

Congressional District Action Team Organizers Toolkit #1

- Introductions to EAA
- First Steps to Build a CDAT
- Mobilization Meeting
- National Week of Initiative
- Needs/Assets Inventory

A guide for leaders all across the country
to build a national grassroots network
to demand equality.

"When the iron hand of this era eventually ends, I want to be standing on the right side of progress. The side of truth, the side of compassion and equality. I want to say YES! I was there. I was present among the dissenting. Standing in the unrelenting turn of a time when every family united by love was covered under the law."

-Poet Staceyann Chin

EQUALITY★ACROSS★AMERICA

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★EQUALITYACROSSAMERICA.ORG★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

Dear Friends,

Where were you on October 10-11, 2009? That was the weekend of the National Equality March, when we gathered and marched on Washington with one single demand: Equal protection for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in all matters governed by civil law in all 50 states. Now.

Our first march on Washington was on the same weekend 30 years earlier, in 1979. A lot has happened in 30 years.

Hard work over the last generation has brought us a handful of rights and protections in a handful of states. In some states, we're protected from discrimination in the workplace. We can marry in a few places and obtain domestic partnerships or civil unions in a few others. But no matter where you live, if you are a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person, you are a second-class citizen.

When Prop 8 passed in California, our community learned a painful but important lesson: any rights we achieve at the local or state level are imperfect and impermanent. They're imperfect because the most important rights can only be granted by the federal government. They're impermanent because they can be taken away from us.

Despite our second-class status in this country, we know that we are equals in every way: Equal in our ability to form and sustain loving relationships. Equal in our ability to raise and care for children. Equal in our ability to work jobs and contribute to society. And equal in our ability to participate in democracy and build a better world—a world of peace and social justice for all people.

This is the dawn of a new day. We have a Democratic majority in the House and the Senate. We have a President who acknowledges and respects our community and who has committed to be a fierce advocate for equality. That means that we have work to do! We have to hold them accountable and keep the pressure high.

The National Equality March was a first step to build a national grassroots network to do the hard work of demanding equality and holding our government accountable. Now we need a whole generation of leaders who, like our friend Harvey Milk before us, will tear down walls and boundaries in every community across this country.

The following pages are a guide for these new leaders. These are the first steps to build the national network that will finish the job once and for all.

Onward,
Equality Across America

I. Let's Start with the Basics

What is Equality Across America, and what does it mean to be a member?

Equality Across America (EAA) is a grassroots network of organizers in all 435 Congressional Districts working together to demand full federal equality for LGBT people. We were the folks who organized the National Equality March, and we stuck together because there's still work to do.

If you are already working with a group who does this, that's great! We don't want chapters, so you don't have to call yourselves "Equality Across America." The benefit of this network is the strategy we'll share and the community we'll build along the way.

Is there a secret handshake? Do you need to stop eating meat or buying synthetic fabrics? How much does it cost? Did you have to be at the National Equality March to qualify?

Nope! It's much simpler than that:

If you believe in full federal equality for LGBT people and you're ready to do something about it, you are a member of Equality Across America.

That's it!

Some EAA members are famous activists like Cleve Jones, and some are people like Tommy Simmons, a rockstar organizer in West Tennessee who works throughout the Mid South. Some of us already belong to local grassroots organizations like One Struggle One Fight, and some of us have never thought of ourselves as "activists" before. We are united by commitment and action, beginning with the National Equality March and continuing until we are fully equal under the law.

What is a Congressional District Action Team?

Congressional District Action Teams (CDATs) are a group of people who live close to each other and organize together as part of the Equality Across America network. In fact, CDATs *are* the network! Some CDATs are chapters of other organizations, like Join the Impact. Others are just a small band of friends who are new to this, but committed to working together.

What is the Congressional District Strategy about?

If we're going to win – and win *big* – we need people building this movement from the ground up in communities all across the country. We need to act locally and think federally – that is to say, we need to engage democracy not just in Washington once a year, but back at home on a daily basis. We don't just mean in urban centers like New York, DC, and San Francisco. We mean in small, rural towns from East Tennessee to Alaska, Idaho to Mississippi.

Just like belly buttons and opinions, every one living in the US has a Congressional District. The size of Congressional Districts varies, but the regions are based on population. Each Congressional District has one Representative in the US House of Representatives.

There is, of course, one notable exception to this generalization. In an astounding twist of irony, Washington, DC has no federal representation. But there is some AMAZING organizing happening in DC for equality, and DC organizers are integral to our movement.

Engaging our US Representatives will be an important part of achieving full federal equality. We'll also have to engage the rest of the federal government – the Senate, the White House, and the Supreme Court – but Congressional Districts are a convenient way to divide and conquer the work we have ahead of us. Some states like California have LOTS of Congressional Districts, while others like Wyoming have only one. It's fine if you work with folks who live in a nearby Congressional District. The point is just that you should be working with people who live close by, who all understand what it's like to live where you do. After all...you don't want someone in DC or San Francisco telling you how to do things in your community, right?!

Who can be a part of these CDATs?

Anyone can join or start a CDAT! A CDAT can start out as one committed person, and grow from there. A good number for a new CDAT could be anywhere from 5-25 people. You can be *any* level of experience from zero to hero and you can volunteer in any number of ways. We're all here to help and learn from each other, and we *all* have a lot to contribute!

The benchmark for success as a CDAT is not how many people are involved, but what you do!

EQUALITY★ACROSS★AMERICA

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★EQUALITYACROSSAMERICA.ORG★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

So...what do these CDATs do?

CDATs are organized around three principles:

1. **Full Federal Equality**

We have one single demand: Equal protection for LGBT people in all matters governed by civil law in all 50 states. We will accept no compromises, and no fractions of equality.

2. **Action**

Actions speak louder than words. CDATs should do more than meet – they should be present in their communities, having conversations, taking actions, changing hearts and minds, building coalitions, and demanding equality from our elected leadership.

3. **Nonviolence**

We may be fighting for our rights, but we're committed to nonviolence! Our movement is situated in a long history of the struggle for social and economic justice. In recent history, the liberation movements of Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., provide amazing examples of the power of nonviolence in making change. Already our movement has embraced many of the tactics of nonviolent resistance, including civil disobedience. We believe the time for coordinated national civil disobedience may be close at hand, and we recommend you visit our friends at Soulforce (<http://soulforce.org>) and the Ruckus Society (<http://ruckus.org>) to learn more.

Based on these three principles, CDATs are empowered to immediately begin the work that will bring us our full federal equality. The first steps will be **CDAT Mobilization Meetings** and our **National Week of Initiative, November 1st-8th**.

II. How do I join or start a CDAT?

Step 1 | Find out which Congressional District you live in.

We've set up a simple online tool you can use to find which district you live in. Check it out here: <http://equalitycrossamerica.org/lookup>

EQUALITY★ACROSS★AMERICA

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★EQUALITYACROSSAMERICA.ORG★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

Step 2 | Connect with other people in your Congressional District.

Whether you're in a city with a big community of LGBT people and allies, or you're the only one as far as the eye can see, the key to a successful CDAT is the T, for "team"! (Here at Equality Across America, we're *all about* the T...the *Transgender* in LGBT and the *Team* in CDAT! We're all in this together.)

Check out the map on the homepage of our website, <http://equalitycrossamerica.org>. Sign up and see if there's already a dot on the map in your area. If there is, get in touch with the organizer listed there. If not, start reaching out to the people you know...and some people you don't!

Start with your friends and family. Use your personal story to explain why EAA is important, and why they should join you. Then reach out to other LGBT folks in your community – use Facebook, social centers, bulletin boards, campus resources, bars, clubs, etc.

Be creative and reach out in other ways too. Connect with potential allies. As a minority, and as a group who is targeted with violence and discrimination, we have some natural friends and allies. Reach out to groups who are organizing for other movements in your area – racial justice, anti-poverty, immigrants rights, labor unions, etc.

Building coalitions is probably the most important thing you can do with your CDAT. In order to win, we have to cross boundaries and tear down walls. It's a very effective way to change hearts and minds. Remember that we're just one piece of a much bigger movement for peace and for social justice. We all have more power when we stand for and with each other.

After all this, what if you're still the only person in your district who seems to care?

Look to see who's in neighboring districts with you. While you continue to work on building coalitions you can connect with others facing similar issues.

If you need someone to talk to about all this, contact us! You can email us at organize@equalitycrossamerica.org. No one has all the answers, but we're in this together. As volunteers we're here to listen and to help you generate ideas.

Step 3 | Participate in the National Week of Initiative, November 1st-8th & Hold a CDAT Mobilization Meeting

The **National Week of Initiative, November 1st-8th**, is a call to all of the members of EAA to begin the real work of coalition building and action. We are calling on all CDATs from all 435 districts to take initiative within their communities.

The **CDAT Mobilization Meeting** is your first chance to bring people together to talk about what full federal equality means, and to plan for future actions. You can hold your **CDAT Mobilization Meeting** on or before the 1st -8th of November, and it can be your group's event for the **Week of Initiative** or the kick off meeting to plan a different event for that week.

Once you have a few folks who are interested, you're ready to hold a Mobilization Meeting. It's a place to do three things:

- Inspire each other.
- Generate ideas.
- Make real commitments to each other.

At this meeting, you should talk about what brings you together, and take the time to hear from everyone. Why are you involved? Were you at the National Equality March? What did you think about it? What kinds of things do you want to do together? What kind of support do you need?

Outreach

Ask everyone who's coming to try to bring a friend. If you and your friends use Facebook, post the event online and invite more people to attend. Leave some fliers for the meeting at local cafes, resource centers, and other public areas. If there are any progressive student groups or churches in your area, show up at their meetings and invite people to attend.

Running the Meeting

Running the meeting is really up to you. Make sure that you or someone at the meeting is comfortable facilitating. The facilitator is responsible to keep the conversation moving, to make sure all the agenda items get discussed, and to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak up. Oh...and it's a good idea to bring some snacks to share!

Sample Agenda

1. **Introductions and Check-ins**

Everyone introduces themselves, explains why they're involved, and states what they hope to get out of the meeting.

2. **Watch Video from Equality Across America**

Shortly after the march, we will prepare a short video that you can watch together at the meeting. We'll upload the video on this page when it's ready:

<http://equalityacrossamerica.org/organize>

3. **Discuss Possible Actions for the Week of Initiative and Beyond**

At strategic moments, we may do national days of action, such as grassroots lobbying or rallies and protests. But what do you want to do together until there is a national day of action? Here are some possible ideas, and we will publish resources and guides on how to do each of these things in the near future:

- **Write a letter to your Representative and your Senator.** You can do this through our website at <http://equalityacrossamerica.org/organize>.
- **Write a letter to the Editor of your local paper.** You can find a tool to do this on the same webpage above. Letter writing is a simple activity, but it let's our elected officials and community members know that people care, and it makes people think about our issues who might not think about them otherwise.
- **Meet in-person with your Senator and Representative.** Grassroots lobbying is a great way to build a relationship with your elected officials and to let them know where you stand on equal protection.
- **Hold a rally, a march, or a speak out.** These actions are fun. They're a great way to express your anger, to gain visibility, to empower others, and to build community.
- **Organize a teach-in or workshop.** A teach-in is a way to bring people together to teach each other about our history, or about skills that will help us all out. You can hold a teach-in about the history of nonviolence, about grassroots lobbying, about specific bills that are important, or about anything else!

4. **Begin Planning**

If you agree on something that you'd like to do together, start planning it. Encourage everyone to take on responsibilities and make commitments about what they will do. Decide when you'll get back together to meet, report back, and figure out next steps.

5. **Discuss Needs and Assets**

What do you have going for you as a group? What kinds of skills, relationships, ideas, and networks do you have? Also, what is missing? What do you need to do this work?

We have prepared a questionnaire to help you think through these things. Discuss these questions, and please fill out the questionnaire online. You can find this questionnaire at <http://equalitycrossamerica.org/organize>.

III. Needs and Assets Inventory

This needs assessment is the first step in developing your unique local strategy. Consider this a tool — move forward immediately to act on your strengths and develop your weaknesses.

These will create a national assessment that will be used to determine what kind of support we can provide to you as local and national leaders in this movement.

Here is a questionnaire to help you start thinking through what you have and what you need. Please discuss these questions at your Mobilization Meeting, and report back to us online at <http://equalitycrossamerica.org/questionnaire>.

How many people attended your first meeting?

On a scale of 1 (low) - 5 (high), how would you gauge the interest of building an action team in your Congressional District?

Are the people in your group connected to other organizations working for LGBT equality? What are some of those organizations?

Are the people in your group connected to other organizations working on other social and economic justice issues? What are some of those organizations?

Which of the following issue areas or communities are people in your group

EQUALITY★ACROSS★AMERICA

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★EQUALITYACROSSAMERICA.ORG★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

connected with? Labor, Faith, Immigration, Global Peace, Veterans Advocacy, Prison Reform, People of Color Organizations

Does your local network contain people of the following groups:

People of Color, People of Faith, Transgender People, Youth

Which of the following activities is your group interested in?

Letter writing, Canvassing (phone banking or door knocking), Grassroots Lobbying, Marches/Rallies/Protests, Civil Disobedience, Social Events (art shows, film screenings, nights out, etc.), Community Service

Which of the following skills do people in your group have?

Media and Communications, Event Organizing, Coalition Building, Fundraising, Web/Technology, Social Networking, Graphic Design

What kinds of support would help you?

Regional Conference Calls, Training Calls and Webinars, Regional Gatherings

What other kinds of support would be useful for you?

What is missing? What else would you like to share with us? Please share your thoughts and ideas, questions and comments.

IV. Moving Forward

This movement is made up of organizers, activists, leaders, and dedicated folks from around in the country—in a word, us. We are the movement. And the movement waits for no one.

As a local organizer, as an activist, as a person dedicated to the equality of all LGBT people, you are empowered to take action immediately.

We know this story will end with full federal equality in all matters governed by civil law. This is a radical new direction for the movement and it will take all of us working together to develop a strategy to reach this end.

As free and equal people we are embarking on a journey for full equality. We will accept no compromises. This is only the beginning...