

## Undaunted by no-shows, group takes its issues to candidates

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MANCHESTER – What if you held a forum for presidential candidates and none of them came?

That's what happened to the Granite State Organizing Project, which had long planned a forum on social justice issues here yesterday. Undaunted, the group decided to bring its message to the campaigns instead.

Armed with songs, prayers and a determination to be heard, nearly 400 members of the GSOP and several like-minded coalitions from other states visited both Democratic and Republican candidates' offices in Manchester. They presented placards expressing disappointment that the candidates had not come to New Hampshire for the event, and detailing their concerns about health care access, a living wage, affordable housing and immigrant rights.

GSOP member Fred Plett of Goffstown said he was there to press the issues that concern him, "because part of running for president should be a conversation with real people, not just sound bites."

A registered Republican, Plett said he worries that this year's compressed primary schedule is changing the process here -- "to the detriment of the country."

"We're making lemonade out of this, but I'm disappointed that no candidate could attend our event," he said. "And I think that's the result of other states crowding in."

Hosted by Southern New Hampshire University's School of Community Economic Development, yesterday's forum had been billed as "a conversation with our next President." Only former Alaskan Sen. Mike Gravel had committed to attend -- and then he pulled out on the eve of the event.

At the headquarters of Sen. Barack Obama, Tess George of Nashua, one of the GSOP team leaders, tried without success to get staffer Nicole Derse to call the national campaign office while the group waited.

But Derse noted Obama had responded to a list of questions the GSOP had sent previously, and she thanked the group for its community work.

Plett then read the group's prepared statement, and the Rev. Moses Akanbi, dressed in the colorful garb of his native Nigeria, offered a prayer for the candidate and the country. The group filed out, singing, "This Land is Your Land."

The scene was repeated at the Millyard office of Rep. Tom Tancredo, where campaign manager Shelly Uscinski spoke with the group on speaker phone.

After a rather heated exchange between Uscinski and George over the candidate's failure to accept the GSOP's invitation, the visit ended cordially, with a promise to get the candidate to answer the group's written questions.

Two other groups visited campaign offices of Rudolph Giuliani, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Mitt Romney and Christopher Dodd.

Event organizer Sarah Jane Knoy said her group got to speak by telephone not only with Nick Clemons, the Clinton campaign's state director, but also with its national field director, Karen Hicks.

She said a third group elicited a promise from the Edwards campaign that he will attend a Dec. 1 event in Iowa sponsored by the GSOP's sister organization there, and spoke to Romney's state director, Jim Merrill, about its concerns.

Meanwhile, Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback's campaign sent staffers over to the SNHU hall to meet with the group.

Arnie Alpert of the American Friends Service Committee, a member of the GSOP, said the candidates who chose not to attend yesterday's forum "don't want to be held accountable by the people."

"The reason why the New Hampshire primary is important is because, in the past, there have been these opportunities to make sure real people's stories are being heard by the candidates," he said.

"If they only do staged events and appearances on comedy shows, that's not the way democracy is supposed to work."