

What Do IVA Advocates Do?

Abolitionist animal rights advocates are sometimes asked: “So, what do you do?” Asked sincerely, the question is an honest inquiry into the actions and tactics of our movement. Some people are unfamiliar with animal rights advocacy. Others are familiar only with the sensationalistic, sexist, violent, or otherwise unsavory work of non-abolitionist animal advocates. Coming from these people, the “What do you do?” question provides a good opportunity to set the record straight and to explain what is involved in being an abolitionist advocate.

Some people, however, ask “So, what do you do?” in a less sincere voice. Occasionally, a non-abolitionist animal advocate will ask this question rhetorically, not as an inquiry into our preferred tactics, but as a cynical suggestion that abolitionist work is pointless or useless (or, perhaps, not even real work at all).

This brief position paper is directed both to the honest inquirer and to the skeptic.

I – The Four Pillars of IVA’s Abolitionist Work

As is well documented on [this site](#) and [elsewhere](#), abolitionists are critical of standard reformist efforts that seek to improve the ways that animals are treated as they are birthed, raised, used, and killed. Although we will not here unpack our reasons for objecting, the IVA follows Professor Gary Francione in holding that welfarist campaigns are counter-productive, morally problematic, and do little or nothing to improve the lives of animals. Along with Francione, the IVA believes that the only way forward is to engage in clear and unequivocal public education. By changing people’s minds and hearts—by showing people that animals ought not to be used as mere things, and by helping to them adopt a principled commitment to veganism—we can create a nonviolent social revolution. It is through this social revolution that we will be able to change laws and bring about the end of animal use.

With this in mind, the IVA encourages abolitionists to engage in four primary forms of advocacy work.

First, the IVA supports what it calls “interpersonal advocacy.” Interpersonal advocacy takes place whenever an advocate takes an opportunity, in his or her daily life, to talk with a colleague or stranger about animal rights and veganism, with the aim of helping the person become a vegan and an animal rights advocate.

Second, the IVA endorses many forms of public advocacy. Public advocacy is like interpersonal advocacy, but it occurs in pre-planned settings, rather than in spontaneous interactions. Popular forms of abolitionist public advocacy include tabling, hosting film screenings, organizing public lectures, and leading open discussion groups and drop-in meetings for people who are interested in veganism and animal rights.

Third, the IVA encourages abolitionists to engage in what it has termed “internal education.” Internal education is the process of educating ourselves and other self-identifying animal advocates about the history, methodology, and best practices of animal rights advocacy. For example, since 2007 the Boston Vegan Association (and now [IVA-Boston](#)) has run a series of free reading groups on animal rights ideology, as well as a series of advocacy practice meetings that give current and aspiring advocates a safe place to hone their interpersonal and public advocacy skills.

Fourth, the IVA supports many forms of legal, nonviolent direct-assistance to nonhuman animals. Although animals’ property status and the structure of the legal welfare system make it tragically impossible for us to directly aid many of the billions of animals who are used and killed each year, there are many living animals who we can directly assist. For example, the IVA strongly encourages its advocates to adopt and foster ‘domesticated’ animals from shelters, to donate their time and money to well-run sanctuaries for rescued animals, and so on.

II – Skepticism About Creating Social Change

To someone who believes that reformist campaigning can be an effective form of advocacy work, the IVA’s platform is likely to seem inefficient and ineffective. Although no one is likely to take issue with the fourth pillar, the first three pillars are common sources of skepticism. One might think to themselves: “I’m out here pounding the pavement, collecting signatures on this petition to improve the lives of animals in stockyards, and you would have me put down the clipboard and ignore all of those animals? You’d have me just chat with people about veganism instead? Really?”

Putting aside our contention that reform work is itself counter-productive and ineffective, it’s easy to see the source of the skeptic’s concern. From the standpoint of the advocate, a day of reformist campaigning is likely to feel rewarding and productive. Signatures are gathered, a petition is completed, materials are delivered to government officials, and (so the idea goes) all of this combines to create the possibility of a concrete legislative change. Meanwhile, large reformist organizations bombard advocates with claims about the “successes” that these kinds of activities are achieving. Taken together, this gives the advocate the feeling that they are making measurable, cumulative progress toward short-term, achievable goals.

By comparison, it may appear difficult to see and measure one’s progress with respect to the abolitionist goals of “changing people’s hearts and minds” and “creating social change.” Collecting signatures to change a law seems achievable and approachable in a way that engendering a nonviolent revolution might not.

In short, many non-abolitionists are not only convinced that reform work is useful, but also skeptical about the prospects of meaningfully contributing to a program of grassroots education.

III – Setting Goals, Following Up, and Seeing Change

Although we cannot here decisively prove that legal change and the end of animal exploitation will be brought about through abolitionist vegan education, we can certainly demystify and concretize the process of generating social change through one’s actions. In both interpersonal

advocacy and public advocacy, abolitionist advocates can observe concrete, meaningful steps forward. In recent years, abolitionists across the world have had tremendous success in changing the lifestyles of their families and friends, causing their schools and places of work to become responsive to vegan and abolitionist concerns, and fundamentally shifting the scope and size of the advocacy work that is being done in their communities.

The two most important practical rules of abolitionist advocacy work are (1) to set short-term goals and (2) to follow-up.

Set goals. If one decided to spend one's year on the abstract goal of creating social change, one would probably wind up feeling frustrated. Instead, it is advisable to focus on local, concrete goals that you have reason to believe could be instrumental in creating broader social change. For example, one could set monthly advocacy goals such as: (i) speak to at least fifteen new people about veganism and animal rights; (ii) help at least three people as they transition to veganism; (iii) talk to my doctor's office about leaving copies of the IVA's Vegan Starter Kit in the waiting room; (iv) advertise and participate in a free public discussion group on the nuts-and-bolts of veganism. Anyone who set out and accomplished this list of goals would be bound to feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment at the end of the month, not only because they did what they set out to do, but because it would become apparent just how big a difference their actions had made.

Follow-up. Part of what can make abolitionist advocacy work seem daunting is that changing a person's mind is often not something that happens in an instant. Case in point, one might speak to fifteen new people about veganism in a month, but receive no sense of whether those conversations produced good results. For this reason, one of the keys to successful abolitionist advocacy—and to seeing concrete results in one's work—is to create and maintain communication with the people with whom one speaks. By exchanging contact information and following up personally, you stand a much better chance of helping a person commit to veganism, and you will also begin to take note how far the 'ripples' of your own work can travel. Once you start receiving emails from the people you've spoken to about veganism, in which they chronicle how many people they've spoken to about veganism, it becomes difficult to deny the power of discussion.

And, in turn, once you consider the implications of thousands of other abolitionists working alongside you across the world, achieving sweeping, widespread social change no longer feels like a distant goal.

In the abstract, creating social change can seem amorphous and difficult. In practice, it's surprisingly easy and rewarding.

IV – The Special Role of the IVA

The IVA is constituted of abolitionist volunteers who individually engage in all of the forms of advocacy mentioned above. However, in addition, the IVA has a special role to play in the animal rights movement. Due to its resources and the cooperation of its volunteers, the IVA is able to play a coordinating and facilitating role for abolitionist advocates.

The IVA produces educational [resources](#) that it freely distributes to abolitionist advocates, including its [Vegan Starter Kit](#). Alongside the invaluable resources produced by [Gary Francione](#), the IVA's materials are important supplements to both interpersonal and public advocacy efforts. Additionally, the IVA produces leader tools for abolitionists who are planning to do internal education work in their communities. For example, the IVA offers comprehensive guides for running reading groups and advocacy practice meetings. Lastly, the IVA is carefully building its network of international IVA chapters, to better facilitate the distribution of abolitionist content across the world.

If you are an abolitionist advocate who is interested in being supported by IVA in your interpersonal or public advocacy, or who is interested in establishing an IVA chapter, please [contact us](#).