



The Science & Environmental Health Network and the  
Women's Congress for Future Generations

# *Tips for Activists*

Volume Three:

Analyzing and Shaping Public Budgets

## **Activist Tips for Change Makers**

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### **Activist Tips: Analyzing and Shaping Public Budgets**

Much of environmental and social justice work depends on government action of some kind – legislation, regulation and litigation. Often an invisible part of that work has a public budget element. Federal, state and local budgets are the vehicles for government policies.

Public budgets are built on basic assumptions of what government is for. If your governor has based her administration on the premise that her job is to promote economic growth, she will set goals and establish budgets that seek corporations to locate within your state. She will privatize basic government services and slash funding for environmental regulation.

If, however, your governor is basing her administration on the idea that government is to serve the public good and she is charged with the well-being of the people, she is more likely to set goals and spend money that protect the common wealth and public health.

Our task is to shape the public conversation and policy. Taking public budgets seriously and showing that public money should be in public hands and used for the public good, is a way to highlight an appropriate role for government.

Here's how you can analyze your state or local budget and come up with recommendations for both revenue and spending.

Many of you will come to your public budget because of some incongruity or flagrant injustice – cutting funding for your state universities and giving it to private corporations or granting



permits to private water companies but not cleaning up the drinking water of the town. That injustice is where you plant your flag. It is your entry point for looking at the whole budget.

In Iowa, we were setting conservation goals for the state and observed that every single goal had a budget component. All of our environmental priorities, particularly river and water quality, had a price tag associated with it: if we wanted to clean up the water, we needed to spend some money. This observation prompted us to take a careful look at the budget and see where state money was going and where we could find some money to dedicate to clean water. What is particularly interesting about rivers is that they fall under a unique legal idea called the public trust doctrine which asserts a duty on the part of the state to care for shorelines for the people. The duty is a fiduciary duty, which is a very high level of care. It was the rivers that led us to understand the key role of government as caring for the wellbeing of its people and that the foundation of that wellbeing is the commons.

1. **Start your budget analysis** by identifying the mismatch between a fundamental aspect of community well-being and the state budget. Is it a neglect of drinking water in Flint Michigan? Or a failure to enforce water quality in the Everglades? Or gross racial injustice in Milwaukee? [Racism has been declared a public health crisis in Milwaukee](#) which puts a unique onus on government to address the systemic nature of racism.
2. **Gather a team** together that can share labor. Your ultimate goal will be:
  - a. to intervene in the state or local budget process to challenge the idea that government's primary responsibility is economic growth.
  - b. advance the premise that government has a responsibility to promote well-being.
  - c. use government money to protect the common wealth and public health, which is the basis for well-being.

The more diverse your team, the more likely you will come up with new insights, have greater organizing capacity and make more connections to bring about change. Look for team members who have skills working at the intersection of issues — environmental justice and racism or conservation and agriculture, or poverty and public health. You are going to want to recommend budget solutions that solve for the patterns of injustice.

3) **Do the research. Be prepared.** Government budgets at the state and federal level are very complicated. Most legislators, even on the budget committees don't read the whole thing. Start by reading the most recent state budget document which is usually submitted by the governor or mayor. One way to get a grasp of the chief executive's view of the budget is to read the budget goals and any highlighted initiatives. Those are usually at the front of the budget document and will help frame the rest of what you will find in the body of the budget.

4) **Compare your goals to those set out in the budget.** Do they promote the economy at the expense of the common good, the environment and public health? Are there glaring omissions



where the state or city throws money at corporations but neglects something essential like mental health or clean water?

5) **Find out where the public's money is kept.** In the case of Iowa, we found that most of the state's money is in Wells Fargo, a bank that has been repeatedly sanctioned for fraud. From an environmental perspective, Wells Fargo has invested money in crude oil pipelines like Dakota Access and, until recently, it funded private prisons. The state has a provision in its state constitution that allows for a state bank. Instead of keeping public money in public hands for the public good, Iowa keeps its money in a bank that commits fraud. That too, it can be argued, is a breach of the state's fiduciary duty.

6) **Map out the structure of financial decision-making and management.** Each state is different. Do you have a treasurer? Some states have one. Some states don't. For instance, Iowa has a treasurer that is elected but Minnesota does not. Minnesota eliminated the position of State Treasurer and instituted a [Commissioner of Finance who is appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Minnesota Senate](#). If the treasurer is elected, you have more opportunities for activist engagement. Look for all the agencies that manage money. These agencies might include the [auditor](#), an [office of the budget and management](#) and an [investment board](#).

7) **Establish a time-line for the budget-setting process and intervening in that process.** Many states set a two-year budget but visit it annually.

8) **Identify points of leverage.** Every state or city will be unique and offer barriers and opportunities for intervening in the budget process. Flow like water.

9) **Make common cause with allies such as the Poor People's Campaign.** The Campaign has established some basic demands for moral federal and state budgets. Those can be seen here: <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/budget/> Key findings in the Campaign's report on the budget are directly on target with the public trust responsibilities of government for the wellbeing of its people. They found that:

*"The United States has abundant resources for an economic revival that will move towards establishing a moral economy. This report identifies:*

- *\$350 billion in annual military spending cuts that would make the nation and the world more secure;*
- *\$886 billion in estimated annual revenue from fair taxes on the wealthy, corporations, and Wall Street; and*
- *Billions more in savings from ending mass incarceration, addressing climate change, and meeting other key campaign demands.*

*It is critical that policymakers redirect these resources to establish justice and to prioritize the general welfare instead. The abundant wealth of this nation is*



*produced by millions of people, workers, and families in this country and around the world. The fruits of their labor should be devoted to securing their basic needs and creating the conditions for them to thrive.”*

10) **Explore democratic ways to set a public budget.** One of the most democratic ways is through participatory budgeting. The [Citizen Lab has a great handbook](#) that describes participatory budgeting and the rationale and process for fully engaging the public. [They say this](#): “With a participatory budget, citizens have the opportunity to allocate resources, prioritize social policies, and monitor public spending...any local government, no matter its number of inhabitants, can implement a participatory budget.”

In summary, you can do this! Public budgets are (frequently) unexplored territory for activists working to leverage change. It is time we changed the terms of the debate and made a case that government has primary responsibilities for our well-being.

Follow the money!