



EFFECTIVE POLICY ADVOCACY

--Handout from workshop, "Advocacy Do's and Don'ts for Nonprofits;" prepared by Theresa Tod, Texas Network of Youth Services

What to Communicate, when you Call, Write, or Visit:

- Identify yourself, your organization
- Be clear about what you want. Name the law you want changed, or program you want funded, specifically what you want the policy maker to do.
- Present a compelling argument. Offer the strongest arguments you can make in support of what you are asking. Help them understand the problem you're trying to solve. Often the most effective way to do that is to tell a story about a real person (and back it up with the supporting data).
- Be brief and to the point.
- Let them know how you can be reached for further information, clarification, etc.

Tips for Being An Effective Policy Advocate:

- Invite your legislator out to your program before the session starts; don't wait until the last minute to engage them. Once they are in session, it often becomes very difficult to engage them directly.
- Get to know your legislator's staff – both at the Capital and at the home office. Staff will often be assigned to specific areas or issues; find out which staff are assigned to the issue you are concerned with. Staff are their eyes and ears; legislators rely on staffers for input and information. You will probably be able to spend time with the staff when visiting; you may or may not be able to meet with the legislator.
- Call legislative offices, before important votes, or on important issues; they keep tally sheets of calls on issues
- Write out a short script for a phone call. Memorize your speech if visiting; practice how you will say it.
- If it's your first time for a legislative visit, go along with someone more experienced if you can. Learn by watching and imitating.
- Bring business card, agency brochure
- If you're advocating for funding, it is usually not the right time to "trash" your cash cow. If you trash the agency that provides the funding you want, why would the legislators want to give them money? Be extremely cautious about raising issues about how the agency administers the program; that is best done by bringing the issue to a higher level within the agency. If that hasn't worked, only with specific legislators who not only have a long history of support of the program, and also your agency.

- Your credibility is crucial; always know your facts – be consistent and DON'T GUESS (or make stuff up). There is nothing wrong with saying “I don't know, but I will get back with you.” But be sure you do so. You gain lots of points by being thorough and accurate, and responsive!
- Don't worry about being rejected. Politicians didn't get where they are by being rude; they aren't likely to risk losing anyone's vote by telling you off.
- Always say thank-you. Better yet, write a thank you note after a visit, and you can include any follow-up information or something you feel you left out.

Tips for Testifying At Hearings:

- Join organizations that will provide fact sheets and other background information, and will inform their constituents about upcoming hearings. Be prepared for little notice!
- It is THEIR club. Always be respectful, never talk while they are talking, never interrupt, and quit talking if they interrupt you. If a legislator appears mean to you (highly unlikely), and you stay cool, you will likely gain sympathy if not points from others on the committee!
- Plan what you will say. Provide a written document (a bulleted document is OK, and easy to read.) Attachments are OK (such as a fact sheet).
- Practice your testimony – DON'T READ IT! (Or if you do, practice so it doesn't sound like reading, and look up as much as possible).
- Note that there may be a time limit, and your time may be limited to as brief as two minutes – which isn't much time! Be prepared to hit only the main highlights; and ask them to read your full written testimony.
- It is seldom that minds are changed in hearings, but you can't ignore them. Lack of participation provides excuse for ignoring (not funding) your issue.
- If you are going to testify before a committee that your legislator sits on, visit ahead of time – at least call. They love to show off their programs. Also, ask them if they would like some questions that they could ask you
- Craft your message, hone it and practice it. This allows you to answer the question YOU want to answer. You can turn a question into an opportunity to reiterate the point you want to emphasize

The bottom line: Speaking up won't guarantee that you will win, but NOT speaking up guarantees that your wishes won't be known!

- Nancy Amidei, *“So You Want To Make a Difference”*

Texas State Government website: www.capitol.state.tx.us

Alliance for Justice: <http://www.afj.org>

Charity Lobbying in the Public Interest: <http://www.independentsector.org/clpi>

OMB Watch: <http://www.lombwatch.org>

Tax.org: <http://www.taxanalysts.com>

Texas Network of Youth Services is a membership organization. Website: www.tnoys.org