

**From:** Margarida Jorge      **To:** HCAN Field Partners  
**RE:** HCAN—Responding to Right-Wing Attacks in the Field - August 4, 2009

Since early February, we've seen increasing numbers of militant right-wing activists attending public meetings across the country targeting Members of Congress and President Obama. Now in the August recess, the "tea-bagger" protesters and right-wing activists are showing up in larger numbers with a mission to be as disruptive as possible in the hopes of rattling Members of Congress and halting health care reform through pure spectacle and obstruction.

**Our response is shaped by 3 things:**

- ***Our targets are Members of Congress who must vote "yes" for this bill. Our targets are not the right-wing extremists.*** *The targets of these attacks are Members of Congress. Those Members are also our targets. We need to use these attacks as opportunities to work with the Members in ways that build our relationship in the field and bring us together as allies in health care reform. Members may be more receptive to partnering with us if they know we will help them combat the opposition.*
- ***Our core message is effective, and we should always come back to it.*** *Our campaign plan has always anticipated opposition. No matter what the right-wingers bring up to distract the debate, we should always circle back to our key message. We are on the side of quality, affordable health care for everyone, and we are against turning over health care reform to the insurance companies and lobbyists who got us into this mess to begin with. We need to educate the press and the public that the protesters are aligned with the corporate lobbyists and insurance companies who are trying to stop reform.*
- ***Our ability to put the extremists into perspective helps us frame our narrative.*** *We should be prepared to respond to the other side, but we don't need to be reactive or feel pressure to answer their accusations point by point. Instead, we should treat them as agents of the insurance lobbyists who want to maintain the status quo. We can dismiss their radical rhetoric by circling back to the basic things that we know most people care about—affordability, access, and quality.*

In many cases, protestors will show up at events or meetings you don't organize but are participating in as an attendee or sponsor. You can still influence the outcome of these events or meetings, and it's important for HCAN organizers and leaders to be ready to encounter these protestors in order to make sure that our volunteers and activists respond appropriately as well as capitalize on opportunities to also move our message, work with Members, and educate the public.

**Who are these people?**

The people who show up are far right-wing ideologues recruited by paid organizers. Much of this recruitment and organizing is funded by industry lobbyists and public relations firms to engage radical right-wing groups. Many of these groups are motivated by far right ideology in general - not by health care as an issue. They are held together by a common vision of the world that centers on defeating Obama and his agenda. We can expect to see anti-abortion groups, pro-gun groups, insurance company employees (mandated by employers to come out), militia groups, and anti-immigration groups.

**What are their goals in turning out disruptive mobs?**

Their goal is to stop Obama, influence the media, and scare Members of Congress into thinking that there is more resistance to health care reform than really exists. The attendees are not reflective of the middle or average Republican Party member. Insurance industry lobbyists and public relations firms recruit mostly right-wing extremists who are willing to employ militant tactics in order to demonize Obama by tapping into fear and anger in the electorate. The fear comes from both aggressive communications tactics and rhetoric: anti-tax, anti-abortion, anti-immigration, and other themes that resonate with the farthest right wing of their party.

**What is the strategy of the lobbyists and right-wingers who are orchestrating these protests?**

The most important thing to remember about this type of mobilization is **that it is foremost a media strategy, not an organizing strategy**. These angry mobs are not trying to persuade Members of Congress or the folks who are attending the event about their point of view. **Their goal is to disrupt the event as much as possible in order to:**

1. Prevent our message from getting out.
2. Scare Members of Congress into silence and submission.
3. Paint a picture for the media that conveys widespread disapproval for health care reform in order to influence the narrative.
4. Create as much tension as possible at these events so that the average spectator is completely turned off and disengages totally from this issue.

### What can we expect them to do?

- **They will be loud:** They will “Yell, stand up and shout out, and rattle” the Members of Congress. They will be disruptive and not follow the agenda. They won’t wait for an opening to speak. They will just interrupt and shout from the minute the event opens until it ends.
- **They will paint a picture:** They will carry a lot of signs. They will have gimmicks and props to get attention from the MOCs and from the media.
- **They will look bigger than they are:** They will spread out and distribute their signs widely. They will also get in front of any TV camera or press people in order to make sure the story that is reported is their story.
- **They will seek confrontation:** The right-wing protesters will foster confrontation at every turn because that’s what draws media and distracts the public. They will use any means to do this including abusive language, arrests, props, and physical violence. Be prepared.

### How should we prepare to encounter the right wing protesters at MOC events?

1. **Contact friendly MOCs and let them know you are coming to make sure our side is heard and that the event is positive.** Provide constructive support for Members of Congress who are holding public events to promote health care reform by turning out constituents and anticipating problems ahead of time. Ask the Member’s staff what would be most helpful and talk through a strategy for making sure the right messages don’t get drowned out by chaotic protesters.
2. **Inoculate your staff and your volunteers** by telling them what to expect and what purpose lies behind the right-wing demonstrations. The more that the attendees know what to expect; the less startled they will be by the irrational tone and militancy of the protesters.
3. **Bring more people than the other side has.** Their side will be smaller but noisier. You must bring enough people to drown them out and to cover all our bases so as to marginalize their disruptive tactics. You don’t want to get into a screaming match, but it must be obvious to everyone—including press—that you represent the majority.
4. **Arrive earlier than the other side does.** We need to stack our folks in the front to create a wall around the Member, and we need to stake out the best spots for visibility and signs. Reconnaissance on the venue and an understanding of the staging will be important here. Make sure you do your homework so you can position your folks most effectively.
5. **Be more visible than the other side.** Bring more signs and leaflets, and whenever possible, post your signs all over the place so that you visually out-perform the other side. Make sure you have people holding signs in every place where a TV camera is likely to be and that next to every right wing sign, there’s one of your signs with your message.
6. **Have a real plan for the media.** Remember, this is a communications strategy that the right wing is using and our goal is to stop them from hijacking and changing the message and tone of these events. Assign 3-5 people to speak with the reporters who attend and make sure the reporters understand the scope and message of the event. If you let the media just report on what they see, they will invariably focus on the mayhem. That is a far juicier story than affordability and the public health insurance option. **Don’t wait for the reporter to approach**

**you. You must approach the reporters and be assertive in shaping the narrative that they write.** Have someone assigned to greeting the media or checking in media as they arrive. That way you will know who they are and be able to work with them both during the event and afterwards. Also, **plan to record both the events you attend and the events you organize.** TV stations will use amateur footage to round out their stories, and the other side is recording and posting video online. We need to be able to give the press video of successful events too.

### How should we interact/what do we say to the other side?

1. **Do not debate on their “policy” points.** Remember, they are seeking a platform to distort the truth about reform by making health care about abortion, rationing, euthanasia, etc. Rather than try to reply with the truth (which won’t move them anyway) we should respond with our message and at every turn re-focus the agenda on communicating with the Member of Congress.
2. **Interrupt them when they get disruptive and refocus the meeting:** Line up a number of people who feel comfortable interrupting and prepare them with statements like:
  - “Excuse me, I came today to listen to Representative XXX explain how this bill is going to make health care more affordable for me and my family. We’re being gouged by insurance companies that just want to make more profits while we struggle to keep up with premiums and co-pays. Representative, how are you going to fix that?”
  - “I’m retired and can’t afford my prescription drugs because I’m on a fixed income. Representative, how is this bill going to affect me?”
  - “I want to hear the Representative speak. He’s the one voting on the bill. Representative, how will this bill help people who already have insurance at work?”
  - “What I’m worried about is how we’re going to keep the insurance companies from continuing to charge people more for being sick and keep them from taking away coverage when we need it most. What’s the plan for that?”
3. **Don’t get into a shouting match with them.** Instead, prep people on our side to keep raising the questions that we want answered. **Repetition** is the key. We need to arm our side with questions that play to the strength of our message and make sure we keep bringing them up over and over so that the press recognizes those central themes. **We should also phrase those questions strategically to help move the message.**
  - “Over the last XX years, insurance company profits have risen XXX %; in this bill you would regulate insurance companies so that they can no longer deny people with pre-existing conditions and would have to play by fair rules. Isn’t that right, Representative XX?”
  - “Isn’t it true that this bill would guarantee everyone a choice of public health insurance option that will lower cost overall in the system?”
4. **Address the MOC directly with a positive message:** Remember, these Members need cover and they are getting beaten up by right wing zealots in these meetings. We want to let the Member know that we appreciate his efforts to hear constituents and that we, the majority, agree with him.
5. **We should demonstrate that we are the majority by chanting:** When the other side gets too loud, we should shut them down with chants that counter their message like “Health Care Can’t Wait!” and “Health Care Delayed is Health Care Denied” and prep people to chant at key points when the other side gets most disruptive.
6. **Follow up with the Member one-on-one:** This experience may have been trying for your MOC. Make sure that you thank him and that you let him know that the majority is with him. He needs to know that we will provide cover and support him at every turn for his leadership on this issue.

## Organizing your own events with a Member of Congress

One advantage to organizing your own Town Hall or public event with Members of Congress is that you **will have much more control over the event and limit the other side's opportunities for disruption**. Still, you should take precautions to make sure that you can keep meetings you organize under control. Here are some basic tips:

- a. **Talk to the Member of Congress ahead of time so that you agree on a format that is comfortable for the Member and that you can troubleshoot roles or concerns that the Member may have about the event.** It is important to know how much time the Member will have, when he will arrive, what staff he's bringing, and how many questions he'll answer so that you can anticipate any issues that may arise and can plan your program appropriately.
- b. **Know who you are turning out to attend the event.** Make sure you turn out a substantial number of people from your base and that everyone signs a sign in sheet upon entering the event. Give everyone name tags so they are easily identifiable. If you want to ensure greater control over turnout, you can ask attendees to RSVP or even issue tickets to the event and require presentation of the ticket at the entrance.
- c. **Choose a venue that is difficult for the opposition to access without being noticed.** Get to your location early and make sure you set up the venue in a way that ensures that the attendees you want are at the front and that any protesters who come are sequestered as far as possible from the stage. Make sure that you have signs and visuals up and that you adequately understand the layout of your venue so that you know where the entrances are, where the press will be positioned, where your speakers will be, etc.
- d. **Select a strong moderator to move the agenda in a disciplined way.** Make sure you select someone who is comfortable interrupting rowdy protesters, who can command the attention of the room, and who understands how to de-escalate tensions and re-direct people to the agenda.
- e. **Lay out goals for the meeting and establish ground rules** for conduct in the meeting at the beginning of the event. Among these ground rules should be a protocol for asking questions. One way to do this is to ask people to submit questions ahead of time on cards, to permit only one question at a time, and to limit the topic of questions.
- f. **Plan for disturbances and assign marshals.** Make sure that you assign marshals to take care of moving the crowd, keeping people organized and orderly, and acting as security should any need arise to ask noisy or disruptive protesters to leave. If you have cause to think that you will need more back-up, notify the police ahead of time.
- g. **Collect signs and leaflets that are not provided by you or your organization.** Another way to limit protesters' ability to hijack your event is to confiscate signs or leaflets that they may bring into the venue from outside. The best way to do this is to make a blanket rule that no one can bring signs or leaflets and to advertise this fact as you do turn out in the weeks preceding the event. You can distribute your own signs in the event and offer them one as they enter if you choose to allow them to enter.
- h. **Assign people to greet the media and to stay close to reporters both as they enter and leave the event.** It's important that you take away right-wingers opportunities to talk with reporters by making sure that your staff or leaders are in constant contact with the media who attend. You should set up a special table or area for the press to sit during the event and that area should be close to the stage and away from any areas of the venue where protesters may gather. Also make sure you have materials ready for the reporters so that they know the purpose and message of the event.