**How to…. approach the media**

Media coverage is a great way to inform the public about an advocacy issue. Although e-mail and the internet can reach large audiences, having local and national media coverage can draw more attention to an issue and adds credibility and perspective. Sometimes the pressure of public exposure is all that’s necessary to get decision-makers to solve a problem. Elected officials read the news too!

# **Credibility and perspective**

Media coverage is particularly valuable for an advocacy campaign. When a journalist covers a story, they’re expected to research the issue, talk to people on both sides, and check the facts. They add perspective to an issue because they attempt to provide balance. And it’s part of their job to interview different spokespeople to validate what you told them. You should anticipate who they might speak to and what those people might say. That's why it’s so important to work with stakeholders in advocacy.

# **Contacting the media**

Journalists may become interested in your story because:

* A member of the public told them about it.
* They hear about it (either thru social media or elsewhere) and want more information.
* CNIB reaches out to the media.

Like any other relationship, trust develops over time. Journalists appreciate people who return their calls promptly, as they often work to a tight deadline and people who provide them with accurate, reliable information. Be prepared with your key messages ready before you contact them. Journalists are very busy. Don't take it personally if you don’t hear back from them.

In smaller communities, getting to know the people who cover local news can be fairly easy. In larger cities, it can be challenging to know all the journalists, producers, and news desks. However, some journalists have a “beat,” such as city council or disability issues. Even if you have not met journalists before, you can learn a bit about them ahead of time by researching their work and following their coverage.

# **Contacting the media checklist**

* Why will the media care about the story/issue? Is it genuinely something that will be of interest to their audience? Why?
* Is it timely? I.e., Why are you telling me this now? It doesn’t mean the story/issue itself has to be something new – new information can also make a story relevant or timely.
* Does the story/issue directly involve anyone else except you? Have you contacted them for their consent to contact the media?
* What is the key thing you want the media to report, and can you summarize this in one sentence? What is the solution to the problem that you want the media to put forward?

# **Speaking with the media**

* Be clear about whether you represent yourself and/or your organization. Never represent CNIB without speaking to your organizational contact.
* If your interview is on camera, ask the reporter where you should be looking. Typically, you would be speaking directly to the interviewer. It is rare to see a spokesperson look directly at the camera (usually just in telethons or scripted talkbacks). If you are on a panel with multiple people, try to respond to the person you are speaking to.
* Body language matters. Try to look confident and professional.
* For radio interviews, use your voice to portray your enthusiasm and keep a smile on your face so it is in your voice (unless the topic is a distressing one – in that case, your natural emotions will direct you).
* The rules of polite conversation apply. Never get openly angry or be rude.
* Be proactive by respectfully launching into your key messages after introductions with “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I would like to speak to you about….”
* This is your interview, so make sure your message gets across even if you have to politely say, "I would like to finish answering your earlier question" and “correct factual errors by the interviewer.”
* Never give inaccurate information. If you are unsure, simply say, "I’m sorry, I don’t know that. I’ll be glad to check and get back to you."
* Never say, "No comment." Maintain an open, positive attitude. If you are waiting for direction from other people or need time to study the issue, say so.
* Don’t repeat a negative comment. Instead, try to respond with a positive. "Actually, did you know…" or "In point of fact, our organization…" or "the real issue is…."
* Avoid one-word answers like "yes" and "no" by adding in part of your key message "yes, and…."
* When there is an opportunity to give additional comments (usually the interviewer’s last question), restate your core message or summarize your key messages.

# **Speaking with the media checklist**

* For in-person interviews, arrive 15 minutes early and let the reporter or front desk staff know you’ve arrived. Try to be flexible as the meeting may start late, end early or be shifted altogether. It is important to be early, flexible and courteous. Remember: they are helping you get your important message out to the public.
* Bring materials to help the audience understand, like fact sheets and other background materials. Bring contact information for anyone else who is willing to talk to the media (remember to ask them first!)
* Clothing instructions often come with interview requests, such as staying away from green (media projection screens are green) outfits. It’s best to avoid fussy prints and bold jewelry as they can distract from your message.

# **Other media outreach ideas**

* Writing a letter to the editor. This should be in response to a relevant article that has recently been published. Your letter should be around 200-300 words.
* Writing an op-ed, which is a guest newspaper editorial written by experts or members of the community on a particular issue.
* Writing a proactive letter to a newspaper to inform the readership about a proposed change (national/provincial legislation, modifications to local built environment) that might affect people who are blind or partially sighted.
* Calling into a "phone-in" part of a radio show when they mention an issue that you’re passionate about.
* Making yourself available as a source to the media in case they need a comment from a person with sight loss for their story.