

## **Effective Local Publicity to Increase the Visibility of the CAC in Your Community**

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Many CACs attempt, in a variety of ways, to capture the attention and participation of the community members they serve. There can be many reasons why attendance at CAC meetings is low. Usually the primary reasons are efforts that are not specific enough for the communities of parents the CAC serves and limited resources (time, energy, manpower, money).

Following are suggestions for making a difference in your community and helping your CAC grow. Some key principles should be identified and some steps should be taken before you get started. First, brainstorm about your community. Write down all you know about it and write down all you think you should know about it. Language barriers, geographical barriers, time barriers, economics, and more all go into the ability of a community member to respond to your call for participation. Perhaps you'll discover that you have pockets of communities that do not respond to the efforts you have made thus far. It doesn't mean they are not interested but may mean that you have not communicated effectively with them to identify and meet their needs. When you brainstorm don't censor yourself, write it all down.

Next brainstorm on all the possible ways you could use to connect with your community. Don't censor yourself and let the creative juices flow. It doesn't matter what it is said just write it down.

Then pull out the yellow pages. Start with the As and go page by page until you reach the Zs. Make a list of all the places where parents go and congregate. You should have a list of headings that will become a part of your publicity plan.

Lastly, make a commitment to keep a log to track what works and what doesn't work. You will choose 2-10 avenues for your publicity plan. You will choose them based on the brainstorming you did and the lists you created. How many avenues you choose will depend on your resources of time, money, manpower, and energy. As parents and others contact or attend your CAC meetings ask them how they heard about your CAC so you can tally that information in your log. Then you can do more of what works and far less of what doesn't work.

When you do eliminate something from your publicity plan try replacing it with something new and track its success also. Remember that a publicity plan takes time and consistency. And you always want to be fresh and new and enthusiastic. It's very uncommon to get an immediate response from your efforts. Don't give up. Just keep at it. Usually people have to see your CAC in print at least four times before acting and that could take 3-6 months. Remember too that someone may not need you today but will file the information or pass it on for later use.

One primary reason parents may attend and then not return is that they are not clear on what the role of the CAC is. If a parent is motivated because s/he is having difficulties with the IEP or 504 processes she may be discouraged to discover that the CAC is not able to "right a wrong". On all your publicity pieces be very clear about what the role of the CAC is. If a parent who contacts your CAC is involved in a conflict with the school or district let her/him know that the CAC is an advisory committee, that it wants to hear from parents to effect positive recommendations to address parent and student concerns, and that it will provide support through resources and information. If someone is misled into believing that the CAC can "right a wrong" not only will they be disappointed but

they will share their disappointment with others discouraging participation. Negative publicity spreads fast.

Following are a variety of suggestions that can help your CAC develop its publicity plan.

Discover your local libraries. Many libraries have display cases or tables where they allow community organizations to decorate and display information. If so, you could display some of the books in the library along with flyers and CAC Fact Sheets as well as meeting notices and resources lists. Some libraries have community tables or bulletin boards where your CAC can leave information. And if they publish a newsletter perhaps they will include announcements about your CAC.

Make business cards with the name of your CAC and contact information. These are handy and inexpensive and can be left in a variety of places. Be sure to include one in every mailing you send out. CAC members should carry them as a ready resource for handing to someone they meet in the grocery store line or at the bank. They are also handy for posting on community bulletin boards in laundromats and grocery stores.

Make postcard-size mailers. They can be used to announce upcoming CAC meetings and left in a variety of places. Also consider making some that can be mailed back to your CAC. Put your CAC address on the back. On the front state a little about your CAC and add a response form so they can put their name and address or phone, state their question or concern, and then mail the postcard back to your CAC for a response.

Make and distribute handwritten invitations to parents and community members to attend your CAC meetings. After a parent or community member attends send a handwritten thank you note as a follow up.

Invite students to attend your CAC meetings. After all, the bottom line is they are the ones whose needs we represent. We need to see them and hear from them. They need to see and hear from the CAC.

Initiate and support a community-based LEAD group. If our schools and districts are telling us that there are not enough resources to serve students then parents and communities should pick up the slack. We don't want to lose precious teachable moments. Information on LEAD can be found at [www.myleadgorup.com](http://www.myleadgorup.com) and [www.ldcan.com](http://www.ldcan.com).

Does your CAC offer childcare? If so, include that in your publicity pieces. If not, then scope out all the possible childcare/babysitting options in your communities. Make a list so it is available for parents to use. If you have a website also post it there and make sure to keep it up to date.

Compile a list of all the support groups and agencies in your community. Parents need resources and information. Keep the list up to date and make sure it gets out in your communities. Contact the support groups and organizations, invite them to your CAC meetings, let them know that you are passing along their information, and ask them to pass along CAC information to their clients.

Send flyers to post in the offices of counselors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, MFCCs, and others. Include a handwritten note asking them to share CAC information with their clients.

Celebrate the anniversary of your CAC by having an Open House. Or have a once or twice a year "Meet and Greet" where community members, families, and teachers can come and "mingle".

If there are conferences or special events in your area contact them and ask if CAC information can be provided. Better yet, see about having a table or booth where you can dispense information and talk to attendees.

Consider rotating CAC meetings holding them at the different schools which your CAC serves. Consider alternating the times and days of meetings to allow for more participation.

Encourage school newsletters, newspapers, and bulletins to include information about CAC meetings in each of their issues. Support group and organization newsletters, and church bulletins may also include your CAC's meeting announcements.

If you serve linguistically diverse communities discover how you can have translators available at your CAC meetings. Check the local colleges, churches or cultural organizations to see if they have volunteers. They may also help you translate written materials.

Press releases and public service announcements should be sent out at least twice a month. Send one set to radio and TV stations and the press at least two to three weeks before your upcoming meeting. Announce what will be discussed. Then after the meeting send out another set telling about the meeting and what was learned or shared. While there is no guarantee that they will be published or announced it's wonderful when they are. Use the yellow pages to get the addresses of the radio and TV stations and the newspapers. A side benefit of sending press releases is that your CAC may be identified as an "expert" and will be asked to comment on upcoming stories.

Offer freebies. Fact Sheets are the easiest and most cost-effective freebie. You can find some samples at <http://cactechassistance.tripoc.com> The CAC Fact Sheets have a space where you can add the contact information for your CAC.

Encourage your publicity plan contacts to post and make copies of these CAC Fact Sheets to distribute. Mention this freebie as a community service in your publicity pieces, public service announcements, and press releases. If your CAC resources are slim ask responders to send a SASE.

People like to join things when there are outlets for them to share their talents and skills. Provide opportunities within your CAC for more participation with easy positions such as a copy writer for your press releases and public service announcements. Ask someone to write your newsletters or become your CAC's webmaster. A phone tree person and a hospitality person may be welcomed by your CAC. Your CAC could have a position for someone to be a legislative liaison. The list goes on of possible positions.

Put together a welcome packet for new parents and students on IEPs and Section 504 plans. Assemble several and place them in the offices of each school that you serve with instructions to give to new families with identified IEPs or Section 504 plans..

If resources are scarce then make posters of community resources and CAC meetings to post in all schools, preferably in rooms where IEP, 504, and SST meetings are held. Don't forget the non-public and private schools in your communities. Make notebooks of CAC Facts Sheets, by laws, resources, and articles to place in counseling offices, school and public libraries, and the administrative offices of schools.

Add a chat room, listserv, or message board to your CAC's website. Especially if the profile of your community is that it is more computer-centered rather than meeting-centered. Maybe you can accommodate one or two parents participating in your meetings by speaker phone.

Invite the mayor, city council, and state and local legislators to your CAC meetings. Send handwritten invitations. Sometimes they will send an assistant but that's great. Certainly makes great copy for your press releases and public service announcements. Once someone attends foster the relationship with ongoing communication and activities.

In fact, foster ongoing relationships with guest speakers, support groups, organizations, and others that you have included in your publicity plan. Don't forget service organizations such as Kiwanis or Lions Club where your CAC can do a presentation.

Make key public figures honorary members of your CAC and award them a framed certificate. With computers, specialty papers, and inexpensive frames from WalMart or Kmart you're good to go.

Sponsor an art contest of student work and find a prominent place to display in the community. Write about it in your press releases and public service announcements. Ask the local news to film or photograph it. Make it a traveling exhibit that goes from school to school or location to location.

Since the role of the CAC is advisory it is important for CACs to get to know and hear from their community. This is important so that CAC members can accurately reflect to those that they report to what the needs, issues, and concerns of the community are.

These are just a few ideas to get you going. As you do more and see the results you'll be encouraged by your creativity and success. Remember that it takes time and effort to get the process going. And it takes time and dedication to keep your efforts going. If you want parents and community to make a place for CAC in their lives your CAC needs to let them know that they have a place in your CAC. And that its more than just a seat at a meeting. It's not that parents don't

care it's just that they don't know who, where, what, when, why, and how CAC is a match for themselves and their children.

Carpe diem!!!

*Claudia*