

Best Practices for Effective Advocacy

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Working Together: Justice can prevail. Peace is possible.

Advocacy can mean many things, but in general, it's about taking action. Advocacy simply involves speaking and acting on behalf of yourself or others. When people are not being treated fairly, you simply can't look the other way—advocacy empowers you to be their voice.

When advocacy works well it can be transformative. Some of the most important changes in the world, such as the end of the slave trade, votes for women, and civil rights, were achieved through advocacy. Knowing how to do it well is crucial for people who want to shape our world for the better.

Studies conducted by the Congressional Management Foundation, Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill, found that citizens have more power than they realize. Most of the staff surveyed said constituent visits to the Washington office (97 percent) and to the district/state office (94 percent) have 'some' or 'a lot' of influence on an undecided member, more than any other influence group or strategy. When asked about strategies directed to their offices back home, staffers said questions at town hall meetings (87 percent) and letters to the editor (80 percent) have 'some' or 'a lot' of influence.

What influences elected officials?

- Personal relationships: Friends, family, and staff members have a tremendous influence on the day-to-day decisions of elected officials.
- The message: What you say to elected officials is actually important! Later sections of this document will help you develop a winning message.
- The media: Media coverage of events will often have an influence on what elected officials talk about in hearings and introduce as legislation.
- Party considerations: Elected officials are often swayed by their political party's priorities.
- Personal interests and passions: All elected officials have one or more policy issues that they care about deeply. Effective advocates will identify those interests and then frame their message accordingly.
- Staff: It is critical to build good relationships and communicate effectively with legislative staff, as they are generally responsible for briefing elected officials about an issue and advising on what their position should be.

- Most importantly... their constituents: A common refrain in any elected official's office is, "How does this impact my constituents?" It is the lens through which many or most decisions are made.
- Reelection: Elected officials take into consideration what will help their reelection efforts.

There are different opinions on the best way to go about advocacy. Some proponents insist that phone calls to legislators are more effective than emails. Some legislative offices will maintain that they don't discriminate when it comes to phone versus email versus a letter. Several senior congressional staffers say that when it comes to influencing a lawmaker's opinion, personalized emails and traditional letters, and editorials in local newspapers all beat out the telephone. Others contend that in-person visits are the chosen method. The fact is that there are myriad ways to make an impact as an advocate. A few of the most popular methods include letters, calls, and in-person visits, op-eds, and letters to the editor.

Writing Effective Letters

Letters can be wonderful advocacy tools, however, security protocols can cause significant delays when writing to members of Congress at their Washington DC office. When dealing with a time-sensitive issue, emails and phone calls are a better option.

Address letters to members of the Legislature as follows:

The Honorable John Doe

- Use the right address and spell your legislator's name correctly. Type or print legibly. Sign your name neatly and give your address correctly so the legislator can respond to your letter.
- Keep letters, email, and faxes as brief as possible. Concisely written correspondence is more likely to grab and keep the reader's attention.
- Identify your issue or opinion at the beginning of the letter; don't bury your main point.
- Cover only one issue per letter. If you have another issue to address, write another letter.
- Back up your opinions with supporting facts. Your letter should inform the reader, and facts make an argument more tangible and convincing.
- Explain your personal connection to the issue and why it's important to you.
- Avoid abbreviations or acronyms, and don't use technical jargon.

Calling or Visiting Your Legislator

- Plan your call or visit ahead of time. When preparing to visit your legislator, make an appointment. Call or write to schedule the meeting as soon as you know when you are going to be at the Capitol. This way you can be sure you will be able to meet with your legislator.
- Keep to the point and discuss only one issue. Organizing your thoughts ahead of time and making notes to help you stay on track can be very helpful.
- Prepare a one-page fact sheet concerning your issue to give to your legislator. This will help them better retain what you present.

Writing An Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor are generally short pieces of about 250 words or less that are in direct response to something recently published in the paper. You should closely monitor the news in your paper and look for opportunities to respond to an article connected to top policy priorities. Send your letter to the editor as soon as possible after the story to which you are responding is published; preferably the same day. Prepare in advance for this quick response by looking up the submission guidelines for your local news outlets and keeping them on hand. You can use the below template to draft a letter to the editor of your local paper:

Op-Eds

Op-eds are slightly longer than letters to the editor; generally about 750 words or less. Op-eds do not need to be in response to a specific article in the paper, but they should be timely and in connection to current events. These tips may increase the chances of publication of your op-ed:

- Focus on a single point, and put it at the beginning of your op-ed.
- Use plain language and your personal voice, rather than “academic” language or jargon.
- Make it personal – be sure to relate your op-ed to the specific value of the policy in your community, rather than dry facts or generalities.
- End strong, with a call to action for national leaders.

Churches for Mideast Peace provides resources to ensure that advocates are informed, guidelines to help your advocacy efforts, and opportunities to engage Congress, State Department, and the current Administration through Action Alerts. Be the voice for those who cannot speak.