

Virtual Town Hall Toolkit

2022



During the August Congressional recess, many Members of Congress (MOCs) hold local town halls or forums to discuss issues that concern their constituents. These events are important for organizations like Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) to show our policymakers that the people they represent are concerned about human rights issues. This is a critical moment in persuading MOCs to act on the issues we all fight for every day.

This August, plan to attend virtual or tele-townhall* events that your elected officials hold and plan to ask them questions about critical human rights issues. This toolkit provides guidance for attending these remote events as well as suggested questions to ask elected officials and candidates.

**You may choose to attend an in-person town hall. In that case, we ask you to follow relevant CDC guidelines and guidelines provided by the event organizers. Tips on attending an in-person town hall [can be found here](#).*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Virtual Town Hall Tips	3
Town Halls for State and Local Elected Officials	4
Campaign Town Halls Events	4
Human Rights Questions for Elected Officials and Candidates	4
PROTECTING PEOPLE FORCED TO FLEE	5
Immigration detention	5
Access to asylum	5
Refugees	6
Internally displaced people	6
ENDING GUN VIOLENCE	7
Gun violence	7
PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY	8
LGBTI rights	8
Sexual and reproductive rights	8
GUARANTEEING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION, AND ASSEMBLY	9
Human Rights Defenders	9
Political repression	9
RESPECTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL SECURITY	9
Use of lethal force and indefinite detention	9
Arms sales	10
OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR RAISING HUMAN RIGHTS DURING CONGRESSIONAL RECESS AND DURING THE MIDTERM ELECTION SEASON	11
IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN REPRESENTING AMNESTY	11

Virtual Town Hall Tips

Town halls are an opportunity for Amnesty members to raise AIUSA's priority legislative issues with the elected officials that represent them. Our goal at town halls is not to protest. When you attend a town hall as a representative of AIUSA, you are there to convey public concern and to help persuade your MOC to do the right thing. Below are some tips on how to make the most of attending town halls.

Visit townhallproject.com or call the district office of your MOCs to find town hall events in your state or district for your MOCs.

Before the Town Hall

- **Connect.** Reach out to your [AIUSA State Legislative Coordinator](#) (LC). They can offer guidance, answer questions you may have, and connect you with other activists in your area. Not sure who your LC is? Email grassroots@aiusa.org.
- **Register.** You may need to register in advance of the town hall event.
- **Choose a question.** Choose the question that you will ask in advance. Several suggested questions can be found in this toolkit. Preface your question with a short statement about why the issue matters to you.
- **Research.** Where does the MOC stand on our priority legislative issues? Use the MOC's website, or other sites like congress.gov to find out.
- **Consider tech.** Set up your phone or computer in a quiet place and test out your tech.

During the Town Hall: Ask a Question

- **Ask questions.** Instructions for asking questions during the virtual/tele-town hall are usually given at the beginning of the event, so be sure to arrive on time. During tele-town halls you will have the ability to verbally ask questions. During virtual town halls, you may type questions using a chat or Q&A feature.
- **Introduce yourself.** If you ask a question, share your name, where you're from, and that you are a member of Amnesty International USA, an independent, nonpartisan, international human rights organization. Thank the MOC for holding the event. Be courteous and brief in all your interactions.
- **Note who else is in the "room."** Pay attention to other attendees and organizations who ask questions related to human rights. These could be future community partners.

After the Town Hall

- **Let us know you went.** We track AIUSA's grassroots engagement with government officials. Please visit amnestyusa.org/debrief to tell us about your experience and report any answers you received from the elected official or candidate.
- **Write.** Consider writing a blog post or a letter to the editor about your experience at the event.
- **Share.** Share selfies and post about your experience on social media. Use #AmnestyLobby, tag @amnestyusa and MOC.
- **Plan for more!** Attend more virtual/tele-town halls to build your relationship with your elected officials and their office.

Town Halls for State and Local Elected Officials

Human rights issues are relevant at all levels of government. This toolkit also contains human rights questions intended for state and local elected officials.

You can check the social media pages and websites of your state and local elected leaders to figure out when these officials are hosting their own town hall events. However, you can also try calling the offices directly and asking about any upcoming events. [Find contact information for the elected officials that represent you here.](#)

Campaign Town Halls Events

469 seats in the United States Congress are up for election on November 8, 2022. This means candidates and incumbents alike are gearing up for Midterms this November. Keep a look out for campaign town hall events in your state and districts. These events are also listed on townhallproject.com, but you can also call the campaign offices of the candidate and incumbent and ask about upcoming events.

When attending campaign events while representing AIUSA, it's especially important to keep our policy guidelines and 501(c)(3) status in mind, included in this [toolkit here](#).



Human Rights Questions for Elected Officials and Candidates

REMEMBER: ONLY ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS OF CANDIDATES. NEVER ASK CANDIDATES QUESTIONS DESIGNED TO ELICIT A YES/NO ANSWER OR A PLEDGE.

PROTECTING PEOPLE FORCED TO FLEE

Immigration detention

The incarceration of immigrants and asylum-seekers is devastating – not just for the individual but also their family and our communities. The United States immigration detention system itself is cruel, abusive, and disproportionately harms Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. We know that people in or at risk of detention have the community ties and resources to navigate their immigration and asylum cases with their loved ones instead of behind bars.

- What will you do to reduce our country's reliance on immigration detention and to support rebuilding an immigration system rooted in human rights and dignity?

Question for federal elected officials:

- Billions of taxpayer dollars are allocated to ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) every year to fuel immigration detention, surveillance, and border militarization. What will you do to ensure that our taxpayer dollars are spent to invest in our community's needs instead of these inhumane immigration policies?

Question for state/local elected officials:

- Immigration detention has become a lucrative profit-making endeavor: most ICE detention facilities are owned or managed by private prison companies, the largest of which have seen profits soar into the billions of dollars. Corporations are responsible to their stakeholders, not the public, and these privately-run detention facilities have a well-documented record of harsh conditions, negligent care, and lack of accountability. How will you support closures of private detention centers in our state/municipality, and what would you do to prevent any new facilities from opening?

Access to asylum

The human right to seek safety in the United States is obstructed by policies like Title 42 and Migrant Protection Protocols that expel and deport asylum-seekers at the border back to the very countries they had to flee from or to dangerous areas in Mexico where they face the threat of kidnapping, rape, and violence. Title 42 alone has been misused over one million times and continues to turn away and endanger people every day under the pretext of public health, despite objections by the CDC and public health experts.

Question for federal elected officials:

- The administration has a comprehensive, whole of government plan and strategy, including capacity and resources, to ensure an orderly process at the border when lifting Title 42 and Migrant Protection Protocols. Furthermore, advocates across the country and communities at the border are ready to welcome people fleeing violence and conflict. How can Congress protect the right to seek asylum and ensure an end to policies like Title 42?

Question for state/local elected officials:

- The administration has a comprehensive, whole of government plan and strategy, including capacity and resources, to ensure an orderly process at the border when lifting Title 42 and Migrant Protection Protocols. Furthermore, advocates across the country and communities at the border are ready to welcome people fleeing violence and conflict. As a leader, how do you plan to welcome immigrants and asylum seekers into this community and push back against hateful and xenophobic policies like Title 42?

Refugees

Currently, there are 100 million people in the world displaced by violence, war, and conflict – the highest levels of forced displacement on record, and among them, 2 million need urgent access to resettlement this year. But governments around the globe are failing them, including the United States’, which committed to welcome 125,000 refugees in 2022 but has currently resettled the lowest number of people in the history of the U.S. refugee program.

- What role should U.S. refugee admissions play in our response to the global refugee crisis?
- Refugees bring immense value to our communities: they invigorate our economies, bring innovation to our towns, and make our public and cultural institutions richer. Refugees are business owners, students, dedicated employees, customers, elected officials, and community leaders. How do you plan to welcome refugees to our community, and what will you do to ensure the administration establishes a robust, responsive resettlement program?

Internally displaced people

53 million people were forcibly displaced within their home countries at the end of 2020. Africa has been hardest hit by this phenomenon: a combination of conflict, violence, and natural disasters (including drought and floods) has spurred displacement in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya, as well as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan. In the Middle East, armed conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen has impelled growing levels of internal flight.

- What kinds of support should the U.S. provide to countries and regions experiencing record levels of internal displacement induced by causes including the climate crisis and armed conflict?

ENDING GUN VIOLENCE

Gun violence

The U.S. has both the highest absolute and highest per capita rates of gun ownership in the world, and guns are easily accessible by those likely to misuse them. In 2017, gun violence killed an average of 109 people each day. Gun violence is the second leading cause of death among children, and firearm deaths disproportionately affect Black and Latino communities.

- What policies should the U.S. implement to reduce and prevent gun violence?
- Firearm injury is the leading cause of death for children and teens (0-19) in the United States and children who live in a home with a gun are at 2X the risk of homicide and 3X the risk of suicide. What policies should the U.S. implement to reduce and prevent gun violence, especially for teens and children?
- How will you support community organizations that have a track record of improving conditions that reduce gun violence?

Questions for state/local elected officials:

- How can you support local community violence intervention programs?
- What is your plan to expand gun violence prevention work?
- How will you support community organizations that have a track record of improving conditions that reduce gun violence?



PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

LGBTI rights

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people face violence, discrimination, and inequality. Despite President Biden’s commitment to expanding LGBTI rights, state legislatures have introduced a record 300 anti-LGBTI bills this year. The discriminatory bills propose restricted access to things such as sports teams, bathrooms, and gender-affirming care. Abroad, from the Malaysian government’s draconian laws permitting caning for same-sex acts, to the Russian government’s complicity in the face of a homophobic crackdown in Chechnya, to the life sentences under proposed Ugandan law for the “crime” of being gay, LGBTI individuals are under attack.

- How should the U.S. protect LGBTI rights at home and abroad?

Questions for state elected officials:

- How will you advance equal marriage rights for all Americans regardless of the gender identity of the two people getting married?
- How will you protect gender-affirming health care for transgender people, including minors?
- How will you expand protections for LGBTI people?
- How do you plan to address the high rate of mental health problems among LGBTI teenagers?

Questions for local elected officials:

- How do you plan to respond to the influx of “Don’t Say Gay” bills which prohibit discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in classrooms?
- What is your plan to eliminate discrimination against transgender and non-binary students in schools?



Sexual and reproductive rights

Recent years have seen a regression in U.S. commitment to sexual and reproductive rights. The Supreme Court ended abortion protections in its reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, leaving states to regulate abortion rights. This was preceded by an enormous uptick in anti-abortion legislation, ranging from medically unnecessary requirements to the criminalization of health care providers. The United States' maternal mortality rate continues to increase, with disturbing disparities by race and ethnicity. The coming months will introduce more geographic inequities as states introduce more extreme restrictions on sexual and reproductive rights.

- How should the U.S. ensure that our foreign and domestic policies protect sexual and reproductive rights?

Question for state/local elected officials:

- Abortion is essential, lifesaving healthcare for millions of Americans. How will you protect abortion rights in our state?
 - How do you plan to protect individuals who may enter our state seeking abortions from other states where abortion is criminalized?
 - What policies will you enact to combat the rising maternal mortality rate, especially for Black mothers?
 - How will you protect the right to contraception in our city/state?
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GUARANTEEING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION, AND ASSEMBLY

Human Rights Defenders

Around the world, governments are targeting human rights defenders who are fighting for human rights. In 2021 alone, 358 human rights defenders were killed in 35 countries because of their work. Human rights defenders are regularly subject to death threats, intimidation, smear campaigns, arbitrary detention, judicial harassment, illegal digital surveillance, hate crimes, sexual and gender-based violence, torture, forced exile, enforced disappearances, and assassination.

- How should the U.S. address the targeting, harassment, and killing of human rights defenders around the world?

Political repression

Across the world, authoritarian leaders seeking to retain power are repressing political dissent and quashing the right to free expression of political opinion. These forms of repression include deadly crackdowns on protesters in countries including Colombia and Sudan, widespread censorship in China, the shuttering of civil society organizations in Turkey, and mass arrest in Russia and Tunisia.

- How should the U.S. respond to the increasing use of political repression by authoritarian governments?

RESPECTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

Use of lethal force and indefinite detention

In the name of national security, the U.S. has engaged in torture and indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay. It has also killed a quarter of a million civilians abroad since 9/11 and has increased its use of lethal force against civilians in multiple countries, including Somalia. Yet no one has been held accountable for these acts, and the U.S. government has taken numerous steps to forestall a possible International Criminal Court investigation into alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes, including attacks on civilians, committed during the war in Afghanistan.

- The U.S. has been imprisoning Muslim men indefinitely without charge or trial for two decades in an offshore prison in Cuba. Yet Congress every year has restricted the government's ability to transfer any of those detainees to the United States, even for trial or medical treatment. It has also placed multiple burdens on transferring detainees to other countries. What can you do to ensure that the Biden administration can finally close the Guantanamo Bay detention center and end the unconscionable practice of indefinite detention once and for all?
- The U.S. government has been fighting a global "war on terror" for the last twenty years, primarily by targeting suspected members of many different armed groups abroad with lethal force. The U.S. has killed thousands of civilians in the process. What will you do to create more accountability in how the U.S. uses lethal force and responds to civilian casualties?

Arms sales

In 2019, the United States announced it would revoke its signature of the Arms Trade Treaty, a landmark instrument that ensures arms transfers are not used to fuel conflicts, atrocities, and abuses. Two of the United States' largest weapons importers are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have used weapons to commit human rights violations and war crimes against Yemeni children and civilians and to blockade ports of entry to restrict aid from entering Yemen, thereby placing 11 million Yemenis at risk of famine. Nonetheless, the U.S. continues to build the military capacity of the Saudi-Emirati coalition, making the U.S. complicit in creating the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

- What can Congress do to ensure U.S. arms are not used to perpetuate human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law?
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OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR RAISING HUMAN RIGHTS DURING CONGRESSIONAL RECESS AND THE MIDTERM ELECTION SEASON



Engage the media by writing letters to the editor of your local news publications, or submit an article to your community paper (including school papers and newsletters), using a recent news hook to draw attention to the human rights questions you want to focus on. [Use this guide](#) to take action.

Utilize social media to send your questions directly to MOCs or other elected officials via their website, Facebook, or Twitter page. Organize a Twitterstorm by using an original hashtag and engage people to use this hashtag to spike activity around a specific question that is being asked of the candidate. Guidelines for social media can be found [here](#).

Organize a Town Hall on campus or in your community. Invite candidates to attend and provide them with the opportunity to discuss some of the major human rights concerns that have been identified by Amnesty. **Be sure to invite all candidates to reflect Amnesty's non-partisan nature.** Invite a student or faculty leader, or a local celebrity (who you can confirm will handle it impartially) to moderate.

Classroom discussions provide space for learning, discussion, and reflection. The goal is to get people involved and heighten self-awareness around the Midterm Elections. As an Amnesty student group, you could serve as a non-partisan moderator and invite your school political affiliation groups to an "Human Rights 2022 Town Hall Forum" and through this simulation you can ask groups to come prepared to represent how their party's candidate would respond to human rights concerns that are asked of them.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN REPRESENTING AMNESTY

Amnesty International is a non-partisan human rights organization that neither supports nor opposes any political party, candidate, government, or political ideology. As a matter of organization-wide policy, Amnesty International does not seek to influence elections.

Because Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) is classified as a “public charity” -- 501(c)(3) -- by the Internal Revenue Service, there are restrictions on the organization’s activities in relation to elections and partisan political activities. A 501(c)(3) may encourage civic participation and educate the public and candidates about its issues but may not directly or indirectly tell people who to vote for and/or who to oppose or support.

Here are some guidelines to help you navigate these restrictions and carry out your Amnesty work.

- **Do not oppose or support candidates while acting in AIUSA’s name.** This includes both explicit and implicit opposition or endorsement of candidates. If someone can potentially infer from your message, post, tweet, graphic, etc. that you support or oppose a candidate, this is problematic and harmful to our organization, as it violates our non-profit legal status in the United States. When representing Amnesty International, you cannot attack or approve of candidates’ positions.
- **Emphasize AIUSA’s impartiality.** For 61 years, Amnesty International has worked to protect human rights in countries around the world in a nonpartisan way. When engaging with candidates or the public, be sure to clarify that AIUSA is a nonpartisan organization that does not support or oppose any political candidate or party.
- **Clarify our nonpartisan approach.** Use this disclaimer on any Amnesty International materials distributed in the context of elections: “Amnesty International USA is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3), international human rights organization registered in New York. AIUSA neither supports nor opposes any political party or any candidate for public office. Amnesty International does not seek to influence elections.”
- **Keep your personal political views separate from opinions or statements made in your official AIUSA capacity.** If you maintain an account on social media that identifies you as a representative of Amnesty International, that account should reflect the positions of the organization and should not contain partisan or election-related information. If you wish to represent AIUSA on social media, then you should have a dedicated Amnesty-affiliated account that is distinct from your personal account. You should not post, tweet, retweet, or share anything through your AIUSA account that suggests the organization endorses or opposes candidates for public office. You are free to engage in political activities in your personal capacity, as long as these actions do not give the impression that they represent the organization’s views, and as long as you do not use AIUSA resources to do so (e.g., an AIUSA computer, laptop, mobile device or phone, printer or from an AIUSA office). When attending AIUSA events, do not wear partisan political items that support or oppose candidates currently running for office. For example, if a staff member/volunteer acting in their organizational capacity is attending an AIUSA rally or briefing, they should not wear buttons, t-shirts, hats, or other items that demonstrate their support for a particular political party or candidate.
- **Do not use your AIUSA-branded social media pages to support or oppose a candidate, and do not act in the name of Amnesty in support of or opposition to candidates (i.e., campaigning, volunteering, partisan voter registration, etc.).** You are free, of course, to support a candidate or political party in your private capacity as an individual, but do not wear AIUSA branded identifiers while you volunteer for a candidate or

engage in other partisan political activities. You should make it clear that you are speaking/acting in your personal capacity and not for the organization when participating in partisan activities outside of your Amnesty work.

- **All candidates in an election must be treated equally by a 501(c)(3) organization.** What you do for one candidate, you must do for all. We pose our questions to candidates of all political parties (and we do not evaluate, edit, or comment on candidates' responses.) If we wish to invite a candidate to a public forum, we must invite all participating candidates in a specific election.
- **Maintain a wide scope of issues.** AIUSA is not a single-issue organization, and we have an interest in hearing candidates' views on a wide range of human rights issues. Spotlighting one issue or a narrow range of issues that distinguish candidates may be perceived as a partisan litmus test of support or opposition.
- **Do not seek pledges from candidates.** Regulations prohibit public charities, like Amnesty International, from asking candidates to promise to support a particular issue if elected. In other words, do not ask questions that can only be answered with yes/no or questions that imply a correct answer. Instead, ask open-ended questions that give candidates the ability to explain their position on an issue.
- **Ask, but do not debate.** Town halls and debates are a good opportunity to highlight the issues we care about. We can ask candidates at an open forum what their views are on a particular human rights issue, but do not comment on their response or seek to debate with them in your AIUSA capacity. Opposing or supporting a candidate's answers could be seen as intervening in an election.
- **Err on the side of caution.** If you draft a letter to the editor regarding a candidate's positions, endorse a candidate, post criticism or approval of a candidate via social media, attend a candidate event/fundraiser, or otherwise engage in partisan political activity during an election, it should be clear that you are doing so in your personal capacity, not as a representative of AIUSA. This policy applies to members, volunteers, interns, staff, and board members. Any bio, byline or identifying information should not include your role/capacity at AIUSA. High-profile, senior level staff and/or board members who may not be seen separately from their roles at Amnesty should refrain from partisan political activity that could be attributed to AIUSA.