

What I want from an ally

We asked several AFSC staff members who work on a range of issues for their perspectives on what it means to be an effective ally.



Photo: AFSC

Sandra Sanchez, Director, Iowa Immigrants' Voice Program

An effective ally is willing to say "I want to follow your lead, recognizing that I am no expert on your community/issues, but I am willing to learn from you and share anything I might know which you may find helpful." Such allies respect and recognize our own power and wisdom, and meet us wherever we are. They recognize that the entire society and cultural constructs of the majority and those in power in this country have been developed in such a way that it takes true honest allies to open doors and opportunities that otherwise we cannot access alone.



Photo: James Wasserman

Joshua Saleem, Director, Peace Education, St. Louis

Kayla Reed, an organizer here in St. Louis,

uses this acronym for ALLY: Always center the impacted. Listen and learn from those who live in the oppression. Leverage your privilege. Yield the floor.

What's most meaningful for me is that first "L"—listening and learning from those living in the oppression. Earlier this year, I met with a guy from our church—he's white—and he asked me, "What's it like for you to live as a Black man in St. Louis on a day-to-day basis?" That was the first time any white person had ever asked me something like that.

Keep in mind that there was authentic relationship before he asked that question, and I felt comfortable answering it—there are times when that wouldn't be the case. I appreciated that he asked the question because it's important to listen to how people of color move differently in this society, and to acknowledge those differences. I think that's an important initial step in becoming an ally.



Photo: AFSC

Pedro Rios, Director, U.S.-Mexico Border Program, San Diego

It's important for allies to acknowledge that affected communities need space to speak for themselves, especially when we're in unequal power relationships. When allies step outside of that space, affected communities can share their truth

and help shape a reality that is inclusive of everyone's lived experience. In our leadership trainings, we encourage those affected to recognize that their story matters and they assert their dignity when they share it. Without their story, somebody else will communicate it for them, and it won't be a genuine reflection of their experience.

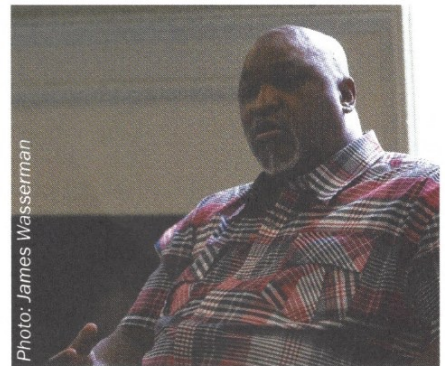


Photo: James Wasserman

Jerry Elster, Healing Justice Program coordinator, San Francisco

An ally who is accountable is a treasure for coalitions and campaigns. This is the person who shows up first for meetings and actions. They are the ones who the team usually turns to in a lurch for materials and just come to rely on, especially in emergency situations. They are the person that demands some serious tactical thoughts when planning an action of civil disobedience.

I have witnessed campaigns lose their vigor simply because of such inconsistencies of meetings not starting on time, people not being valued, and countless other ways to say someone has a habit of dropping the ball. Accountability is another treasure for a good ally relationship, and it certainly does not hurt to have a person of substance on your team. ■