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## **LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY**

### ***Background***

Tracking and monitoring local, state, and federal political processes is an important activity related to promoting healthy pregnancies and birth outcomes. It is important to stay informed about how political decisions, changes to existing laws, and the formulation of new laws may impact the populations we serve. This brief deals specifically with building an organization that can help you and your initiative/cause gain support from elected officials. In its simplest terms, legislative advocacy is working with individual lawmakers and lawmaking bodies to gain support for your cause or initiative, for the needs of a specific population, for an organization or group of organizations, or for specific services. Lawmakers' support can take several forms, usually in the form of a bill that is a proposed law, introduced during a session for consideration by the Legislature and identified numerically in order of presentation. Some examples are as follows:

- *A bill with funding attached.*
- *A bill with wording that supports a particular philosophy or helps to legitimize your issue.*
- *A bill with regulations that benefit your target population or advance your cause.*
- *A local ordinance that supports your cause.*
- *Budget advocacy.*
- *Simple political, intellectual, or moral support.*

- *Links to other contacts.*

Actual legislative advocacy can involve anything from working personally with a legislator or aide on the wording of a bill to mobilizing hundreds or even thousands of supporters to flood a legislature with phone calls about an issue. It includes educating legislators, supporters, and the public about the issue, working with the media, continuously seeking out allies, and being persistent over long periods of time.

### ***General Guidelines for Public Policy and Legislation***

The most important factor in conducting effective legislative advocacy is timing. Legislative memories can be short, and today's all-important issue can be tomorrow's item of no concern. While good advocates keep at it all the time, deciding when to do a real push can be crucial to success. Times when advocacy efforts are particularly important include:

- *When the lawmakers are about to take up something crucial to your issue.* If someone has filed or is about to file a bill that's particularly favorable or unfavorable to your cause or your target population, or if someone is proposing funding increases or cuts that will affect you, it's definitely time for action.
- *Just before and during budget time.* If you have funding concerns, the time to make them known is when legislators are actually working on the budget for the next fiscal year. At the same time, if they're thinking of making cuts in your

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area, you want your voice to be heard while they're deliberating.

- *When your issue or target population is drawing attention.* The adage "Strike while the iron is hot" applies here. If a book about your issue has just been published and is being widely read and quoted, it's a perfect time to add the voice of your advocacy group – as an "expert" to the discussion.
- *When a vote on a crucial bill is likely to be very close.* In that case, you may have to pull out all the stops in order to try to influence the votes of a few key lawmakers.
- *When a bill or budget—or the veto of a bill or budget—that hurts your case has just been passed or signed but can still be changed by an amendment, a veto, or an override.* Now when you have to act quickly and decisively is the time when careful organizing can really pay off. If your group can produce a flood of phone calls and visits to legislators, all with the same message, you're more likely to accomplish your goal.
- *When it's important to make legislators aware that your issue exists.* Many areas that are now regularly discussed and funded by legislative bodies-- environmental preservation, adult literacy education, services for the homeless--were unmentioned and, often, unheard of until concerted efforts by advocates brought them to lawmakers' attention.

## **Steps to Conducting Legislative Advocacy**

Effective organization is crucial to successful legislative advocacy. You have to gather

your allies, create a coordination structure, do your homework on the issue, define your message, establish and maintain a communication network, and cultivate media relationships so that you can use everything you have when you need it. Finally, legislative advocacy demands that you take the long view, and expect that you'll be at it for a long time.

### **Step 1: Organize your allies**

There is strength in numbers. Identifying the people in your camp and getting them to commit to an advocacy effort are your first steps toward building a powerful organization. Who are the people you need to bring in?

- *Any legislators who are already in favor of your position.* Approach those who've voted to fund or support your issue in the past, or with whom you've had recent positive conversations. Legislators who have a personal interest are natural allies. If you're advocating for more physical access for those with disabilities, for instance, a legislator who is herself in a wheelchair, or who has a hearing-impaired family member, is likely to understand the issue and be sympathetic.
- *Actual or potential beneficiaries of the policy or funding you're advocating for.* Make sure that all these folks are registered to vote, if they're citizens and 18 or older.
- *People who work in organizations offering services aimed at the issue or the population in question.* In addition to being sympathetic, these are the people who usually know the most about the issue.

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- *Recognized "experts" in the field.* Academics, former legislators who've dealt with the issue, beneficiaries of the policy in question who've turned their lives around, and long-time providers of services are the types of believable, authoritative voices that legislators often listen to.
  - *Supportive community and business leaders and other citizens who understand the issue.* These include the community opinion leaders--business people, clergymen, heads of organizations, newspaper columnists--who are able to influence large numbers of others because of their standing in their field or in the community at large. They also include people who simply have the time and inclination to work on the campaign, and will stuff envelopes, man phones, and act as gofers when they're needed. Such people are often the heart of a grassroots advocacy campaign.
  - *Credible celebrities who are sympathetic to the issue.*
  - *Professional or other organizations concerned with the issue or with the population affected.* Labor unions and other organizations which already engage in advocacy themselves are especially helpful.
  - *Be careful not to write off people with whom you may disagree on other issues.* The ties you establish as a result of this advocacy campaign, may mean that you'll be allies again in the future, or even that they'll be more willing to listen to your arguments about the issues on which you disagree.

Putting together a core group for an advocacy campaign takes some serious work. It means using your network--or creating one--to reach an ever-widening circle of concerned people and organizations. Generally, you start with those you already know, or who you know are allies. It helps to have some connection (approach sympathetic legislators, for example, through people in their districts, where possible, or people who know their aides), but sometimes you simply have to call and ask for an appointment, or collar someone you don't know at a meeting.

When you find recruits to your advocacy cause, you are also finding, through them, the folks who are part of their networks. Ask each recruit to become a recruiter, so the more allies you find, the faster the circle grows. You may be alone, or almost alone, at the beginning; but if you can interest a few key people, your advocacy campaign can grow quickly. As you collect allies, make sure that everyone agrees on the basics of what you're advocating for. It's better to have a smaller group that's rock-solid than a larger one that's split into factions or that can't agree on a reasonable message.

## **Step 2: Create a coordination structure**

It's vital to have a single coordinating individual or body at the core of your advocacy effort. This facilitates communication and decision-making, but, most important, it puts at the center of the effort one person or small group whose business it is to know what's going on and to act or react quickly, decisively, and effectively. The coordinating individual or group should, of course, involve all the

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participants as much as possible, but there may be times when the whole advocacy group will need to trust the coordinator to make a decision and mobilize support for it.

As you gather supporters, you may want to explore forming a coalition. A coalition of equals can sometimes serve the purpose of coordination without raising the concerns about who has power that often wreck advocacy efforts before they get started.

Whether you form a coalition or not, it's usually a good idea to have a coordinating body that represents a number of the different groups and interests involved in the advocacy effort. The individual coordinator might then come out of that group. The coordinator should serve as the focal point for the campaign, orchestrating communication, direct action, or whatever else needs to be done.

### **Step 3: Do your homework**

- *Know your issue inside out.* If you're going to advocate effectively, you and everyone else involved have to learn as much about your issue as possible. You should have all the statistics available. If there's science or political philosophy or history involved, you should know it well enough to explain it in a way understandable to the average person.
- *Know the other side.* If you have opponents or if there are drawbacks to what you're advocating for, you need to know the arguments against it as well as you know your own, and you need to develop point-for-point answers to them. If there are legitimate arguments that you can't answer, you should at

least consider rethinking your position on those issues. If that's not possible--i.e. if you see what you're advocating for as far more important than its negative consequences--then you should at least acknowledge those arguments as problems, and offer to work toward solutions with your opponents. It's absolutely essential to be honest in these situations, because your credibility is at stake.

- *Know the committees that are important to your issue and who's on them.* Find out who among those legislators are supportive, who needs to be convinced, and what will convince them.
- *Know who other key legislators are and their positions on your issue.* Chairs of important committees (Rules, Appropriations), legislators who serve on the Conference Committee that reconciles the House and Senate versions of the annual budget or of important bills, legislators who are willing to take up your issue as a personal cause, individuals whom other lawmakers respect and listen to -- learning who the players are should be an important part of your preparation.

All this is true for local lawmakers as well. Knowing which County Commissioners or Finance Board members are key can be extremely helpful in getting regulations or ordinances passed. Being aware that a particular City Councilor has supported your issue in the past may be crucial.

### **Step 4: Define your message**

You need to be specific and crystal clear about what it is you're advocating for. In order to be sure that your message is one that all your allies can happily support, you can develop it through a process involving representatives from all constituent groups.

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Alternatively, if there's an advocacy group that everyone supports, it could be agreed that the message developed by that group will be the message voiced by everyone.

The advocacy message has to make sense, be easily understandable to those unfamiliar with the issue, and effectively address the issue in reasonable ways. If it offers solutions, they should be feasible, given the economic and political climate and the resources available to the state or federal government, or to the agencies which will implement laws or administer funding. There are several reasons why a clear and specific message is so important:

1. A well-defined message is easier to pass on to your allies, easier for them to understand, and less likely to be misstated.
2. A clear message is easier for legislators and the public to understand, especially if they're unfamiliar with the issue.
3. A message that's specific and concise is more likely to be heard favorably by legislators, especially if it asks for some specific action. Legislators dislike ambiguity; if there's something they can actually *do* that will benefit constituents and that they can then take credit for, they're apt to favor it if it's not too controversial. If it is controversial, they will appreciate the fact that you're being absolutely clear about what they'll have to do if they support you. They can then weigh the consequences of that support, and know what they're getting into. The clearer and better your ideas, the better your chances of success. If you can make a powerful argument that's easy to understand and difficult

to counter, you're more than halfway home.

4. An advocacy effort *must* speak with one voice. Having a clear and specific message that everyone agrees on makes that possible.

### **Step 5: Create a communication network that works**

It's vital that you and your allies be able to reach one another quickly, and to mobilize for immediate action. You'll often have a day or less to make an impact, and you have to make every minute count. The best way to insure effective action (putting together an urgent strategy meeting, calls to legislators, organizing a public event on short notice, etc.) is through an effective communication system. Effective systems vary with circumstances, but they have a few features in common:

- *An individual or small group responsible for coordinating communication.* A communication system needs someone to manage it. The logical person for this is usually the advocacy coordinator, but it could be a separate communication coordinator who works with him, or it could vary from situation to situation. If it isn't possible for one person to play this role, then it should be shared among as few people as possible to minimize errors and missed opportunities. Being at the center doesn't mean that the communication coordinator should do all communication himself, but rather that he should oversee and manage it.
- *A fast and reliable way of getting information out to everyone who needs it.* E-mail is probably the best if it's possible, because it's instantaneous and can be sent to large numbers of people at once with a single keystroke.

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A well-maintained web site with an e-mail link may also be an excellent--and nearly instantaneous--source of information. A distant second are fax or phone trees. This method only works as long as everyone completes her calls, and the coordinator knows exactly who hasn't been reached. A very distant third is a mass mailing, which--although slow, costly, and lacking in feedback--can be a reasonable way to transmit information that doesn't have to be acted upon immediately.

- *A feedback loop so the coordinator can determine whether a requested course of action -- phone calling to legislators, information-gathering, etc.-- is being carried out and what its results are.* If people report back to the coordinator about the results of their contact with legislators, for instance, she'll have the information that will allow the group to decide what to do next.
- *Messages to the whole group originate at the central point, so there will be no doubt about their content or accuracy.* If someone has new information or a message for the whole group, it should go through the communication coordinator.
- *Links not only to the advocacy group or coalition, but to the media, allies in the legislature and elsewhere, and other outlets and resources--other coalitions, celebrities, national groups, etc.*
- *Regular updates.* People and organizations change jobs and staff people, move, switch their Internet service providers, get new phone and fax lines, etc. The communication system has to be constantly checked

so that information is accurate and people can be reached on the first try.

- *A crisis management plan.* If something happens that results in adverse publicity or scandal attached to your advocacy group, a plan will help you minimize the damage.

### **Step 6: Cultivate the media**

Publicity is often a major element in an advocacy campaign, and the best way to get it is through the media. In order to make sure you have access, you need to develop and maintain relationships both with newspapers and radio and TV stations and with individual editors, columnists, reporters, producers, and broadcasters, so that you can get your message out quickly and at the right time. In particular, you might want to arrange some or all of the following before there's an emergency or an all-out campaign, so that you'll have the procedure down when you really need it.

- Press releases
- Press conferences
- Stories you write or arrange
- Op-ed pieces, columns, or editorials
- Public events the media will cover

### **Step 7: Take the long view**

One of the most fundamental pieces of a solid advocacy effort is the understanding that advocacy takes time. A particular success--getting money in the budget for your issue, for instance--can often be accomplished in a short burst of intense activity. But it may take years to get a bill passed, or to have your message become common knowledge among policy makers.

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Your group has to be willing to keep at it, even in the face of apparent defeat, or worse, indifference. There is no guarantee that sustained effort will lead to success; but there is an absolute guarantee that a lack of sustained effort will lead to failure.

### ***Tips to Approaching Legislators and other Policymakers***

The final element in organizing for advocacy is approaching legislators and others. Advocates don't have to--and in fact shouldn't--wait until there's a burning issue to make contact with policy makers. Establishing and maintaining regular contact with as many legislators, staffers, and other influential people as possible will serve you well when the crunch comes. There are three basic rules for this kind of contact: 1) approach policy makers personally; 2) have a clear goal in mind to talk to them about; and 3) make sure they understand the advantages of supporting you and the costs of not doing so.

#### **1. Approach policy makers personally**

- *Make sure that everyone involved in the advocacy effort knows who his state representative, state senator, Congressman, and U.S. Senator are, and that he has a personal relationship with someone in each person's office.* The ideal is to have enough contact with either the legislator or their staff so that that person recognizes your name and will answer or return your calls.
- *Make sure that key advocates establish relationships with key legislators.* It is best if the advocates involved are actually constituents of those legislators, or, if this isn't possible, that

they can be identified as officers or representatives of a coalition or formal advocacy group. Sympathetic legislators can also be helpful here, in arranging introductions and vouching for advocates and their legitimacy.

- *Use your constituency.* Mass visits to legislators' or other policy makers' offices can be extremely eye-opening for legislators. They often don't realize the strength of grass roots support for an issue until they actually have a large group of people facing them and asking for action.
- *Try to create, with the help of allies in the legislative body, a caucus to deal specifically with your issue.* A group of interested legislators and aides who meet on some regular basis, and who are well-grounded in the needs of the target population, the goals of your initiative, the intricacies of the issue, etc. can be tremendously helpful in getting support made into law.
- *Make it personal.* Introduce policy makers to people who are or will be directly affected by their policies, and let those people tell their own stories (personal testimonials).
- *Get policy makers to visit the sites that their policies directly affect.*
- *Stage educational events for legislators.* Hearings, information sessions, presentations, and townhall meetings--at the State House, or in the field--can help to educate legislators and gain allies for your cause. Legislators are more likely to attend such an event if they are invited formally by other legislators.

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- *Hire a lobbyist.* If that is financially and legally feasible, it is another way of establishing personal contacts with legislators. Keep in mind, there are different rules for different types of agencies when it comes to lobbying or educating public policy decision makers. It is important that you know what you can and can't do depending on your sources of funding.

## **2. Approach policy makers with a clear goal in mind**

Your goals should be clear, specific, and involve something a lawmaker can actually try to accomplish. As we discussed earlier, clear goals are easier to understand for both those you are trying to convince and those working with you. Legislators and other policy makers have many demands on their time, and many people asking them to do something. If your message isn't clear, specific, and accomplishable, they're not likely to want to spend much time on you. For example, you can use a previously drafted bill you want to pass; a specific budget you want appropriated; or a letter you'd like the legislator to sign on to.

## **3. Approach policy makers with the consequences of their actions**

Make sure that legislators and other policy makers understand how their support of your issue will benefit their constituents. It's particularly helpful if you can give them real numbers of people in their districts who are currently in need of the services you're advocating for, or who fall into the categories of people whose needs are at issue. Once a legislator knows that your coalition represents 11,000 people who oppose development of a natural area, or that her district contains 27,000 children who lack immunizations, he/she may be more willing to listen to you. Whether a legislator has been swayed by your arguments or

supported you from the start, be sure to thank him formally. Lawmakers want to know not only that they have done the right thing, but that someone has noticed and will remember at the next election.

## **Source Materials & Useful Resources**

For full text of this document, please visit:

**Organizing for Effective Advocacy - Community Tool Box**

<http://ctb.ku.edu>,

[http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub\\_section\\_main\\_1253.htm](http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub_section_main_1253.htm)

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