

## **Lesson 12: Selecting the Issue**

### **Goals/Purpose**

This lesson will lead the group to a decision about what issue to focus on. Engaging in this decision making process will enhance their skills in a number of areas including:

- Analysis
- Creating and applying criteria
- Decision making:
  - Debate
  - Compromise
  - Consensus and voting

### **Objectives**

- Youth will be able to articulate the difference between a problem and an issue
- Youth will decide what specific issue to focus on
- Youth will be able to articulate and apply criteria to a set of issues
- Youth will demonstrate abilities to participate in group problem solving

**Total Time:** 2 –6 hours depending on what is happening in the community, whether there is informal consensus about a problem, the level of group experience with group decision making

### **Activities**

- Introductions/Icebreaker
- What is a problem and an issue?
- What are criteria?
- Making a list of criteria
- Small group and large group work
- Large group selection process for choosing among several proposed issues

### **Facilitator Preparation**

- Create a poster sized visual showing how an issue is a solution to a problem (see the Tools Section of this lesson)
- List the words Winnable, Deeply Felt, Widely Felt, One Year, and Easy to Understand on newsprint, leaving room for more words
- Create a poster sized criteria grid (see the Tools Section of this lesson)
- It is important to have one adult facilitator per small group

### **Materials Needed**

- Newsprint and markers for each group
- Newsprint and markers for large group report outs
- Stickers for voting, if voting becomes necessary

### **Tools**

- 8.5 X 11 criteria grids, one that is filled in and one that is blank
- Problem/Issue graphic sample
- Problem/Issue graphic blank



## **The Basics**

As described in the lesson “Choosing a Problem,” problems and issues are different things in direct action community organizing. A problem is a broad area of concern (e.g. pollution). Issues are specific pieces of the problem that have a specific solution (building more windmills on public land). Here is another example of a problem and an issue:

Problem: teen pregnancy

Issue: Youth need access to appropriate, comprehensive sexual health education in schools.

In direct action community organizing, “cutting the issue” is the term used to describe a process of breaking down a larger problem into smaller issues that are winnable. A community group cannot solve the problem of teen pregnancy, but they can take on smaller aspects like providing appropriate sex education. When the group picks a smaller piece of the problem to work on they have a good chance of being able to build power to make the change that is needed.

From a youth development perspective, success with an issue contributes to participants’ sense of empowerment and builds their resiliency.

Cutting the issue involves looking at the problems your group has identified and brainstorming the solutions. From there, it is a matter of developing some criteria for selecting an issue and applying the criteria. The three most important criteria for selecting an issue are:

- 1) Is it winnable?
- 2) Is it something that is deeply felt by your group?
- 3) Is it something that is widely felt by a lot of young people and their adult allies?

Additional criteria can include:

- 1) Can your group make a difference in a short period of time (we have defined this as one school year or less)?
- 2) Is it easy to understand?

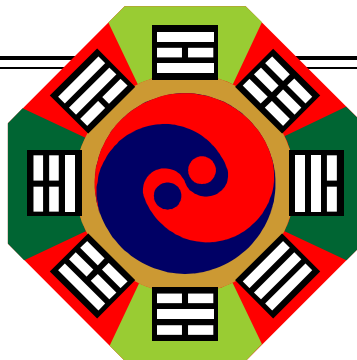
Your group will come up with its own criteria. Resources such as the Midwest Academy’s book and the TIGHT Toolkit can help you develop your own criteria (see the Resource Section at the end of this guide).

Cutting the issue is often a challenging process for young people because it requires them to develop and use analytical skills that may be new to them. It involves knowing something about the community and its politics, getting information from people outside the group, discussing alternate points of view, resolving any conflict that arises, and compromise. Alternately, sometimes an

issue arises that the group can just go with – there is little need to analyze and choose. Whatever the situation, it is important for you to take the time needed to select an issue. Don't rush the process because your group cohesion and the chances of your success depend upon doing this well.

**TIPS**

- Picking an issue cannot be accomplished in one 2-hour session—it takes a lot of time. Be prepared to use one full day of a retreat or several group meetings to complete the process. Nothing will be gained—and a lot could be lost—from rushing through this lesson.
- This work is intellectually demanding. It is important to pace the group and use fun breaks as a means of reviving members' energy and mental capacity.
- Much of this work mirrors that of picking a problem. Repetition of this process can help build young peoples' analytical and group decision making skills.
- The adult leader(s) has a large role in this process. The leader needs to be part of the conversation to help the youth understand which of the issues is winnable. The adult leader needs to help guide the youth to a project that has a good chance of being successful. At the same time, the adult needs to be careful not to force an adult agenda on the youth.
- Like picking the problem, selecting the issue tests group cohesion, conflict resolution and decision-making skills.



## 1. What is an issue?

60 minutes

Materials: List of the problem your group is working on for each small group, newsprint and markers.

### Step 1: Large group presentation

Talk to the large group about what an issue is. You can tell the group that: An issue is a small piece of the problem with the solution built in. Show them the poster-sized visual you have like the one in the illustration “Problem and Issues” in the Tools section of this lesson. Refer to the examples in the basics section and use the following examples from young peoples’ lives.

#### **Problem: Your social life is not happening.**

Issue 1 - Get mom to let you borrow the car. (The solution may be getting transportation to be able to go out.)

Issue 2 – Join extracurricular activities. (The solution may be participating in social activities.)



#### **a. Step 2: Small group work to brainstorm issues.**

Divide into small groups of 5 - 8 participants. Review the difference between a problem and an issue, then take the problem the group has selected (in the “Choosing a Problem” lesson number 10) and ask them to brainstorm solutions. You may want to review ground rules for brainstorming (see page 4-17)

#### **b. Step 3: Large group report out.**

Have the groups come together and share the list of issues they have brainstormed. Make a note of similar issues the groups have generated either by circling the common issues or writing them up on another piece of newsprint.

## **2. What are criteria?**

**60- 90 minutes**

Materials: Poster-sized list of criteria words, poster-sized criteria grid, 8.5 x 11 criteria grids (1 per small group), newsprint and markers.

### **a. Step 1: Large group presentation and discussion**

Discuss what criteria are with the large group. You can tell the group that: criteria can help make decisions, especially between difficult choices. Criteria help weed out issues that are unpopular or difficult to implement. They show you what will be most worthwhile for your group to work on. Two examples of criteria are: can the issue be completed in one school year, and; do people really care about the issue?

Talk about the 3 most important criteria in direct action community organizing which you have listed on newsprint. You can tell the group that: in direct action community organizing, there are three criteria that have to be met in order for the group to succeed.

- 1) The issue must be winnable – that is, you have to know that you can be successful. You as the adult leader may have information that will help them answer this question.
- 2) The issue must be deeply felt – it must be something that people feel very strongly about such that they will keep working on it when things get hard.
- 3) The issue must be widely felt – a lot of people, youth and adults, must feel strongly about it. You need a lot of power to win, and people are power.

Add the additional criteria of making a difference in a short period of time (one school year or less) and easy to understand, both of which you have listed.

You can tell them that groups often have additional criteria to help them weed out solutions, like can you make a difference in one year? Ask for suggestions for other criteria and discuss them.

### **Break**

**15 minutes**

Doing something that involves using your bodies will help the group to revive.

**b. Step 2: Small group work at applying criteria.**

Divide back into small groups. Take the criteria generated by the large group and review them. Is there anything that shouldn't be there? Have the group members fill in their small criteria grids with their issues and the criteria they have determined to be most helpful. As a group, go through the list of issues and apply the criteria to each one. Discuss this as much as possible and challenge them to think things through e.g. If pressed, they may see something they want as not winnable). Using the criteria grid, select (2) issues to recommend to the group.

**c. Step 3: Large group report out.**

Each group reports out on the issues they have selected, using the criteria as a reference. Once all the groups have reported, see if there is any overlap to the issues that have been selected. Finally, compile the issues and write them on newsprint.

**3. Large group selection process for choosing among several proposed issues.**

**60 minutes**

Materials: List of issues on newsprint, stickers.

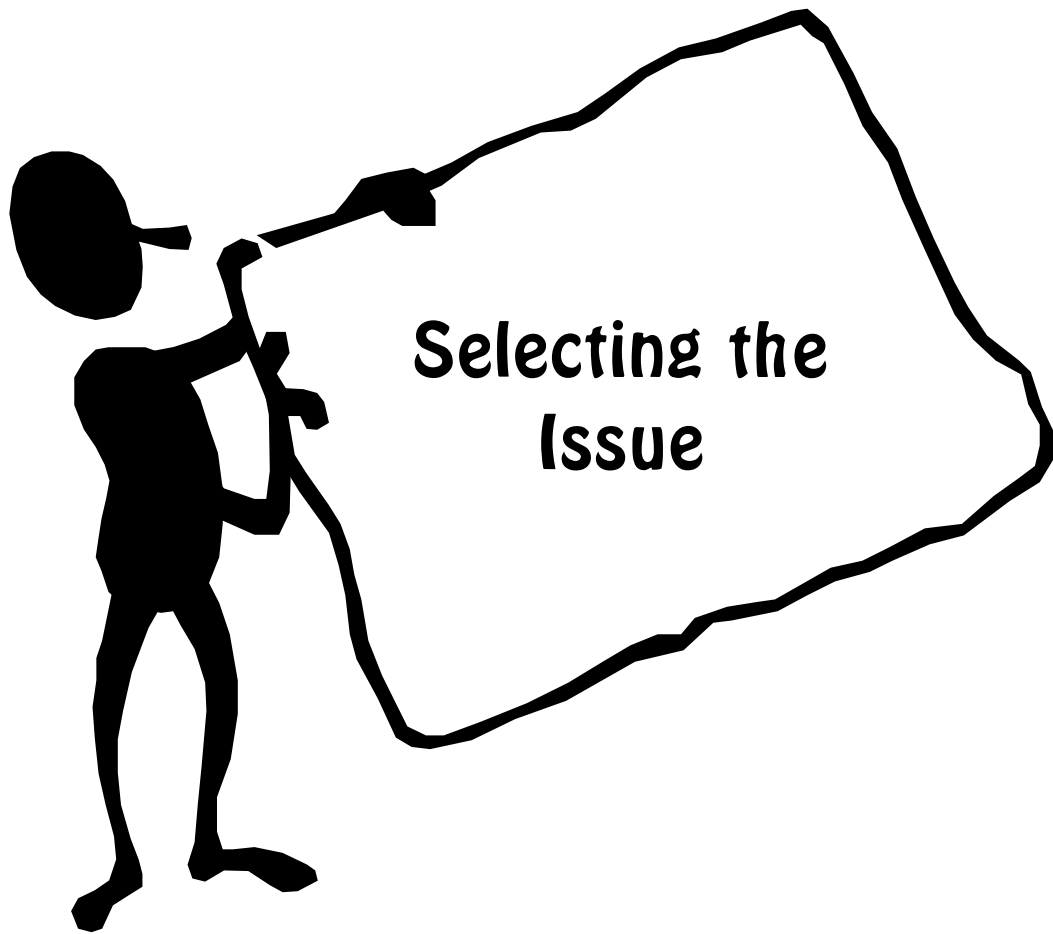
Depending on your group, you can use a consensus process or voting to select the issue that your group will focus on. A suggested consensus process was outlined in the "Choosing a Problem" lesson plan. You may also have your own consensus process developed by the time you select your issue.

**Voting.** List the proposed issues from each group on a large piece of newsprint. Give everyone one sticker for voting. Have them put their sticker next to the issue they want to work on. The issue that receives the most votes is the one that is selected.

Once the issue is selected, celebrate!



## **Tools – Lesson 12**





# Problem and Issues

~Sample~



**PROBLEM**

Tobacco Industry Targets Youth



**Issue:**

Restrict  
Billboards



**Issue:**

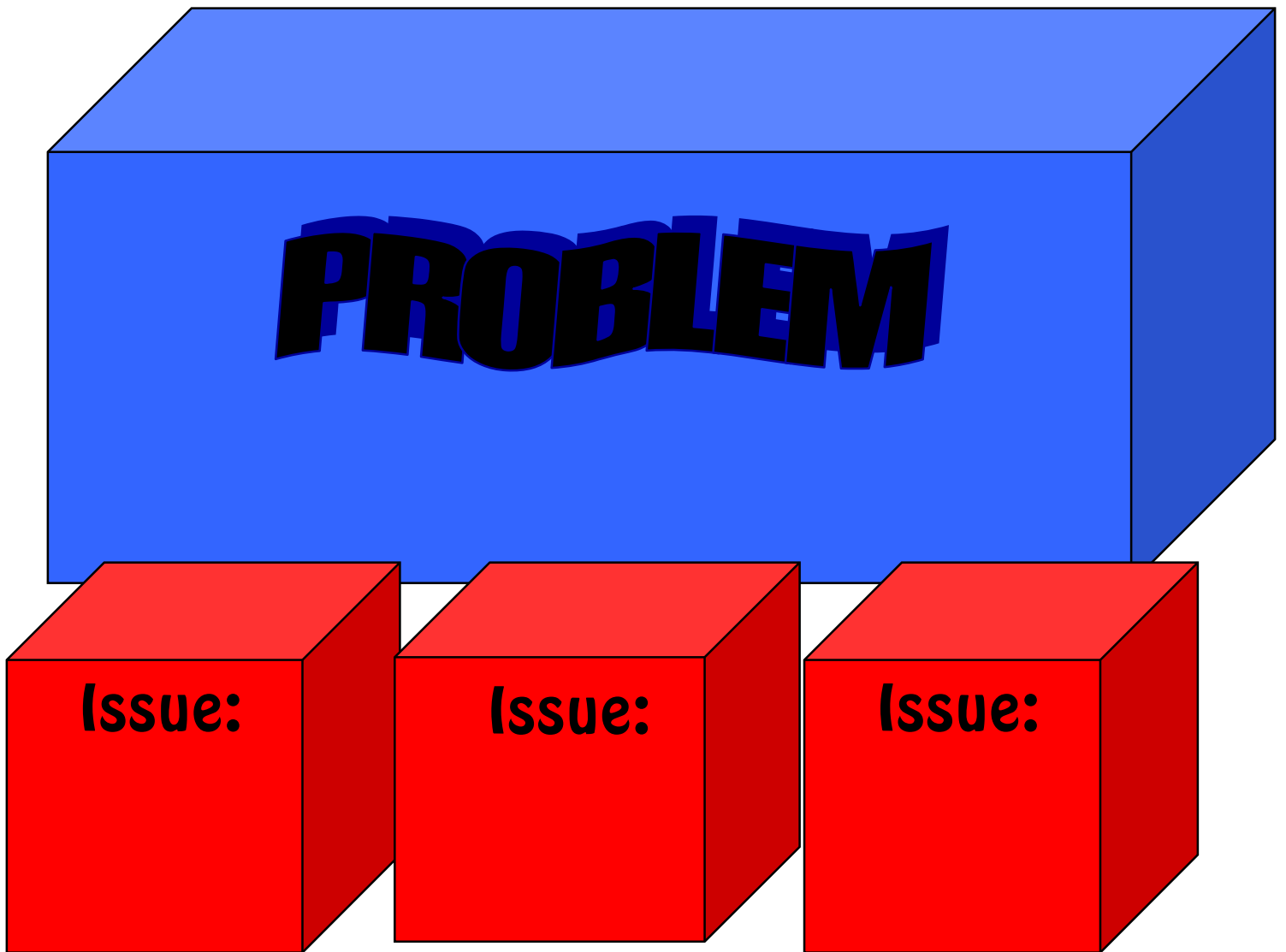
Ban Self-  
Service  
Displays



**Issue:**

Enforce  
Tobacco  
Laws

# Problem and Issues



# Criteria Grid

## Issues

### Possible Criteria

	<b>Winnable</b>	<b>We can win within one school year</b>	<b>People feel very strongly about the issue</b>	<b>A lot of people feel very strongly about the issue</b>	<b>We can get adult allies if we work on this issue</b>	<b>The issue is easy to explain and understand</b>	<b>Other</b>
School district provide accurate sexual health education in the classroom	maybe	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	Very controversial in our community
School district provide resources to clean the bathrooms in the high school	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	How can anyone be against this?
School lunches include food that young people like to eat	maybe	maybe	yes	no	maybe	yes	Are students really going to get behind this?
School district provide extra transportation at night after school events	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes	This affects a minority of students and those who aren't affected won't care

# Criteria Grid

## Possible Criteria

Issues

	Winnable	We can win within one school year	People feel very strongly about the issue	A lot of people feel very strongly about the issue	We can get adult allies if we work on this issue	The issue is easy to explain and understand	Other