

ADVOCACY 101

Individuals – either connected to an association, organization, company or simply engaged as a citizen advocate – can influence the public decision-making process that determines so much of our daily lives including what we pay in taxes, the type of health care we receive, our education, the jobs available to us, etc.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of your influence, it is important that you have an understanding of the processes at work in developing government policy and how you can work as part of a local, regional, statewide or national network to achieve public policy objectives.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

“Advocacy” is defined as “The act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy; active support.” (American Heritage Dictionary 2000)

How does Advocacy differ from the “L” word?

For a variety of reasons, “Lobbying” has been a practice viewed with some level of disdain by the public. It could be that most of the public does not recognize “Lobbying” for what it is: “To try to influence the thinking of legislators or other public officials for or against a specific cause”. Not that much different than advocacy, right?

In a more technical sense under the modern political system, lobbyists are also generally compensated for the services they provide and it is this factor that triggers compliance with various ethical and lobbying disclosure laws governing their activities. The effectiveness of these laws is presently a matter of great debate.

In addition, lobbying is a guaranteed RIGHT in America – “Congress shall make no law... abridging... the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” (1st Amendment, United States Constitution). So, in a sense, if you have ever spoken with a public official on an issue that you are for or against, then you have “lobbied” your official and “advocated” on behalf of a cause. However, you are usually not subject to ethical and lobbying disclosure laws unless you are compensated for your activities.

Generally, legislators and other elected officials are hardworking, dedicated individuals who take pride in being a public servant. It is important to be aware, however, that they often don’t have the specific information – or necessarily the same commitment as you do – on a particular topic or issue nor a complete understanding of how their decisions will affect the lives and welfare of various citizens. That’s why it is vital for you to be an active and effective advocate on behalf of your organization.

Another distinction between “advocacy” and “lobbying” is the line between “fall on your sword” activism and the ability to “make a deal” accomplishing part of your objective.

*Source: Capital Associates, Inc.
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EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY 101 – HELPFUL HINTS

- Be Authentic, Passionate and Professional. Maintain the right attitude about government and your role in it.
- Have a general understanding of how the executive and legislative branches work.
- Identify who represents you – get to know your elected officials and their staff.
- Meet with your legislators. Do your homework – review the legislators' background on their websites. Establish a personal connection by demonstrating genuine interest in learning more about him or her.
- Do not underestimate public officials. With few exceptions they are honest, intelligent, hard working people who want to do the right thing. Your job is to inform them of what you think is right.
- Know your issue. You don't have to be an expert, but be informed and be able to identify and convey the subject that concerns you. Do your homework and know the pros and cons of your position.
- Offer to the legislator yourself as an information resource on your issue.
- Present the facts in terms of where you work or live and demonstrate the impact of the issue on the officials' constituency. Be yourself and tell your story.
- Write the appropriate Representative, Senator, Committee Chairs, the Governor and executive departments. Respectfully request written replies.
- Work closely with legislative staff.
- Attend "town meetings" when your Representative or Senator is in your district.
- Schedule appointments with your legislators during their time in their district offices.
- Develop and share specific recommendations with your public officials.
- Consider media involvement where appropriate. Consider "letters to the editor," invite the media to your public affairs events, provide special interest feature stories that include real life situations that support your position, participate in radio and television call-in programs, and consider "advertising" your position.
- Offer to write a letter to the editor recognizing the good work your legislator has done.
- Write thank you notes to staff that have been helpful in arranging meetings or providing information.