



Calling All Activists:

How to start and run a local beyond pesticides organization

By Meghan Taylor

Are you concerned about the pesticide practices taking place in your community and want things to change? You have the power to set in motion a course for positive reforms. Organizing a campaign in your neighborhood is a forceful way to stand up for your right not to be exposed to toxic chemicals. Consider starting a local Beyond Pesticides organization in your community.

You may be reeling with enthusiasm for such an endeavor, and perhaps confusion too. How do you start? What exactly do you do to reform pesticide practices once you have set up your organization? Read on for ideas and advice about community pesticide activism.

Where do I begin?

Identify an issue and define specific goals. The goal you establish can be broad or narrow, ranging from decreasing pesticide use in your community, to changing a local law or pesticide policy of a school, park, hospital or any other public site. Be flexible, as the goal you set may change as your coalition builds.

Once you know what issue you will be working on, research it. Understand the problem and the solution, and

your exact platform. When you know your issue, you can ask questions and talk to community members, policy makers and other parties with confidence. Beyond Pesticides can provide any research, information and assistance you might need.

Who will join me?

Start with your family, friends and neighbors. Point out to them the aspects of pesticide reform that affect their lives. This type of discourse will help spur people into action in the community. Talk about the human health threats that pesticides pose, especially to children. Point out that using integrated pest management (IPM) will usually save money in the long run compared with chemical use. Keep your language simple and based on common sense.

Contact local groups that might be interested in your cause as well. Depending on your issue, this may include environmental organizations, community groups, public health associations, doctors, garden clubs, churches or the PTA. Additionally, Beyond Pesticides can provide contact information for activists located in your state and local area that may join you.

How can we work together?

Set up a meeting. This is where you can start to organize your ideas to take action. Plan an agenda ahead of time that will give attendees an overview of the problem, allow a discussion of goals, and ascertain what the next steps will be. Be sure to establish a time and place for the next meeting before everyone leaves. You can also include assignments to accomplish before the next meeting. Keep the meeting short, and more people will likely take part.

What kind of strategies should we consider?

Strategize to educate the public and affect key decision makers. What you do exactly may be a function of financial resources, how much time you have, and how many volunteers you have recruited. Consider these activities as you set up a specific plan of action:

■ **Community Outreach:** This can include gathering signatures for a petition, educational presentations to interested groups; creating and distributing an educational fact sheet (include contact information!); tabling at community events or near schools or churches; public protests; and phoning interested people or parties to let them know of upcoming events or actions needed. You can also start a letter writing campaign, and provide sample letters to appropriate officials, clearly stating what is being requested and from whom.

■ **Developing a Report:** You can conduct research to evaluate a specific site's pesticide use and report your findings along with suggestions for alternatives. *Beyond Pesticides Community Pest Management Evaluation Toolkit* is a good resource for this project. A report will allow you to provide hard evidence of the need for change to journalists, policy makers and the public at large. These tend to be more successful if a broad coalition is behind it, such as unions, neighbors, doctors, and environmentalists.

■ **Creating Policy:** Use your research of your issue to come up with a policy that will provide a solution to the problem. Determine exactly what policies you would like adopted. Consider such things as notification, banning of the most toxic chemicals and use of integrated pest management.

■ **Interacting with Policy Makers:** Meet with elected officials, the health department and other agencies that influence your goal, encouraging their support. Research in advance which

key decision makers are most likely to support and oppose you. This will prepare you to lobby or meet with them. Bring relevant materials such as fact sheets, petitions, a list of members and supporters, and a copy of your specific platform. If you get a chance to discuss the policies with decision makers, make sure everyone feels involved in creating a solution. Listen to all concerns against your position, and be prepared to answer logically.

■ **Working with the Media:** Begin gathering appropriate media contacts as soon as possible. Identify target newspapers, magazines, T.V. and radio outlets. Call and ask for their mailing address, and the appropriate contact person for this type of story, including phone and fax numbers. When you have a finalized report or policy to promote, create a press release. Mail, phone and fax it to your media contacts. Do the same celebrating victories in the movement, or expressing outrage with losses. Other options to bring your campaign to the media include editorials, letters to the editor, and calling your local radio station to set up a public discussion of your issue on a talk show.



■ **Sustaining Public Interest and Knowledge:** Stay active in your community through gains and losses. Set up a seminar or workshop where you can discuss alternatives to pesticides for pest control companies and managers of public sites throughout your area. Presentations may be welcome at other venues as well, such as garden clubs or shops. Contact *Beyond Pesticides* for any information needed.

Where do we get the money needed to take action?

Fundraising! Events such as walk-a-thons, auctions and bake sales will provide some funding, but are usually more significant in furthering your presence in the community. For more substantive fundraising, consider seeking grants from local and community-based foundations. You can go to your local library to look for fundraising reference books for guidance. Also see The Foundation Center's website (www.foundationcenter.org) for a listing of cooperating libraries and links to grant-maker websites.

You will find that many grant applications require that your organization be incorporated or that you have 501(c)3 status under the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) code. You can read about how to achieve these in the section below. If you decide that pursuing such status is not useful at this time, you

should find a fiscal sponsor, an organization that is a 501(c)3. Beyond Pesticides can act as a fiscal sponsor to an unincorporated organization performing work that meets our mission, and conducts activities allowable under 501(c)3. With a fiscal sponsor, your donors can write tax-deductible checks to the fiscal sponsor and designate that the funds support the work that you are doing. Acceptance of tax-deductible donations is very important in raising funds.

How do we become an official “non-profit” organization?

Here is the confusing part! Don't be discouraged by the myriad of steps and application processes you are soon to read about. Take a deep breath, and just think about one step at a time.

You can register your organization to become incorporated (something like *Beyond Pesticides of Utah, Inc.*). This does not mean the group will be a non-profit 501(c)3 tax exempt organization, but that it will be established as a legal entity to conduct business in your state. To become incorporated, you need to set up a board of directors and. The board of directors is made up of elected officers such as President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. Community leaders and professionals interested in the issue are good choices for the board. You also must file a document called Articles of Incorporation with your state. The exact department to apply to varies from state to state. Incorporation usually requires both an initial and an annual fee.

After incorporating, you need to apply to the IRS to become a 501(c)3. This process is lengthier. The first step is to submit Form SS-4, available from the IRS, and receive an Employer Identification Number (EIN). This number is very important. It will allow you to open a “community” bank account that will provide a separate place for funds to go. This helps since an individual will not have to report the organization's funds on a personal tax return. Next you should prepare an IRS Form 1023, which can take two weeks to six months for approval after submission. With approval, you receive an “advance ruling determination letter” that provides 501(c)3 status provisionally for up to six years. After this period, you need to prove with financial data that you qualify as a non-profit for the status to become permanent. Basically, the IRS will be checking that at least 33% of funds donated to your organization came from the public at large, and not a handful of major donors or the board of directors.



Keep in mind that you must also file with your state for tax exemption status, after both incorporating and receiving a 501(c)3 status from the IRS, if the state does not provide it concurrently with the IRS.

You might be asking yourself, ‘Why go through such a mess of applications and obscurely numbered forms?’ Your organization will benefit once you get through the cyclone of paperwork. 501(c)3 status allows you to assure potential donors that their gifts to your organization are tax-deductible. In addition, foundations require a formal letter from the IRS showing this status to accompany grant applications. Most states offer an exemption from sales tax for items purchased by the non-profit. You can also receive discounts on bulk mailings.

Where do I go for more information to work in my community?

Beyond Pesticides offers a variety of extensive resources, depending on the issues you are working on (see *Resources for Organizing from Beyond Pesticides*). We can provide assistance at any step of the way with advice, brochures, information about chemicals and alternatives and other pesticide-related issues.

Resources for organizing from Beyond Pesticides

Community Pest Management Evaluation Toolkit (\$12 ppd)

West Nile Virus Organizing Manual (\$10 ppd)

Expelling Pesticides from Schools (\$15 ppd)

Building Blocks for School IPM: A Least-Toxic Pest Management Manual (\$15 ppd)

Model Pesticide Ordinance (\$5 ppd)

Model State School Pest Management Law (\$5 ppd)

Model School Pest Management Policy (\$5 ppd)

For more information about Beyond Pesticides, current issues and ways to participate, write our office (701 E Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003) or visit us online at <http://www.beyondpesticides.org>.

