

Counterprotesting in Niagara 101 & Emotional Health and Safety Guide

Version 2.0 - Updated March 2024

created by **Niagara Reproductive Justice**
niagarareproductivejustice.com



Introduction

This Guide will walk you through the anti-choice groups in Niagara, their strategies, some strategies for protesting against them (counterprotesting), and emotional health and safety considerations when counterprotesting. It also provides some additional resources for reproductive justice (RJ) and abortion issues locally and nationally.

We recommend that you familiarize yourself with the FAQ: Abortion in Canada page on NRJ's website that provides important information before engaging in counterprotesting: bit.ly/NRJFAQ.

This Guide was created by members of NRJ and contains recommendations and advice for counterprotesting in Niagara that has been gathered from personal experience and research. Please treat it as a *guide*, not as an official set of rules to follow. While we have included what we believe to be best practices, situations will vary and will call for a diversity of tactics. **Always prioritize your own emotional health and personal safety needs.** Keep in mind your own positionality, taking into account the barriers and privileges you experience in regards to safety, activism, and reproductive justice, and the positionality of those around you. We can't do this work if we aren't accountable and considerate of those doing it with us!

Please contact us to contribute information and recommendations to this guide.

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Emotional Health & Safety Considerations

COVID Precautions

Anti-choicers are known anti-maskers. **Wear a mask** and stand at least 6 feet apart from them at all times.

Personal Information

While it is unlikely that the anti-choicers in Niagara that you confront will try to gather information about your identity to harass or use against you later, **it is safest to not tell them anything about yourself.**

- Do not counterprotest while wearing identifiable work or school clothes.
- Do not tell them your real name. Do not reveal the names of the people with you.
- Do not identify yourself as a member of a group.



Buddy System

As much as possible, it is **always best to counterprotest with another person.** This should be somebody you trust and know well.

Do not give them any excuse to call the police

Drawing the police to an area endangers everyone there, including any passersby and unhoused people who live nearby and are already a constant target of police. Police are likely to side with the anti-choicers regardless of the events that transpired.

Be aware of the space and who is around

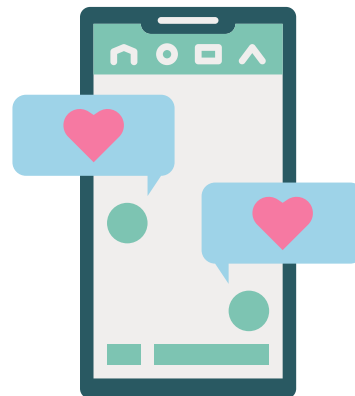
The protesters may be disrupting unhoused people who live nearby, harrassing people walking nearby, and blocking the sidewalks for people with strollers or mobility devices. **Ensure you are not contributing to these disruptions.**

If the protesters are near or on private property, **be careful not to step onto the private property.** This could include certain sections of sidewalks outside of government buildings or businesses.

Emotional Health & Safety Considerations (cont.)

Debriefing

- **Encountering anti-choicers in any form, even if you don't directly speak to them, is exhausting and can be emotionally triggering.** Talking it through can be helpful, even if you just want to let out your frustration or explain what happened.
- If you've been counterprotesting as a group, it's a good idea to debrief in-person immediately following the activity, if possible.



Additional Security Recommendations

Web Security

- Check your privacy settings. Figure out what of your personal information is viewable to the public by using the “view as” function, and then change your settings to make information viewable to friends only if you want. You may want to use an alternate last name or profile picture.
- It's a good idea to Google yourself occasionally to see what comes up and who might be talking about you, or what people might find out about you if they search your name.

Never leave a protest alone if possible. Be conscious of where you travel to after, and if you're going somewhere close by, don't go directly there.

Legal Considerations

As we emphasize throughout this guide, do not engage in any activities that could result in the police being called or you being fined or arrested. Case after case has shown that the police will side with the anti-choicers regardless of the situation.

Best Practices:

- Do not step onto private property while counterprotesting.
- Do not get within 6 feet of the protesters.
- Do not make threatening motions toward them or threaten them verbally.
- Do not carry anything with you that could be perceived as a weapon.
- Do not steal or destroy their signs.
- If you are with a lot of counterprotesters, do not crowd the protesters or block them from leaving.

BE OVERLY CAUTIOUS.

Strategies for Counterprotesting



WHAT NOT TO DO

Do not invade their personal space or get too close to them physically

- Especially during COVID, anti-choicers do not often wear masks so you should be careful to stay at least 6 feet away from them and wear a mask.

Do not wear something that could identify you, such as your name tag or clothes from work.

If you speak to the protesters, **do not tell them your real name or any personal information**. Do not tell them where you work. Do not identify yourself as a member of a group. The less they know about you, the safer you are.

Do not believe that you can convince them that they are wrong.

Do not yell, physically intimidate them, or give them any reason to draw police to the area.

Strategies for Counterprotesting (cont.)

WHAT TO DO

Plan for safety and establish group norms for protesting.

Make sure you have a plan and that you are on the same page.

It is better to **go with others** than to counterprotest alone, and it's important that you know that you are all on the same page.

Establishing group norms needs to happen at the beginning of **every** counterprotesting or postering activity, even if you have been out with the same people before.

Discuss the following as a group before going out:

Do you want to split into smaller groups or stay together as a group?

- Either way, it is recommended that no person is ever completely on their own. If somebody is going to separate from the group, have them take a buddy with them.

Do you want to engage with the anti-choicers?

- It is likely you will be approached by the anti-choicers and asked to have a conversation. Decide beforehand if the group is okay engaging with them, or if anyone in the group prefers to not have to overhear that conversation or be in the close presence of the anti-choicers for long.

If things escalate or if the police show up, what will the response be?

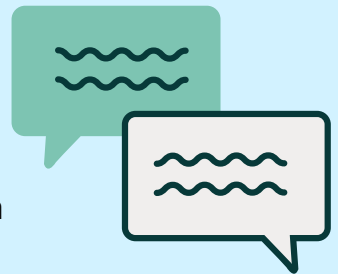
- Some volunteers may wish to immediately leave the area. It should be made clear that it is not necessarily other volunteers' job to intervene in a situation.

Did anybody in the group walk here, and if so, do they need a ride home?

- It's not good practice to let a volunteer leave on their own, in case they are followed by an anti-chooser.

Does anybody have any concerns they'd like to discuss?

- For example, maybe somebody wants to make it known that they have precarious immigration status and therefore need to take every precaution that the police will not be drawn to the area
- Is there anything else anybody wants to discuss?



Strategies for Counterprotesting (cont.)

Strategy 1: Gathering Information

If you don't have time to counterprotest but you do feel comfortable approaching the anti-choicers, try to gather as much information as you can from them.

- What group are they with?
- How often do they protest? Where?
- Where did they get their materials from?
- Do they ever work with any other local groups or organizations?
- Do they have funding? Where does it come from?
- What is the name of the person you are talking to?

If you can talk to them a bit before they know you're in opposition to them, you may be able to get more information out of them, such as what church they belong to or more details about the organizations they are affiliated with. This information is helpful for us to understand the anti-choice networks in Niagara.

Strategy 2: Leafleting and Sign Holding

The most effective counterprotesting strategy is to hold pro-choice signs near the protesters and pass out pro-choice materials. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Abortion access saves lives
- Protect abortion access
- They're wrong (with an arrow pointing toward the anti-choicers)

Your sign should be very clearly pro-choice so that you don't get confused with the anti-choicers by passerbys. They might confuse you anyways despite your efforts.

You can also pass out reproductive justice materials. NRJ's website has small zines that counter some of the most common anti-choice talking points that you can access download and print:

www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/materials-2



Strategies for Counterprotesting (cont.)

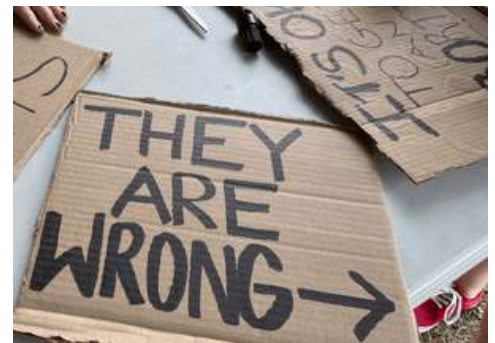
Strategy 2: Leafleting and Sign Holding cont.

If you see anti-choicers hand a leaflet to passerbys, you can offer them one of your pro-choice leaflets, and if possible switch out their anti-choice material. Remember to approach with consideration and calmness. They've just been approached by anti-choicers, which can be a jarring and unpleasant experience, and they may be confused or wary of you.

It is not advised to hand out leaflets or zines unless you are also holding a pro-choice sign. Otherwise, passerbys may think you are passing out anti-choice material.

Strategy 3: Wasting Their Time

If you are by yourself or don't have any counterprotesting materials with you, you can waste the time of the protesters by talking to them. For this strategy, it is useful to approach the protester who looks the most inexperienced or new.



While you are not going to be able to convince the protesters that they are wrong, they may believe that they can convince you. You can use their false belief to your advantage by engaging in conversation with them and wasting their time. As long as they are talking to you, they can't talk to someone else who might actually be susceptible to their arguments.

You can engage in a variety of conversation topics with the anti-choicers. It's always good to collect as much information from them as you can (see the "Gathering Information" section above). Arguing with them is the natural default, as the first question they ask you is likely to be "what are your thoughts on abortion?" You can be as agreeable or disagreeable as you want, it is inconsequential since it is extremely unlikely that either of you will convince the other.

They may be better at arguing their points than you are at arguing yours. Try not to get caught up in proving them wrong. Remember that the goal is to waste their time, not convince them that you're right.

Strategies for Counterprotesting (cont.)

They will likely end the conversation once they realize you cannot be convinced and are trying to waste their time or if they feel like you are disrespecting them. At this point, you probably won't be able to approach any other protester because they will have noticed you talking to their friend. The protesters also may decide to move location once they finish talking to you. You can choose to follow them, but do it safely and from a distance.

Please note that this strategy can be emotionally exhausting and generally unpleasant. It is important that you have someone to debrief with afterward and that you plan some self-care activities, like going for food with friends.

If you don't want to approach anti-choicers but you still want to be involved, here are a few options:

- Let others know right away when you hear or see of anti-choice activity in the region
- Help coordinate a response by handling the logistics or any printing or materials needs
- Go postering with trusted friend(s) if you feel comfortable with that. Make sure you review our Postering Safety Guide beforehand! You can find it and other materials at www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/materials-2
- Spread the word about our Anti-Choice Activity in Niagara Reporting Form on social media and by talking about it and sharing the link with your friends and family: bit.ly/reportantichoicers
- Monitor the online presence of anti-choice organizations and alert others if you see that they're planning a protest or event in Niagara



Logistics & Resources

Who to contact when you see anti-choicers

If you're in Niagara, message NRJ on Instagram. Include the following information: time, location, estimated number of protesters, and whether or not they have graphic posters

Fill out the reporting form after seeing them or going out to counterprotest, the sooner the better so you'll remember the details: bit.ly/reportantichoicers.



**Anti-Choice Activity in
Niagara Reporting Form!**

Where to get counterprotesting materials

NRJ has posters, counterprotesting zines, and other materials available to the public for free download at www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/materials-2

Buddy system

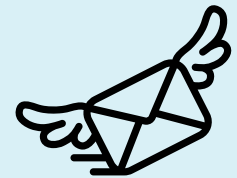
Take somebody with you to counterprotest. If you don't have anyone but want to do this regularly, consider joining the Rapid Response Network! Email NRJ at volunteer@niagarareproductivejustice.com

On-the-Go Counterprotesting

If you spot anti-choice activity happening and want to counterprotest on the spot, here are some tips that might help you be prepared for any moment!

- If you have a car, keep a pro-choice sign in your trunk.
- If you don't have a car, use a pillowcase and paint to make a protest sign. This way you can roll it up and keep it in the bottom of your bag. If it's a windy day, you can place rocks or something heavy in the pillowcase to stop it from blowing in the wind.
- If you don't have materials with you and don't want to stand there on your own, you could consider approaching the anti-choicers to find out information about them. Make sure you're not wearing anything that would identify you. Only do this if you feel comfortable.

Contact us!

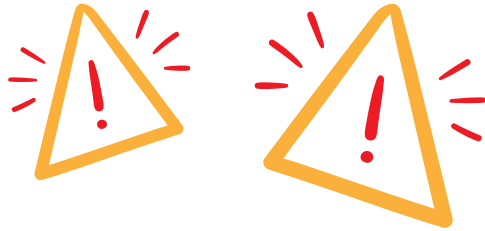


[volunteer@niagara
reproductivejustice.com](mailto:volunteer@niagara
reproductivejustice.com)

Anti-Choice Groups in Niagara

In the following section, we will highlight the most active anti-choice groups in Niagara. For a complete and up-to-date list, visit niagarareproductivejustice.com/monitoring-anti-choicers.

Local



Niagara Against Abortion

NAA is responsible for most of the graphic protests you see around Niagara. They usually hold large posters with graphic images on them at intersections in St. Catharines and Welland.

They are interns with the Canadian Centre for Bioethical Reform (based out of Alberta). They are also the people responsible for the anonymous graphic leaflets left in mailboxes throughout the region.

Clarity Pregnancy Options

Crisis Pregnancy Centre in Welland (263 Division Street) and there are two satellite locations, one in St. Catharines (226 Merritt St), and one in Niagara Falls (4099 Portage Road). They are a branch of the Niagara Life Centre.

They promote misinformation about the risks associated with abortion and are religiously affiliated. They pose as a non-judgmental pregnancy resource centre, but their goal is to prevent people from accessing resources that don't align with their anti-abortion agenda.

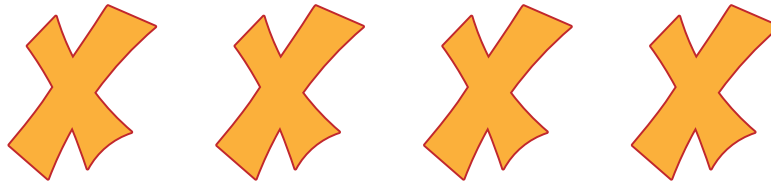
Niagara Life Centre

Niagara Life Centre is an anti-abortion, Christian Crisis Pregnancy Centre that also offers mental health counseling and other programming.

The following are extensions of Niagara Life Centre: Clarity Pregnancy Options (formerly known as Elisha House), South Niagara Life Centre, and Grimsby Life Centre. While all these organizations have established their own boards of directors and registered as separate nonprofits after getting their start within the Niagara Life Centre, they all remain committed to the same goal of misinforming the public about abortion.

They are a member of the Canadian Council of Christian Charities that intentionally promotes misinformation about abortion. They also run a group called Young & Pregnant in Niagara, which finds its way onto well-intended resource lists across the region, so be careful even when receiving information from sources you trust!

Anti-Choice Groups in Niagara (cont.)



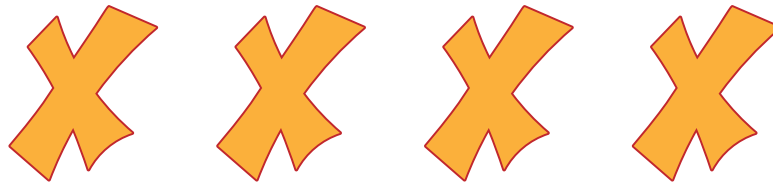
Choose Life Niagara / St. Catharines Right to Life

They are part of the national Right to Life network. They are a registered non-profit with a chapter in St. Catharines that is called Choose Life Niagara, Choose Hope Niagara, and Right to Life St. Catharines. Located in St. Catharines at 1 Belton Blvd. Ste. 102 off Glenridge Avenue.

They design and fund most of the anti-choice billboards across the region. They claim they never use violent or graphic imagery on signs or pamphlets and do not agree with those who do. They purposely spread unscientific misinformation about abortion in an attempt to create an atmosphere of guilt around the medical procedure.

They do a lot of work with high schoolers:

- They have an annual high school scholarship program where they award money to students who write essays on anti-choice topics.
- Their Youth Banquet and Conference indoctrinates high school students to “stand up and be a voice for life.”



National

Canadian Centre for Bioethical Reform

National organization based out of Alberta with the goal of having an “abortion-free Canada”. They provide training and graphic materials to Niagara anti-choice groups, and run an internship program.

Their graphic leaflets have been known to end up in unmarked envelopes in mailboxes throughout Niagara for the past decade. They are distributed by their local interns.

They develop local “Against Abortion” community groups throughout the nation, including Niagara Against Abortion, Hamilton Against Abortion, and London Against Abortion.

Anti-Choice Groups in Niagara (cont.)

Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA) & We Need a Law

National organization advocating for restrictions on abortion access through policy with activity in Niagara.

They sometimes hold flag demonstrations at Montebello Park in St. Catharines. Most recently, they have launched a legal challenge to St. Catharines' bylaw restricting the unsolicited delivery of graphic anti-choice flyers.

ARPA works closely with other anti-choice organizations such as Canadian Centre for Bioethical Reform in order to provide them legal support.

National Campus Life Network

They attempt to help university students start anti-choice clubs. They have worked with students at Brock to start Badgers for Life, but were unsuccessful.

They lack organization and follow-through and haven't been able to have much of an impact in the last few years.

In March 2021, MPP Sam Oosterhoff headlined an event for this group. He was re-elected as MPP for Niagara West in 2022 and he has previously pledged to “make abortion unthinkable in our lifetime”.

Summary of anti-choice talking points

This section summarizes some of the main talking points and arguments used by anti-choicers. See the **Appendix** of this guide for more detailed information.

They typically rely on finding common ground with the person they're speaking to by starting with what can be agreed upon and attempting to lower defences. Then they'll use analogies, stories, and graphic images to provoke empathy, and then push their “evidence” and anti-abortion arguments.

Anti-Choice Groups in Niagara (cont.)

Summary of anti-choice talking points

In conversation, they'll try to push the human rights argument and the ageism argument:

Human Rights - They believe fetuses are humans that deserve human rights, they'll try to use faulty questions like "if two humans reproduce, what species is their offspring?" or "if an organism is growing, doesn't that mean it is alive?" to attempt to justify their point.

Ageism - They believe denying fetuses human rights is due to ageism, calling it "deadly age discrimination"

They're also prepared to argue that the fetuses life is more important than all circumstances including teen pregnancy, poverty, sexual assault, and the pregnant person's life being in danger.

Known sites and times

You can view the Anti-Choice Activity Map to see recorded instances of anti-choice protests and events in Niagara on our website: niagarareproductivejustice.com/monitoring-anti-choicers.

If you know of anything missing or have seen something, fill out the Anti-Choice Activity in Niagara reporting form: bit.ly/reportantichoicers.



Additional Resources



NRJ Resources

Please read our Values Statement on our website:
www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/our-values

Anti-Choice Activity in Niagara Reporting Form: bit.ly/reportantichoicers

Our Niagara Resources page lists sexual health resources in the Niagara Region:
www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/niagara-resources

You can find our zines (The Truth About Abortion in Canada; Debunking Crisis Pregnancy Centres; Sexual Health Resources in Niagara) on our Materials page,
www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/materials-2

You can also review some of the basic information about abortion in Canada on our FAQ page: www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/FAQ

It's always good to know how to help people access abortion in Niagara:
www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/support

Follow us on Instagram (@niagarareproductivejustice) for updates and links to other resources

Educational Resources

What is Reproductive Justice? | SisterSong

Abortion in Canada | The Canadian Encyclopedia

Crisis pregnancy centres mislead women, report says | Global News

Five Years After Abortion, Nearly All Women Say It Was the Right Decision, Study Finds | University of California San Francisco

Canada's anti-abortion movement is rebranding — and pushing for political impact | CBC



Additional Resources (cont.)

Abortion Issues in Niagara

'Fatigue, frustration and anger' felt in Hamilton, Niagara region after Roe v. Wade overturned in U.S. | CBC

'People need to be very vigilant': concerns rising over future of abortion access in Canada | St. Catharines Standard

Niagara MPP Oosterhoff headlining event after organizer compared abortion to Holocaust | CBC

My Unthinkable Abortion: St. Catharines Reg. Councillor Goes Public and Sends Letter to Oosterhoff | iHeartRadio

Organizations Doing Related Work

Local to Niagara

- OPIRG Brock: www.opirgbrock.com
- Niagara Falls Community Health Centre: www.nfchc.ca
- Quest Community Health Centre: www.questchc.ca
- OUTNiagara: www.outniagara.org
- Positive Living Niagara and Streetworks: www.positivelivingniagara.com
- Student Justice Centre at Brock University: www.brocku.ca/human-rights/student-justice-centre

Online & National

- Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project: www.maggiesto.org
- Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada (ARCC): www.arcc-cdac.ca
- SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective: www.sistersong.net
- Native Youth Sexual Health Network: www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com
- Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights: www.actioncanadashr.org
- National Abortion Federation of Canada: www.nafcanada.org
- University of Victoria's Anti-Violence Project: www.antiviolenceproject.org



See www.niagarareproductivejustice.com/rj-resources for more local organizations and reproductive justice resource recommendations.

Appendix: Understanding Anti-Choicers

Their Goals

The goal of most anti-choice groups is to end abortion. Some groups advocate for a law that bans abortion across Canada, while other groups, like Niagara Against Abortion, claim to not want a law. Instead, they want to “change people’s hearts and minds by exposing the ‘truth’ about the harm that abortion causes to fetuses and women”. Anti-choicers want to shift the narrative around abortion so that it becomes shameful, stigmatized, and socially inaccessible.

Their Strategies and Talking Points

Niagara Against Abortion, who are the most frequent protesters in Niagara with the graphic posters, rely on a set of strategies when protesting. The first is their use of graphic images of what are supposedly fetuses that have been aborted. They believe that “abortion photography” is essential even though it causes harm to some passerbys because photography has been successfully used in other social movements.

Below is an outline of the strategies they use when talking with people on the street. You may want to familiarize yourself with these strategies if you plan to confront anti-choicers using the “waste their time” counterprotesting strategy. Please note that the terminology used here is paraphrased from their pamphlets; you can access one of their pamphlets here: <http://bit.ly/antichoicepamphlet>.

Anti-choice terminology below



Effective Communication

Build a Bridge

- Find common ground with the person. The goal is not to win arguments, it is to reach the person.

Touch the Heart

- Know what to say and when to say it. Use analogies and stories to touch the heart.

Deliver the Message

- Ask questions (like the Socratic method) to draw out the “truth.”
- Use scientific evidence and the philosophy of human rights.

Appendix: Understanding Anti-Choicers (cont.)

Anti-Choice talking points and strategies, paraphrased from their pamphlets.

Conversation Tools

The Human Rights argument

- Argues that fetuses are humans and therefore deserve human rights. They may ask odd questions like “if two humans reproduce, what species is their offspring” or “if an organism is growing, doesn’t that mean it is alive?” to make this point.

Ageism argument

- Argues that denying fetuses human rights is due to ageism. “Pre-born children” are denied human rights because of their age. Therefore, abortion is “deadly age discrimination.”
 - You are still dependent on your parents after you are born, but then it’s not okay for a parent to abandon their child because they will die.

Common ground

- Start with what you agree on
- Show that you are listening and you care
- Break down barriers and lower defenses

Analogies

- Use analogies or stories to illustrate your point
- Show, don’t tell (i.e., use the graphic material)

Question

- Help people realize what they already know, and leads them to their own conclusion
- Show that you’re interested in dialogue and understanding their position
- e.g., “Would it be okay, however, for me to swing my arm into somebody else? Why not?”



Circumstances

Have responses prepared for all of the circumstances listed here that argue that the fetus’ life is still more important: poverty, teen pregnancy, sexual assault, mother’s life is in danger

Drowning Analogy (if two people are drowning and you only have time to save one);

- If you don’t have time to save the second person, have you killed them? If you hold the second person’s head underwater, have you killed them?

Appendix: Understanding Anti-Choicers (cont.)

"Science:" When does life begin?

"Human Development begins at fertilization when a sperm fuses with an oocyte to form a single cell, the zygote. This marks the beginning of each of us as a unique individual."

"The term 'fetus' tells us how old an organism is, not what kind of organism. A human fetus is a human being from 8 weeks to 9 months — fetus is an age-range term."

List all the "facts" about when the heart starts beating, when the brain is developed, etc.



Stay in touch!

 Niagara Reproductive Justice

 @niagarareproductivejustice

 niagarareproductivejustice.com

 **Contact us!**
niagarareproductivejustice@gmail.com