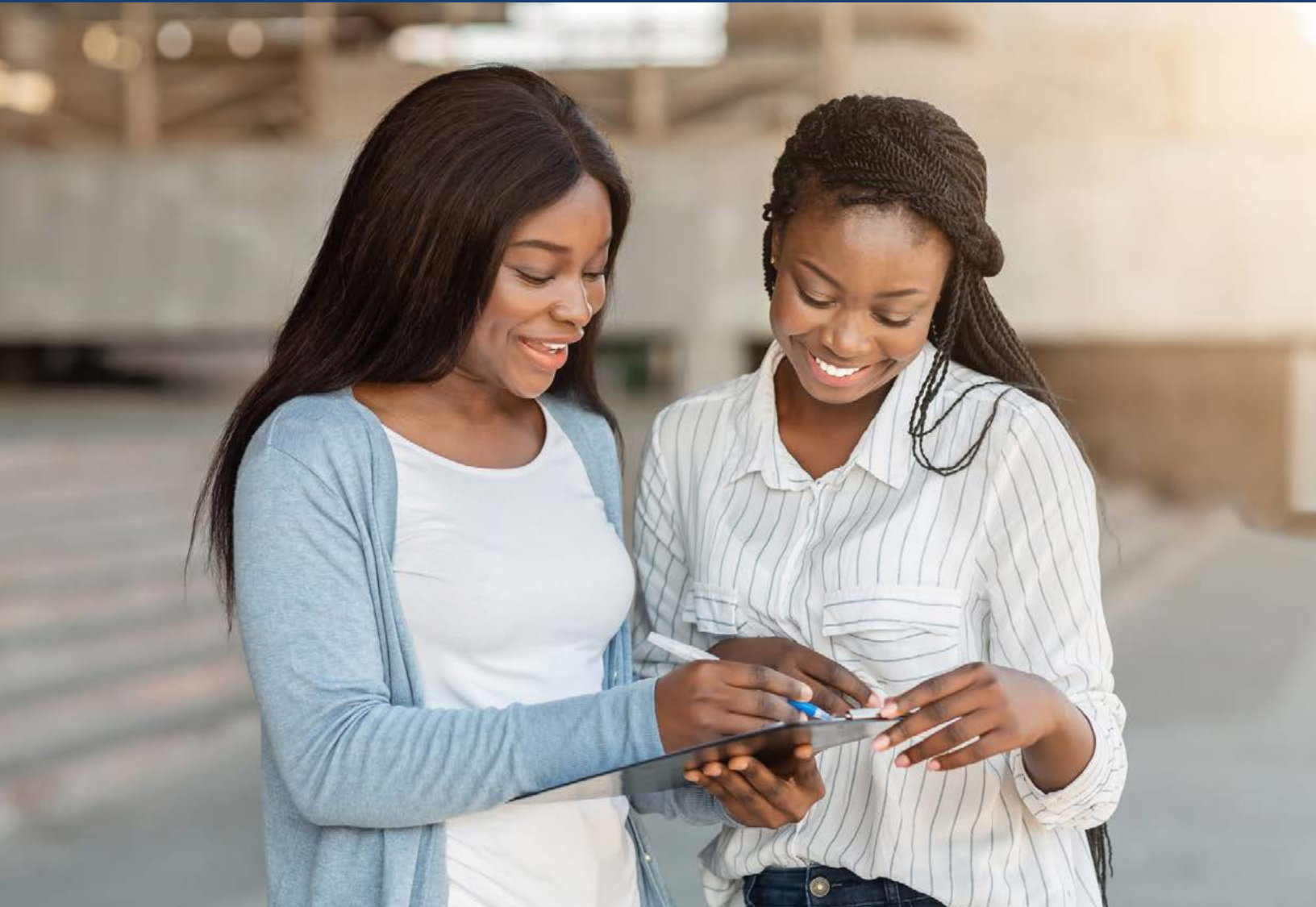


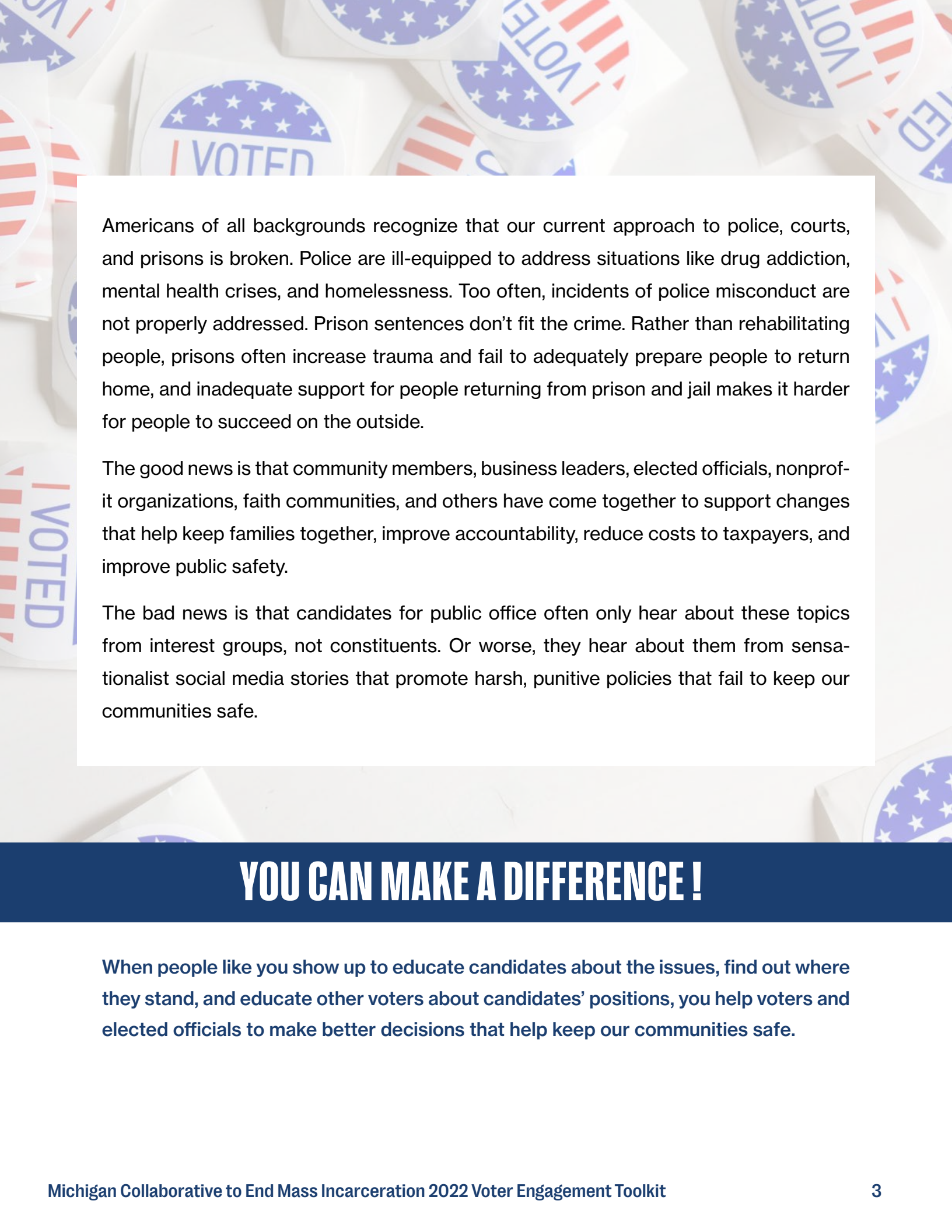
VOTER ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT



Educating Voters and Candidates About Ending Mass Incarceration and Promoting Public Safety

MICHIGAN COLLABORATIVE
MI CEMI
to END MASS INCARCERATION

Why voter engagement?	04
Getting Ready	05
Educating Voters and Candidates	07
Expand the Pool of Voters	11
Staying 501(c)3 Safe	12
Sample Questions	13
Conclusion	15
Appendix: Resources	16



Americans of all backgrounds recognize that our current approach to police, courts, and prisons is broken. Police are ill-equipped to address situations like drug addiction, mental health crises, and homelessness. Too often, incidents of police misconduct are not properly addressed. Prison sentences don't fit the crime. Rather than rehabilitating people, prisons often increase trauma and fail to adequately prepare people to return home, and inadequate support for people returning from prison and jail makes it harder for people to succeed on the outside.

The good news is that community members, business leaders, elected officials, nonprofit organizations, faith communities, and others have come together to support changes that help keep families together, improve accountability, reduce costs to taxpayers, and improve public safety.

The bad news is that candidates for public office often only hear about these topics from interest groups, not constituents. Or worse, they hear about them from sensationalist social media stories that promote harsh, punitive policies that fail to keep our communities safe.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE !

When people like you show up to educate candidates about the issues, find out where they stand, and educate other voters about candidates' positions, you help voters and elected officials to make better decisions that help keep our communities safe.



Why voter engagement?

Help voters make informed decisions

Democratic elections are supposed to lead to a government that represents the view of the voters. This requires that voters understand how candidates stand on the issues, their past voting records, and how they have carried out the duties of previous elected offices or positions held. This is a large lift, and so we run the risk of voters making a decision on more superficial grounds, such as name recognition and campaign slogans.

Shape the narrative around issues

While issues of policing policy, prison spending, and reentry support touch everyone's lives, many voters haven't taken the time to look at the issues, sort out fact from fiction, and understand the issues deeply. Too often instead they rely on Hollywood fictions and internet memes to shape their thinking.

By informing voters about the issues that matter and the policies that promote community safety and racial justice, you not only help them make good choices in the ballot box this year, but you also help to shift the broader narrative about how to keep communities safe, how to promote second chances, and how to make best use of taxpayer dollars.

Educate candidates about the issues, show them support in district

Most elected officials work on and care about a wide variety of issues. They don't have time to research every topic in depth, and often choose what to focus on based on what they hear from their constituents.

When you engage candidates in the election, you can provide them with important information to shape their perspective and show them that people in their district care about these issues.

Getting Ready

Get some friends together

Our culture is full of stories of how one person can make a difference. Here's the secret: usually when that happens, it's because they got other people to work with them. Don't try to go it alone! Find like-minded people to help you. You will share the workload, you'll be more effective, and it will be more fun.

Connect with other organizations

As you pull your team together, consider if there are other organizations in your community you can partner with. Organizations often have name recognition, mailing lists, social media followings, and other resources that help to increase the profile of your efforts.

Organizational partners can help ensure that candidates will participate in your activities. Candidates have a lot of demands on their time, and they have to decide which events to attend and which to skip. A strong roster of trusted organizational partners lets candidates know that this event is worth their time and that they will be treated fairly.

As you consider potential groups to partner with, think beyond just organizations that deal with policing, courts, prisons, and reentry. There may be pro-democracy groups, civil rights organizations, faith-based groups, women's rights

groups, mental health advocacy organizations, and other groups with aligned concerns. Not only does partnering with these groups expand your reach, it also helps you comply with IRS rules that nonprofit voter education covers a broad range of issues (see "[Staying 501\(c\)3 Safe](#)" below).

Know your community

As you plan your voter education, make sure to customize your efforts to your specific community. The approaches that work in Jackson may not work in Escanaba. So, as you use the [sample questions](#) and other resources in this toolkit, please customize them to your community. That might mean finding local stories or statistics. That might mean finding religious leaders from denominations that are active in your community. Or it might mean adjusting how you talk about an issue to respond to community sensitivities. We trust you to know your community and to figure out how best to reach them.

Find out who is running

Most election coverage focuses on big races like the president and governor – but “down-ballot” races can have a greater impact on day-to-day issues like policing practices, over sentencing, and reentry support. Since these races get less attention, you have a greater possibility to impact them and support smart policy changes. Don't ignore those races for local judges, city council,

township board, and county commission. Not sure what the connection is? Check out the “Why Local Races Matter for Ending Mass Incarceration” section of this voter guide.

Here are some resources to help you find out who is running in your area:

What’s on the ballot? This website run by the Michigan Secretary of State will show you a sample ballot for any precinct in the State for the upcoming election.

Vote 411: This website run by the League of Women Voters will not only help you see what’s on your ballot, it will also help you discover upcoming debates in your area.

Ballotpedia has resources showing many races, including listings of contested house and senate races.

Craft good stories and questions

Whether you are talking to a candidate at the farmers market, organizing a candidate forum, or putting together a candidate questionnaire, how well you craft your stories and questions makes a big difference in how the candidate responds. This can be a delicate balance. On the one hand, you want to frame it in a way that the question or story supports smart changes to

current practices instead of giving a platform for a “tough-on-crime” rhetoric. On the other hand, your question should not be so leading that it builds distrust or invites a pandering answer in which the candidate tells you what you want to hear, regardless of their actual position.

Here are a few tips to help you prepare:

Be brief: Campaigns are fast-moving, with candidates, news media, and voters trying to cover a lot of ground. Try to keep your question or story to three to five sentences.

Be personal: If you have a story or personal connection to the issue, use that to make the case for why this is important and why voters and the candidate should care.

Share data: The facts are on our side. The punitive approach to public safety doesn’t work. Find a fact from research to highlight what’s wrong with the current system to set up your question. The [MI-CEMI Founding Resolution](#) cites many statistics and studies to help you out.

Be friendly: It is easy to tune people out. If you come off as hostile, the candidate may assume they have no chance of getting your vote anyway and move on to the next person they think they can connect with.



Educating Voters and Candidates

Who should define the important issues in a campaign for voters and politicians, you or the news media and special interest groups? When you educate voters and candidates about key issues, you take power in the political process.

There are several ways to get involved. Here are a few:

Shape the narrative around issues

One of the easiest ways to support grassroots voter engagement is to show up when candidates are having events and ask them about the issues you care about. As they seek office, candidates will have their own rallies, town hall meetings, and house parties, as well as participating in public debates and meet-and-greet sessions.

All you have to do is find out when these are, show up (maybe with some friends), and be ready to tell your story and ask your question.

Candidate forums

A classic event in American democracy is the candidate forum. Community members or organizations host an event where residents share their concerns with candidates and ask questions of people running for public office.

[Nonprofit Vote](#) has put together an excellent resource on [Hosting a Candidate Forum](#) that walks you through every step of the process. That guidebook, the partners you identified above, and the sample questions we offer below provide you a strong foundation for hosting a forum.

Here are a few additional considerations:

Consider an online event: Traditionally, organizing a candidate forum involved intensive discussions of site logistics: Where will it be? Where will people park? Who will do sound? Will candidates speak from podiums or a table?

After the pandemic, more and more groups are switching to online candidate forums. Not only do they save you a headache on the logistics side, but they are also easy to record and repost so that you can reach a broader audience.

Getting the candidates to participate: One thing to remember about candidates is that they are busy. Between door knocking, fundraising, phone banking, debate prep, and everything else, they have a lot to do before election day. For that reason, candidates will ask, “Is this forum the best way to use my time? Will there be pursuable donors there? Will I be treated fairly?”

Help convince them that your forum is worth their time by working to generate a high turnout and to create a fair forum. One tool to help accomplish both ends is to find other community partners such as congregations, civic groups, [League of Women Voters](#) chapters, or others who can cosponsor the event. Their involvement will increase your credibility, improve turnout, and add additional hands to help make the event a success.

Look for partners: Other local organizations may already be organizing a candidate forum. Consider if the best way to reach voters and candidates is by partnering with an existing effort (and shaping the questions they ask) rather than organizing your own.

Candidate Questionnaires or Voter Guides

Another tool to get candidates thinking about the issues you care about and inform voters about where the candidates stand is a candidate questionnaire. Like a candidate forum, you ask candidates to share their perspectives on various issues. However, instead of having a live event where people discuss the topics, the candidates share written responses that you then share with voters.

Here are a few hints on making a voter guide:

Keep it brief: Candidates are busy. If you ask too many questions or ask them to go into too much detail, it will be hard for them to make the time to create a response. Keep your questions short and focused.

Keep it fair: Give each candidate an equal opportunity to respond. Make sure candidates and the public see your questionnaire as a fair platform.

Keep it legal: If you are partnering with non-profits, there are specific rules to keep in mind about voter guides. The Alliance for Justice has a useful resource on [Candidate Questionnaires and Voter Guides](#) to help you be as effective as you can be while also staying legal.

Spread the word: Make sure you have a plan for publicizing your voter guide once it's complete.

Where can you distribute print versions?

Can you get it in libraries? Businesses? Will congregations include it as a bulletin insert? Can you table at events?

Where can you distribute it online?

Are there local discussion groups on Facebook or NextDoor? Is there a Twitter hashtag that people use in your community or a subreddit? Who are the people with a gift for engaging others online? Can you ask them to share it?

Meetings with candidates or their teams

Sometimes, the best way to influence policy is not a big, public show. Sometimes, the best way to make an impact is a direct meeting with a candidate or elected official (or their team). These direct meetings give you more time to tell your story and educate on the issue. They can also make space for more candid discussion than is possible when there is a microphone or a video camera recording each moment.

Candidate meetings also require a lot less work to pull off. Here's how to make it happen:

Build your team: You can do a candidate meeting on your own or with a few friends, but keep the entourage small. Small numbers encourage candor and ensure that everyone has a chance to participate in the meeting.

Reach out for a visit: Contact the candidate through their website to set up an appointment. Some candidates have regular times for meeting with constituents, others will set something up for you specifically. Sometimes, meetings will take place at their office, other times at a restaurant or coffee shop.

Here's a sample script:

"Hello, I am a resident in [Candidate's] district and I'm very concerned about _____. I would like to meet with [Candidate] to share why this is important to me and others in the community and hear their perspective on the matter. What is the process for setting up a meeting with them?"

Be persistent: It may take several tries to get an appointment, and you may have to try phone and email to get through. Keep at it. No candidate wants the reputation of dismissing constituent concerns

Spread the word: Some candidates, especially for state or federal office, are hard to get on their calendar. Keep trying! As a constituent, they are campaigning to work for you! That said, if you can't meet with the candidate themselves, meeting with a staff person can still be very helpful.

Plan your visit: Depending on the candidate, you will likely get between 10 minutes and an hour for your visit. Even if you're given a full hour, plan to get to the point quickly – sometimes candidates get called away. In your visit, share why this issue is important to you personally and to others in the community. Use a combination of your own story and other facts to make your case.

Follow up: After the meeting thank the candidate for their time and follow up with any materials or information you promised in the meeting.



Engaging on the campaign trail

Throughout the campaign season, candidates will be trying to be visible by hosting coffee hours, meet-and-greets, and showing up at public events to be visible. These are all opportunities for you to let the candidate know what issues are important to you.

Be brief: Often at these events, they are trying to see a lot of people, so you have to be ready to make your point quickly.

Be assertive: Many other people may also be trying to get a word in with the candidate. Be assertive to make sure you get a chance as well— your voice matters, too!

Plan it out: Look on the candidate’s web page and social media to see if they have any campaign appearances scheduled.

Have a team: One way to increase your impact is to plan it out with friends where you each raise a similar point at different events. Just five different people raising an issue in different settings can shift the candidate’s perception from, “no one is talking about this,” to “this is a big issue.”



Expand the Pool of Voters

In addition to educating candidates and the public about what is wrong with our current criminal legal system, you can also ensure that those who know it's harms best are empowered to vote.

In Michigan the [Voting Access for All Coalition \(VAAC\)](#), and [Nation Outside](#) are leading efforts to ensure that all persons in pretrial situations, individuals about to be released from prison, and those formerly incarcerated, along with their families and community members, have the opportunity and knowledge they need to exercise their right to vote in every election.

They do this through:

Jail voter engagement: Many people held in jail have not been convicted of a crime. In Michigan, they are eligible to vote. Sadly, most jurisdictions in Michigan don't support the civic rights of jailed citizens. VAAC, in cooperation with Nation Outside, has created a resource titled, [Ensuring the Right to Vote: How to Expand Voting Access in Michigan Jails](#), and is organizing across the state to ensure that people held in jail pretrial can exercise their constitutional right to vote.

Staying 501(c)3 Safe

Have you ever heard anyone say, “we’re a nonprofit” or “we’re a church, so we can’t get political.”

While it’s true that nonprofits and faith communities cannot support or oppose candidates for public office, there are a broad range of activities they can engage in– including the voter education activities discussed in this guide!

That said, there are some guidelines to follow to stay safe. [Bolder Advocacy](#) has a treasure chest of resources to help you maximize your impact while staying legal. We’re sure you’ll read – and love – their full resources but, to get you started, here are a few points:

Voter education should cover a broad range of issues:

There is not clear guidance about what constitutes a broad range of issues, so it is unclear if the range of sample questions discussed below is broad enough. Consult with an attorney if you are concerned. Or, use this as a motivation to reach out to other organizations in your community such as mental health groups, civic organizations, student groups, environmental organizations, and pro-democracy groups.

Candidates should have equal opportunity to respond:

If you are organizing a candidate forum, that means equal time on the clock. If you are organizing a candidate questionnaire, that means giving them equal space.

Ask about issues, don’t ask for pledges or commitments:

You can ask a candidate for their perspective on a topic, but you can’t ask them to agree with or to promise to support a specific policy. The questions below have been designed with this guidance in mind.

The moderator stays neutral:

The rule for 501(c)3 nonprofits is that they cannot support or oppose candidates, so it’s important that the moderator at an event not show favoritism or approval for a certain candidate.

You can take a position on ballot initiatives:

While 501(c)3 nonprofits cannot support or oppose candidates for public office, they can support or oppose ballot initiatives.

Sample Questions

We want to make this easy for you, so here are some sample questions you can use or adapt for your activity. You can also check out the other [Sample Voter Guides](#) in the appendix for more inspiration.

How to construct a good question: As you plan your questions, think about how to shape the discussion so that you educate both the candidate and other voters about key facts and stories related to the issue.

Here are a couple of hints:

Lead with a fact, a story, and or a value:

Set the context of the discussion by sharing a statistic, a personal story, or a value.

Engage broadly-held beliefs: It is hard to argue about fairness, second chances, or other broadly-felt values. Starting here will help build common ground for your issue. [The Opportunity Agenda](#) has fantastic resources about values-based framing.

Tailor the question to your community and audience: A question that will land well in Ann Arbor is different from one that will land well in Escanaba.



General purpose questions

Lawmakers have passed laws to reduce racial disparities in sentencing. For example, Congress passed legislation to reduce the differences in sentences for crack and powder cocaine. Do you believe more changes are needed? If so, what are those?

The United States holds more people in prison than any other country in the world, even China or Russia. Yet, evidence shows this high incarceration rate has not improved public safety, even as it puts a tremendous drain on taxpayer dollars. What steps would you take to shift our response to be smart on crime rather than tough on crime?

Questions on policing

Alternative response: A growing number of communities throughout the country have created special response units to handle emergencies related to substance use or mental health, rather than relying on the police. Please explain how you would view such an initiative in our community?

Oversight and accountability: Throughout the country, including Michigan, there have been accusations of police mistreatment of nonviolent protesters as well as people suspected of committing crimes. What mechanisms, if any, would you promote to improve oversight and reduce these types of incidents?

Bail: For some people, posting bail or paying fines and fees is not a problem. For others, it is impossible and leads to life-changing consequences such as remaining in jail, losing a job, and losing custody of children. What changes, if any, should be made to create a more fair and just system for people who have not been convicted of a crime?

Questions on sentencing

Second Look: Michigan has some of the longest sentences in the country, despite the fact that there is no evidence that long sentences deter crime. If elected, what would you do to ensure that people who have served decades behind bars could have their sentences reviewed to see if they should go before the parole board?

Young Minds: A growing body of research shows that the brain does not stop developing until someone is in their mid 20s. But, under Michigan law, a mistake before the brain is done developing can lead to life imprisonment. What, if any, reviews do you think should be in place for someone sentenced as an emerging adult to see if they are safe to return to the community?

Questions on prison conditions and programming

Education and training: Quality education and vocational training has been shown as one of the best ways to prevent recidivism. Michigan has the vocational village program, which provides these services for some, but they only reach a fraction of the people in prison. What, if any, changes do you suggest to education and training to prevent recidivism and improve public safety?

Education and training: [Evidence](#) shows that use of solitary confinement exacerbates physical and mental health problems, which also causes increased costs for the prison system. What, if any, changes would you recommend to how MDOC uses solitary confinement?

Reentry services

Our communities are safer when people coming home from prison are set up to succeed with support obtaining a job, housing, and successfully reentering their community. What, if any, changes would you make to how the State of Michigan and our nonprofit community supports people returning home from incarceration?

Conclusion

Research shows that the punitive approach to public safety is at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive. Polls show that voters support smart changes to improve fairness, support second chances, and promote public safety. The personal stories of those harmed by our current approach speak to the urgency of this issue.

You can make a difference by engaging your community and the candidates who wish to serve it. This voter guide gives you the tools. If there are other ways MI-CEMI can support your efforts, please contact us at mail@mi-cemi.org.

Appendix: Other Resources

Why local races matter for ending mass incarceration

Part of what makes the current system of mass incarceration so dangerous is that it affects so many areas of our lives. That means that just about every election on the ballot has some tie-in to mass incarceration. Here are a few to consider:

State House and Senate: People in these positions have tremendous power to make the laws that police enforce, to set the rules for prisons, to fund or not fund schools and housing, and so much more.

City/Township Government (mayor, city council, township board): Local government sets many of the rules for **policing**. How much money goes to the police department? What oversight exists for officers? Will the department prioritize nonviolent crimes like drug possession and prostitution? Local governments also influence **housing and human services policies** such as if zoning will support new housing construction or the allocation of federal human service funds. Local government can also **address reentry barriers**. For example, [Nation Outside](#) has led efforts to pass Fair Chance Housing Policies that expand housing access to formerly incarcerated people in several cities in Michigan.

County Board of Commissioners: Counties in Michigan oversee broad areas of **local social services** that can help prevent incarceration or help people returning from jail or prison reenter successfully. They also **set the budgets for sheriffs' departments**, and therefore they have influence with the sheriff to shape policy related to law enforcement and jail conditions.

Sheriff: Not only do sheriff deputies do road patrol and provide policing services across the county, but they also oversee the jail. As such, it is important that voters hold them accountable not just from a policing standpoint, but also relating to the condition of the jails.

Prosecutor: Prosecutors are gatekeepers to the criminal legal system. They make decisions about who will be charged with crimes and their recommendations carry a lot of weight at sentencing. Prosecutors exercise discretion at each stage of criminal proceedings – from initial charging decisions to the sentences. They also wield significant influence over and can work with legislators, judges, public defenders, law enforcement, and other community stakeholders to advance justice through policy reforms.

Educational Boards (school board, community college, colleges and universities): Sadly, while education is better than incarceration, schools, colleges, and universities often contribute to mass incarceration by having officers in schools, doling out excessive and racially disparate punishments, and sometimes even having their own police forces.

Judges: There are many types of judicial races in Michigan, including the State Supreme Court, appeals court, circuit court, district court, probate court, and others. While most major crimes are tried in the circuit court, it is important to ask judges at every level of the court system how they plan to advance racial equity and avoid excessive punishments.

Sample voter guides

Note: Not all of the voter guides below were designed by 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations. Please review the Staying 501(c)3 safe section for resources to ensure your voter guide is appropriate for your organization.

- [Injustice Watch 2020 Judicial Voter Guide](#)
- [Liberate Don't Incarcerate 2020 Prosecutor Candidate Scorecard](#)
- [ACLU Illinois Chicago Mayoral Candidate Questionnaire](#)
- [ACLU DC At Large Candidate Questionnaire](#)
- [Moms of Black Boys United for Social Change Candidate Questionnaire](#)

Facilitation tips & tricks

New to facilitating? No worries! We have some tips & tricks to help you feel confident in facilitating a community meeting!

State House and Senate: at the start of your meeting, clearly outline the goals of the meeting & review the agenda. Emphasize that the meeting will be most successful when everyone participates. Balance that by mentioning that the agenda is ambitious, though, and we should limit personal narratives to 2 minutes per person.

Pivot: It wouldn't be a community meeting if someone didn't derail the meeting! As a facilitator, your role is to redirect their comments to get the agenda back on track. Using a phrase like "Thanks so much for that comment--that is a very important issue, but for this meeting, we want to stay focused on prosecutors as we know they are such important players in the criminal justice

system.”

Parking Lot: One trick to keep people on track through the meeting is to create a ‘parking lot’. If participants have off-topic thoughts, questions, or ideas, they can write it down on a sticky note & add it to the ‘parking lot’ to be addressed later.

About The Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration

The Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration (MI-CEMI) is a broad-based, statewide, non-partisan collaboration representing non-profit, faith-based, advocacy, grassroots, and service organizations united to end mass incarceration in Michigan. MI-CEMI is dedicated to leveraging individual and organizational power to reduce our prison and jail populations in this state, while also seeking to create and restore safe and healthy communities.

To learn more or to become a members visit www.michigancollaborative.org.