

Affinity Groups

note: this document was written specifically for people participating in School of the Americas demonstrations, but much of the information is more generally applicable.

from the School of the Americas Handbook for Nonviolent Action and Civil Disobedience

<http://members.tripod.com/SOAWatchLocal/LocalPages/handbook.html>

Affinity groups are self-sufficient support systems of about 5 to 15 people. A number of affinity groups may work together toward a common goal in a large action, or one affinity group might conceive of and carry out an action on its own. Sometimes, affinity groups remain together over a long period of time, existing as political support and/or study groups, and only occasionally participating in actions. If you are planning to do civil disobedience, it is a good idea to either form an affinity group or join an already existing one. Affinity groups serve as a source of support and solidarity for their members. Feelings of being isolated or alienated from the movement, the crowd, or the world in general can be alleviated through the familiarity and trust which develops when an affinity group works and acts together. By generating this familiarity, the affinity group structure reduces the possibility of infiltration by outside provocateurs. However, participants in an action should be prepared to be separated from their affinity group .

Affinity groups form the basic decision-making bodies of mass actions. As long as they remain within the nonviolence guidelines, affinity groups are generally encouraged to develop any form of participation they choose.

Every affinity group must decide for itself how it will make decisions and what it wants to do. This process starts when an affinity group forms. If a new person asks to join an affinity group, she/he should find out what the group believes in and what they plan to do, and decide if she/he can share it. Some groups ask that all members share a commitment to feminism, for example, or to nonviolence as a way of life. Others, which have specifically formed to do a particular action, might have less sweeping agreements.

A group cannot hope to reach consensus decisions without having some base of agreement. Once a base is agreed upon, working out the details of specific issues and actions is not as difficult as one might expect, providing that there is a willingness to go along with a good idea, even if it is someone else's. If you find that you cannot work effectively with your group, it might be better to try to find another one.

Affinity groups for mass actions are often formed during nonviolence training sessions. It is a good idea to meet with your affinity group a few times before an action to get to know them if you are not already friends, and to discuss issues such as noncooperation and relationship to the legal system, the role your group will play (in a large action), etc. After an action, it is also helpful to meet with your group to evaluate and share experiences.

Roles Within the Affinity Group

These roles can be rotated: Facilitator(s), vibes-watchers, spokesperson to convey affinity group (A.G.) decisions to core support and other A.G.'s in a mass action. Roles that probably shouldn't be rotated: Support person(s) once you take on this responsibility, you should see it through.

More About Responsibilities of Support Person

The role of support in a civil disobedience action is crucial. Support people accept the responsibility of being a visible, involved contact to the outside once a member of the affinity group is arrested. They are the personal extension of the care and concern an affinity group shares among its members, an extension of the need all the participants have to see that individuals who participate in nonviolent direct action are not isolated, neglected, and overburdened because of their political statement.

It can be hard for you to decide whether to do civil disobedience or support. It is strongly encouraged that those considering doing support go through nonviolence training. In making the decision, you could

consider how each role would affect your family, job, and other commitments, as well as your legal status (i.e. being on probation, not being a U.S. citizen, etc.). During and after a mass action, be sure to stay in touch with support people from other affinity groups, for information sharing and emotional support.

Before an Action

Help the affinity group decide upon and initiate their action, provide physical and moral support, and share in the excitement and sense of determination.

- Know the people in your affinity group by name and description.
- Know where people who are arrested are likely to be taken.
- Make a confidential list with the following information:
 - Name of arrestee
 - Name used for arrest
 - Whether or not individual wants to bail out, and when.
 - Who arrestee would like contacted and under what circumstances.
 - Special medical information or other special needs info.
 - Whether the individual plans to cooperate, and in what ways.
 - Whether the person is a minor.
 - Whether the person wants/needs a lawyer.

For a mass action

- Know who the support coordinators are.
- Know the phone number of the action office.
- Be sure the group fills out an affinity group check-in sheet.
- Be sure your name, phone number, where you can be reached, and how long you will be available to do support work are written on your affinity group's list.

During an Action

- Know the boundaries of arrest and non-arrest areas, if applicable.
 - In a mass action, give emergency info about yourself to another support person.
- Bring paper and pen, and lots of food for yourself and people doing civil disobedience (CDers).
- Hold ID, money, keys and any other belongings for CDers.
- Keep in touch with CDers for as long as possible, noting any changes in arrest strategies, etc.
- Once arrests begin, write down each individual's name, and the time and nature of the arrest, the activity of the person arrested, the treatment of the arresting officer (get the badge number, if possible), and who is noncooperating.
- At least one support person from your affinity group should stay at the place of arrest until all members of your group are arrested, and at least one should go to where those arrested are being taken as soon as the first member of your group is arrested.

At the Courthouse (if that's where CDers are taken)

Be present during arraignments, and try to keep track of the following info for each person in your group. During a mass action, call this info into the office.

- Name of judge or magistrate.
- Name of CDer (Doe # if applicable).
- Charge
- Plea (Not Guilty, Nolo Contendere, Creative Plea, Guilty, etc.).
- If found guilty, sentence imposed.
- If not guilty:
 - Amount of bail, if applicable.
 - Whether the person pays bail or not.
 - Date, time and place of trial.
- If there's a lawyer in the courtroom ask her/his name.
- Any other info that seems relevant.

After the Action

- Call whoever needs to be informed about each person who was arrested.
- Go to trials or any other appearances of CDers; help with rides.
 - Help gather information for pro se defendants.
- In a mass action, be sure to let the office and/or support coordinators know when/if you have to leave town and give them all relevant info about the people you've been supporting.

If CDers are in jail, it is important for someone to be near a phone so that call from jail may be received. You will probably be the go-between for your A.G. members who are not jailed together, as well. .

- Contact the office (in a mass arrest) about people in jail and where they are being held.
- Be prepared to bring medication to the jail site for who ever needs it, and follow up on whether or not it has been administered.
- Visit your group members in jail, and pass on any messages.
- Take care of plants, pets, cars, etc., for CDers.
- Write letters to the people in jail; organize a support vigil in front of the jail.
- Be there to pick CDers up when they are released from jail.
- Support other support people working together will ease the load.

- *Nancy Alach*