



Hosting Political Candidates at Your NAMIWalks Events

Campaigns are in full swing, which means candidates are looking for every opportunity to talk directly with voters. NAMIWalks events are likely to be a target of campaigns: they are well-attended and community leaders are in attendance. Even with a virtual NAMIWalks event, they can get a great deal of attention in your community. This can be very beneficial for your NAMI, as it can help you build and maintain relationships with the people who make decisions on important issues that impact people with mental health conditions. But as a nonprofit, you must follow rules to remain nonpartisan.

Below are tips on how to engage responsibly with candidates at your NAMIWalks event.

1. If one candidate is invited, all candidates must be invited. When inviting candidates to your NAMIWalks (or any NAMI) event, you must invite all viable candidates in the same race. If the race has more than two candidates, all do not have to attend. If there are only two candidates in the race, it is best to only invite candidates if you believe both can attend.

All candidates in the same race must have similar opportunities to address your membership. For example, if you allow only one candidate to address your NAMIWalks participants, you would need to provide a similar-sized audience at an event of similar importance for the other candidates in the same race.

If a candidate reaches out proactively and asks to attend and/or speak—and you want to provide that opportunity—you should invite all of the candidates.

Current elected officials are different. You may invite a policymaker to speak in their official capacity. Be sure to set ground rules, including that they may speak about official business, but they cannot campaign. If they're running for reelection, be cognizant of how close your event is to Election Day. To learn more about inviting policymakers to your events, please review *Building Relationships with Policymakers Using NAMI Events*.

2. Candidates are invited guests and should act as such. Candidates do not get free reign to turn your event in a campaign rally. Soliciting votes and donations are strictly prohibited. Candidates are free to have conversations with NAMIWalks participants about their experiences and policy proposals to address mental health in the community.

3. Showing up as a member of the public doesn't mean a candidate can campaign. Since NAMIWalks events are open to the public, candidates may appear at your event on their own. That does not mean they are excused from the ground rules. In this case, it's important to avoid an actual or implied endorsement. The candidate also should not have an opportunity to address the event or distribute campaign literature. They are free to participate in the event like any other public attendee.

4. Always be nonpartisan. Mental health sees no political party affiliation—it's an issue that all sides care about—and NAMI takes that very seriously. As 501(c)(3) organizations, NAMIs cannot endorse candidates for office, directly or implicitly. When candidates attend your NAMIWalks event, it's important to stress (repeatedly, if you must) that their attendance is not an endorsement.

Contact NAMI's Government Relations, Policy & Advocacy team at elections@nami.org if you have questions or would like to strategize about how to engage candidates.