

Part V

Fringe Benefits of Policy Advocacy

New advocacy groups are springing up everywhere, and broad coalitions of existing organizations are taking on a wide range of issues important to their communities. They are educating the public and their own members, working with the media and lobbying their elected officials. And they are winning victories large and small: preventing cuts in vital programs, changing laws and budgets, influencing public agendas.

In the early years of the 21st century, Congress renewed the Violence Against Women Act, improved the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-earning families, improved services for the mentally ill, approved expansions of protected lands, finally passed campaign finance reform, and more. And all of the laws and budgets approved had something in common: none of it happened by accident; all of it happened with the help and support of advocates in communities of every size.

Lists can also be compiled for state governments nationwide. Those lists of legislative accomplishment – the displaced workers in Minnesota who won important benefits when all the experts told them it could

not be done, the immigrants in California who won critically needed food stamps benefits despite an energy-strapped budget, the low-income parents in Maryland who won increased aid to the poorest school districts, the child advocates in Kansas who saved tobacco settlement funds from an attempted raid – all are among the direct results of policy advocacy. And note: these are victories won without the ability to write big campaign checks.

But something else is happening at the same time. Groups that began with a handful of discouraged people now boast hundreds or thousands. Those who got involved speak of feeling energized and empowered, where before they spoke of feeling burned out and disregarded. And they radiate an excitement that is positively contagious.

It is not because these are all super-men and super-women, but because advocacy can have that effect. These are ordinary people who have seen a need and figured out some way to try and meet it. In the process they (and the groups they belong to) are being changed. Advocacy has benefits that go far beyond the achievement of immediate goals.

Benefits to the Individuals

You can start small. If your group wants public hearings before the county decides whether (and where) to build a new nursing home, for example, that has a relatively short timeframe as well as a very clear conclusion.

Moreover, that is something which might be accomplished in a very low-key manner – by having individuals in your group make phone calls to county commissioners they know. In cases like this, your group may not get any experience mounting a large-

scale letter-writing and lobbying campaign, or working with the local media, but they will learn about low-key advocacy techniques.

The obvious way to judge that effort is in relation to **the goal**: did you succeed in getting public hearings held before a decision was made? Did you *win the victory* you had in mind?

But another way to judge an advocacy effort is in relation to its **effect on the people involved** in the effort, and whether it was carried out in a way that helped you *build the movement* for change. Even a losing effort can teach valuable lessons, including:

- How to think strategically;
- How to build trust and come to joint decisions;
- Who in your group has ties to community leaders;
- The value of reaching out to other voters; and
- How to grow a network.

You – and everyone involved – will also have learned what it means to be active participants in a decision, not just passive objects of decisions made by somebody else. If you are concerned with human dignity, that last point is particularly important.

That is why **empowerment** is a word so often used in describing the benefits of advocacy. It is far more empowering to be one of those that decide than to be the one being decided for. That is especially true for anyone who is directly affected. If your group includes families with an ill or troubled member, single parents who are feeling overwhelmed, or people living in a changing environment, being able to influence services, supports, or zoning regulations will leave them feeling less like pawns.

Morale is another fringe benefit of advocacy. Those who work in nonprofits often speak of being burned out, particularly when need is rising faster than donations, budgets, or volunteers.

They, not the politicians, must say “no” when the services, money, or staff have been exhausted. Seeing need day after day, while feeling powerless to help, takes a toll that can be physical as well as psychological. An advocacy effort to protect a service, save a natural resource, increase a budget, or win better policies can be a helpful antidote to burnout.

Attacking root causes is also a benefit of advocacy. More than most, direct service workers (paid and volunteer) understand that more shelters will not end homelessness, and more volunteers are no substitute for decent wages or a way to pay the doctor.

Understanding that and not knowing how to change it is demoralizing. So is the sense of wanting to *do something*, anything, even if it is not the answer. Both are among the reasons there is so much staff and volunteer turn-over in the helping professions and many nonprofits: it is debilitating to wage a hopeless, ineffective war.

Advocacy offers an opportunity to change that.

Think what it would mean to be able to fight underlying causes, to make things better for tens or thousands at a time, to deal with what Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, calls, “a growing poverty of the spirit.” Think how much more efficient, more effective, and more energizing it would be to know you would not have to fight the same battle over and over again.

With advocacy, that can happen. Staff that were overwhelmed and under-funded get to work for changes that will make their jobs more manageable and help more people – all at the same time. Working to fix a bad system is far more satisfying than working to patch up mistakes after-the-fact, one frantic person or cause at a time.

Benefits to the Organization

Whenever an advocacy effort is undertaken in the name of a sponsoring group, the benefits accrue to more than just the individuals involved, in the same way that a small committee may be responsible for a fundraiser but everyone in the group benefits from the money they bring in.

It helps develop true constituencies.

Sometimes a handful of vocal people become an issue's spokespeople by default. A good advocacy effort changes that.

By seeking out the views of those being spoken for, it helps develop constituencies – those affected by the issue, potential supporters and their organizations – and gives them a voice. And if the advocacy effort is managed with integrity, your organization will become more accountable to those you speak for, as well as less easily dominated by a vocal few.

It helps build organizational structures.

Nothing complex can be carried out without policies and procedures, roles and responsibilities, methods and mechanisms, all carefully spelled out and assigned. Your group will learn just by deciding on its own structure: should the Core Committee be big or small? Is the campaign short-term or long-term? The procedures formal or informal? Decisions reached by majority or consensus?

Working out those practical questions and living by the decisions builds organizations.

It is a way to identify and develop new leadership.

The very fact that a new effort is about to be un-

dertaken will interest those who have taken on leadership roles in the past.

But it is also likely to attract the involvement of some who have been invisible before, and among them will be potential new leaders – old and young – with previously unrecognized talents. Developing new leadership pays off many times over, for everything your group hopes to accomplish (including attracting new members), and not just the immediate issue.

Advocacy efforts help to educate the public.

They provide natural opportunities to educate yourselves, your group, and others about the policy process and the unmet needs of your community.

Because advocacy efforts tend to have high public visibility, they also offer opportunities to educate the larger community about your organization's perspective on important community issues, as well as your role in dealing with them. In that sense it is a form of advertising or outreach.

People in need of services will learn what you provide, as will many who may have been unaware of your group's existence.

Advocacy efforts help establish (or improve) relations with community leaders.

To be successful, you will need to identify and become known to a variety of community leaders. You may begin by wanting those relationships to advance specific elements of your advocacy campaign. But having established relationship with elected officials and the heads of various community institutions and groups (and their staffs), you may call upon for other purposes as well.

Benefits to the Democratic Process

In the normal course of events, public policies are more likely to reflect immediate concerns over cost and efficiency than long-range concerns over what we all need for a better future. But it is almost impossible to devise well-rounded policies if the people most concerned about others refuse to get involved.

Think who is most likely to have a voice in the policy-making process and what their priorities are likely to be, and you will understand why you need to get involved. It is often said that, in a democracy, decisions are made by a majority of the people. Not true: decisions are made by a majority of those who get involved, and who vote.

In a participatory democracy, a policy debate reflects what the participants bring to it. So, if those who care about the broader community and not just their own narrow self-interest opt out of the process, policy-makers lose the benefit of an important perspective.

The same point applies to the perspective of nonprofits. We do not want doctors prescribing treatment without ever seeing a patient or lawyers deciding what to plead without talking to their clients. Neither should we adopt policies about public health, social services, the arts, or the environment without hearing from the people who provide and care about them. A 24-year-old staff aide working for a legislator from a wealthy suburb may not fully appreciate what life is like for a parent with a chronically ill child, low wages, and no health coverage.

People who work in nonprofits can help be the voices of those whom the laws are most likely to affect. They can be their surrogates on some occasions, their eyes-and-ears of the policy process on others, and all the time they can bring valuable insights into a process that might otherwise be dictated by media interests and big campaign contributors. When those who understand first-hand refuse to become involved, the entire process is poorer for it.

Benefits to Society

Occasionally it seems as though advocacy is just a high-stakes, fast-paced, adrenaline-pumping, hard ball game played to be won.

It is all that, and it is also much more. Public laws and budgets affect all of our lives and the lives of our communities in countless ways every day. They affect who will get help and on what terms; they help determine who lives and who dies; they determine whether natural resources will be protected or exploited. Public policies even help determine whether our communities are more divided or united.

But advocacy is not only about winning, and a sense of community does not depend solely on victories. Sometimes advocacy efforts are important

to take on even when the odds seem hopelessly stacked against any possibility of success. Five are worth noting.

1. When it is what your constituency wants.

As advocates you have to use your best judgment about when to proceed and when to use your resources, but you also have an obligation to respond to your constituents. They may want something you regard as unrealistic, but one of your jobs is to convey what your constituents want and feel they need. Sometimes you just may win – like the smoking-cessation “Davids” who took on the tobacco industry “Goliath” when many thought that victory was impossible.

2. When it serves to educate the public.

Advocates often think in terms of two and three-year plans. Typically the first year is assumed to be for public education – with little expectation of early political action. But you cannot get political action on a non-issue. Public consciousness has to be raised; the media and public have to be educated. That cannot occur in a vacuum. Framing an advocacy issue and developing a campaign (e.g., getting a legislator to introduce a bill, or setting out three demands) will sharpen the topic and give focus to any education efforts.

3. To build membership or rally demoralized troops.

It is far easier to organize people for a specific goal than for a generalized, hypothetical issue. Developing an advocacy campaign can energize old members and attract new ones.

4. When the group affected is socially isolated.

People with a mental illness or full-blown AIDS do not carry as much weight in our political system as healthy millionaires or deep-pocket trade associations, but their interests should be just as vigorously defended, and just as competently represented. Advocacy can do that, while sending a powerful signal that somebody cares.

5. When morality demands it; whenever there is injustice.

Fighting apartheid in South Africa often seemed hopeless but it was the right thing to do. If there are people in your community who are mistreated or go without care because of deeply-held prejudices (because of race or gender or income or whatever) it would be wrong *not* to do battle on their behalf, no matter how unlikely the chances of success.

In our democracy, public policies are a direct reflection of those who choose to get involved. Just as corporate farmers tend to shape agriculture policies and defense contractors influence military procurement policies, so the policies affecting fragile environments or vulnerable people can and should be shaped by those who choose to get involved.

Never forget: laws and budgets will be adopted with us or without us; the choice is ours. Happily, whole communities benefit when we get involved, but they suffer when we do not. Getting involved is no guarantee of victory, but when we do win – well, there is just nothing sweeter.

Jane Addams – who helped immigrant families with everything from literacy classes and musical evenings to child care and hot baths, who served on the school board, fought for women’s suffrage, and won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1931 – understood better than most why each of us must act. She said:

“Nothing could be worse than the fear that one has given up too soon and left one effort unexpended which might have saved the world.”

Organizing: What Holds It All Together

All too often advocates find it easier to assemble their statistics and spell out the arguments for their position than to organize the citizens capable of using those facts and arguments to win better policies from decision-makers. That is not a winning strategy. Facts, statistics, and research – all are important. But in a political context, even the best information in the world is no substitute for good organizing. Facts alone rarely persuade politicians; organized voters using facts in a politically savvy way often do.

Notes:

Good advocates know the importance of bringing people together (i.e., *organizing*) to get, keep, and use power to solve problems or improve conditions for people they care about; and they know the value of organizing coalitions (i.e., *an organization of organizations*).

Organizing is the building block essential to making your advocacy efforts work.

(A good resource on this topic is, *Organizing for Social Change: a Manual for Activists in the 1990s*, by Bobo, Kendall, and Max; Seven Locks Press, 1991.)

Are You Advocacy Ready?

Advocacy takes many forms, and a good advocacy system will have elements of each. Using this list, identify the strengths and weaknesses in your community's (or your group's) advocacy system. Review it once or twice a year – check your progress. Keep in mind that advocacy is just about Speaking Up — but in ways which help our institutions work as they should. Good advocacy helps everyone enjoy the benefits, services, and/or rights to which they are entitled.

Rate each of the following forms of advocacy as it exists in your community or group as:
POOR _____ O.K. _____ OR EXCELLENT _____.

Case Advocacy: POOR _____ O.K. _____ EXCELLENT _____

This form of advocacy focuses on helping individuals deal with complicated systems to get the services or benefits they need. It is the first step for many. It is especially important to families with a mentally or physically disabled member. They quickly learn that speaking up is essential, but acting case-by-case is far too slow and not enough — which is when “case” turns to “cause.”

Community Education: POOR _____ O.K. _____ EXCELLENT _____

This form of advocacy is designed to influence ordinary citizens as well as opinion-makers through information. It includes such activities as asking a carefully crafted question at a public forum, wearing a message T-Shirt, speaking up at the PTA or Kiwanis, carrying out a Media Campaign, and/or helping to analyze and publicize policies, statistics, and chart books.

Capitol-Based Advocacy: POOR _____ O.K. _____ EXCELLENT _____

This is where professional lobbyists as well as concerned citizens fit in. Included are activities in the state Capitol during the legislative session that are intended to win better budgets and laws. It includes sending out legislative alerts, testifying, participating in lobby days, and coming to visit your legislators and their staff when personal contact from the voters is critical.

Grassroots Advocacy: POOR _____ O.K. _____ EXCELLENT _____

This includes everything you do from back home to influence the legislative process: writing letters, responding to legislative alerts, maintaining an effective telephone tree, expanding your network, forming coalitions of likely and unlikely allies, supporting good candidates, and sponsoring forums for citizens and legislators.

Media Work: POOR _____ O.K. _____ EXCELLENT _____

This includes developing relationships with print and electronic journalists in the community, participating in Editorial Board meetings, writing OP/ED pieces and letters-to-the-editor, as well as commenting on radio and TV coverage of your issues. Good media work involves generating positive coverage, as well as countering the negative.

Reality Check

Once you have identified any gaps in your advocacy system, identified the priority areas for increased advocacy capacity, and drafted a legislative agenda, ask yourself the following:

Does everyone you are expecting to be advocates (including board and staff) feel comfortable talking about your issues and the programs you care most about?

- Does your group have the expertise to carry out your advocacy plans? If not, can you get it?
- How much time will your advocacy plan require? Do you have the time?
- How much will it cost? Can you afford it?
- Will engaging in the advocacy activities have benefits beyond immediate legislative goals (e.g., will it increase community understanding? Reach out to potential new advocates? Increase diversity? Empower those affected? Build your movement?)?
- Will the advocacy activity help current leadership or staff? OR
- Will it burden current leadership or staff?

NOTE: If the answer to any of these reality check questions proves worrisome, you either need to re-think your advocacy plans or build in steps to deal with the gaps.

For example, you could arrange briefings and develop talking points for board members or staff; you might raise funds specifically to enhance advocacy capacity; you could recruit individuals with specific talents; or you might scale back (or gradually phase in) your plans.