

What Happened at the CAA Town Hall Meetings?

Preparations for 2017 Strategic Planning

How should CAA encourage people to have empathy for animals and help them move toward a plant-based diet? We gathered for two Town Hall meetings in April to get community feedback on this question.

In the weeks leading up to those meetings, everyone on our email list was invited to share their thoughts on the big problems in society that CAA should address. In other words, what's CAA's reason for being? They were also asked to share basic demographic information about themselves so that we could be sure that we were also hearing ideas from people who have been underrepresented in CAA's decision-making. Below, you can see examples of the problems people shared through this online survey. In fact, we received over 140 ideas for problems that CAA should be addressing as part of its mission. As CAA's executive director, I teamed up with two of our board members to look for patterns in what was submitted.

On April 6 and 8, a combined total of sixteen CAA volunteers, board members, and staff members participated in town hall meetings to look together at our future direction. The sessions, which I led, took participants through a process of prioritizing problems that CAA could address and then turning those problems into outcomes we could possibly work to achieve.

We looked for patterns in the kinds of problems that people submitted. Ideas with similar themes were combined by our board and staff into fifteen overarching problems that we as an animal advocacy organization might want to solve. (Any problems that were internal to the organization, such as problems in design of our website or our approach, are listed at the end of this article and will be considered by board and staff.)

The overarching problems recognized at our town hall meetings were the following. Short phrases on note cards were used at the meetings. The language has been revised to make them easier to understand when reading them. To see them as they were shared, [click here](#).

- The general public has these negative perceptions about plant-based eating:
 - Vegan food tastes bad.
 - Vegan food is expensive.
 - A vegan diet is unhealthy.
 - Meat and other animal products are needed for good health.
 - A plant-based diet does not provide adequate protein.
 - A plant-based diet does not have potential health benefits
- The general public has these negative perceptions about vegans and animal advocates:

- Vegans are viewed as having negative attitudes (preachy, angry, mean, misanthropic, all-or-nothing, etc.)
- Vegans are unlike me in one or more of the following ways:
 - They are white.
 - They are not farmers.
 - They have more money.
 - They are “hippies.”
 - They are politically liberal.
- The general public doesn’t want to know about or feel empathy for animal suffering.
- People don’t know the horrors of animal agriculture or don’t understand the effects of their eating habits.
- The general public feels that animal suffering is less important than other social justice issues (human or environmental).
 - The animal advocacy movement lacks a relationship with other social justice movements.
- Those who go vegan and vegetarian don’t stick with their plant-based diet and return to eating animal products (recidivism).
 - The animals advocacy movement does not have proven methods for preventing recidivism.
- Moving toward a plant-based diet can be inconvenient.
 - Vegan food can be difficult to find in restaurants (especially fast-food chains) and in supermarkets (especially pre-packaged convenience foods).
 - Learning to cook differently takes time.
 - Plant-based food options are not readily available in institutions such as hospitals and schools.
- Information about animal protection issues and plant-based diets is not readily available through school systems, healthcare providers, government resources, and media outlets.
 - The media (through TV, social media, and advertising) doesn’t report on animal protection issues and plant-based food options.
- Changing behavior is difficult.
- Laws don’t protect animals.
- Cultural norms discourage the general public from embracing their empathy and moving toward a plant-based diet. Children are conditioned from a young age according to these norms, and the pressure to assimilate to family, friends, and co-workers persists through all life stages. These norms include the following:
 - The pervasive attitude of speciesism
 - The general perception that animals are products
 - Meat-eating as it relates to a perception of masculinity
 - The ubiquitousness of animal products
- Animal agriculture has a destructive impact on the environment, and the general public is unaware of this effect.

Each group then decided on what they believed the most important 3 to 5 problems were. As you can see below, it was stunning how similar their choices turned out to be. These problems are stated as short phrases; to see more of what was included in the concept see the list above.

Thursday Group's Top Problems	Saturday Group's Top Problems
Behavior change is hard	Behavior change is hard
Information about animal protection and plant-based eating isn't available	People don't stick with plant-based eating
People don't want to know about or feel empathy for animal suffering	People don't want to know about or feel empathy for animal suffering
Cultural norms	Cultural norms
	Negative perceptions about animal advocates and vegans

Top Problems from People of Color
Address other reasons to end factory farming (environment, social justice)
Getting the word out about the state of farmed animals

We then reviewed CAA's current approaches (focus on farmed animals, focusing outreach on young people, and our core values). After that, we worked to turn these problems into outcomes and thought about what outcomes were most important for CAA to achieve. Thursday's group also spent time looking at CAA's current programs and to what degree CAA's current programs supported them. This information, as well as a summary of the resulting discussion, is in italics.

What outcomes should CAA set out to achieve?

First Set Of Outcomes

Thursday's Initial Outcomes	Saturday's Initial Outcomes
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<p>People are willing to learn about animal suffering. People want to know where their food comes from and how animals are treated.</p> <p><i>CAA programs to support this outcome: Pay-per-view and virtual reality outreach (downtown or at the Mall of America to get media exposure); Vegan food giveaways (The food giveaway at Grand Old Days was hugely successful)</i></p>	<p>People feel empathy for animals. People see animals as fellow beings and treat them with respect, recognizing their personhood.</p> <p>People are willing to acknowledge animals can suffer and that all animals matter. They see a clear way to remove themselves from causing animal suffering.</p>
<p>Information about plant-based eating is readily available. Plant-based information is ubiquitous.</p> <p><i>CAA is not working at an institutional level. Current programs approach this at individual level, but institutional level change is needed to support this outcome.</i></p>	<p>Veganism is accepted as the standard diet.</p> <p>People who have contact with CAA become part of a strong, stable, plant-based community and gain the resources needed to build plant-based communities for themselves.</p>
<p>It becomes easy for people to change their behaviors. The barriers to behavior change are reduced.</p> <p><i>CAA programs to support this outcome: Twin Cities Veg Fest, cooking classes, potlucks, Thanksgiving potluck, mentorship programs, Acknowledging the presence of food deserts, growing awareness of different economic circumstances and addressing this need with CAA programming</i></p>	<p>CAA makes it easy and fun to transition to a plant-based diet. People embrace the challenge of behavioral change.</p>
<p>Compassionate living and eating a plant-based diet is the cultural norm.</p> <p><i>CAA programs to support this outcome: Twin Cities Veg Fest; widening focus beyond young adult demographic; connecting with non-English speakers, farmers, and libertarians; and finding common ground in our values of compassion</i></p>	<p>Vegans are highly respected in the community.</p> <p>The animal rights community shapes the cultural norms.</p>
	<p>CAA spreads a positive and friendly way of being in the world.</p>

Lastly, small groups were asked to think of what we might need to do to achieve the outcomes listed above. They were encouraged to define these statements in regards to geography and population. There was a general consensus that while outreach to students was critical, it was also not sufficient. Both groups also thought that the organization needed to focus on

institutional change as well as individual consumer change. Thursday's group was divided on whether CAA should work statewide or focus on its efforts in the metro area. Saturday's group all believed that a metro area focus was important.

Second Set of Outcomes

Thursday's Second Set of Outcomes	Saturday's Second Set Outcomes
Behavior is changing. animal consumption is decreasing; plant-based food consumption is increasing. (the group thought this was the most important outcome)	People in the metro area (possibly people CAA engages with) feel that they can have an impact on reducing animal suffering.
CAA exposes animal abuse in Minnesota through undercover investigations.	People engaged through CAA programs feel they are part of a community. They stick with plant-based eating and don't see it is a sacrifice but a gain.
Legislation is introduced to protect farmed animals. (This legislative reform may not be initiated by CAA, but CAA does shift cultural norms at the state or city level to make this change possible.)	CAA gives people the skills to build plant-based communities for themselves.
People are more aware of animal suffering. People in the Twin Cities are aware of animal cruelty and how it relates to their food choices.	CAA establishes strong alliances with animal sanctuaries in the Midwest that help people build empathy for animals.
People are empowered through education and inclined to make compassionate food choices.	People have an "ice bucket challenge" mentality for plant-based eating in the Twin Cities.
CAA creates a community that provides a sense of support that is visible in the Twin Cities or in Minnesota. There is a compassionate community in the Twin Cities region and possibly beyond. People interested in compassionate living feel the support of a welcoming community.	Places of worship consistently include conversations about animals as equal sentient beings and our evolving relationship with them.
People learn about plant-based food choices and feel confident they can thrive on a vegan diet. Cultural Norms are shifting.	CAA has a reputation for being open and friendly.

	Animal advocacy is a regular part of the schools' curriculum in the Twin Cities.
	Vegan options are promoted and available in public schools in the Twin Cities.
	Animal rights and human rights are equally essential parts of the social justice discussion in the metro area.
	Plant-based diets are adopted in part or whole in schools, hospitals, and other institutions in the metro area.

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Internal workings or organization focus concerns OR solutions to unstated problems:

Recidivism among vegans

Twin Cities Veg Fest at zoo

Little outstate activity

Host events outside of Mpls/St. Paul

Animal testing

Clothing/fashion use of animals

Giving people more tools to support their transition to plant based

Familiarize people with plant based food

Unsure how to be involved; email response

We need more structure and learning targets within movement

People have a hard time finding their voice as advocates

Reach more than just college kids

More discussions with people in positions of power who are or aren't vegan to get them on board (institutional)

More cooperation with other animal groups

Clunky, text-heavy online presence

Support groups (or something like that) for new vegans