

Legislative Advocacy: The Art of Developing an Effective Relationship with Legislators

All of us advocate every day when we try to influence other people's decisions. The most successful advocates are those who go the extra steps. They actually develop relationships with their legislators.

The basic rules for getting along with other people also work for developing relationships with legislators and other policy-makers—be positive; don't lie; be considerate of the other person; use every chance you get to build the relationship. Here are some of the basic rules:

- **Stay Positive**

It's easy to get frustrated and maybe even angry when you can't get things to work as they should. But channel your anger into positive energy. Who do you respond to better—the person shaking their finger in your face while yelling at you, or the person smilingly saying that even though you disagree this time, you know that next time you'll see eye to eye. A positive contact keeps the door open for next time.

- **Use every chance you get**

There are many different kinds of advocacy: face to face; in letters, e-mails and phone calls; in rallies; in letters to the editor, etc. But also use the accidental meeting on the street or the little league game. Don't always call just when you need something. Call just to say thanks or share information. Be respectful of their privacy (no stalking), but do use all the tools in your tool belt.

- **Get to know the legislators**

We all pay more attention to family and friends than to total strangers. So, make an effort to develop a relationship with legislators who are likely to be regular advocacy targets. Part of that is using every chance you get. (See above.) And part of it is doing your homework. (See below.) Does someone in your group know the person? Does he go to the same dog park? Does your brother-in-law service her motorcycle?

- **Do your homework**
 Most legislators are busy people. They don't have time to be an expert on every issue. But you ARE an expert on your issues. Be sure that you've thought through both the problem and the solution. Can you give examples of other places where your solution was successful? Or examples where the issue you're fighting against failed miserably. Who's likely to be a supporter that will help you? Who's likely to oppose you and how can you argue against them? It's all part of becoming an expert.
- **Be clear**
 Make sure that you're not using jargon or acronyms (words that most people won't understand). Work on getting your message across in as few words as possible. People remember "sound bites." Explain the problem, how it affects people and the solution. Be sure to be very clear about what you want the legislator to do.
- **Never give bad information**
 If you want your information to be trusted, it has to be trustworthy. So, it's very important to always give good information. It helps if you've done your homework. If someone asks a question and you don't know the answer, tell them you'll find out and get back to them by a specific time. Getting back to them gives you another contact.
- **Be balanced**
 Try to be balanced in your advocacy. Share both emotional appeal (personal stories) and good research (facts and figures). Go for both quantity (a whole stack of post cards) and quality (a handful of personal letters).
- **Work with staff**
 You don't need to start at the top with the legislator. Start with staff working on the issue and then if they can't help you, work your way up. Get to know people who work in the office. Don't ignore folks who can help you. The receptionist who answers the phone may control access to his boss.

- **Use your friends**
It might sound tacky, but we have to use what we have. If you find someone who is supportive, get them to talk to other legislators and to introduce you.
- **Give exposure to your friends**
If you're doing media work or community meetings, offer to include supportive legislators. They get and keep their jobs, by getting public attention. But, be careful about anything you do that might be interpreted as partisan. Be especially careful at election time.
- **Never threaten your "enemies"**
This is an extension of the rule about being positive. Even if you've disagreed with an elected official 99 times, there's always a chance that the 100th try will be the charm. Don't slam the door.
- **Get involved in the political process**
Do voter registration and make sure that elected officials are aware that your group will turn up at the polls. Vote and get others to vote.

Prepared April 29, 2013
For the Disability Advocacy Support Hub (DASH)

This publication is supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council.
Copyright © 2013 Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council. Permission to reprint, copy and distribute this work is granted provided that it is reproduced as a whole, distributed at no more than actual cost, and displays this copyright notice. Any other reproduction is strictly prohibited.