



# PETITIONS, TABLING AND CANVASSING

Volunteer Action Network Toolkit

# Petitions, Tabling and Canvassing

Grassroots organizing is a critical tool in educating the public and building support around end-of-life issues, including advance care planning and medical aid in dying. As we've seen with many issues in national politics, grassroots momentum in support of, or in opposition to, a law or policy can be extremely powerful. Grassroots efforts put a face and a voice to a topic and issue that many may know little about. It is a vital element of any successful campaign.

Get organized in your community with these useful tips and suggestions. Contact your local Action Team leaders or Compassion & Choices field staff for C&C materials and support getting started.

Whether you are petitioning, tabling OR canvassing, here are some tips for success.

1. Mobilize Online – You can easily create an event and find other like-minded people to join you for petitioning, tabling or canvassing on Mobilize.us. C&C has numerous templates for a variety of events for you to use in your volunteer efforts. (Mobilize coming in Fall 2025)
2. Have fun. For the most part, these volunteer activities are a great experience. Relax, be yourself and be prepared to have some amazing conversations.
3. Know your message. Know your basic points, have a script in case you get lost, and roleplay and rehearse talking points in advance.
4. No pressure. If someone is uncertain or doesn't have time to talk, try to get something with our logo/website or a QR code in their hands. You are not in the business of convincing, coercing or converting. You are curious about their thoughts and have information to provide.
5. Pay attention. Look at the forms they fill out. If you need full addresses to gain district information, be sure the writing is legible before they walk away; be sure the email is legible and that they know we will be in touch to get them involved.
6. Super Supporters. Be sure to refer any person who is super supportive of our work to the Compassion & Choices staff working in your state so that we can get them involved. If there is something they can do at that moment, (pose for a picture with our sign, post a selfie of them at our booth, etc.) help them get it done! If they pose for a picture for us to use in any way, ensure they fill out the photo release form.
7. VIP's. If anyone identifies themselves as a physician, nurse, terminally ill, legislator, etc., make a note by their name on the sheet so that we can get them in touch with the right people.
8. Disagreeable Visitors. Simply agree to disagree. Again, you are not in the business of convincing, coercing or converting. Say thank you, smile and turn away. Be compassionate and disengage with kindness. Focus on people who want to hear what you have to say.
9. Hard Questions. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't ad lib. Tell them you'll find out and get back to them, or that you'll have someone get in touch.

# Petitions: Grassroots Activism 101

The simplest of political acts, signing a petition, remains among the most important currencies in public policy. Petitions, like letters, are monitored and tracked by public officials and legislative staff, and tallies are kept on the numbers of supporters on all sides of an issue/bill. Strong community support, demonstrated through a large number of petition signatures, can encourage politicians to support an issue or policy. Often, legislators are not focused on or informed about medical aid in dying, until they are. That's one of your primary roles as a volunteer - to be a calm and reasonable person, who is a source of reliable information.

Below, we offer some basic ideas and best practices for both gathering signatures on petitions to support or oppose legislation, and the best way of presenting those petitions to your local, state and federal elected officials.

## **TIP: Copy Compassion & Choices!**

Regardless of what kind of petition you are using or whom you are petitioning to, always send a copy of the completed petition pages to Compassion & Choices so that we can track and aggregate all grassroots activism, add people to our supporter list and amplify your efforts in our meetings with legislators. Send your petitions to: Compassion & Choices' Processing Center PO Box 485, Etna, NH 03750-0485.

## What Should My Petition Say?

In states where we are passing or defending medical aid-in-dying policy, use the basic petition in support of medical aid-in-dying, which can be found in the Resources section of this toolkit. For petitions, on behalf of, or calling for other specific legislation in your state, contact your Compassion & Choices field staff or your local Action Team Leader.

## Types of Petitions

Compassion & Choices recommends that you choose between three basic types of petitions, depending upon how you wish to submit it and whether legislation is under consideration in your state:

- general support petitions
- legislative petitions
- online petitions

***In the context of this toolkit, we are NOT talking about official Secretary of State petitions/signature gathering for qualifying a ballot initiative on a state ballot.***

## General Support Petitions

Illustrated by the basic petition provided at the end of this guide, general support petitions ask people to offer their signature in general support of the medical aid-in-dying platform, but not for specific legislation. You should be ready to answer basic questions about Compassion & Choices and about medical aid-in-dying if you use this type of petition.

## Legislative Petitions

Petitions that support specific medical aid-in-dying legislation or that seek the creation of specific legislation are legislative petitions. It is important to consult Compassion & Choices before drafting or circulating a legislative petition to ensure you are using the most current and effective language to support end-of-life options in your state. For legislative petitions, you should be able to answer specific questions about the state legislation and explain your support for its provisions.

## Online Petitions

Online petitions can be extremely useful for responding quickly to an event on the ground, such as Lawmakers voting for or against medical aid-in-dying legislation, a hearing being scheduled, or the city council's response to your medical aid-in-dying resolution. [Change.org](https://www.change.org) provides an easy platform for digital petitioning. As with other petitions, please consult your Compassion & Choices field staff to ensure you are using the most current and effective language to support end-of-life options in your state.

## Successful Petitioning

Regardless of which type of petition you're circulating, remember these simple tips:

- 1. Set a goal.** Even an initial modest goal of 20 signatures will keep you on track. Gather 20, then set a new goal and repeat. Before long, you could have 100 signatures or more to present to your legislator(s), committee, Governor, or other officials.
- 2. Ask each person individually.** Be sure to ask each person individually. If one person from a group or family signs, ask the others to sign.
- 3. Be courteous and respectful to everyone.** You will likely encounter people who disagree with your views. If that's the case, resist arguing with them. Thank the person for their time, smile and move on.
- 4. If someone appears to want to avoid you, let them.** Never force an unwelcome interaction. Smile and move on.
- 5. Be ready to answer difficult questions.** You are likely to speak with people who have never considered the issue you are petitioning for or have views that differ from yours. Be prepared to provide basic information about medical aid-in-dying, end-of-life issues and any legislation you are supporting. Questions you don't feel comfortable answering can be referred to the Compassion & Choices website at [www.compassionandchoices.org](https://www.compassionandchoices.org).

6. **Be sure people know you are volunteering for Compassion & Choices.** Wear your yellow Compassion & Choices shirt, a volunteer name tag and display Compassion & Choices-branded materials on your table or clipboard.

## Challenge Yourself and Others!

Getting 20-100 names on a petition by yourself is a great start. Now think about how to multiply your activism and get some real traction! Identify some like-minded friends and colleagues, and recruit them to join your petition drive!

### Here are a few tips on putting together a successful petition effort:

1. **Make your list.** Identify at least ten people you think might participate.
2. **Get the word out.** Send an email announcing your petition drive. Attach the petition and provide the basic pointers outlined above for gathering signatures.
3. **Go social.** Consider expanding your drive to social media by posting on Facebook or Twitter, and asking whether anyone would commit to gathering 20 signatures individually. Have people message you privately so you can send them the petition along with instructions and talking points.
4. **Set a deadline and a goal.** This will help you create urgency and give your team a target to hit!
5. **Tell us what you need.** Compassion & Choices can provide pens, yellow T-shirts, literature, stickers, etc.

## Tabling: Bringing End-of-life Issues to the Community

Tabling and petition-signature gathering go hand in hand. Staffing a table provides an opportunity to bring the dialog about end-of-life issues into your community in a friendly, visible way. It's also a perfect opportunity to get Compassion & Choices resources in the hands of people who are interested. Tabling also gives you a base of operations for your petition drive and allows people to explore the issue, ask questions, gather information and take home materials. A well-presented table also gives professional brand visibility to Compassion & Choices and the end-of-life options movement.

### Guidelines for Tabling

While tabling is a relatively easy way to gather petition signatures and raise awareness, it still requires some forethought and preparation. Follow these general guidelines for a successful tabling effort, and use the tabling checklist found in the resources section of this toolkit.

1. **Location, location, location.** Choose the location of your table strategically: Where will you get steady foot traffic? Is there an event, market or park where people will be milling about? Is there a specific population or event you want to target?

2. **Private property - ask permission.** If you are interested in tabling on private property, like a mall or a special event, always get permission first.
3. **Get the proper permit.** To table in most public parks, college campuses, farmer's markets or other events, a permit or registration might be required. Make sure you know the rules and have the proper permits if required.
4. **Partner up.** It is always a good idea to recruit other advocates to help. You'll have more fun, get more signatures, speak to more people and feel even more engaged!
5. **Order materials in advance.** If you are ordering materials, magazines or other Compassion & Choices-branded swag (tote bags, pens, clips or T-shirts), request from a staff member and allow at least two weeks for delivery.
6. **Be creative and have fun!** More people will be interested in approaching a table that looks fun and friendly. Use nicely organized materials, flowers, chocolate, candy, etc. to draw people in.
7. **Table without a Table!** Find a suitable place to gather petition signatures with just a clipboard, pen and materials in a small backpack. Work with other advocates on a specific corner, entry/exit or suitable busy place at a public event. Wear your yellow Compassion & Choices T-shirt or branded stickers to identify yourself.

## Additional Guidelines for Tabling at Health Fairs, Conferences and Events

1. **Plan in advance.** Some health fairs, events and annual conferences sell out early. Inquire about booth opportunities six months or more in advance to ensure that you can reserve a booth. If there is a fee associated with having a booth, contact Compassion & Choices staff to discuss our ability to cover the cost.
2. **Recruit other advocates.** Staffing a booth at an event can be fun and rewarding, especially when you have someone working side by side with you. Be sure to invite other advocates to help with the setup and tear down and staffing of your booth.
3. **Order materials in advance.** If you are ordering materials, magazines or other Compassion & Choices-branded swag (tote bags, pens, clips or T-shirts), request from a staff member and allow at least two weeks for delivery.
4. **Check the Agenda.** Plan to staff the table during the times people are circulating. This varies per event. Try to plan your table time so that you are not sitting alone while everyone is attending break out sessions/going to lunch etc.

Once you've thought through the preparations and process, you can focus on fine-tuning your outreach approach. It's important to actively engage people. Don't think about tabling as setting up materials and sitting down to wait for people to approach you. Stand, smile and greet people as they walk by. Make eye contact and invite them to pause and learn more about your petition. Wear your yellow T-shirt and/or our stickers to provide a visual clue as to who you're representing.

You may be nervous about speaking to strangers, and that's normal — just remember you're having conversations about an issue you care about. After two or three conversations, it will become easier and more natural. You can also role-play with a friend or fellow advocate or a Compassion & Choices staff member in advance.

Speaking with strangers will also be easier if you create a clear message for your visitors and a short question to draw people in. For example, "*Hi, will you please sign our petition?*" This is simple, and it results in people asking "*What is it for?*" rather than just saying no. This provides an opportunity to answer and engage the person with greater detail.

## Canvassing: Taking the Show on the Road

Canvassing is a more direct approach than tabling because it involves going house to house (or business to business) and asking people for their support. Many people appreciate the face-to-face interaction of canvassing, while others may not be. Use your best judgment and follow these tips for a safe, successful canvass:

- 1. Be prepared.** Have a clipboard with your petition and pen ready, along with some basic materials on Compassion & Choices. Bring a great attitude. Use your discretion regarding a raincoat, sunscreen, hat, water, snacks, etc.
- 2. Create a Script.** Plan and practice what you will say when someone opens the door and gives you the opportunity to talk to them. Your script will depend on what you are petitioning for and the local context of Compassion & Choices' work. Remember: it's fine to have a script or notes on your clipboard.
- 3. Ring, then knock.** When canvassing, if there's a doorbell, ring it and listen for the sound of the bell. If there isn't a doorbell or you don't hear it ringing, don't be afraid to knock, and then knock again. If there is no answer, move on. Use your best judgment to make sure you were heard, but not bothersome.
- 4. Do the wave.** Once you see someone approaching the door, be sure to wave and smile so that they know you are friendly and want to talk with them.
- 5. Make it personal and just be curious.** Introduce yourself, smile and make eye contact while you're speaking to anyone. Use your script opening question and go from there.
- 6. Don't debate.** If the person you're speaking to is very busy or is strongly opposed, it's best to simply move on. In canvassing it's most important to find the people who support our issues or are still undecided, so don't spend time debating or arguing. Just thank them for their time, smile and move on.
- 7. Teamwork works!** Canvassing can be intimidating, even for people who have done it before, so recruit like-minded individuals to join you in pairs or small groups.

8. **End positively.** Always end the conversation on a positive note and tell the person to have a nice day/evening. Thank them for their time, even if they didn't agree or sign your petition.
9. **Leave material.** Always try to give them a palm card, postcard or other C&C material/hand out for reference, so they have our website.

#### **TIP: Safety First!**

- Stay in your comfort zone; canvass in areas that you know; stop when it starts getting dark.
- Canvass in pairs or small groups.
- Don't knock on a door if there are loud pets, signage (protected by Smith & Wesson) or other obstacles present.
- **Never go inside a house**, even if invited.
- Don't debate or argue with people. Say thank you, turn and walk away.

## Thank you

Once again, we're so grateful that you've chosen Compassion & Choices as a place to invest your time, energy and talent as a volunteer. Volunteers Make Change Happen!

## Resources

### General Petition

To print a general petition for your table or canvassing effort, download a general C&C petition from the [Volunteer Resource Center](#), and customize the petition language on the top to match your local or state campaign.

### Tabling Checklist

- ☐ **Select a date and time for your tabling.** Be realistic about how long you can table. We suggest a minimum of two hours and a maximum of six to eight, depending on the event, location and how many volunteers will take shifts.
- ☐ **Set goals.** Based on where you are tabling and how long you'll be there, set goals for signatures gathered, conversations held and/or materials distributed — and keep track of your progress!



- ❑ **Select a location.** Public parks, popular pedestrian areas and college campuses as well as private spaces like malls have great potential. Events like street fairs, farmers markets, community festivals or other public gathering spots are also good options.
- ❑ **Obtain necessary permission/permits.** Wherever you decide to table, look into any posted guidelines for setting up a display or contact the management of the facility or event to get permission to table when required.
- ❑ **Recruit at least one tabling partner to join you.** If you are going to table for longer than three hours, you should consider changing shifts and recruiting two more advocates so you can each work one two-hour shift.
- ❑ **Secure a table.** A card table or fold-up six-foot table is a very standard size, easily transportable and works well for tabling. Bring a tablecloth of appropriate size.
- ❑ **Assemble a supply box.** Include
  - ❑ Clipboards, blank petitions and pens.
  - ❑ Swag: clips, hand sanitizer, wristbands, fans, bags, etc.
  - ❑ State-specific swag or handouts.
  - ❑ General materials from Compassion & Choices (magazine, literature, brochures, etc.) You should have adequate supplies for the number of folks you want to attract based on the goals you've set.
  - ❑ Bottled water and snacks.
  - ❑ A small first-aid kit.
- ❑ **Get the latest talking points.** Make sure to have the most recent messaging and updates from Compassion & Choices. Reach out to your Compassion & Choices staff contact for guidance.
- ❑ **Create a visually appealing table.** Use Compassion & Choices-branded materials and your own creativity to bring attention to your table. Use colorful flowers, candy or other items to invite people to approach.
- ❑ **Make it count.** Ensure that all the people who signed your petition get logged into our records. Send your petitions to Compassion & Choices Processing Center: PO Box 485, Etna, NH 03750-0485.

Remember the Mission, Vision and Values of Compassion and Choices in your volunteer efforts.

## Mission

Compassion & Choices improves care, expands options and empowers everyone to chart their end-of-life journey.

## Vision

A society that affirms life, accepts the inevitability of death, embraces expanded options for compassionate dying and enables everyone to choose end-of-life care that reflects their values, priorities and beliefs.

## Values

**Compassionate** in our commitment to dying patients having access to needed care at the end of life and being free of unwanted treatment, suffering or interference.

**Respectful** of the autonomy of individuals to decide what end-of-life options are best for them and their loved ones.

**Courageous** in our willingness to confront the toughest end-of-life health challenges, disrupt the broken status quo and protect an individual's right to self-determination.

**Credible** in all our education, advocacy and partnerships — our efforts are grounded in objective research and demonstrable facts.

**Resilient** in our capacity to respond to opportunities and threats in the movement, so that we can achieve our vision as quickly as possible.