

Advocacy for Everyday People: The Rules of the Road

Adapted for NASW-CA from a similar piece by Lynn DeLapp, Legislative Consultant

High-powered, well-coifed men and women in well-tailored suits, running around the State Capitol or Washington, murmuring into cellular phones, attending \$1000 a plate fundraisers and power lunches, arranging quiet rendezvous with power brokers and committee chairs.

Lobbyists. Certainly not us.

Think again. How important are your programs? Are you reliant on public money? Is funding for your demonstration program about to run out? Are policymakers just not "getting it" when it comes to your practice area? If so, you must learn to use basic advocacy skills. Otherwise, policymakers who control the purse strings may not be prepared to provide you with the funding or support your agency needs. Your hard work and successes could end up on the list of budget cuts for 2004.

Advocacy is not particularly difficult. In fact, it's mainly common sense. You don't have to wear \$700 suits, or even come to Sacramento. But there are some basic rules.

The guidelines below have been gleaned from longtime legislative staffers and policymakers. If you keep them in mind, you will avoid most of the pitfalls of advocacy, and may succeed in winning critical support for your programs and agencies.

Policymakers--especially elected officials--want to do good things, and get credit for them.

They absolutely do not want to act foolishly, especially in public. Thus they appreciate anything you can do to help them make good policy and avoid looking uninformed. On the other hand, providing them with one-sided, unrealistic, or dubious information, or policy recommendations that cannot be defended will probably result in doors slamming in your face, and may jeopardize your whole program.

Get to know your representative. This means your city council member, county supervisor, assembly member, state senator, or congressional representative. The better you know your policymakers, the more likely they will be to seek out the benefits of your wisdom and advice.

Do your homework. Be very clear about the message you want to give to your representative. Maybe you want to acquaint him or her with community needs. Or perhaps you need assistance in

establishing a new program, expanding services, or locating financial or other types of support. In any case, make sure that you can clearly identify your specific need, request or problem. Then be prepared to support your request with evidence, and offer your best solution to the problem. If you are asking for financial support, for example, be prepared to justify your request, know what level of funding is realistic, and where additional resources might be found.

Show, don't tell. Invite your representative to visit your program not just once, but annually, or whenever there is something new. Seeing a program makes it come alive; policymakers can get a far better understanding of your goals and needs by seeing consumers receiving services or involved in serving community needs, than by reading about the program. Besides, policymakers like to get out of the office, and talk to people in the real world. On the other had, make sure you have planned the visit for a day when things are happening. It also never hurts to send your visitor home with a few photographs of him or her talking to clients. Those photos might end up on the wall of your representative's office, or in the local newspaper.

Become a "source." One of the most valued commodities for a policymaker is information. Every policymaker develops a network of experts on a variety of issues upon whom they can call to obtain information or try out new ideas. As term limits have taken effect, more and more new representatives take office who have not yet developed their "sources." It provides a great opportunity to become their expert. How? Get to know the policymakers. Educate them on the issues, using their language, not jargon. (I've yet to find anyone except insiders who know the meaning of the phrases "integrated services", "wrap-around" or "special needs.")

Then, when important issues arise, write a short note explaining the implications for child and family services, and offer alternative approaches (all favorable to your goals, of course) to address the problems. In addition, offer to answer any questions that arise in the course of their work, but be prepared to spend time obtaining information that is not at your fingertips. Make sure that any information you provide is both accurate and reasonable.

Never underestimate the power of staff. Representatives' staff - from receptionist to policy advisor - are a critical link to policy and policymakers. First and foremost, staff control access to policymakers by deciding whether your telephone call goes through, or your meeting is placed on their boss' schedule. Second, staff are frequently assigned to collect information and make recommendations on issues. Becoming a "source" for a staff member may be as important as providing information to the policymaker, because the staff member usually has more time available to meet with you and digest your information. Finally, staff typically are assigned to write

ordinances, bills, regulations and policies. If you are a trusted "source" and are on good terms with staff, they are more likely to listen to your advice.

Timing is everything. When to convey your message is as important as the message itself. Timing is important in two ways. If you are not clear on your objective, or not quite ready to "go public" with your message, wait until you are. Also, pay attention to your representative. If he or she is currently on a rampage against community agencies or welfare mothers, and you happen to operate a family resource center in a low-income area, you might want to delay a visit to your program until things quiet down.

Understand the budget and legislative process. If your issue becomes a proposal for a local ordinance, state budget item or statute, it is important to know the *real* decision points in these processes. In most cases, discussions about proposals, negotiations, and agreements on bill amendments take place before public hearings. Policymakers have usually decided how to vote before they enter the hearing room. Therefore, it is important to get involved early, before staff makes recommendations and decisions are formulated.

Educate your peers and chain of command about your issues.

Build alliances and NEVER fight in public. There *is* strength in numbers. If you need help from policymakers, chances are good that others do too. Policymakers need to know if a problem is widespread or limited to your program (or you). They may use different strategies for narrow and broad-based problems. Support from others with similar issues builds credibility for both the problem and proposed solutions. So before approaching a policymaker, check the situation out with your colleagues, and agree on a favored solution. (And, of course, make sure that you have the support of *your* chain of command.)

Then, join forces to advocate for the preferred solutions. At the state level, contact professional associations for superintendents of education, directors of welfare, health, mental health etc., as well as the California State Association of Counties, California School Boards Association and League of California Cities. Once you have formed alliances to support an issue, solidarity among allies is critical. At least one service for children has lost credibility with legislative staff over the years because advocates have had a history of public disagreement, and have regularly fought it out before legislative committees. Unfortunately, it was the children who lost.

Provide support for your representative. If your representative has supported your issues, be

there when s/he needs you. Provide campaign help (on your own time, of course) by assisting with phone banks, planting signs in supporters' yards, attending fundraisers, addressing campaign literature, etc. Campaigning usually ensures that the elected official will take the time to listen to your issues.

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER tie political or financial support to requests for action on an issue.

(i.e. "I hope you will support this bill, Ms. Assembly Member. By the way, we are planning to buy ten tickets to your fundraiser next week.") It is illegal, unethical, and a good way to get thrown out of an office.

Never give up. (But don't be a pest.) Many important policies don't happen overnight. It is not unusual for a bill or ordinance to be introduced two, three or more times before it is enacted. Times and circumstances (as well as the issue of the year) change. If you have an important issue, and can muster significant support, keep trying. But don't annoy policymakers by making a pest of yourself. You may need their support tomorrow on another issue.