

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA CENTER FOR EMERGING LATINO LEADERSHIP

Helpful Hints for Advocacy

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When you are crossed politically, don't get mad, get even. - Robert F. Kennedy

Advocacy (n.) - The act or process of supporting a cause or proposal.

Advocacy can mean something as formal as sitting down and talking to your legislator, as intensive as engaging in efforts to change a law or policies, or as simple as telling your neighbor the impact of a law.

Many people underestimate the importance of talking with their elected officials. Whether it is at the local, state, or national level, the individuals who represent you and your community are eager to hear your thoughts and views about issues on which they will have to vote. It is normal to feel nervous the first time you speak with an elected official, but remember they come from the same community or area as you do, and by following a few simple guidelines you will be able to get your thoughts and opinions across effectively. Here are some frequently asked questions concerning advocacy and what you can do as young leaders, as well as some helpful tips.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I get involved in advocacy?

Young leaders such as yourselves can become advocates on many levels. You can meet with your Congress member for instance, or you can hold a speak-out at your school or in your community on issues important to you.

Why is it important?

Advocacy is important because it allows you to make a difference in your community and address those issues that are important to you. It is also important because your thoughts about an issue can be the very things to help pass a law you support, or defeat a law you do not support. Either way, you are an asset and your thoughts and opinions are important.

Is there a difference between advocacy and lobbying?

The best short definition of advocacy is “speaking up.” Advocacy can be done at any time, by anyone. Lobbying is a specific form of advocacy, with a specific legal definition. Essentially, it means communication with public (usually elected) officials or their staff that urges a position on a pending piece of legislation. Lobbying is regulated by the law in terms of what organizations can do it and how much they can spend in terms of resources to lobby. It is helpful to work with a group or person that understands the laws about lobbying when you partake in lobbying activities as a group; but generally, when you speak for yourself – as a “private citizen” – you are free to ask public officials to take a position on legislation, and you should.

How do I get in contact with my senator or Congress member?

The best form of communication is to send a fax or email your representative. Because of the attacks of September 11 and several anthrax scares on Capital Hill shortly thereafter, it is easier, safer, and much faster for your elected official to receive a fax or email. If you choose to send a letter it can take up to several weeks to be read.

DO'S TO ADVOCACY

Make an appointment in advance.

Time is always at a premium in legislative offices. Contact the legislator's scheduler in advance to arrange a meeting. It is best to make your meeting request in writing (fax or email) and follow up with a phone call. Be clear about who will be attending the meeting and the specific reason for the meeting. For example, you should indicate if you are part of a group or organization, and also specify if you live, study, or work in the legislator's district. Unfortunately, legislative schedules are unpredictable so your meeting may be rescheduled, or you may have to meet with staff in lieu of the elected official.

Do your homework.

Prepare carefully and thoroughly for your meeting. Take the time to "know" your legislator by reviewing past votes or statements on the issue, his/her party's position, and committee assignments. You can visit the member's website by going visiting www.senate.gov or www.house.gov to learn more about him or her. Develop an agenda for the meeting that all your participants understand. Know your talking points (what you plan to say) in advance, and be prepared to make your case. Research the opposition's arguments against your position and, if possible, acknowledge and rebut those arguments in your presentation.

Stay "on message."

Effective legislative meetings should be narrow in scope. Stick to a single issue, state only a few key points in support of your position, and make a definite request for action. Many meetings are ineffective because a participant brings up other issues or strays from the key arguments supporting your position. Have a message and stick to it.

Go local.

Your effectiveness is based on geography; legislators want to hear your thoughts and opinions because you are a constituent. One of your most useful strategies is the way you relate the issue and your position to your community. Legislators have many other avenues to get national or state analysis, reports, and statistics, so local statistics and stories are important and you could be the only source for such rich information. Do not be afraid to humanize the issue by relating it to your local community or personal experience.

Make a clear, actionable request.

Many people are afraid that it may be impolite to make a direct request. Do not forget that the purpose of your meeting is to secure support for your issue. It is appropriate and expected that you will make a request during that time. The key is to make sure that your request is clearly

articulated and actionable by the legislator. Keep in mind that your request should be timely and consistent with the legislative process.

It is usually not enough to ask for generic support for an issue or cause, rather make a direct and specific request that is tied to pending legislative activity (if possible). For example, ask that a legislator co-sponsor a bill. You should make reference to bill names or numbers and be knowledgeable about the status of the bill. Making a specific request gives you the opportunity to evaluate the legislator's response.

Cultivate a relationship with staff.

Many grassroots advocates underestimate the important role of legislative staff. A supportive staff person can often make the difference between success and failure in your effort. Staff play an invaluable role in shaping a legislator's agenda and position on issues. It is important that you make every effort to cultivate a positive working relationship with staff. In time, staff may even come to regard you as a helpful resource for information on your issue.

Follow-up

What happens after a meeting is almost as important as the meeting itself. Send a thank you letter after the meeting which expresses appreciation and reinforces your message and any verbal commitment of support made by the legislator or staff. If you promise during the meeting to get back in touch with additional information, be sure that you do so. Failure to follow up on your promise will call your credibility into question. Also, if your meetings are set up as part of a larger coordinated effort or campaign, do not forget to report the results of your meeting back to the larger group. This information is vital to coordinating overall legislative strategy and evaluating the impact of advocacy efforts. Follow-up is important even if the legislator does not agree to support your request because you are building a long-term relationship.

DON'TS TO ADVOCACY

Do not go "off message" or discuss unrelated issues.

You must deliver a unified message during your meeting. Sending different messages or discussing unrelated subjects will only undermine your ability to secure support. Limit your advocacy to one or two issues at the most. Legislators meet with many groups and constituents so it is important that your message and request are clear and uniform.

Do not engage in partisan critiques.

It is best to keep the discussion based on the merits of the policy or issue. Avoid characterizing your position in strictly partisan terms. Worse, do not make snide or disparaging partisan comments. You are working on behalf of an issue, not a party. You want legislators of both parties to support your position. Be careful not to alienate legislators or staff based on partisanship.

Do not use threats.

While it may be tempting to tell a legislator who has rebuffed your request that "you'll never vote for him/her again" or that "you pay his/her salary," such discourtesy only ensures that your arguments will be discounted – now and in the future.

Do not be late.

Time is a valuable and scarce commodity for legislators. Punctuality conveys professionalism and demonstrates your commitment to your issue, which is after all the reason for the meeting. Arrive early, and if you are meeting as a group allow time to calm your nerves and make a final review of the talking points and message before the meeting.

Do not get too comfortable.

Advocates are sometimes surprised by the courteous reception they receive, even from lawmakers who disagree with their position. As a constituent, you will be accorded respect by the legislator and staff. Do not mistake this respect for agreement. Do not let the comfortable nature of the exchange deter you from making your request. Finally, do not mistake "concern" for your issue with support for your position.

Do not forget to follow up.

Immediately send a thank you letter. Stay informed on your issue, and track how your legislator responds. Did the legislator follow through on his/her promise? If not, request an explanation. If so, express your appreciation.

Last but not least, use the power to make a difference that is within your reach – VOTE!

This document was compiled with information from the American Psychological Association's Office of Public Policy, the Advocacy Institute, and the Washington Office for Advocacy.