

Part I

Thinking About Advocacy

If you answered, “yes” to any of the quiz questions, then you are an advocate, because each is an example of advocacy.

- The first is “self-advocacy,” something we do all the time when we speak up for our selves or our families.
- Second is an example of “case advocacy,” which often involves helping someone deal with a complicated bureaucracy.
- Third is an example of “public (or community) education,” which is another form of advocacy.
- Fourth is an example of “administrative (or regulatory) advocacy,” which includes responding in writing when a governmental unit proposes a change in its rules and invites public comment.
- And fifth is an example of “legislative advocacy,” almost anything done to influence a legislator’s vote – testifying, speaking, writing a letter....

Many people hesitate to get involved in advocacy because they equate it with activities they are not comfortable with – like demonstrations at the Capitol or public protest. Those are legitimate advocacy strategies, but they are only part of the story.

“Advocacy” covers a range of activities broad enough to include just about everyone, in just about any kind of setting. And most are things we already do for our neighbors, our friends, and ourselves. Policy advocacy just carries that activity into the policy arena.

It helps to keep a few underlying principles in mind. *Advocacy assumes that people have rights, and those rights are enforceable.*

Advocacy works best when focused on something specific.

Advocacy is chiefly concerned with rights or benefits to which someone is already entitled.

And policy advocacy in particular is concerned with ensuring that institutions work the way they should.

These last two points are related. You have a right to accurate tax bills; your neighbor has a right to his Social Security. Speaking up to protect such rights is not unreasonable.

You would not just pay unfair tax bills or give your neighbor a list of soup kitchens and suggest he adjust to life without Social Security. Instead, you take action to make certain that the government systems involved (the tax office, the Social Security agency) operate according to the law. That is part of policy advocacy.

Anyone can be a policy advocate who is willing to:

- Speak up;
- Help others get services or benefits to which they are entitled;
- Challenge government systems when they do not work;

- Work for, and vote for, laws, budgets, and policies that do work; and
- Be a voice for others (especially those with troubled lives) with policy-makers.

Our government is a system that works well for anyone with knowledge of, and access to, the political process. It works less well for those who either do not know how to get involved, or who face problems in getting involved – like children, low-income families, and those with mental or physical disabilities.

Six Good Reasons to Get Involved

This is where you come in. As Americans we pride ourselves on having a system that is fair and open to all no matter what their age, or income, or race. But that does not just happen by accident, and neither will prior years' victories stay won without vigilance.

Left on their own, some groups (e.g., foster children, victims of domestic violence or environmental destruction, people with Alzheimer's) tend to be voiceless. How they fare in the political process depends on the role that others are willing to play on their behalf. And when those others (i.e., you and me) fail to get involved, too often the voiceless get left out.

Fortunately, when more of us get involved, wonderful things can happen. All of the legislative victories of recent decades – civil rights for people with disabilities, electoral reforms, environmental protections, child care for working parents, cleaner air and water, nursing home reforms, food safety, and many, many more – are the direct result of advocacy. They represent a tremendous achievement through which millions of Americans have been helped to a better life, and in which millions of ordinary Americans can take pride.

Getting involved will not always yield victory, but not getting involved never does.

Besides, advocacy is fun. There is a tremendous exhilaration in winning, as well as a lot of satisfaction just in trying. But if making your corner of the world a better place and having a good time are not reason enough, here are six more.

1. Charity Is Not Enough

A lot can be accomplished by caring people who offer a helping hand. It is great to volunteer at a shelter, or donate toys to the local hospital. But that will not always be enough.

Donated toys are no substitute for a way to pay the rent, and families with a disabled family member do not need a shelter nearby so much as they need affordable housing and access to home-based care. Volunteers cannot answer either of those needs unless they are also working for public policies to ensure the availability of low-cost housing or of the home-based services so many families need.

The Reverend William Sloan Coffin, long-time chaplain at Yale University, put it succinctly: "Charity," he wrote, "is a matter of personal attribute, justice a matter of public policy. Never can the first be a substitute for the second."

That is where policy advocacy comes in. Without better public policies, many people will lack what they need to be productive members of their communities.

2. Advocacy Has a Role For Everyone

It is possible to be an advocate by informing others, writing or calling a policy-maker, organizing a

grassroots campaign, or helping in the background – e.g., doing some research or writing a check, (more on this topic can be found in *More Ideas For Making A Difference* to be published in 2003).

Advocates for better social policies can be found anywhere: in public agencies and private; in clinical settings and direct service projects; among volunteers and professionals; on the boards of community agencies and business roundtables; voted into office or just plain voting.

Sometimes individual effort is all that is needed. A Texas social worker with an irregular work schedule used to monitor the weekly City Council meetings whenever possible. One day she heard a dog owner complain to the City Council about the unfairness of making him pay a license fee while cat owners paid none (a differential the Council chose to ignore).

Some time later she heard the Council consider a proposal to cut services at a mental health clinic, for lack of what seemed a relatively modest sum. During a break she called the pound and the SPCA, collecting estimates of the number of cats in the area. Then she made a quick calculation, which she passed to one of the Council members. It showed that if the same fee required for dogs was also applied to all of the cats, there would be enough money to avoid a cut in mental health services – and dogs would win equity with cats. The Council agreed, and the services were saved.

3. Some Problems Require a Broad Attack

Some issues are too big and far too complex to be easily resolved with a few phone calls and a back-of-envelope calculation. Medical research is one such case.

Diseases like Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, leukemia, or ALS, strike their human victims irrespective of income or family background. And everyone who has

ever been diagnosed with a life-threatening or degenerative disease has needed help along the way – some of it provided by family members and volunteers.

But they also need hope: that such terrible diseases can be stopped, or at least slowed down. For that they need more than the help of a kindly volunteer or dedicated family member, more than the assistance available from local faith-based groups and community programs – they need sophisticated medical care and expensive, ground-breaking research. That is why there is advocacy to persuade Congress and the White House to allow the use of federal funds for stem cell and other basic research, and why such efforts routinely attract such broad, bipartisan support.

Slowing the rate of environmental destruction offers another case in point. Small efforts are important, and individuals can play a critical role, but at some point governments, public policies, and broad citizen consensus are also required.

In 1970 environmental consciousness was chiefly the province of small, hardy bands of committed groups and their largely volunteer memberships. Most Americans did not have a clear idea that they could – or should – be involved. Then one U.S. senator, Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, called for a nationwide “teach in” on the environment. Working out of borrowed space, with a skeleton staff and energetic students everywhere, the first-ever Earth Day was held on April 22, 1970. That first year an estimated 20 million people and thousands of schools participated. Congress shut down for the day, as 500 members of Congress spread out across the country to take part.

Now it is an annual event. By Earth Day 2001, it was estimated that over 200 million people were participating, in 140 countries worldwide. Public attitudes everywhere had undergone a sea change. And perhaps most significant, in the time since the first Earth Day, the U.S. Congress had adopted a Clean Air Act, a Clean Water Act, an Endangered Species

Act, and created an Environmental Protection Agency. On the international front change was also visible, as multi-national agreements were being struck on global warming, energy efficiency, and the ways in which human rights and the environment are linked.

It is true that efforts on this scale require a high level of sophistication: knowledge of the laws, the efforts of organized groups, the help of professional lobbyists, and sustained activity over a period of months or even years. Some of those involved have been pressing their case for decades.

But it is also true that each step along the way meant the involvement of countless ordinary people along with the professionals, and each victory also meant a better quality of life for many – including those in poor communities and rural areas where resources are scarce.

Any time we insist on helping only through one-on-one, voluntary activity, we make others dependent on the whims and fashions of charity. And we effectively write off everyone who lives where the charity (or volunteer) that is needed is not available, or whose conditions stem from something too big for one person, one volunteer to address.

4. Government Policies Affect Everyone

There are also self-interested reasons to get involved, whether the people needing advocacy are related to us or not. Everyone with an interest in the future, for example, has a personal stake in policies for children, as does everyone who hopes to get old. Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund, once remarked that, depending on what we do now for the children, before long they will be either ... supporting us, depending on us, or shooting at us. In the same way we all have a stake

in what happens to the air we breathe, the wages we earn, the products we buy, and the quality of life in our communities.

Every level of government is important and plays a part. Some examples:

- Local school boards are responsible for the schools;
- County and city governments operate hospitals, make grants for the arts, and protect the local environment;
- State governments decide whether everything from nursing homes to child care is licensed and affordable;
- Federal laws affect every aspect of our lives – agriculture, education, elder care, environmental policy – and much, much more.

Visionary members of the business community understand. They reach out to meet immediate needs, e.g., by mentoring or forming partnerships with individual schools, but they also work through the political process to improve conditions in all the schools. Business leaders in Chicago, for example, lobbied their state legislature on behalf of education reforms. Similarly, on the national scene, the business executives who make up the Committee for Economic Development have been powerful advocates for greater government investments in prenatal care, childcare, education, and the arts.

5. Democracy Is Not a Spectator Sport

In a democracy where every voice and vote count, doing nothing is a political act; it is a vote for the status quo. Staying out of the process does not mean that laws will not get passed; it just means they will get passed without reflecting your priorities and wishes, or those of anyone you might speak for – especially those who have been disabled or abused, ill or in pain, troubled or poor.

If you feel intimidated or uncomfortable at the thought of speaking up or otherwise getting involved... if you have been thinking it is enough to be informed about the issues and cast your vote intelligently... then it is time to think again.

If you went to a restaurant just to read the menu you would be informed – but you would be missing the point. Ultimately you have to decide what you want, what you are willing to pay for it, and be willing to engage with other people to get it.

That also applies to your role as a citizen in a democracy: being informed is not enough. You have to decide what you want from your government, what you are willing to pay for it, and engage with your elected representatives so they can help you get it.

6. Politicians Are People Too

Many city, county, and state elected officials work part-time in their political roles (often for very little pay), and the rest of the time in their family/bread-winning roles. They have little or no paid staff, and no magic way of knowing what is on the voters' minds. Nor can they afford fancy polls, focus groups, or surveys. "Feeling the pulse," as a local official in Indiana said, "is often accidental." Unless constituents tell them, they do not know what people think.

Another problem arises when legislators must vote on matters outside their personal experience and do not have any real feeling for the consequences of their votes. That is why a Utah state senator tells advocates to expose their elected officials to their issues in very human, personal ways. Invite them to spend an hour or two with emotionally troubled children, she suggests, or to have dinner at the home of a family in subsidized housing. This is a challenge just ripe for creative solutions.

A national program called "The Walk A Mile Program" uses this approach. Working with state and local groups, they pair low-income people with a local, state, or federal elected official for a month, and

ask them to participate in at least one shared activity each week. In addition, the elected officials are asked to put their families on a food budget comparable to what low-income families get from food stamps. State legislators have found themselves stranded when their "pair's" old beater car breaks down (and there is no money for AAA or towing) or spending long hours waiting for their low-income pair to be recertified for Medicaid or food stamps. Without direct experience, it is hard for middle-class legislators to appreciate the practical affect of the decisions they make (e.g., requiring frequent recertifications, limiting the value of the cars owned by working people who use food stamps or Medicaid to supplement low wages).

A St. Louis group called ROWEL (for the sharp-pronged wheel on a stirrup that prods a horse – or Missouri mule – into action) offers a simulation that uses 15-minute time blocks to correspond to a week in the life of a low-income family. Elected officials and community members are given parts, e.g., of someone who is elderly, disabled, or just needing help (short- or long-term), while others act the parts of such community resources as a food bank, pawnshop, grocery store, the food stamp and social service agencies, the police, a landlord. During the Simulation participants are subject to all rules governing assistance in their community and told that their job is to survive one month. The experience, however brief, reveals how hard it is to be poor in America – and how difficult it can be to get help. One local judge who participated said he finally understood the frustration low-income people express at "the system."

Above all, advocacy is a frame of mind. As everything mentioned thus far should make clear, advocacy is first and foremost a mindset – not a job title, occupation, or role in life. Whether it involves a single individual like the woman in Texas or a group with staff like Walk A Mile, advocates see opportunities when others only see obstacles, and work to change the institutions that cause problems for everyone, rather than waiting until after the damage is done or being satisfied with easing problems one-by-one.

TAKE FIVE...

Just like the famous Duke Ellington refrain, here is something deceptively simple – and as likely to stay with you.

Experienced advocates know three things. (1) Phone and letter campaigns remain effective. Elected officials (and their staff) note the issues that generate the most letters and calls; they are a useful gauge of community support for/against an issue. But, (2) Broad appeals for action do not work. Alerts that sound too general or too complicated get set aside. (3) The competition for attention is keen. By now, there are so many groups sending out e-mail and regular mail appeals requesting action that readers ignore much of what comes their way. And groups with tight budgets cannot afford to waste scarce resources on postage, paper, and/or staff time for long alerts that do not get results.

If you want your appeals to produce results: make taking action easy; make it time-limited; and design it to fit into busy lives. Here is one version that gets results.

A few years ago University of Washington social work students tried to get other students to write letters about legislative proposals they thought might harm children, but the answers they got just seemed like excuses. In response to their pleas, people said:

- I don't have time
- I don't know my legislator
- I don't have any envelopes/paper/stamps
- I don't know what to say
- I don't know the address
- I cannot.

To their credit, the students took the excuses seriously, treating them as real barriers to be eliminated. In the process they developed "TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS" — a way to be an advocate for children in just five minutes or less.

At a strategically located table, during lunch hour, they provided answers to all the excuses: sample letters, brief fact sheets, people to answer questions, blank paper/ envelopes/stamps, plus the names and addresses of all the legislators. Visible to all was a big sign reading: **TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS.**

Right off the bat, they generated a couple dozen letters. A week later they were back at their table with new information – and this time they got twice as many letters. Before long, people were referring to the "take five tables" and inventing variations.

Some advocates have adapted the idea by renaming and re-formatting their legislative alerts, with a section for "actions you can take in 5 minutes or less," or, "TAKE FIVE FOR ... (HOUSING, or WHALES, or ...)." Like the students at their table, these alerts include all the key ingredients, in a simple, easy-to-accomplish format that enables concerned citizens to fit advocacy into busy lives.

On a single page handout, usually within a text box, give brief information, brief messages, and all the information needed to contact a legislator by mail or phone. Clip art can supply a clock.

TAKE FIVE (con't)

People who get **TAKE FIVE** alerts in written form say they prop them on their telephones or computer keyboards every week until they have made their calls or written letters. (Guilt, they admit, is part of what makes it work: "You mean I could not take *five minutes a week* to help out?") Those who work for public agencies get their TAKE FIVE alerts at home. They cannot lobby while on the public payroll, but on their own time they are citizens like anybody else, and lobbying is allowed.

TAKE FIVE TABLES are popping up everywhere: in the lobbies of social service agencies and children's hospitals, after services on Sunday, at PTA meetings or professional meetings. One group set up a Take Five Table at the beginning of a cross-Iowa bike ride, hoping to expand their network in support of a new bicycle helmet law. They got 400 members signed up in just a couple of hours. Women eager to see the Violence Against Women Act renewed in 2000 set up Take Five Tables beside the Silent Witness silhouettes of women murdered in domestic violence: over 400 letters resulted. Psychology students at the University of Utah set up tables in the cafeteria, seeking letters in support of higher education for foster children; they got over 700 during the course of a week. As one participant reported later,

"With only two days (four hours each) at the tables, we got 271 letters signed in support of the bill!! I am so thrilled at this success not only for the bill, but for the amazing number of students that wanted to get involved and learn a little more about the legislative process (not to mention learning who their legislator was)!"

Take Five alerts and tables work to *generate letters, sign up members for a grassroots network and win involvement in a community education campaign*. People on the receiving end say that just knowing they can be advocates for something they care about, **in five minutes or less**, is empowering.

Tips: Because they get so much computer-generated mail, many legislative offices make a distinction between "astro turf messages" (i.e., identical cards or letters that might all be signed by the same person using different names) and "real grassroots messages." Both are noticed, but real grassroots communications get more attention.

To make sure the letters generated by your Take Five Tables fall in the "real" category, even when the heart of the letter is identical, have senders do three things:

- Sign and print their names
- Put their home address
- Add a personal note – even something as brief as "I really care" or, "This means a lot to me," sends a message to the staff opening the mail.

The possibilities are endless....

The Three-Legged Stool

In 1995 a group of child advocates in Washington state began conducting an annual three-day Advocacy Camp, a place to train advocacy leaders for more effective work statewide. The framework developed for Advocacy Camp offers a good way to think about, and plan for, advocacy work. The basic idea is simple: *Good Advocacy rests on a Three-Legged Stool; to be effective, all three legs must be in place.*

■ The Capitol Leg.

This leg of the stool refers to everything that goes on where the laws and policies are made: city or county council, state legislature, U.S. Congress. That is where you have full or part-time lobbyists, where you hold lobby days or go to testify, where someone sends out regular alerts, where citizens go to meet with their legislators during the legislative session, where you can meet with people who staff the legislators and the various committees. And, after an ordinance (local) or law (state, federal) is passed, this is where you meet with staff from executive branch agencies to work out plans for implementation of the laws.

■ The Community, or Grassroots, Leg.

This leg of the stool refers to everything that goes on in the community. This is where you set up your telephone trees and e-mail lists for responding to the alerts coming out of the Capitol; it is where you set up "Take 5 Tables" to generate cards and letters or sign people up for your networks. It is the place where grassroots campaigns take root; it is where you do community education, sponsor community/candidate forums, and host site visits by your elected officials.

■ The Media Leg.

This leg of the stool refers to everything we do to spread the word to more people, whether through establishment media – local radio, TV and newspapers – or through informal media like professional newsletters, congregation bulletins, apartment house notice boards, e-mail chat rooms and other Internet

vehicles. We need this leg for three reasons – first, because elected officials pay attention to the media; second, because we need to reach more people than those already informed and persuaded, and third because we have to deliberately counter the inaccurate misinformation that shows up all too often in the media.

Here are three helpful points to keep in mind.

(1) Two of the three legs are firmly planted where you live. The work done in the legislative or congressional district is as important as the work being done in the Capitol.

(2) You need not cover all three legs of the stool alone. You can work with other groups to see that all three are getting attention. For example, on an issue like childcare (which affects people of all incomes, and children of all ages, children with disabilities and children whose parents work the night shift), it is easy to think of ways to share the workload:

— To cover the **Capitol Leg**: think of groups already lobbying in the Capitols – early childhood education professionals, statewide child advocacy groups, women's organizations, faith communities (which is where a lot of child care is located).

— To handle the **Media Leg**: think of approaching a local community college or university communications program and a local Junior League group; or

— To take the lead on the **Community Leg**, think of asking the PTA, a women's group, Kids Count leaders, or perhaps a supportive business group.

(3) Do not worry if you do not have all three legs in place from the start. Work with your strengths, and build from experience. Just aim to have the three legs in place within a reasonable time frame, like two-five years.

In the stories and examples that follow throughout this book, look for evidence of the three-legged stool.

Notes:



Web Site Links

Walk a Mile

<http://depts.washington.edu/nwicf/WalkaMile.html>

ROWEL simulation

http://www.extension.iastate.edu/cyfar/wnew/sat/sat_sim_sum.html

Committee for Economic Development

<http://www.ced.org>

Earth Day

<http://www.earthday.org>



SUBWAYS ARE FOR SPEAKING UP

I picked up one of my favorite, least-costly advocacy techniques one morning on the subway in Washington, D.C. The car was packed with tourists, though I noticed a woman I know about two-thirds of the way down the car. We waved to each other and smiled. Then, just as the subway lurched into motion she called my name: “Hey Nancy.” When I turned to look at her she asked, “Did you see what the Senate Finance Committee did yesterday?” I felt so mortified; right out there in public she was striking up a conversation about something I could read in my newspaper. But I had acknowledged her, so I could not pretend I had not heard.

“No,” I called back, “what happened?” “Well,” she said, “they did something yesterday that is going to affect every working family in America! And I’ll bet most people don’t even know about it yet.” At that, heads all over the subway car perked up, and just as suddenly, I caught on.

From then until we reached the next subway stop, I fed her straight lines (“oh no... that’s terrible... tell me more...”), and she spelled out more details. Soon those tourists were like people at a ping-pong match, heads swiveling back and forth to follow our conversation.

When she got off, I rushed to catch up with her in the station. “What you just did was wonderful,” I said, “those people were just ‘lobbied’ by a pro. Do you do that very often?” “Oh sure,” she replied, “I do it all the time. I’m especially fond of elevators – you know, they can’t get off.”