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BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING THE MEDIA
It’s time to celebrate afterschool programs! Lights On Afterschool (LOA), is a nationwide event that celebrates afterschool programs and the impact they have on young people, their families, and communities. The LOA campaign is a time when afterschool programs receive immense recognition across the United States.

Lights On Afterschool will be taking place on October 20, 2022! This year, the Afterschool Alliance is celebrating the role afterschool programs play in encouraging youth to amplify their voice and be civically engaged. Throughout the month of October, and primarily on October 20, 2022, providers across the state of Illinois will be able to join in on the celebration by participating in events led by colleagues, highlighting and facilitating their own afterschool programming, and more!

We know that out-of-school time (OST) plays a fundamental role in empowering young people to get involved in their communities and raise awareness of diverse issues. Civic engagement opportunities are essential to empowering both individuals and communities to make decisions for themselves, get involved in politics, and shape surrounding institutions. Providers have been a critical resource for amplifying youth voices. We also acknowledge that OST programs have given young people the tools they need to make a difference in their communities. Many afterschool programs have provided safe environments for youth and community members to come together in order to foster tough discussions regarding equity and advocate for social justice.

For every child in an afterschool program in Illinois, four more are waiting to get in.

In 2022, 57% of parents without a child in an afterschool program reported programs being too expensive was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child.

73% of parents agree that programs help children become more interested in school.

The afterschool field in Illinois is comprised of superstars that light the way to positive development for many. As such, Lights On Afterschool remains a key time to engage our policymakers, families, community members, local businesses, and the media in order to spread awareness of the field and build partnerships.

If your program has any questions or is in need of assistance during the Lights On Afterschool 2022 campaign, please reach out to Tiffany Ellison, ACT Now Policy, Communications, and Operations Associate at: ellisont@actnowillinois.org.
Advocacy is the sharing of your point of view, program stories, plans, and ideas with elected officials in order to gain support for your work. Advocating is an integral way to connect with legislators and discuss the issues that you, and the youth you serve, encounter in your communities. Issues such as access to sustainable funding for the afterschool field, transportation to programming in both urban and rural regions, mental health resources for providers, and staffing concerns should all be elevated to your policymakers. By sharing information with them you can:

### ADVOCACY TOOLS AND RESOURCES

**Lights On Afterschool 2022** is a great time to remind families, policymakers, and community members about the importance of afterschool by advocating for your program and afterschool colleagues!

ACT Now encourages program providers to invite their policymakers to visit sites and to host other in-person events during **Lights On Afterschool**. To help you with your Lights On Afterschool advocacy, ACT Now created the following resources:

- **ACT Now’s Action Alert**
- **Tips on creating personal letters /emails for legislators**
- **Sample Letter/Email for policymakers**
- **Best Practices for Phone Conversations**
- **Sample Phone Conversation**
- **Social Media Templates**
- **Tips for Planning an Event**
- **Best Tips for Engaging the Media**
IDENTIFYING ELECTED OFFICIALS

Writing an email, writing a letter, talking to a representative, or encouraging the youth in your program to do so is a great idea! The Illinois State Board of Elections has a District and Official Search page where you can find your elected state and federal officials.

Please Note: You must enter a complete address with a corresponding zip code (ex: 101 N Wacker Drive, Chicago, IL 60606, Cook County) for the map to locate your legislators’ information. Otherwise, you may enter the county in which you pertain (ex: Peoria County, Peoria County) in order to find out your elected officials.

Tips for Writing to Legislators:

- **Remain targeted and highlight where you are from.** You should address letters to the appropriate legislators in the district where you live and/or where your organization is located.

- **Keep it personal.** Tell your elected official why this legislation matters in their community or state. Include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you. A constituent’s personal stories can be very persuasive, especially as your legislator shapes their position on an issue.

- **Know the issue.** Legislators are concerned with multiple items, so be sure to provide good background information. For example, explain or have statistics that show that there is a high demand for afterschool programs in Illinois!

- **Be nonpartisan.** Remember, there is a higher chance of receiving a response to your advocacy if the message does not center on partisanship.
The Honorable (Full Name)  
Illinois House of Representatives  
Address  

Re: Lights On Afterschool  

Dear Senator [Last Name] or Representative [Last Name],  

My name is (your name) and I am (insert position here) who resides in your district. I am writing to encourage you to support afterschool programs and continue to ensure they are adequately funded. I am also writing to ask you to join in the celebration for Lights On Afterschool 2022, on October 20, 2022.  

Lights On Afterschool (LOA) has been celebrated for over 20 years. It is an annual event that celebrates the importance of afterschool programs and the role they play in the lives of young people, their families, and diverse communities. LOA is a time to acknowledge how afterschool programs have stepped up during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have provided critical resources. It is also a time to appreciate how afterschool programs have provided a safe space for young people to grow, learn, and be engaged in their communities. Ultimately, LOA highlights the fact that millions of children are still in need of high-quality afterschool programming in Illinois.  

Afterschool programs have been a valuable resource and a safe space in a time of racial violence, public health crises, and a struggling economy. Afterschool programs have a number of connections in place that make providing these critical resources more streamlined. To meet the expanding and diverse needs of youth and families, we need to create new opportunities for publicly funded OST programs and expanded learning in Illinois.  

You can show support for your local afterschool programs by:  

* Checking in with your local out-of-school time programs  
* Making afterschool a legislative priority for you  
* Advocating for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (federal) and Teen REACH programs (state)  
* Encouraging local school district leaders to partner with established afterschool programs in your district  

Sincerely,  
[Your Name]
CALLING ELECTED OFFICIALS

Calling the legislators that represent you is one of the most effective ways to share your thoughts.

**Illinois General Assembly:** To reach your legislators in Springfield, you may call the switchboard at 217-782-2000. You can also find the numbers listed for the Illinois House and Illinois Senate.

**Congress:** The U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate webpages provide direct links to your federal legislators’ information (including office phone numbers).

### Tips for Calling Legislators:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research your legislator.</th>
<th>Prepare prior to the call.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn their position on afterschool programs beforehand. Have they visited a program in your community? Do they have family members that participate in expanded learning opportunities?</td>
<td>Know the issue you wish to discuss, your goal, or the action you want the legislator to take. Before calling, have your message written in front of you and review it carefully so you know exactly what you want to say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep it brief.</td>
<td>Be polite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative aides receive a high volume of phone calls every day, so keep your call short. You should aim to have the phone call be no longer than 3 minutes.</td>
<td>The staffers that answer the phone are there to help you and you should treat them with the same respect you expect from them, regardless of their party affiliation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be personal.</td>
<td>Did you reach the office’s voicemail?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective phone calls combine a thoughtful approach to policy issues with an explanation of why it’s important to you and the member’s community. Tell a story about how afterschool programs have impacted your life or community!</td>
<td>That’s okay! Leave a brief but detailed message stating why you’re calling and urging a specific action. Offices check their voice messages and keep track of concerns of their constituents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Staff Member: Thank you for calling Representative/Senator (Last Name)’s office. How may I help you?

Caller: Hello, my name is (Your Full Name) from (City or Town), and I am calling on behalf of (Name of Afterschool Program or Organization).

Staff Member: Wonderful, what can I do for you?

Caller: I am calling to kindly remind Senator (Last Name) or Representative (Last Name) that October 20th is Lights On Afterschool! Lights On Afterschool is the annual and nationwide event that celebrates afterschool programs and the integral role they play in the lives of youth, families, and our diverse communities. We ask that you reach out to your afterschool programs on this day, and keep them in mind as you return to the legislative session. (You can also add why afterschool programs are so important to you and your greater community. Remember, be brief!)

Staff Member: Thank you for sharing this with us. I will relay your comments to Representative/Senator (Last Name). Do you have a phone number or email address to contact you at?

Caller: Yes, my phone number and email address are (Insert phone number and email address). I appreciate you allowing me to share my thoughts. Have a great day, and I look forward to hearing back from Representative/Senator (Last Name).
State Representative:
The Honorable (Full Name)
Illinois House of Representatives
Address

Dear Representative (Full Name):

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me on (Date of conversation) to highlight the importance of expanded learning programs in Illinois and in your district (Include district number/area). As we discussed, and as you have witnessed on-the-ground, afterschool programs help to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes, keep youth safe and engaged, and support career development not only in underserved and historically marginalized communities but across the state of Illinois. I know firsthand that afterschool programs have helped to amplify youth voices and help to encourage young people to be civically engaged. Many providers are ready to collaborate with state agencies and school districts in order to support the diverse needs of young people as they relate to providing high-quality and diverse afterschool programming.

I look forward to speaking with you again to discuss further the ways in which we can work together to ensure that young Illinoisans have access to afterschool programs and the tools they need to successfully transition into educated, creative, empathetic, and skilled adults.

Sincerely,
(Your Full Name)
Social media continues to be a powerful way for program providers, youth, advocates, and families to connect with elected officials, highlight programmatic successes, and spread information! Lights On Afterschool is a great time to engage policymakers by tagging them in your Lights On Afterschool content or inviting them to join the celebration. Most legislators use Twitter and Facebook to interact with their constituents and local community members. Some also use Instagram to reach more people, specifically youth populations!

The steps to set up an account on Twitter and Facebook are simple. Both platforms have “help” pages that will guide you through the process and give you a better understanding of how the service works. Ultimately, choose the social media content that resonates most with you, your afterschool program, and your community.

Please tweet at legislators by using their Twitter handle (see examples below):

Senator Karina Villa: @Citizens4Karina October 20th is #LightsOnAfterschool! Join us in celebrating afterschool providers that offer trauma-informed & engaging programming to approximately 283,120 youth in Illinois. Thank you for all you have done to support afterschool programs!

Illinois Representative Aaron Ortiz: @RepAaronOrtiz Let’s put the #LightsOnAfterschool for afterschool staff who have risen to the moment to serve our students this year! Every day, afterschool staff work to provide a safe & fun environment & facilitate enriching programs for youth in their community! #LightsOnIL

Note: The Afterschool Alliance has social media content as well! Click here to access their social media toolkit.
### Social Media Templates

Below, you will find sample Tweets and Facebook content relating to Lights On Afterschool 2022 developed by ACT Now. Please use the following hashtags in your posts: #LightsOnAfterschool #LightsOnIL #ACTNow4LOA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook Post</th>
<th>Media/Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 20, 2022, is a day to celebrate! Lights On Afterschool is taking place this year with the knowledge that Illinois students are strong leaders. That’s why this year #LightsOnAfterschool is highlighting student leadership in their classrooms and communities. We want to support afterschool programs that encourage Illinois students every day to reach their full potential. We know that afterschool programs encourage civic engagement and important discussions regarding equity and advocacy in social justice. #YouthVoiceYouthChoice</td>
<td>Afterschool Programs Nurture Young Leaders Graphic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New leaders are emerging every day. Youth today are at the center of civic engagement. #ACTNowLOA wants to hear about YOUR youth civic engagement activities and discussions! #LightsOnAfterschool this October 20, 2022, and help highlight how youth today are reaching their full potential with afterschool programs in Illinois #YouthVoiceYouthChoice</td>
<td>Lights on Afterschool 2022 Graphic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#LightsOnAfterschool this October 20, 2022, is a great time to celebrate the importance of afterschool programs in Illinois. This year #ACTNowLOA is shining a light on youth leadership programs that are enhancing Illinois youth leadership and civic engagement skills <a href="https://bit.ly/3dLYmSF">https://bit.ly/3dLYmSF</a> #YouthVoiceYouthChoice</td>
<td>Afterschool Programs Prepare Students for Fullfilling Careers Graphic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you know that in Illinois one million students would enroll in an #AfterschoolProgram were it available to them? #LightsOnAfterschool this October 20, 2022, celebrates the programs that could use our support and appreciation. <a href="https://bit.ly/3dLYmSF">https://bit.ly/3dLYmSF</a> #YouthVoiceYouthChoice #ACTNowLOA</td>
<td>Lights on Afterschool 2022 Graphic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
October 20, 2022, is **#LightsOnAfterschool**! After-school programs in IL empower students to have meaningful conversations and lead the way for change in their communities. Let’s celebrate programs that prepare youth to lead! **#LOA**

**#ShineALight** on After-school programs! On October 20, 2022, we want to hear how After-school programs made you a leader **#ACTNowLOA #YouthVoiceYouthChoice**

https://bit.ly/3dLYmSF

October 20, 2022, **#ACTNowLOA** wants to celebrate your youth civic engagement! Highlight your activities and events with the **#LightsOnAfterschool** hashtag

This October 20, 2022, is all about appreciating IL After-school that enhances **#YouthVoice** in their communities. **#ACTNowLOA #LightsOnAfterSchool**

https://bit.ly/3dLYmSF
Lights On Afterschool is a great time to engage policymakers and media to elevate the profile of your program and garner support for your program in the future. It is also a great time to showcase all the amazing work that your program is doing. Below are four tips to keep in mind when planning your event.

To aid in the planning of virtual and in-person events, the Afterschool Alliance has dedicated an entire webpage to activities that providers can do for Lights On Afterschool 2022. The Afterschool Alliance has also released materials to help programs understand the timeline, work out logistics, and more!

Think about who you want to reach.
Examples of groups you might want to garner attention from are policymakers, educators, funders, local business leaders, and media outlets.

Stay organized and start planning early.
For planning and organizing, assign someone, or a team of people, to help with the logistics of the event.

Include young people in the process!
Encouraging youth to be involved in the planning process will teach them important skills. Young people will also offer a unique and valuable perspective.

Think about what format you want to use to get your message across.
Do you want to host a panel? Do you want to host an in-person or virtual event? Go with an idea that is right for your program!
# LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL EVENT IDEAS

Planning a Lights On Afterschool Event does not have to be stressful, expensive, or time consuming. This is a great chance to think outside of the box and be creative! Below are some ideas for planning an event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invite a Legislator</th>
<th>Decorate Your Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inviting a legislator to see all the amazing work your program is doing is a great way to develop strong relationships and engage policy makers.</td>
<td>Decorate your community with posters and student lightbulb artwork. Post in your facility’s windows and provide artwork to families, partners, and local businesses to post in their window.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form a Light Bulb!</th>
<th>Elevate Youth Voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form a human light bulb on a giant field, parking lot, or any open space. Allow students to take the lead on how they want to position themselves!</td>
<td>Hold a panel with young people in your program. This is a great way to get youth more involved in the community and become more civically engaged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Letter and Drawings To Policymakers
Develop a Mad Libs-style letter to policymakers where students fill in the blanks about why their program is important. For instance, you could have them describe how afterschool has allowed them to develop and sustain meaningful connections with fellow peers and afterschool staff. You might also ask students to draw something that reflects their experience in afterschool and include those pieces of art when mailing letters to legislators.

Light Bulb Art
The Afterschool Alliance has printable light bulb art that youth can decorate and write on to creatively demonstrate the importance of afterschool. You can have youth in your program work on the light bulbs in a group setting and send them to local policymakers as a follow-up to your event. This is an initiative that youth across the United States do annually for Lights On Afterschool! To access the Light Bulb Template, click here.

Afterschool Letter Exchange
Partner with another afterschool program and have students exchange pen-pal letters. Ask students to share with their pen-pals what they do in their afterschool program and draw a picture to reflect that. Students can also exchange light bulb art!

Virtual Afterschool Tour
Have students bring a friend to afterschool – virtually! Students can video call a friend or family member and give them a virtual tour of the afterschool space and programming. This is a great way for other students to see what happens in afterschool. You might even get some new registrants!

Thank You Cards
Let students show their appreciation by writing Thank You cards to give to an afterschool staff member who has had a positive impact on them. Encourage students to be creative and think about all the people who help make their afterschool program possible!
Students Lead the Charge!
Modeling behavior is an important part of elevating youth voice and choice! Asking your students how they would want to celebrate Lights On Afterschool and who they want to include in the event will showcase their leadership roles. Encourage students to help plan the activity and highlight how afterschool programming has impacted them!

Advocacy Event / Afterschool Program Tour & Visit
Collaborate with youth in your program to host a conversation with policymakers in the community about the importance of afterschool and expanded learning opportunities. This event may include local legislators and school board members, leaders in your afterschool program, family members, and other elected officials. Help students to create a list of priorities they want to share and provide time to practice and work on public speaking.

Youth Service Projects
Youth Service America (YSA) has developed guides for helping young people give back to their communities through project-based learning opportunities. There are projects related to sports, the arts, literacy, and STEM! These guides touch upon the topics of health, nutrition, and more, and can be co-facilitated by students and program providers to ensure that youth leadership is at the core of the work.

Social Media Campaign
Utilize some of ACT Now’s and the Afterschool Alliance’s social media content to help inspire youth in your program to launch a social media campaign about important topics that affect them. Perhaps encourage them to think about elevating successes in the community or ways to solve issues in their surrounding environment. Youth can combine a variety of craft projects to be elevated in this social media campaign. Make sure that youth engage with their elected officials by tagging them in content!

Cross-Program Connections
Help students coordinate a visit with another local afterschool program or host a virtual celebration in collaboration with a fellow out-of-school time (OST) program. Ask students to share some of the things they love the most about their program and highlight any skills and talents they have developed with their peers. Students can share stories, projects, and lived experiences with one another. Combine this event with some of the aforementioned activities to help forge cross-program connections!

Plan a Party – Virtual and Distance Friendly
There’s no better way to celebrate than by having a party! Let students pick the playlist and jam out either virtually or in-person. You can also find easily adaptable improvisation and party games to play as a group. Don’t forget to decorate ahead of time!
Connect with News Outlets.

Call or write to the news desk of your local paper or news station and give them a brief summary of your program. If you are hosting a Lights On Afterschool Event, make sure to include all relevant information in your communication.

Be Persistent.

Tell them you have a press release (and photo, if relevant), and find out the best address (physical address or email address) to send it. Make sure you get the name of the individual you spoke to in order to follow up with them.

Send Invites.

Invite local newspaper writers, radio show hosts, and news anchors to participate in your event.

Follow up.

After the event, be sure to thank any news outlets who did media coverage! This is a great way to develop good relationships.

RESOURCES FOR REACHING OUT TO MEDIA OUTLETS:

- Use this sample media alert to tell reporters about your Lights On Afterschool event, and convince them that afterschool is an important topic to cover!
- Edit this sample news release to reflect your Lights On Afterschool event! Distribute it to media personnel who attend and then email or fax it that same day to reporters on your press list who may not have been able to attend the event.