posts (short and adaptable)
- Branded or issue-aligned graphics
- Suggested hashtags or tagging guidance
- Upcoming engagement opportunities (e.g., when is it most effective to post?)

In the appendix, you can find [sample social media post language](#) for guidance.

AMPLIFY STRATEGICALLY

Consistent messaging across networks can help reinforce priorities and expand reach. Ensure you are fully leveraging your newsletters and partner communications forums to amplify relevant social media posts. Encourage partners and supporters to:

- Share and repost coalition content
- Add local context or personal perspective
- Tag relevant stakeholders when appropriate
- Link digital posts to real-world actions

CONNECT DIGITAL WORK TO YOUR BROADER PLAN

Social media should reinforce other tactics. Integrating digital strategies with other tactics helps create a cohesive approach. Use social media to:

- Promote events and participation opportunities
- Recap key moments or candidate responses
- Share earned media placements
- Highlight community stories
- Signal next steps

TRACK ENGAGEMENT AND LEARN

Monitoring digital engagement can help organizations understand what resonates and identify opportunities to strengthen outreach. Consider tracking participation, reach, and feedback to inform future efforts.

TRACK AND ADJUST

Monitor what gets engagement and what doesn't. Track:

- Reach and shares
- Comments or questions raised
- Supporter participation
- Campaign responses, if any

Use that information to refine future posts.

KEEP IT ISSUES-FOCUSED

Center posts on policies, community experiences, and shared values. Avoid language that could be interpreted as supporting or opposing a candidate.

Appendix

Timeline Milestones for Candidate and Public Engagement

Campaigns move through distinct phases. Understanding when key decisions, events, and transitions occur allows organizations to engage strategically — not reactively.

Taking time early in the cycle to map important dates helps ensure that infant and toddler homelessness and housing instability are raised when candidates are most receptive and public attention is at its highest.

KEY MOMENTS TO IDENTIFY

- **Filing deadlines and ballot qualification:** Early filing periods are often when campaigns are building policy teams, defining priorities, and identifying stakeholders. These moments can be useful for initial outreach and introductions.
 - When do candidates formally enter the race?
 - When are primary ballots finalized?
- **Primary election dates:** Engagement may differ before and after a primary. After primaries, campaigns often expand their audience and refine messaging for the general electorate. Planning for both phases can help maintain continuity.
 - When is the primary?
 - Is there a runoff?
 - When are results certified?
- **Policy rollouts and platform releases:** Campaigns frequently organize messaging around thematic policy weeks (e.g., education, workforce, health). Aligning early childhood priorities with these moments can help position infant and toddler homelessness as part of broader policy conversations.
 - When do campaigns typically release policy agendas?
 - Are there thematic rollout weeks (education, workforce, health)?
 - When are there local policy or discussion windows related to housing, homelessness, early childhood, health, or family support systems?

- **Major debates and candidate forums:** Debates and forums create natural openings for public questions, media coverage, and increased visibility. These moments can be particularly effective for raising community experiences and priorities.
 - When are televised debates scheduled?
 - Which civic organizations host recurring forums?
 - Are there issue-based forums planned?
- **Editorial board meetings:** Endorsement interviews often involve substantive policy discussions. Providing educational materials in advance can help ensure candidates are prepared to speak thoughtfully about infant and toddler homelessness and housing instability. Similarly, providing relevant resources to the editorial board members can help to ensure they grill candidates on campaign issues and consider infant and toddler homelessness in their endorsement decision.
 - When do major media outlets (e.g., newspapers and online publications) host endorsement interviews?
- **Transition planning period:** Transition engagement often begins quietly before inauguration. Preparing for this window early increases the likelihood of sustained engagement.
 - When is a transition team typically announced?
 - Are advisory committees formed post-election?

WHERE TO FIND THIS INFORMATION

- State, county, or city election websites (Secretary of State or Board of Elections)
- Candidate campaign websites and press releases
- Local news outlets
- Statewide or local civic organizations
- League of Women Voters or similar groups
- Political party websites (for primary structures)
- Coalition partner intelligence

Note that not every election will have the same types of campaign peaks. These are examples of milestones to track and build toward. Creating a shared timeline document early in the cycle helps coalitions coordinate outreach and anticipate opportunities rather than scramble to respond.

Tracking and Metrics for Election-Year Advocacy

Tracking engagement supports learning, strengthens coordination, and helps demonstrate progress over time. It also ensures that activities connect to strategy — rather than becoming isolated events. Metrics should be simple, consistent, and aligned with your chosen pathway.

WHY TRACKING MATTERS

In short, tracking connects day-to-day activity to long-term impact. Tracking supports:

- **Strategic Learning.** It helps you understand which tactics are gaining traction and which may need adjustment.
- **Coalition Coordination.** Shared tracking prevents duplication and ensures partners are building on one another's efforts.
- **Funders and Accountability.** Clear documentation demonstrates thoughtful engagement, progress over time, and responsible use of resources.
- **Year-over-year Improvement.** Capturing lessons learned makes future election cycles more efficient and strategic.
- **Institutional Memory.** Campaign cycles move quickly. Tracking ensures knowledge does not leave when staff or partners transition.

WHAT TO TRACK

- **Engagement activity:** Measures the level of outreach and visibility.
 - Number of candidate meetings or briefings
 - Forums attended
 - Questions asked publicly
 - Roundtables convened
- **Candidate responses:** Indicates issue traction and awareness.
 - Public references to infant and toddler homelessness
 - Infant and toddler homelessness references included on the campaign website
 - Follow-up requests from campaigns
- **Public visibility:** Tracks narrative reach and visibility.
 - LTEs and op-eds published
 - Earned media mentions
 - Social media engagement metrics
 - Coalition amplification efforts

- **Supporter mobilization:** Measures organizational engagement and people power.
 - Partners engaged in specific tactics
 - Turnout numbers at events
 - Story submissions or supporter actions

HOW TO USE TRACKING STRATEGICALLY

Tracking should inform decisions, not simply document activity. Over time, metrics can help organizations:

- Identify which tactics gain traction
- Adjust timing or approach
- Strengthen future engagement
- Demonstrate progress to funders
- Build institutional knowledge for future cycles

Consistency matters more than complexity when tracking. A simple shared tracker (e.g., a Google Sheet or Microsoft Excel spreadsheet) can capture basic information about an action you're tracking:

- Date
- Activity
- Who participated
- What was said
- Follow-up needed
- Outcome

Regularly reviewing this information as a coalition helps maintain alignment and momentum.

CONSIDER THE SCALE

Not every organization will pursue every tactic. Success should be defined relative to capacity and context. For some organizations, success may mean one substantive meeting with a campaign. For others, it may mean coordinated federal, regional, statewide, or local visibility. The goal is disciplined, sustainable engagement — not sheer volume.

Using Earned Media to Elevate Infant and Toddler Homelessness and Housing Instability

Please note that these examples are intended as templates or guides for you to adapt to your preferred messaging and your election's local context. They are not to be copied verbatim, as submitting identical pieces can be considered plagiarism and may harm relationships with editors if they see the same content published elsewhere. Use these materials as inspiration!

TEMPLATE: LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sample Issue: Infant and toddler homelessness and housing instability

Suggested word count: 175-225 words

Submission subject line: LTE Submission: Candidates Must Address Infant and Toddler Homelessness

To The Editor,

When people think about homelessness, they do not usually picture a baby in a motel room, a toddler on someone's couch, or a family moving from place to place. But that is the reality for too many families.

Nationally, nearly [447,000 infants and toddlers experienced homelessness or unstable housing in 2022-2023](#). Here in [STATE/COMMUNITY], families with young children face the same pressures: rising housing costs, limited affordable homes, and supports that are too hard to access.

Families are not failing. They are being pushed into crisis by rising costs and systems that are too hard to navigate. We know what helps families thrive: stable housing, safe shelter, early childhood supports, healthcare, and policies that reach families before housing instability becomes homelessness.

As candidates in [STATE/COMMUNITY] talk about housing, costs, health, and families, voters deserve to hear how they would help expectant parents and families with infants and toddlers stay housed and supported.

Strong families start with a safe place to call home.

[Name]

[Title or background that brings you to this issue, such as "parent of two young children"]

[City]

TEMPLATE: OP-ED

Suggested length: 650-800 words

Submission subject line: Op-Ed Submission: Candidates Talking About Housing Should Talk About Babies, Too

As candidates in [STATE/COMMUNITY] talk about housing costs, family budgets, healthcare, and the cost of living, one group is too often missing from the conversation: infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

That omission matters.

When people think about homelessness, they do not usually picture a baby sleeping in a motel room, a toddler staying on a relative's couch, or a family moving from place to place because there is nowhere stable to go. But for many families with very young children, that is what homelessness looks like.

Nationally, [nearly 447,000 infants and toddlers](#) experienced homelessness or unstable housing in 2022-2023. These are children in the most important years of development, when stability, health, safety, and connection shape what comes next.

Because this crisis is often hidden, it is easy for candidates and policymakers to miss.

A family may not match the public image of homelessness if they are doubled up with relatives, sleeping in a motel or car, or moving between temporary arrangements. But the instability is still real. So are the consequences for parents trying to keep a job, get to a pediatrician appointment, find child care, recover from pregnancy, and keep their children safe.

Families are not failing. They are being pushed into crisis by rising costs, limited affordable homes, and systems that are too hard to navigate.

The numbers make that clear. The lowest-income renters face a shortage of [7.1 million](#) affordable and available rental homes, and only [1 in 4](#) families that qualify for housing assistance receives it.

That means too many families are left trying to solve a systems problem on their own.

This is not only a housing issue. It is also a homelessness response issue, an early childhood issue, a health issue, and a family stability issue. Families with infants and toddlers often have to navigate each of those systems separately — applying for housing support in one place, child care in another, healthcare somewhere else, and emergency help only after a crisis has already deepened.

We know what truly helps: stable housing, safe shelter when families need it, early childhood supports, healthcare, and policies that reach families before housing instability becomes homelessness. And yet, [only 10%](#) of infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness are enrolled in an early childhood development program. That means too many young children are disconnected from supports that could help them during a critical period — and too many parents are left without the coordinated support they need to stabilize their families.

Here are some ways to strengthen your op-ed submission:

- Add a brief personal or local example
- Reference a current policy conversation or community moment
- Connect the issue to shared values like stability, opportunity, and strong communities
- Keep the tone constructive and solutions-oriented

Here in [STATE/COMMUNITY], this should be part of how we talk about [ADD LOCAL HOOK: rising rents / shelter capacity / child care access / family homelessness data / mayoral race / legislative race / county budget / housing debate / candidate forum].

Candidates at every level have a role to play. Federal leaders shape national funding and programs. State leaders can coordinate agencies, budgets, housing investments, Medicaid, maternal and child health, and early childhood systems. Local leaders can influence shelter access, affordable housing, zoning, outreach, data-sharing, and partnerships with community providers.

The tools may differ by office, but the standard should not. Candidates who are serious about housing, health, children, families, and the cost of living should be able to explain how they would help families with infants and toddlers stay housed before the crisis deepens. They should understand how families access safe shelter when they need it. They should recognize the need to connect families experiencing homelessness or housing instability to early childhood supports, healthcare, and other services. And they should be ready to make systems work together so parents are not forced to navigate crises alone.

Election season is when candidates tell voters what they believe deserves attention. Infant and toddler homelessness deserves attention.

Strong families start with a safe place to call home. If candidates are serious about supporting families in [STATE/COMMUNITY], they should be serious about helping expectant parents and families with infants and toddlers stay housed, stable, and supported.

Include a 1-2 sentence biography of the author at the end of your submission. [NAME] is a [POSITION] at [PLACE] and lives in [CITY].

Activating Social Media Around Elections: Sample Social Media Posts

Use these posts as starting points. Add local data, partner tags, event details, or candidate forum information where relevant. Keep posts nonpartisan, values-based, and focused on issues and solutions.

SAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

General Awareness Posts

1. Strong families start with a safe place to call home. This election season, candidates should be talking about how to help families with infants and toddlers stay housed, stable, and supported.
2. Many people do not realize infants and toddlers experience homelessness. Nearly 447k infants and toddlers experienced homelessness or unstable housing in '22-'23. This issue should be part of every serious conversation about housing, families, and community well-being.
3. Only 10% of infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness are enrolled in an early childhood development program. Housing and early childhood systems need to work together so families can get support faster.

Consider including a hashtag for the race you're engaging in! This can often be found in posts shared by journalists who cover the relevant federal, state, or local race.

Candidate Engagement Post

Question for candidates in [STATE/COMMUNITY]: Did you know that there are [NUMBER] infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness in our community? What would you do to help families with infants and toddlers stay housed and supported?

Event Engagement Posts

1. Heading to tonight's town hall to ask how we can better support families with young children. Strong beginnings matter: for kids, parents, and our communities.
2. There were more questions than time at [EVENT]! One issue we hope candidates will address: how they would help families with infants and toddlers avoid homelessness and housing instability before a crisis deepens.

Consider encouraging people to share a relevant photo of themselves when sharing their stories online to help humanize issues.

If sharing photos of storytellers, always seek approval first. Prioritize human-centered, respectful imagery of infants, toddlers, parents, and caregivers; avoid visuals that stereotype families or sensationalize hardship. Where photography feels too sensitive, use graphics that illustrate connection, stability, systems, or homes. [See here](#) for more information on ethical creative in digital spaces.

Story-Focused Post

Families with infants and toddlers are doing everything they can. But too many are being pushed into homelessness and housing instability by rising costs and support systems that are too hard to access. Strong families start with a safe place to call home — and election-year conversations should reflect that.

Supporter Activation Post

If you care about whether families with infants and toddlers can stay safely housed, now is the time to stay engaged. Follow candidate conversations, ask questions, share what you're seeing in your community, and help make infant and toddler homelessness visible.

The early years matter. So do the policies that shape them.

Town Hall Engagement: Sample Questions on Infant and Toddler Homelessness and Housing Instability

SAMPLE QUESTIONS ON INFANT AND TODDLER HOMELESSNESS

Adapt to your election's context and current policy landscape.

- Strong families start with a safe place to call home.
What would you do to help families with infants and toddlers stay housed?
- Many families with young children experience homelessness in ways that are hard to see, like staying in motels, doubling up with friends or relatives, or moving from place to place.
How would you make sure these families are seen and supported?
- The first three years of life are foundational for healthy development. How would you prioritize stable housing and early childhood supports for infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness or housing instability?
- What policies or investments can increase access to early childhood programs?

OFFICE-SPECIFIC ADAPTATIONS

- For a **federal** candidate, ask about federal housing resources, homelessness programs, early childhood funding, healthcare, and supports for families with low incomes.
- For a **state** candidate, ask about state housing investments, shelter access, early childhood systems, Medicaid and maternal and child health connections, state agency coordination, and prevention policies.
- For a **local** candidate, ask about local shelter access, zoning and affordable housing, coordinated entry, family homelessness services, data-sharing, outreach, and partnerships with early childhood and health providers.

Hosting a Policy Roundtable with Candidates or Elected Officials

SAMPLE POLICY ROUNDTABLE RUN OF SHOW

- **Welcome and framing (15 minutes)**
 - Introduce participants
 - Set expectations and goals
 - Short, focused context-setting on what we're here to discuss
- **Moderated discussion (60 minutes)**
 - *Recommendation: Make this truly a discussion rather than stakeholders going around the room one-by-one to share stories. Focus on about five overarching questions, with each one surfacing a challenge facing the different stakeholders present. The goal is to illustrate the problem, what is or isn't working currently, what stakeholders want to see change, and how they would like to see policy approached.*
- **Next steps and closing (15 minutes)**
 - Summarize key takeaways
 - Share opportunities for continued engagement

Bird Dogging: Sample Questions for Candidates

SAMPLE QUESTION APPROACHES

Adapt based on your election's policy and political context and your comfort level.
Keep questions open-ended and solution-oriented.

Sample Question: Public Event Setting

"I'm a [parent / caregiver / provider / neighbor / advocate] and I care about making sure every baby has a safe place to grow. Many families with infants and toddlers experience homelessness in ways that are hard to see, like staying in motels, doubling up, or moving from place to place. What would you do to help families with young children stay housed and supported?"

Sample Question: Informal Setting (i.e., impromptu run-ins at the grocery store, farmer's market, or community center)

"I was alarmed to learn that, in a single year, about half a million U.S. infants and toddlers experienced homelessness or unstable housing. I care deeply about making sure every baby has a safe place to grow up. What do you think [STATE/COMMUNITY] should do to help families with infants and toddlers begin to address this crisis?"

QUESTIONS TO AVOID

- Asking for a yes/no answer
- Asking the candidate to pledge support for a specific bill or proposal
 - For example: Instead of "*Will you commit to funding [PROGRAM]?*" ask "*What policies or investments would you consider to help families with infants and toddlers stay housed and supported?*"
- Suggesting that one answer is the "correct" answer
- Praising or criticizing the candidate
- Comparing candidates to one another
- Implying support for or opposition to a candidate

Customizable Companion Template: A Practical Planning Tool

[This companion template](#) is designed to help organizations translate the toolkit's guidance into a clear, actionable engagement plan. It includes structured sections for defining your goal, identifying targets, selecting strategies and tactics, mapping timelines, assigning roles, tracking metrics, and identifying needed materials. Organizations are encouraged to make a copy and adapt the template to fit their state context and capacity.

Resources

The following resources provide strong information as a starting point when seeking to elevate infant and toddler homelessness in an electoral context.

- [Thrive From the Start Policy Agenda](#)
- [Thrive From the Start Policy Agenda Orientation Guide](#)
- [Thrive From the Start one-pagers and partner resources](#)
- [SchoolHouse Connection: Infant and Toddler Homelessness Across 50 States](#)
- [Harvard University: Center on the Developing Child: Brain Architecture: An ongoing process that begins before birth](#)
- [JAMA Network: Homelessness and Maternal and Infant Health](#)
(McGovern ME, Treglia D, Eliason EL, Spishak-Thomas A, Cantor JC)
- [NCIT Prenatal-to-Three Homelessness Fast Facts](#)