

How to become involved in the establishment of a user organization: 10 steps

(Source: Jürgens R (2008).

“Nothing about us without us”, adapted from Dave Burrows, 1992)

1. *Gather a group of users, ex-users, and people interested in IDU issues.* Discuss concerns about HIV and injecting and other issues that the group believes are of concern for users. This will provide an agenda for later meetings.
2. *Attract people who use to a general meeting.* This can be done by giving out leaflets, posters on walls or telephone poles. If the meeting needs to be clandestine due to police activity, use pocket-size cards with no details other than the date, time, place. When advertising the meetings, stress that they are an opportunity for users to get together to talk about issues which affect them.
3. *Hold a series of meetings to determine the major issues affecting users in the local community.* Some time will have to be given over to “bitch sessions” at these initial meetings in which people talk about how difficult it is to buy drugs, consume them without being busted, etc. The major issues from these sessions should be noted for future work, but the discussion should be directed towards HIV and safer using issues. It is in this health area that the group can have the most immediate effect. After all, if users die or are hospitalized, then no other issues are likely to be relevant.
4. *Recruit articulate speakers and thinkers among the group.* Try to talk to them after the meetings and tell them what the group is trying to achieve (better health for users, advocacy on user issues).
5. *When the group seems ready, suggest that a committee be formed to work out what can be done in the area for users.* Election of committee members from the floor or a call for volunteers can achieve this. Here, the role of outsiders begins to diminish. The group will begin to exert its own dynamics and the outsider will have less control over where the group goes next.
6. *Assist in committee meetings.* This may be as simple as suggesting a date and time and arranging a location, or it may be a more active role as either a committee member or minute-taker. Records should be kept of meetings (though not necessarily of names of those attending) so that the same ground is not covered each time. Achievable goals include realistic aims and objectives of the group, a name, and a set of priorities for activities. It is important to remember that, if the group explodes at this point (see next step), the group’s organizers have still achieved a great deal. For many users, this may be the first time they have ever been asked their views, and the seeds of working together for change have been planted.
7. *The cult of the personality will develop.* One or more stronger committee members will begin to direct the group. If two or more relatively equal forces come into play, the group may explode, implode or simply collapse through inertia. Either one force will win and the organization can continue, or else the group will be abandoned.

This should not discourage the group's organizers. In most cases in Australia, groups that have completely stopped functioning have eventually started up again. Also, one of the results of this process is often that the group moves away from one or two strong personalities and achieves a wider community base.

8. *Structure peer education and discussion sessions.* These sessions should be simple and modular (that is, they should give a package of information and skills on one topic) because turnover at these sessions can be very high, and people who come to today's session may not return next week. Other areas in which users may have great interest are: newsletters, research, and political work. Provide details of the latest research results that affect users. Ask their opinions; open up lines of communication between users and researchers studying user issues.
9. *Encourage people who seem to have a long-term interest in the group to receive training. Try to get funding for the group* or for an individual from the group to work with the local community. Start liaising with politicians and bureaucrats about issues of importance to the community. One factor that helps when dealing with hostile people in authority is to remind them that the group is a communications channel with users on the streets. This means that governments and researchers can learn much more about users' lives and behaviour (for policy- making, laws, etc.) and that they can provide more information directly to users (for health promotion campaigns).
10. *Wherever the group wants to go* (longer opening hours for needle exchanges, safe injection sites, heroin trials, street drug testing, policing, improved health care and housing, positive images of users through art and media, education, job training), *the group will choose the direction(s)* and those working with the group can help them achieve their goals.