U.S. CAMPAIGN TO END THE DEATH PENALTY

DOCUMENTARY SCREENING TIPS

Using film to move audiences from watching to conversation, connection, and action

PURPOSE Film can open doors that a fact sheet, speech, or policy briefing may not. This guide synthesizes strategies shared by death penalty abolition advocates and documentary filmmaker Linda Freund for choosing films, reaching new audiences, hosting meaningful conversations, and turning screenings into organizing opportunities.

1. START WITH THE GOAL

Choose the film and format based on what you want the audience to feel, understand, or do.

- Define the purpose before selecting the film: public education, base-building, leadership identification, fundraising, faith outreach, student engagement, policy advocacy, or relationship-building.
- Match the story to the audience. Different films resonate with different communities; one film will not work equally well for every constituency.
- Consider films that broaden the frame beyond innocence alone. Stories about humanity, faith, rehabilitation, victims' families, execution personnel, racial history, and directly impacted people can reach audiences through different entry points.
- Use shorter films when you want substantial time for discussion. A 20–30 minute film can fit comfortably into a 60–90 minute program with a panel or facilitated conversation.

USCEDP PRINCIPLE Do not treat the screening as the event's finish line. Build the program around what happens before and after the film.

2. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Meet people where they are rather than assuming everyone enters the room with the same beliefs.

- Acknowledge openly that not everyone in the room may oppose the death penalty. Naming that can make the conversation more welcoming and less defensive.
- For faith audiences, consider films and speakers that engage faith, redemption, mercy, moral responsibility, and the experiences of clergy or faith leaders.
- For Black and other directly impacted communities, representation matters. Audiences may connect more deeply when they see people who share their identities both experiencing injustice and leading efforts for change.
- For students, choose age-appropriate content and consider whether graphic footage should be omitted or contextualized.
- For professional audiences, consider the perspective most likely to create an entry point: law enforcement, corrections, medical professionals, lawyers, jurors, victims' families, or people who have experienced death row.

3. BUILD THE RIGHT SCREENING FORMAT

The film is flexible; the format should serve the organizing objective.

- In-person theater screening + moderated Q&A.
- Faith-community screening + facilitated discussion.
- College or high-school classroom + curriculum or discussion guide.
- Virtual watch party + panel or directly impacted speaker.
- Small house meeting, church group, or study-group/book-club model.
- Film festival or symposium + advocacy materials and a specific action.
- Short clips + facilitated training when a full screening is not practical.
- Pair the film with art, letters, or another creative expression from people on death row when the venue and program allow it.

4. CHOOSE SPEAKERS STRATEGICALLY

Who speaks after the film can change the entire character of the conversation.

- Whenever appropriate, center directly impacted people as substantive participants, not simply as testimonials. Offer a fair compensation to directly impacted participants. This can include an honorarium, gas cards, etc.
- Consider exonerees, death row survivors, victims' family members, former corrections personnel, clergy, attorneys, organizers, filmmakers, academics, or others connected to the film's themes.
- Invite filmmakers, directors, producers, or featured participants when possible; virtual participation can make this more accessible.
- Match speakers to the audience. A faith leader may be especially effective with clergy; a former corrections officer may reach law enforcement or corrections audiences; a student or educator may help on campus.
- Prepare speakers and moderators in advance so the discussion connects the film to the campaign's goals and does not end with storytelling alone.

5. CREATE SPACE TO PROCESS

Death penalty films can be emotional, traumatic, and deeply personal.

- Do not rush immediately from the credits into an organizational pitch. Give people a moment to absorb what they have seen.
- Use a skilled moderator and prepare discussion questions in advance.
- Consider trauma-informed support, especially when the film includes executions, violence, graphic images, family loss, or other triggering material.
- For particularly intense programs, consider involving a mental health professional or identifying support resources.
- Allow for different reactions. Grief, anger, uncertainty, disagreement, and changed opinions can all be part of the conversation.

6. USE CONVERSATION TO MOVE PEOPLE

Small conversations can make participation safer for people who are not ready to speak to the whole room.

TRY THIS: BEFORE & AFTER Before the film, ask participants to turn to one person and discuss: "What do you believe to be true about the death penalty?" After the film, return to the same partner and ask: "What did the film challenge for you? What did it affirm?"

- Build a panel around the film, but leave enough time for audience questions.

- Q&As may be 30 minutes or much longer depending on the venue and audience; plan flexibility where possible.
- Collect recurring audience questions and use them to improve a discussion guide for future screenings.
- Ask questions that connect the film to local realities: Who is affected here? What decisions are being made now? Where does this audience have influence?

7. TURN WATCHING INTO ACTION

Every screening should offer at least one realistic next step.

- Make the call to action specific to the audience and moment. Examples include signing a petition, contacting a lawmaker, attending an execution vigil, joining a local campaign, volunteering, donating, or participating in a program serving people on death row.
- Give participants the information they need on the spot: QR code, sign-up form, campaign materials, lawmaker contact information, upcoming dates, or volunteer options.
- Use screenings to identify potential local leaders. Follow up with people who want to organize at their church, school, campus, neighborhood, or professional network.
- Offer low-pressure actions for people who are not ready to volunteer. This can be a commitment to attend another event, watch another movie on their own, read a book, or even to embrace jury duty and recognize its importance.
- Encourage people to host smaller follow-up screenings with churches, study groups, friends, or community organizations.
- For students, the action may be reflection, writing, research, storytelling, or identifying an injustice in their own community.

BUILD A LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT WATCH → DISCUSS → CONNECT → ACT → LEAD. Give people more than one entry point so they can choose a level of involvement that fits their capacity.

8. REACH BEYOND THE CHOIR

A screening can introduce the movement to people who would never attend an explicitly abolitionist meeting.

- Advertise outside your existing supporter list, even when a faith institution or partner is hosting.
- Use community calendars from local radio, television, newspapers, and other community outlets.
- Use local online community spaces, including neighborhood or city event forums.
- Give supporters a printable flyer and ask them to post it at coffee shops, churches, campuses, libraries, community centers, and other gathering places.
- Seek venues where people are already planning to attend and ask for space on an existing agenda.
- Partner with colleges, high schools, film schools, human-rights programs, faith institutions, social-justice groups, arts organizations, and independent theaters.
- An art-house theater or film partner may provide built-in promotional support and access to audiences outside the movement.

9. BUILD PARTNERSHIPS AROUND THE FILM

The strongest screenings can create relationships that continue after the credits.

- Ask filmmakers and distributors about partnerships, promotional materials, speakers, screening access, and other support.

- Invite organizations whose work intersects with the film's themes rather than limiting the event to death penalty organizations.
- Use co-hosts to expand the audience and share promotion, venue, speaker, and follow-up responsibilities.
- Consider cross-constituency partnerships with faith leaders, victims' advocates, innocence organizations, criminal legal reform groups, universities, arts organizations, and directly impacted networks.
- Treat unexpected attendees as relationship opportunities. Screenings have helped organizations connect with donors, former corrections employees, public officials, and other potential allies.

10. VENUE & LOGISTICS CHECKLIST

Make the experience easy for the audience and technically reliable.

- Confirm screening permission or licensing with the filmmaker, distributor, or rights holder before publicly showing a film. A personal streaming subscription does not automatically provide public-performance rights.
- Confirm whether the screening is free, ticketed, or donation-based and whether the film provider charges a screening fee.
- Test the film, sound, captions, projector/screen, internet connection, and any virtual speaker connection before doors open.
- Know whether you are streaming, downloading an authorized screener, or playing from another approved source.
- Confirm run time plus enough time for welcome, processing, Q&A, action, and closing.
- Provide content notes when appropriate and make the program accessible to the extent possible.
- Have sign-in, follow-up, and action materials ready before attendees arrive.
- Make the event easy to attend for the community. Consider serving food and offering childcare so that attendance is easier for participants.

11. PROMOTION CHECKLIST

Promote the story, the conversation, and the opportunity to act.

- Create a simple event title and description that explains why the film matters now.
- Promote the featured speaker or panel along with the film.
- Ask every co-host and speaker to share the event through their networks.
- Send supporters a ready-to-share graphic, email language, and printable flyer.
- Use community calendars, campuses, congregations, neighborhood networks, local media, and partner newsletters.
- Where appropriate, invite reporters, editorial boards, public officials, community leaders, and professional constituencies connected to the film.

12. AFTER THE SCREENING

Follow-up is where a one-night event becomes organizing infrastructure.

- Contact attendees quickly while the experience is still fresh.
- Send the promised resources, action links, upcoming events, and ways to stay involved.
- Personally follow up with people who expressed interest in leadership, hosting another screening, volunteering, donating, or making introductions.
- Track outcomes: attendance, new contacts, volunteers, donations, action completions, follow-up screenings, new partners, media, and changed relationships.
- Ask what resonated and what questions remain. Use those responses to improve the next screening.

- Keep the film in your organizing toolkit and identify a follow-up film or activity for audiences that have already seen it.

SAMPLE 90-MINUTE SCREENING AGENDA

Adapt the timing to the film, venue, and audience.

TIME	PROGRAM
10 min	Welcome, introductions, framing, and pre-film conversation prompt
25–45 min	Film or selected clips
3–5 min	Quiet processing / transition
20–30 min	Moderated discussion or panel
10 min	Audience questions
5–10 min	Specific call to action, sign-up, and next steps

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use or adapt these to move from reaction to reflection and action.

- What stayed with you most strongly from the film?
- What did the film challenge or affirm about what you believed before watching?
- Whose perspective did the film help you understand differently?
- What does this story reveal about who is affected by the death penalty beyond the person sentenced to die?
- Where do race, poverty, disability, geography, faith, trauma, or access to counsel show up in this story?
- What does accountability look like if execution is not the answer?
- What is happening in our state or community right now that connects to this film?
- What is one action you are willing to take after leaving this screening?

A NOTE ON FILM ACCESS

Always distinguish between a link to watch a film privately and permission to screen it publicly.

Screening terms vary by film. Some filmmakers may waive screening fees or provide private screeners for organizing purposes, while commercial films may require public-performance licensing. Contact the rights holder, distributor, or filmmaker for the specific event you are planning. Do not assume that a streaming-service subscription authorizes a public screening.

FROM THE USCEDP NETWORK The strategies in this guide were synthesized from a national USCEDP discussion among abolition advocates and filmmaker Linda Freund about how organizations are using documentary and narrative film in death penalty abolition campaigns.

FILM CAN START THE CONVERSATION. ORGANIZING TURNS IT INTO ACTION.

Explore USCEDP resources and take action at enddeathpenalty.org