

Making a difference through communication

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Step 1: Prepare Your Organization for Public Policy

- **Get motivated and educated.** There are many resources you can use (books, websites, courses) to learn more about why lobbying and voter education are important ways to serve your mission.
- **Get equipped for public policy.** Secure a telephone, fax machine, Internet and email capability for use in your work. If you do not have access to a computer, it will help to have, at minimum, a place to file important information.
- **Study the legislative process.** You do not have to be an expert, but it will help to be at least somewhat familiar with the process by which a bill becomes a law..

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- **Review the relationship between your organization and government.** Meet with your executive director and board chair to develop a comprehensive list of the ways government, at all levels, affects your organization's ability to provide services. For example, you will want to answer questions such as: How do various laws and regulations affect the way we provide services to the community? What are the rules associated with grants and contracts? How do these rules affect our ability to educate and provide information to government agency staff and elected officials? What are the national lobbying laws for nonprofits and individuals?
- **Create a who's who list.** Make a list of the government officials, including elected representatives, judges, and agency staff that make policy decisions about the laws, regulations and rules you have already listed. The purpose here is to build a master list of persons who are in positions of influence with regard to your programs and services. Be sure to gather complete contact information for entry into a data base.

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- **Prepare your board of directors.** A dedicated committee of your board of directors can be supportive and influential in developing positive relationships with government. In three hours you can discuss the potential benefits of a board committee on public policy with your Chairperson and query board members to determine their interest in helping build your organization's public policy capacity.
- **Connect public policy with organization's governance.** Develop an agenda of items for discussion and decision at your next board meeting. Aim to inform your board how public policies affect those you serve and your organization's ability to provide services. At the next meeting of your board of directors, enlist several members to comprise a public policy committee that will work with you to develop and promote appropriate public policy goals that are consistent with your mission. Be sure to discuss the findings of your research on how government policies currently affect your mission.

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- **Take advantage of your human resources.** Make a list of key persons who work, volunteer, or are served by your organization, including members who would be willing to contact their elected officials on behalf of your cause.
- **Diversity helps.** Invite and encourage persons from disadvantaged groups to participate in your public policy work. Multiple perspectives will strengthen the process and outcomes of your efforts.
- **Develop useful data.** Develop a local success story that demonstrates the good work of your organization. If your program was made possible because of certain laws and/or funding from government, include such information in your story. The connection between government action and a positive impact on your community will be well received by elected officials and agency staff and useful in your future lobbying efforts.

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- **Look for allies.** Contact your national association of nonprofits or umbrella organization that represents your cause before the state legislature or federal government to gather recent information about your issues and ways you might get involved.
- Make a list of other nonprofits, in your region, that provide similar services. Contact them to find out if they also work on similar public policy matters. If so, find out if they participate in any coalitions of nonprofits and how you can get information about joining. Remember public policy work is not a solo activity. Getting the change you want in public policy will occur most readily when you join with other groups in coalition.
- **Know your policymakers.** Research the interests of your elected officials to find out if they have professional or personal ties to your cause. Usually local officials' offices provide biographical information. You also may want to ask their local staff about the officials' charitable and philanthropic interests.

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- **Develop a public policy agenda.** Having identified several members of your board to work with you on public policy matters it is time to have a meeting to identify the two or three most important long-term changes in laws and/or regulations that would benefit your cause and organizational capacity. Have a clear number one priority so you will be able to maintain focus. Write them down. Next to them, describe in a few sentences, if these changes occurred, how those you serve would benefit. Be sure to select a chairperson to provide leadership for the committee, to run committee meetings and present the committee's agenda at board meetings.
- **Review the law.** You don't have to be an attorney to learn the legal opportunities and limits of nonprofits' participation in the public policy process. Lobbying is legal. Supporting candidates for office is not.
- **Brief your advocate(s) and accountant(s).** Provide information about the laws governing lobbying make sure they understand the legal opportunities for public policy participation.

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Assess your capacity to take action

Review your organization's decision-making structure to make sure that you can act quickly enough to keep pace with the legislative process. Educate your board so that they will be a catalyst and facilitator for your public policy work. Remember bills will become laws without regard to when your board or key committee meetings are scheduled. So, general individuals should be designated to make key legislation related decisions when required, between meetings.

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Step 2: Become a Voice for Your Cause and a Vehicle for Citizen Participation

- **Build a public policy presence.** Attend a coalition meeting of another organization working on similar public policy issues. Your presence will send a strong signal that your organization cares about the issue.
- **Become a source of reliable information.** Create a packet of information about your organization including its mission and services and your public policy agenda along with a letter to each of the key elected officials and government agency staff whose decisions affect your cause. Send the packets with a note that you will follow up to schedule an informational meeting to discuss their position with regard to your public policy priorities. Your packet will serve as a helpful informational tool for many audiences. Remember: Building credibility is vital to the long-term strength of your public policy efforts. If you are not sure of your facts about the issue, don't fudge; admit to what you don't know and get back as soon as possible with the correct information.

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- **Begin building relationships with policymakers.** Use one of your three hours this week to meet with one of your elected officials or a key agency staff person to inform them of the policies your organization supports and to learn how your organization may work cooperatively with them to achieve your public policy goals. Ask one of your board members to attend the meeting with you. If you find out that the official or representative you are meeting with is not in agreement, be polite, agree to disagree, but maintain mutual respect, honesty and open lines of communication.
- **Become a vehicle of democracy for your community, constituents, and volunteers.** Use one of your hours this week to invite volunteers and people served by your organization to meet with you to discuss your organization's public policy agenda and to learn how they may contribute to your decision-making and promote it with policymakers. Think about the types of examples of community benefit that your members, clients, and volunteers might help you develop for use in public policy work. Meet with them and enlist their support for future meetings with elected officials and grassroots lobbying efforts.

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Step 3: Increase and sustain your advocacy

- **Meet face to face.** Meet with one of your legislators at their local offices to lobby on behalf of, or in opposition to legislation that would affect your cause. Bring a board member. Note: There is no form of communication as powerful as meeting in person.
- **Know the Staff.** Often, the staff of a legislator may be the most knowledgeable person in the legislator's office about your issues. Find out which staff person works on your issue and get to know them. In many cases, state or local legislators will have one staff person or none. Members of Congress usually have many staff. Send staff your information packet. Meet with them as appropriate. On occasion, invite them to speak to your members.
- **Use the telephone.** Make telephone calls to your elected officials about pending legislation, regulations, or other priority public policy matters to describe how a change in law would affect your programs and constituents. Urge your members and volunteers by mail or broadcast fax to do likewise.

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- **Write a letter.** Recent surveys show that a well-written letter from a constituent is one of the most influential ways of communicating with a legislator. Be sure to include how your members, community, and those you serve would be affected by a proposed change in the law. Send a copy to the legislator's staff and to the chair of your public policy committee.
- Email is not necessarily effective. Recent surveys show that some legislators treat email with the same value as a regular paper letter and others treat it with low value, like bulk mail communications. When in doubt, back up your email with a paper letter.
- **Testify.** Your organization has expertise needed by legislators before they make decisions about the budget, regulations, or new laws. Find out when the appropriate committees in your state legislature are holding hearings on subjects related to your mission and ask permission to testify in person. Include in your testimony data about the impact of your services along with your recommendation for action on the public policy issue.
- **Demonstrate your organization's effectiveness and values.** Provide a one-hour tour of your programs for one of your elected officials. Be sure to have a board member on site to show their support.

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- **Cover all the bases.** Contact local or national government agency staffs that you work with to let them know how pending legislation or regulations will affect your ability to deliver your programs. Write a similar letter to your authority representative.
- **Share information and be inclusive in decision-making.** Convene a small meeting of your key board members, constituents, and volunteers with one of your elected officials to explain how pending public policy may affect your constituents and community.
- **Give credit when credit is due.** Write a letter of congratulations to one or more of your elected officials when they act in a helpful way to your cause. Remember to thank all those who volunteered time and money to help your public policy efforts.

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- **Provide leadership opportunities.** Host a speaking opportunity to provide an opportunity for an elected official to articulate his or her support for your cause and position on important legislation. You may also want to delegate the tasks of developing an analysis, organizing constituents and/or others served by your organization, to a volunteer who has demonstrated reliability and leadership in public policy work.
- **Inform the media.** Write a letter to the editor of your local or regional newspaper about how a pending public policy issue would affect your cause.

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- **Build relationships with the media.** The media can be a powerful ally in your public policy efforts. In one hour you can meet with the writer who covers the beat most closely related to the work of your organization. Also, meet with a member of the editorial board of your local paper to pitch a story idea about community needs that your organization confronts through its public policy work.
- **Inform and educate your public.** Write an article for your next newsletter about a public policy issue and how it may affect your cause. Be sure to let your readership know how they can be supportive and receive more information.

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