

HOSTAGE US

A FAMILY GUIDE TO FUNDRAISING



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Dealing with the practical challenges of a hostage taking or wrongful detention – financial issues, managing social media and communications – can add to an already stressful situation for families.

Often, families experience financial problems because of the kidnapping or wrongful detention. Your family may be impacted by the loss of your loved one’s income and your ability to earn an income. You may need to cover your loved one’s costs while in captivity and more.

Raising funds from family, friends, and the community is something many families in your situation face. Hostage US is here to help you problem solve. We’ve created a fundraising toolkit and suggestions on when and how to share your story on social media.

These tips and techniques should be personalized for you. What works for your situation may not work for another family. Please reach out with any questions and ideas. We are here to help.

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Telling Your Story

Raising funds begins with raising awareness and telling your story. Your story is the basis for all your communications to help your loved one.

To begin to tell your family's story and the need to help your loved one financially, write down all the details of your loved one's situation. Take the time to create a draft of the who, what, where, when, and how of your loved one's wrongful detention.

Consider sharing your draft with Hostage US before you share it more broadly. We have great experience with other families who have raised funds successfully and can offer suggestions on what makes truly compelling outreach.

Share as many details as you can.

- First, ensure that anyone who is working on the operational response to get your loved one home knows and approves of what details you share.
- Name the country
- Don't assume everyone understands what wrongful detention is. Explain that your loved one is being held for political leverage and has not done anything wrong.
- Be specific about your needs and how the funds raised will be used.
- Explain that there is no government money available for families of wrongful detainees.
- Share your loved one's story beyond his/her detention. What is your family's story?

Describing the Need

Whether on your website or in information for a fundraising event, give your audience an understanding of what your loved one's needs are when making donation solicitations. Use specific language in asking for money and make the story more about your efforts to support your loved one than about the injustices surrounding the wrongful detention.

REMEMBER: People give to people and to compelling causes – and the emotional weight of your loved one's story and the impact on your family is very compelling.

Details matter to potential funders. Explain that an average detention can be multiple years, though each case is different. Detention cases are rarely resolved quickly and the need for funds is ongoing.

Giving donors an understanding of the financial parameters of what wrongful detention means is helpful as well. For most families, the monthly costs of supporting a loved one in detention are astronomical to a typical family budget. If you have a specific dollar amount for a category, list it. If not, list a dollar range for each category.

Categories to list may include:

- Monthly supplies for food, medicine, hygiene items, clothing, etc. for your loved one can range from \$500 to \$2,000/month
- Legal fees in the detaining country average \$2,000/month. Many U.S. attorneys offer their services *pro bono*. Hostage US can help facilitate connections with U.S. law firms.
- Increase in your family's mental and/or medical care costs, due to the stress of the case for the family
- Website costs for maintaining an online presence to advocate for the loved one
- Travel and lodging for trips to Washington, D.C. to meet with U.S. Department of State officials and non-government organizations (NGOs) to help manage the case. Hostage US can help you cover these costs.
- Lost wages due to the huge amount of time necessary to work on the release of the loved one and manage the case
- The family's general living expenses and bills, which can be especially challenging if the loved one was an income earner for the household
- News subscriptions so families can read anything that is released that could be related to the loved one's captivity or the region where he/she is being held. Hostage US has partnerships with news agencies to help with these costs

Creating a Family Member Fact Sheet

Once you've listed the details, you will use this copy to create several resources, including a fact sheet about your family member. This document can be linked to your webpage, sent to donors, shared in social media, and provided to government officials, etc. You will write longer pieces in fundraising letters and on your website, but this simple, concise, one-page document consolidating your family's plight for a general audience is a useful tool.

Make sure your fact sheet includes:

- Your loved one's name and background (where they live, occupation, age)
- Where are they being held
- Who is holding them
- Why are they being held
- What do you hope happens next with moving the case forward
- Include a photo of the hostage but be aware that it could be used in the media. Try to find a personal family photograph rather than an official passport-style one. Choose one with good light that highlights their good qualities.

IMPORTANT: Avoid any photos that show the hostage in a negative light or doing anything that could be construed as negative in the kidnapper's eyes. Do not use photos that show the hostage:

- Partying or drinking
- Dressing immodestly
- Showing an allegiance to a particular religious faith or political cause
- Giving the impression that the captive is wealthy or has military links

Creating a Website

Many families choose to create a simple, streamlined website as the central place for all information about their loved one's detention.

Today, with online website-building tools like Wix.com and SquareSpace.com, creating your own website is more affordable than ever before. Expect to pay \$150-\$200/year to build and maintain a website. Compare this to paying a web designer \$2,000-plus to create a three-page site and charge an annual maintenance fee. Other good sites to consider: Weebly, Strikingly, GoDaddy.

Think twice about websites that offer "free" options. They attach their domain URL to the end of your site's name (example: www.freejoesmith.blogspot.com). This makes it very difficult for people to find your site and has a mostly negative impact on Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

What's typically included in website-building tools?

- Custom domain URL name
- Domain payment for first year (about \$25/year after first year)
- Annual hosting fee
- Annual SSL certificate fee
- SEO checklist to make sure your site can be found on Google
- Blank or designed page templates for desktop and mobile phones

Website Must-Do's:

Make it easy to find via SEO by using your loved one's full name in any headings and opening copy and using commonly searched phrases like "wrongful detention."

The website name/URL should be easy to remember like **[www.free\[name of your loved one\].com](http://www.free[name of your loved one].com)**.

Always include a link to your donation page on your website and Venmo or GoFundMe page in all your communications and press releases. Every page on your website needs a "call to action" – what you want the user to do. In this case, it's donate. It's important that the link appears on every page.

On your **Homepage**, write a summary of your situation (100-150 words, tops), donation link (to "How You Can Help") page and up to 5 photos that tell your family and loved one's story. You might include a day counter of days in detention for a compelling visual that underscores the immediacy of the need.

Your website should be simple to use and have the following sections:

Our Story Page: a carefully worded, detailed story about the situation (maximum 350 words).

News Page: Articles, social media posts, and documents of official news on your loved one's situation, if appropriate. Hostage US will work with you to have your social media feed updating live on your page, so that articles are updated automatically. If you are hosting any fundraising events, you will include details here as well.

How You Can Help Page: Put your donation link front and center. Be clear that these donations are not tax-deductible. List the needs with dollar figures alongside them so people have a clear sense of the need. Also include other ways people can help, such as prayers, letter writing, food chain, etc.

Website Glossary:



Hosting Site: Web hosting is a service that provides space on a server for your website information, basically allowing it to be available on the internet and found while browsing. This is often included in the fees of the website design platform.



Security Certificate (SSL): An SSL certificate is a digital certificate that authenticates a website's identity and enables an encrypted connection. Any websites without the SSL certificate will remain http while those with encryption will show https in users' browsers. Browsers have begun issuing warnings that non-https sites are "insecure" and not allowing users to view the website's content. SSL is a Google ranking signal, so unless you have SSL, your site will be harder to find, impacting on your traffic, SEO, and donations.



SEO or Search Engine Optimization: This is the process of improving your site to increase its visibility when people search for products or services related to your business in Google, Bing, and other search engines. The better visibility your pages have in search results, the more likely you are to garner attention and attract donations. The goal of having a website is to be easily found!



Mobile Phone Friendly Capabilities: 55% of website traffic in 2021 came from mobile phones. If your site shows signs of not being mobile friendly, it can affect SEO, traffic, and donations.

Using Social Media

Social media can be a powerful tool for sharing information and increasing engagement and reach about your loved one's situations. Think carefully, though, about using social media during a kidnap. Much of the content on your accounts will be public or semi-public, so can be accessed by the kidnapers themselves or the media. Your accounts or those of your loved one held captive might contain information or photographs that could be harmful for them. Some families may experience unwanted attention or messages on social media, which can be very upsetting.

If you are working with a media consultant, it is important to speak with that person to align your social media campaign with all other media work. Each solicitation, social media post, event, etc. is connected and needs to work together to tell your loved one's story.

Social Media Tips

If you choose to use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other social media, there are best practices that are the same regardless of platform.

- Always include a donation link and link to your website.
- Add images, videos, photos of your loved one and your family, or graphics whenever possible to your posts.
- Get others involved and interested. Tag relevant people and organizations but try to space it out across many posts. Don't tag a dozen people in a single tweet as this can become "white noise."
- Ask your followers to act by sharing, posting, retweeting, tagging, and giving, contacting relevant organizations or politicians, etc. Use hashtags like #freejoesmith, #hostage, and #wrongfuldetention.
- Interact with your followers and/or comments. Some people might have questions and the more information they receive from your cause, the more helpful they might be in spreading the word.
- Interact with other accounts you're following, especially if they are related to similar cases. This will give your account more visibility.
- Create a public group or page on Facebook and on Instagram to encourage people to get involved.
- Post regularly and share (or retweet) others who are supporting the effort to amplify their voices. Use your public page or personal account to update followers on the various efforts and highlight positive developments.
- Highlight quotes from stories and articles that you share. Find a compelling line in the story and highlight this in your post to peak audience interest. On Twitter, you can **thread multiple tweets together** to tell a complete story.

- Include data that is impactful and compelling like:
 - Anniversary dates and birthdays
 - Number of days in captivity
 - Estimated amount of effort you have put into the case – i.e., number of phone calls you have made since captivity started, number of hours you have spent “on the phone” or “in meetings” or other efforts.
- Make it personal to appeal to the human side of your audience. Help others understand what it’s like to walk in your shoes. Starting social media posts with first-person pronouns (such as “I,” “we,” or “my”) is an effective way to frame the posts.
- Use a dedicated hashtag so that your audience can easily search for the latest news. #FreeName is one example.

Choosing a Social Media Platform

In general, use the platform that you are most comfortable with to share information. If you are working with a media consultant, discuss your social media plans so that all postings are strategic. Be sure all your social media is linked in your website footer and in any emails you send.

Facebook: Use your personal page, or you can create a Facebook page dedicated to your loved one. Facebook **Pages** are for businesses, brands, organizations, and public figures to share their stories and connect with people. Like profiles, Pages can be customized with stories, events, and more. Anyone can create a Page, but only official representatives can create a Page for an organization, business, brand, or public figure. Go to [facebook.com/pages/create](https://www.facebook.com/pages/create) to set up your page. Facebook offers a **help center** that can answer a lot of questions about using the site.

Twitter: Though you are limited in your message length, Twitter has massive potential to share information and reach a wide audience. Check out The James Foley Foundation Twitter account, which does a great job of posting daily and supporting those who are being held hostage. They’ve retweeted some accounts that have great shared language with a similar cause.

Instagram: What began as a photo-sharing site is a massive marketing machine today. You can use Instagram’s very user-friendly tools and marketing features to share your message in an image-driven way that encourages action.

It’s important to note that frequent posting on social media is key to creating awareness and driving traffic. If you plan to use social media, take the time to create a strategic content plan: what you will post on which platform and when. This could be as simple as reposting something from another organization or posts that connect personally with your loved one (birthday, anniversary, a family tradition, etc.).

If you are working with a media consultant, talk about your social media strategy, particularly how to handle comments that you might receive through platforms.

Working With the Media

Working with the media can influence efforts in your case, but it is essential that families understand that speaking to the media potentially may have negative impacts on the hostage.

Talking to the media can:

- Raise the kidnapper's financial expectations
- Lead to a hostage transfer
- Attract hoaxers, internet trolls, and other unscrupulous people

Working with the media can influence efforts in your case, but it is essential that families understand that speaking to the media potentially may have negative impacts on the hostage.

Each case is different, but once you have publicized the case, you cannot undo this action. There are some cases where the media can play a useful role. If news of the incident is public or if those handling negotiations encourage it, you may choose to make a statement. Language is very important! Carefully consider what phrases and comments to include. If you have a media advisor, ask for help in determining what to avoid. Any public condemnation of the kidnappers' demands can be unhelpful, too.

We recommend that you speak with a media advisor before contacting the media. Hostage US can help you find an advisor. Any media outreach should be closely aligned with your response strategy.

Read our [Media Guide](#) for advice on talking to the media.

Fundraising

Most families need to raise funds to meet the financial hardships that come with a loved one's kidnapping or wrongful detention. In this digital era, there are several ways to solicit funds, but traditional methods – letter writing campaigns and events – can be just as successful.

Share your fundraising plans with those who are helping with response efforts, including media assistance or government assistance, before you create a crowdfunding website or plan an event.

You should create a proactive fundraising calendar, using significant dates in your loved one's life and detention when creating your calendar. Birthdays and anniversaries, including the anniversary of the date your loved one was kidnapped or detained, can be compelling times to inspire others to give. There may, of course, be the need for appeals to be reactive to your loved one's specific situation, but having a general plan mapped out of when and how you will solicit funds is helpful.

Letter-writing Campaign

We encourage you to write a letter – A LOT of letters – and send it to friends, family, and local businesses to ask for their support. There are lots of ways to do this. Hostage US has sample solicitation language for inspiration.

- Write old-fashioned snail mail letters to family and friends. You can create a general letter with a photo of your loved one (photocopied in the letter) and add a personal message. Create letterhead with a photo of your loved one and a footer with your giving site.
- Or handwrite a personal note. (**Vistaprint.com** is an economical way to make notecards with your loved one's photo on it.) But always include a pre-labeled return envelope.
- Host a letter-writing party where you provide general, pre-printed letters about your loved one and ask family and friends to write a personal note and send it to their contact list. If you are using social media, post a photo of the event/your loved one with links to your Venmo, GoFundMe, and website.
- Include a QR code that links directly to your giving page. Try a free QR code generator like **QR Code Monkey**. Once you create the code, include it on all your printed materials, any emails you send, and on your website.
- Email letters are effective, too. Include links in your letters to your website, Venmo or GoFundMe, and a few photos. To make it easier to manage, use the BCC feature of your email program. Do not type in all the addresses in the TO: section.
- Ask family and friends to send email letters as well. Provide them with digital resources (language, photos, QR code, links to website, etc.), but be very specific with them about what language to avoid. Preparing a “Thanks for Writing Letters” short guide on what to do and not to do is helpful.

Fundraising Tips:

- Always ask for a specific dollar amount with a goal in the letter. For example: Ask for \$50 from each person to support your loved one and the monthly expenses of \$1,000. If you can get 20 people to contribute \$50, you've raised \$1,000.
- Clearly and compellingly tell your story.
- Give examples of how the money will be used.
- Explain that these gifts are not tax-deductible.
- Personally thank each donor, preferably with a handwritten note.

Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding can be a good way to raise funds, usually in smaller amounts from many people. The two most popular crowdfunding apps are GoFundMe and Venmo.

GoFundMe: You can create a GoFundMe page to solicit support for food, medicine, legal fees, and other supplies that are needed. Review GoFundMe's **Terms & Conditions** to make sure crowdfunding is a good fit for your situation.

Click here to learn more about how GoFundMe works, how to start your fundraiser, and how to share it with friends and manage donations. **Click here** for best-practice tips on using GoFundMe.

Tips for Successful Crowdfunding with GoFundMe:

- Write a powerful **campaign story** that connects with your audience. This can mean the difference between someone passively viewing your fundraiser and someone who donates.
- **Share your fundraiser** to increase donations. Whether sharing on **social media** or teaming up with a local business, expanding your network will help you see more donations.
- Reach your goal with the right **fundraising email templates**.
- Include your website, photos, and other information about your loved one on your page.

Venmo: This is a popular, easy way for family and friends to give you funds. Venmo is an app that allows two people, not organizations, to exchange funds. It is free for you to set up by downloading the app. Once you set up an account and share your Venmo "handle" or address with others, they can transfer funds directly to your bank account. **Click here** to learn about Venmo and setting up an account.

Ensuring Success with Crowdfunding

We recommend that you set a fundraising goal when crowdfunding. Since there is no known end date for the need for support, a good first goal would be to estimate what the need would be for one year. For instance, \$25,000 would cover about \$2,000/month for a year. If the detention goes beyond that first year, you can adjust the original goal as needed.

- Include your GoFundMe page as well as Venmo in all your communications so you can easily receive donations.
- Update your GoFundMe page frequently with news of your loved one, reports on various fundraising activities, thank-yous, etc.
- Always thank your donors with a personal thank you. Emails are great, too, but a handwritten note is important. Consider having preprinted notecards with a thank you message that you can sign so that this doesn't become burdensome.

Fundraising Events

Many families hold various fundraising events to raise money. Fundraising events from the simple (a bake sale) to the more elaborate (concert with a silent auction) are good ways to raise funds and awareness. Check with your tax advisor to understand any tax implications resulting from donations and/or fundraising efforts on your behalf. Hostage US can assist with tax-specific questions. If you are working with a media consultant, discuss event promotion.

Many local nonprofit and faith-based organizations can assist you with your fundraising efforts and help you organize a fundraiser. Many venues or businesses may be willing to donate space, services, or food for the cause.

Fundraising Event Ideas:

- Host a concert/performance/art show with a silent auction.
- Ask a local restaurant or business if they would host an event where you receive a percentage of sales to support your loved one. Many chains will do this, such as Chipotle, Qdoba, Mod Pizza, Panera, etc.
- Create T-shirts to sell. You can use free graphic design sites (**Canva.com** is a good one) or ask a graphic designer to donate his/her services. Print them online (**Vistaprint.com**) or ask a local print shop that can help you.
- Host a **Coffee and Bake Sale**.
- Organize a **Polar Plunge**.
- Organize a **Fun Run**.
- Organize a **Car Wash**.
- Host a **Trivia Night** at a local restaurant or bar or do an online trivia night.

Raffles

Raffles, whether in-person or online, are an excellent way to raise funds quickly. In some states you will need a permit to hold a raffle. Check with local officials to make sure that raffles are allowed in your city or county. Working through a local nonprofit (that has been recognized by the IRS for at least five years and has been in continuous and active existence) to hold the raffle on your behalf is an option. You can purchase raffle tickets at your local party store or online.



Ask a friend or local business to donate a “big ticket” item(s) and have a raffle.



Advertise the raffle on social media, flyers, and with local organizations.



Offer compelling raffle items like a TV, concert or sporting event tickets, gift certificate, personal services (house painting, lawn clean up).



A 50/50 raffle means the prize is 50% of the money taken in by the raffle ticket sales. The other 50% is retained by the group holding the raffle.

Tips for Planning a Fundraising Event

Once you've settled on the type of event, determine the fundraising goal and all the event details.

- What is the event type?
- Date (and rain date if outdoors)? Time?
- Venue? Is there a cost for the venue? If so, what is the deposit?
- What is included in the venue rental?
- Will other things need to be rented (dishes, glassware, sound/av equipment, dance floor, stage, etc.)? If so, where will you rent them?
- Who is invited (closed guest list or general public)?
- Will you need food? Who is providing the food?
- Will you need decorations?
- Will there be entertainment? If so, what? What is the cost for entertainment?
- How will people be invited? Standard mail? Online event programs like Paperless post or Evite? If you are using mail, determine printing and postage costs. Typically, you will want to mail invitations 4-6 weeks out from an event.
- A flyer or printed invitation should have your hashtag, website, and how to register for the event.
- How will you handle RSVPs? Mailed replies? An online evite program? Sign-up via your website? EventBrite charges a small fee to handle tickets and registration for paid events, or you can choose to have the attendee absorb the fee when you set up ticketing. Visit [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com) for details.

- Once you have outlined all your costs, you can determine what any ticket costs will be. You want to be sure that you are covering any costs and doing more than breaking even! If there is a fee to attend, include an option for someone to give more than the requested fee.
- What are your goals for the event program? Map out the program schedule and who will say what and when. Make sure your brief any speakers ahead of time about best talking points and messaging.

Get your family and friends involved in the planning to divide and share the work. Host a planning meeting well in advance to see who knows venues, florists, caterers, entertainment, etc. Use your network to get donated services. If you have a friend who is a graphic designer, ask them to design the marketing materials. Know a deejay, photographer, or bluegrass musician? You get the point – use your network!

Promoting Your Event

This is an essential part of any successful event.

- Be sure to include any events on your webpage or social media.
- Use your social media and plan various posts around the event. Make sure that your posts and website have event details, how to register, and your GoFundMe or Venmo information.
- Plan a series of different posts about the event. If your loved one loves to ice skate and you are renting the rink for a fun night of skating and food, post with a photo of your loved one on the ice. A few days later, do a post thanking and tagging the businesses who are supporting the event.
- Ask friends and family to like, share, retweet, etc. any posts about the event.
- Make a digital flyer for your event and send an email to your mailing list.
- If it's an event open to the public, ask your local library, coffee shop, car dealer, etc. to publicize it on their bulletin board.
- Ask your church, mosque, or synagogue to publicize it in a weekly program.
- If it is an event open to the public, provide family and friends with flyers and invitations for them to share with their network.
- Some families promote their events on the local news. Talk with Hostage US or your media consultant about that. You can find the right person at the local news station in the "Contact Us" or "Share News" section of your local news' website.
- Take photos at your event to share post-event on your website and on social media with a hashtag and link to give. It's best to make these general photos about the event (event set-up with signage, people in event t-shirts at a bake sale table or registration table) and not of people partying (no photos with drinking glasses). You do not want to include photos that could be misused by those holding your loved one.
- Thank all vendors and others who donated services, time, etc.

Ways for Others to Help

When someone offers to help, say yes! There are many ways that people can help without donating money:

- Make posters
- Share posts on social media
- Spread the word – telling friends and family
- Make phone calls asking others to donate
- Help with writing and mailing letters
- Help organize an event
- Sell raffle tickets
- Contact a local Rotary Club, school Parent-Teacher organizations, book club, etc. to help you organize an event or help you fundraise.

Visit hostageus.org/resources for more information on how to help your loved one. We are here to help you, your loved one, and your family during and after the period of captivity.

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