Social Work Advocacy: An Overview

David Conley, PhD, MSW
Assistant Professor
UNCW School of Social Work
conleyd@uncw.edu
Office: 910.962.3872
Agenda

What’s Political Social Work?

Introduction to Advocacy

How to Participate
Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021)

- Social work’s primary mission: “...to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to...people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.”

- Social workers accomplish this mission by: “…their activities in direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, research and evaluation.”

- “Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully.”

- “Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.”
Common Themes

- Social and political action are at the core of our profession.
- All who hold social work degrees have received a professional education with a skillset that can be put to use politically.
- Micro social workers should work politically on behalf of clients in area of interest.
- Macro social workers should work politically on behalf of organizations & communities in area of interest.
What is Macro Social Work?

Macro social work: interventions designed to bring about change in organizational, community, and/or policy arenas (Netting et al., 2017).

Example positions:
- Organizations - program coordinator, executive director
- Communities - social activist, community organizer
- Policy - legislative advocate, policy analyst

What is political social work?
Political Social Work  (Lane & Pritzker, 2018)

- “Social work practice that explicitly attends to (1) power dynamics in policy-making, and (2) political mechanisms for eliciting social change.”
- “Form of practice...through which social workers fulfill their ethical responsibility to social and political action for social justice.”
- Political social work includes:
  1. Expanding the political power of marginalized groups
  2. Influencing the decision-making and policy agendas of political candidates and policymakers
  3. Holding professional and political staff appointments
  4. Engaging with campaigns in support or opposition of candidates, ballot initiatives, or introduced policies
  5. Seeking and holding elected office
Types of Political Interventions

Electoral Interventions:
- Those that focus on convincing voters to cast their ballot for or against a particular candidate or issue

Voter Engagement:
- Ways in which individuals and communities express their power through voting
- Social workers can use voter engagement, including voter registration, education, and mobilization, as a tool
- Laws and policies that relate to voting are constantly changing, and vary significant from state to state

Advocacy interventions:
- Focused on bringing about a specific policy change
- Strategies involving advocating for expanded political power, and for influencing policy agendas and policy decision-making
What is Advocacy?

**Definition:** the process of speaking out for or against a certain issue or policy (WHO, 2004)

**Purpose:** Why advocate?
1. There is a situation or problem that needs attention, analysis and action.
2. The solution requires action by various stakeholders.

**Types:** advocating on behalf of oneself, a client, an organization, a population, a cause, or a policy/piece of legislation

- **Example: legislative advocacy** - taking a position on an issue and initiating action to influence policy choices at various legislative levels (local, state, federal) (Loue et al., 2003)
- **Purpose:** to win the support of key constituencies or policymakers in order to influence legislation and funding as well as bring about social change (WHO, 2000).
When to Advocate: The Policymaking Process

Wilmington City Council:
- Drafting of bills/Bill introduction
- Public hearings
- Voting
- Mayoral decision
- Bill becomes a law

North Carolina General Assembly & Congress:
- Drafting of bills/Bill introduction
- Reference to committee
- Consideration by houses/Amendment process
- Governor/President decision
- Bill becomes a law
How to Advocate: Political Strategy Development Steps

Advocacy in political social work is most effective with a clear vision, set of goals, and strategy

**Five steps:**

1. Determining the specific purpose of the political change effort; what specifically you are trying to change and what intervention do you need?
2. Assessing the organizational and environmental contexts
3. Identifying goals and outcomes
4. Selecting the specific targets
5. Selecting tactics that may influence the target
How to Advocate:
Step #1. Determine your Purpose

Legislative advocacy addresses social problems by (1) drafting new laws, (2) changing existing laws, and/or (3) advocating for or against others in their efforts to draft or change laws.

In all three scenarios at the state level, you will need to become familiar with the North Carolina General Assembly website, including the Bills and Laws page.

(1-2): Drafting new laws or changing existing laws

• *Searching existing code (law)* - visit the North Carolina General Statutes (laws) page in order to understand current law.

(3): Advocating for or against introduced bills

• *Tracking bills* - If you seek to advocate for or against legislation during session, start by using the “Bills by keyword” search option, in order to track current bills in your area of interest.
Step #1: Determine your Purpose Cont’d

When you search for a particular bill, the page should look like this:
How to Advocate:
Step #2. Finding Advocacy Partners

There are many advocacy groups, both nationally and in NC. This is great news because:

- There is power in numbers
- They do much of the legwork for you
- They’ll help you stay up-to-date on issues (follow action alerts, gather information, learn about issues)
- **Examples:** NASW-NC, NAMI-NC, The ARC, etc.
How to Advocate:
Step #3. Choosing Targets

**Goals:** What’s your plan? What are your specific outcomes?

**Targets:** Legislative advocacy can be done as a constituent or as a non-constituent

1. **Constituent:** requires that you find your representatives
   
   All US citizens living in North Carolina are represented by five legislators:
   
   - US Senate- all North Carolina residents are currently represented by Senators (1) Richard Burr and (2) Thom Tillis.
   - (3) US House; (4) NC House; (5) NC Senate- representatives depend on the district in which residents live

   To find YOUR representatives:
   
   - Go to North Carolina’s General Assembly [website](https://ncleg.gov/)
   - Clink on the link “Find your legislators” at the top right
   - Type in your address; the results will be on the left-hand side and will include your district-based representatives.

2. **Non-constituent:** requires finding sponsors or committee members relevant to the bills you are interested in

   - [https://ncleg.gov/Committees](https://ncleg.gov/Committees)
   - [https://www.ncleg.gov/About/ContactInfo](https://www.ncleg.gov/About/ContactInfo)
How to Advocate:  
*Step #4. Crafting a Message*

According to the literature, influences of policymaker voting behavior are both internal and external

- **Internal influences:**
  - Religion
  - Gender/sex
  - Race/ethnicity
  - Ideology
  - Age
  - Education level

- **External influences:**
  - Media
  - Political party
  - Public opinion/constituencies
  - Lobbying/interest groups
  - Research
  - Advocacy efforts
Step #4: Crafting a Message Cont’d

Crafting Your Message:

• Policymakers are human. Typically, the same messages that appeal to you will typically appeal to them.

• It’s best if you can combine both quantitative and qualitative information sources.

• **Hard data** speaks to a policymaker’s rational sense, especially when there’s a Return on Investment (ROI).
  • 55% of adults with mental illness received no mental health services in 2019 (SAMHSA, 2020).
  • Diagnosis and treatment of depression has a ROI of $7 for every $1 spent (NASMHPD, 2012).

• **Personal stories** appeal to a policymaker’s emotional side, putting a human face to an issue.
Presenting Your Case

• Policymakers don't have much time to spend reading a lot of text or listening to long presentations, so you need to be efficient and sharp when delivering your message
• Often times you'll speak with a staffer, not the elected official directly
• You'll often know more about an issue than the elected official does – so be confident!
• A “leave-behind” can be really helpful.
• **Types:** issue brief, policy brief, research brief, fact sheet

Typical components of most leave-behinds:

• Background on the issue & key datapoints (discussed in body and displayed visually)
• Current status of the issue & key data points
• An ask (what do you want the official to do?) & ROI if available
• References
Don’t Forget the Budget!

Influencing the state budget through advocacy can be just as important as influencing the outcome of specific bills.

Here’s a link to North Carolina's Budgeting 101 and how the NC budget is developed.

The best ways to stay informed are to:

1. Follow current events
2. Track policy resources:
   - Data/stats- CDC, census bureau, WHO, bureau of justice statistics, etc.
   - Government agencies- HHS, CBO, GAO, CRS
   - Legislative Information- LegiScan, ncleg.gov, congress.gov
   - State and local agencies/groups- NAMI, NASW, The ARC, Sentencing Project
Other Facts

• Most state legislators are citizens, meaning they have other jobs year-round.
• Most legislators are not paid very much (avg- $17,000 per year in VA)
• The importance of legislative assistants
• Research suggests that it’s best to establish a relationship with your representatives as soon as possible, preferably before session, to establish rapport and credibility
• Legislators are elected to represent their constituents!
• Remember that most of the time, legislators WANT to hear from field experts and constituents about problems in their districts because they are busy people (have other jobs) and cannot possibly learn about all things on their own
Thanks!

You can find me at:
conleyd@uncw.edu