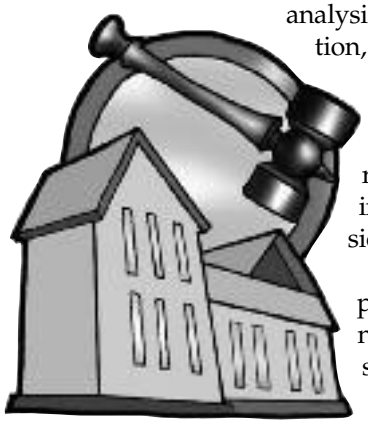
Public Policy Education and Advocacy

Supporting strong public policies provides significant opportunities for individuals and groups to work together toward providing healthy environments for individuals, families, and communities. An effective public program is based on the deep conviction that the work of every member of a team is essential to the well-being of those it serves.



Positive legislation comes from knowledge, analysis, organization, planning, cooperation, and hard work. Few achievements are more satisfying to individuals or as good for the morale of an organization as is a solid legislative victory that contributes to individual interests or to an organization's mission and objectives.

To carry out their responsibilities, public officials want, welcome, and need the advice and assistance that sincere and well-informed people provide. If you have ever felt powerless and wished you were in control or wanted to influence someone else or "the system," then you have an interest in power, public policy, and advocacy.

Public policy is made by public decision-making groups, usually governmental bodies. Public decisions affect all of us, as members of the community or as individuals. It is important to learn how to communicate your thoughts and concerns to those in decision-making positions. To do this, you may become an advocate or a lobbyist, and there is a difference.

The term "**advocacy**" is often used synonymously with the expression "**lobbying**." The Internal Revenue Service has limitations on lobbying; therefore, it is important to know the difference between these two activities. Lobbying, for nonprofit organizations as defined by the IRS, involves attempts—in the name of the organization—to influence **specific legislation** at the local, state, or federal level. Activities in the name of a particular organization considered lobbying include the following:

- Contacting any legislative member, legislative staff, or government employee to influence him or her to propose, support, or oppose specific legislation.
- Trying to persuade the public to share your views on a particular legislative proposal.
- Urging the adoption or rejection of a particular bill or provision of a bill.

If a nonprofit organization is found to engage in such activities, it is at risk of losing its nonprofit tax-exempt status.

Lobbying Tips

Grassroots lobbying is the key in the policy-making process. Effective lobbying is a developed skill that translates strong emotions about an issue into persuasive communication. Here are a few tips to help make you an effective lobbyist:

- Be professional. Know your topic.
- Greet your policy maker with a firm handshake. Clearly introduce yourself and the others in your delegation.
- Project an image of self-confidence. Don't be bashful or get intimidated by the surroundings or the people you meet.
- Anticipate opposing arguments and develop reasonable responses to them.

Mississippi State University Extension Service

- Personalize the issue. Use examples of how the issue impacts you and/or other constituents.
- If something is told to you in confidence, keep it that way.
- Don't take rejection personally if the lawmaker differs with you or cannot support your position.
- Do not take anything for granted. Be sure you understand the policy maker's positions clearly.
- If a policy maker's opinion differs from yours, don't hold a grudge. Let the policy maker know in a nonbelligerent way you are disappointed and you will inform others of the situation.
- Never break a promise to your legislator.
- Focus on the issue. Allow time for "give and take," but don't stray from the topic.
- Don't attack the policy maker on a personal basis.
- Get commitments for action from the policy maker and suggestions on other areas or people who need lobbying.
- Maintain your credibility. Do not speculate, generalize, or guess.
- Send a thank-you letter following the meeting. Provide any information you may have been asked to provide.
- Keep in touch on a regular basis.
- Get others to lobby with you.
- Be realistic about the policy-making process. It is slow, deliberate, and time-consuming. One visit is not enough to get action.

Advocacy, on the other hand, covers a range of activities broad enough to include just about everyone, in just about any kind of setting. Ironically, lobbying always involves advocacy, but advocacy doesn't always involve lobbying. Every person can be an advocate for a particular cause.

Examples of Advocacy

Speaking out about the rights or benefits to which someone is entitled or taking action to ensure institutions work the way they should are examples of advocacy. Advocacy does not promote specific legislation; it does support the specific ideas that will address certain needs.

If you speak as an individual not affiliated with a nonprofit organization, you may lobby for specific legislation. However, if you as an individual speak for the position in the name of the nonprofit organization of which you are a member, then you are a lobbyist.

Examples of activities the IRS allows nonprofit organization representatives to perform include the following:

- Write letters to political officials on the organization's letterhead.
- Call long distance to a public official at the organization's expense.
- Transport people to Washington, DC, or a state capital with mileage paid by the organization.
- Respond to inquiries about whether your organization is for or against particular legislation.
- Attend legislative sessions to give advice on legislation being discussed.
- Conduct research or other analyses that can be used to support a strategy or action.

Individuals may oppose or support specific legislation if they do not take the stance of speaking for the nonprofit organization. No matter what the level of government, the nature of the change desired, or the need, there are three basic tools available to every policy advocate: **writing**, **calling**, and **visiting**.

If policy makers are to represent your position in the policy process, they need to hear from you. The fundamentals of contacting policy makers are extremely reasonable.

- Be brief and to the point.
- Identify yourself and how you will be affected by what's being proposed; for example, the law, the budget cut, a change in rules.
- Be clear about what you want. Name the law that's being discussed or rules about to be changed and specifically what you want the policy maker to do.
- Mention provisions that you agree or disagree with, and if possible, offer some alternatives.
- Let the policy maker know how you can be reached for further information, clarification, or help.

In addition to reaching policy makers directly, there's a second audience to keep in mind: other voters. If enough voters get interested, they will help you make your case, and your job will be easier.

While it is true that some advocacy is carried out by experts, there is much to do that is simple and easy. You don't need to be an expert; you just need to care enough to get involved and speak up. Your influence is greater than you think and not hard to use. Consider the following:

- Speaking up doesn't guarantee you will win.
- Advocacy is easier if you are part of a group.
- It is helpful to go along with someone more experienced the first few times. It won't seem so intimidating.
- Don't be afraid of being asked something you can't answer.
- If asked something you can't answer, say you don't know but you'll find out and get back to them.
- Don't be afraid of being rejected.
- Practice, practice, practice. Memorize a speech, write out a script, role play with a friend.
- Be yourself.

Communicating with Policy Makers

The privilege to make one's opinions known is a fundamental principle of democracy. Policy makers should make decisions that are in the best interest of the general public, but they often do not know what the public believes. It is a civic responsibility for each person to make his or her viewpoint known.

Public policy tends to evoke foreboding thoughts of the marble halls in the states' and nation's capitols. Actually, public policy is being decided every day in company boardrooms, in the not-for-profit organizations, in the workplace and, yes, in governmental bodies at the local, state, and national levels.

There is no "one size fits all" method for communicating with policy makers, so you must use judgment and common sense in any effort to influence public policy. Following are some ways of communicating with policy makers.

E-mail

The rapid development of Internet use has created new opportunities for getting information to and from policy developers quickly. Most government offices, businesses, and not-for-profit groups maintain e-mail addresses and have Web sites. It has been documented by lobbying consultants that congressional offices will respond to e-mail from constituents as well as or better than they will respond to regular mail.

Face-to-Face Meetings

One of the most productive forms of communication for influencing public policy is to visit a policy maker. The same principles for planning and carrying out a constructive meeting apply, whether it is at the local level or in Washington, DC. A successful visit with a policy maker involves—

- a specific purpose for the visit
- an appointment
- prompt arrival
- an agenda
- a designated spokesperson if a small group is visiting
- knowledge of the policy maker's position on the topic you want to discuss
- information you can leave with the individual or a staff member
- appropriate follow-up

Before a visit with a policy maker, confirm the appointment and get the name of the appointment clerk or secretary. **Never** underestimate the value of meeting and establishing a relationship with a policy maker's staff. Ask how much time you will be allowed for the visit.

Just before the visit, you may want to make another call to confirm the arrangements.

Facsimile machine (Fax)

Letters

Sending letters via the U.S. Postal Service is the most popular choice of communication with congressional offices. Here is a list of helpful suggestions to improve the effectiveness of letters to policy makers:

1. Have the purpose of the letter in the first paragraph. If the letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly. For example, House Bill H.R. _____; Senate Bill S. _____.
2. Be courteous and to the point, and include key information; use examples to support the stated position.
3. Address only one issue in each letter; if possible, keep the letter to one page.

In all correspondence, avoid using gender-specific language. Don't use words such as "congress**man**" or "congress**woman**." "Representative," "senator," and "member of Congress" are preferred because each is gender neutral.

Telegrams

Western Union has special rates for public reaction to legislative activity:

—Public Opinion Telegram. This is a special telegram containing up to 20 words, not including your name and address, delivered the same day.

—Mailgram. A mailgram contains as many words as you want, including name and address, but there is a minimum cost for 50 words or fewer. It can take up to three business days for delivery.

Telephone Calls

Using the telephone is a practical communication strategy, especially when time is a factor.

A "telephone tree" is an effective way to mobilize many people on a particular issue. To establish such a network, formulate a plan for the calling sequence and list the names and telephone numbers of all interested people. Print a copy of the tree for the group's reference.

Ten Tips to Build Political Support

1. Personally work to develop basic "political savvy." This involves being politically intelligent but not biased. It is essential to follow the news carefully and pay attention to local people and issues.
2. Become knowledgeable about the county government process and structure.
3. Use the "make a friend" approach by building relationships. A friend knows who you are, what you are all about, your strengths and your weaknesses, and can give you feedback on how you can strengthen weak points.
4. Focus on issues—connect with the interests of the decision makers.
5. Get to know the aides of policy makers at the local, state, and federal levels, particularly those who are concerned with your subject matter.
6. Remember that policy makers are people, too! They have talents and shortcomings just like everyone else.
7. Everything is politics, all politics are local, and often the politics are biased.
8. Become familiar with the organization—its history, goals, membership, programs. You cannot build a relationship with someone else if you don't know yourself.
9. Remember, the emphasis is on building partnerships to work on public issues.
10. Symbols and positive images are good. They make people easy to recognize.

Know the rules if you're going to meet with a decision maker. These are hard-and-fast and sure to pay off.

Relating with Elected Officials

1. **Mutual respect is an absolute must.** Many citizens have a great deal of contempt for anybody holding elected office. If you're such a person, you are best advised to stay away from lawmakers. Your attitude is sure to communicate itself and ruin your efforts. Actually, the quality of the average legislative body is no worse than that of the same number of people randomly selected off the street, and probably somewhat better.
2. **Never, never lie**—not even a little bit. You will be working in one of the last areas of human endeavor where an individual's word is considered as good as a signed contract. It has to be that way. For example, if a senator asks if there's anything controversial about one of your bills and you answer in the negative even though you know better, you're washed up with that particular decision maker. You may have pulled off a fast one for the short run, but too many of these tricks, and you'll have squandered your effectiveness.
3. **When a lawmaker votes your way, thank him or her. When he or she does not, forget it.** Make the best pitch you can and hope it is good enough. If it turns out that it wasn't, never go back and scold or ask for an explanation. Maybe the lawmaker was logrolling; maybe the lawmaker had a personal interest in the issue; or maybe it's none of your business. At any rate, let it go, and start working on the next issue.
4. **Do not speak ill of a lawmaker to his or her colleagues.** If you spend much time in the company of elected officials, sooner or later one will criticize another in your presence. Listen politely, but resist any impulse to join in the criticism—even if you feel it's right on the mark. A "club atmosphere" really does exist in virtually every legislative body, from the U.S. Senate to the town council. An outsider criticizing a club member is like a friend calling your sister ugly. It's okay for insiders to make comments, but they really don't want to hear it from anyone outside the group, even if it's true.

Generic Reasons Nobody Gets Around to Lobbying

1. **Time.** "It takes so much time. I/We just don't have the time."
   - Is it a priority?
   - Can you plug into an existing network to help reduce your time?
   - Have you taken the time to focus on a few major issues?
2. **Lack of interest.** "Nobody around here cares enough to get involved."
   - Have you chosen the hot issues?
   - Have you determined what other people think is critical?
   - Have you figured out how legislation affects other goals?
   - Do you have lively meetings?
3. **No impact.** "'Little ol' us' can't have any influence on public policy."
   - Have you focused on a few realistic goals?
   - Have you systematically communicated—early and often?
   - Have you heard any success stories?
4. **Lack of information.** "I/We don't want to appear ignorant."
   - Did you know elected officials often know less than you know?
   - Are you using other resources to help you research?
   - Did you know that asking the right questions helps elected officials?
5. **Lack of resources.** "I/We simply don't have the funds to do it well."
   - Is it a priority?
   - Are your goals connected to other goals?
   - Have you thought of it as a sales tool?
   - Have you started small and built a success?

References

Building Political Support for Extension in the 21st Century. October 22, 1996. Dr. Michael J. Tate, Michigan State University.

How to Use Power - Public Policy: Influencing Public Policy. Family Community Leadership.

Public Policy Issues: Communicating for Impact. Dr. Raygene C. Paige, Mississippi State University.

Public Policy Manual of the American Association of Family and Consumer Services (AAFCS). February 1997.

So You Want To Make A Difference - Advocacy Is The Key. 1991. Nancy Amidei, OMB Watch