



NPO Advocacy Tips

Advocacy Amplified – How Nonprofits Can Garner State Legislative Support for Their Causes

In order to serve their communities and advance their missions, nonprofits frequently advocate for laws that will improve people's lives. To create lasting change, nonprofits must overcome the complex legislative landscape to effectively lobby and pass laws that serve their communities.

To do this, they must persuade legislators — the people who make the laws — to pass bills, a process known as lobbying. Lobbying can be done by any number of people within the nonprofit sector, including nonprofit staff, volunteers, contracted individuals, or hired lobbying companies.[\[1\]](#)

“It’s not about promoting your cause or your organization; it’s about passing laws that benefit the communities you serve.”

Whoever does it, though, must understand that the legislative process frequently works in ways that some people may think is illogical. I’ve seen bills win (and lose) for reasons that have nothing to do with their content. Legislative outcomes are often not the result of thoughtful discussion but of the exercise of political power.

But fear not! Nonprofits can exercise that power if they do it correctly. They need to know what to say to legislators, how to say it, and when to say it. They need to know which tactics will work and which won’t. Winning is very, very possible.

Here are eleven things you can do to garner legislative support for your issue:

1. Know the rules and customs of the legislative body you are lobbying.

Every legislature operates differently and often in ways that you might not expect. You can learn about these customs from experienced colleagues or just discover them on your own. Things do not happen the way they were taught in your high school civics class.

For example, when two committees claim jurisdiction over a bill, we were taught that the bill is then referred to the Rules Committee to decide where it will be heard. In reality, legislative leaders decide what committee hears a bill (sometimes arbitrarily). This means leaders can mark a bill for defeat without anybody having to vote against it by sending it to the Rules Committee.

Similarly, defeated bills can be given second lives via conference committees, and a committee chair can have the authority to report a bill to the full chamber even without the requisite number of votes. This means that you need to know the key players on your bill’s committee and get them on your side.

2. Recruit a sponsor who can get your bill passed.

When asking a legislator to sponsor a bill, don’t just approach the one who is most supportive of your issue. Select a person who you feel will be able to get other legislators to vote for the bill.

To do this, you’ll first need to collect some information. Before a legislator agrees to sponsor your bill, that person will want to know who’s for it, who’s against it, what you are doing to win over (or at least neutralize)

opponents, and where the governor stands on the bill. They'll want to know what they are walking into on your behalf.

3. Think from the legislators' point of view, not from your point of view.

Appeal to each legislator's self-interest. Your goal is to get legislators to vote for (or against) a bill, not to make them care about the people you are fighting for.

Legislators can be progressive, conservative, and everything in between. They include politicians, community activists (of all ideologies), and regular people in both parties who bring their personal beliefs and biases to the legislature.

Simply put, you won't succeed by demanding legislators "do the right thing." In many places, legislators can take this to mean being anti-choice, anti-trans, anti-immigrant, and pro-police, stances that generally do not align with the values of many nonprofits.

Despite their potentially problematic beliefs, the one thing most legislators have in common is a desire to get re-elected. The opinions of registered voters are what matters to them (not non-voters, non-citizens, or underage people), so frame your issue to be clearly advantageous to legislators' constituents.

Take the following example: in my state, three conservative Republicans voted in favor of a bill to increase public aid for Medicaid recipients who resided in nursing homes. They did it because voters in their districts had family members who had run out of money, were no longer able to pay for nursing home care, and had to go on Medicaid. They were persuaded to do what they believed helped their own people, even though they might vote against something that was perceived to give benefits to the undeserved.

So, remember, legislators are elected to represent the people who live in their districts, not the people who live somewhere else. Make your issue matter to them.

4. Talk to legislators individually.

You're more likely to get legislators' votes by talking to them one-on-one than by making speeches to big groups. You'll be better able to pitch to their individual interests that way.

This means you have to know legislators' political orientations and personal attitudes as well as who might be able to influence them. Try to find a connection to them, such as a church you both belong to, an organization you were both involved in, or a candidate you both supported.

But even though you want to talk to legislators individually, don't wait to schedule a one-on-one meeting. Instead, expect to catch them in passing (like walking in a hallway), and know that you'll rarely have their full attention. They may, for example, continue walking while you talk to them, giving you less than one minute to make your case. Get right to the point, and don't let interruptions bother you.

5. Distribute a very, very brief handout.

Your handout should be a very quick read. Ideally, it should be one side of one page with lots of white space and very little copy—no more than three or four bullets stating your main points. Don't give legislators reports or reams of data. Even those few who might want to read it just don't have the time.

These handouts are usually referred to as "leave-behinds," meaning that any time you talk to a legislator or testify in a hearing (see next point), you should make sure you have many on hand to pass out. Yes, you should

put your contact information on the handout, but only to identify your organization as its source. Legislators will not call you with questions.

6. State your case in legislative committee hearings.

To be clear, this is not how you win influence, as few legislators are swayed by committee hearings.

In fact, legislators don't always listen to legislative testimony (although they'll try to look engaged). Some legislators may not even show up for a hearing if they know a vote won't be taken. Others will be there to fill a quorum but might be reading a book, for example. Often, the only legislators listening to you will be your supporters (to help you) and your opponents (to knock you down).

But remember that even for your supporters, the merits of the bill are not necessarily what matters to them. Many legislators simply vote in accordance with party/faction interests or because of their relationship to the legislative sponsor. But because you've talked to each committee member individually, you should already know the outcome of the vote.

Present your views at committee hearings, anyway. Your testimony will be expected, and if you don't show up, it may make it easier for some to vote against your bill. Make it as difficult as possible for people to vote against you.

Testimony also puts your position in the legislative record, connecting a live person to a bill that only exists on paper.

Lastly, it enables you to score public relations points. You can disseminate a press release about your action afterward, and there may be reporters or even television cameras in the hearing room when you testify. This will help the public put a face to the bill, but it also gives face time for your organization.

7. Enlist legislative allies.

Identify every group or individual who has a reason to support your bill, even if that reason has nothing to do with the legislation. This will broaden your appeal and connect you to legislators you wouldn't have been able to influence on your own.

For example, the hotel and restaurant industries are often supportive of immigrant rights because their businesses are heavily reliant on immigrant labor. Their support can attract the votes of pro-corporate legislators who wouldn't otherwise be influenced by progressive issues.

Potential allies may want to be identified with your issue or use it to position themselves for something else. Maybe they want to get even with a legislator or another group because of something that happened in the past or they hope to sidetrack a rival's current political efforts.

Sometimes others' arguments will be more likely than yours to influence legislators. For example, in my state several groups independently opposed a proposal to shorten the election season by rescheduling the primary. Jewish organizations opposed its conflict with High Holy Days, unions opposed the difficulty of organizing summer campaigns, and the county clerks' association argued that any legal challenges to primaries might not be resolved in time to print ballots for the general election. Ultimately, the clerks' argument carried the most weight and led to the bills' defeat — a win for all. However, think of how much less time and energy these organizations would have expended if they had realized their common cause and banded together to fight this bill.

8. Avoid petition drives.

Petition drives are the least effective of all legislative advocacy tactics. That is, they will not get you legislators' votes, even though they might help you build your donor database.

The reason that petition drives don't work is because legislators know that the number of signatures you collect is likely very small compared to their district's population — you are not likely to amass the more than 750,000 signatures of the people who live in each congressional district, for example. Legislators are less likely to be swayed by the amount than by the kind of support you claim, which is again why you should enlist powerful allies. As always, legislators are judging you to see how your efforts can help or hurt them, and petition drives will usually fail to frame your issue in their terms.

9. Try to divide your opposition.

When opinion is divided for any reason within a cause, profession, or industry, many legislators will be hesitant to take sides. After all, they don't want to lose the support of their constituents when re-election comes. Try to win the support of some anticipated adversaries. It will reduce the strength of your opponents.

In the earlier example of the conservative Republicans who voted for increased public aid to nursing home residents, consumer groups divided the opposition — namely, trade associations who represented nursing homes. One of the three trade associations felt that its members were being treated less fairly by the state than members of the other organizations, so consumer groups exploited this division. Ultimately, legislators — even those who wanted to support the nursing home industry over the consumers — were unwilling to oppose the bill.

10. Be prepared to compromise.

Compromise does not mean selling out. Think about it: even the most politically powerful people have to make concessions.

Start by asking for more than you need. Then you can strategically give up things you really didn't want in the first place.

Remember, bills are usually modified throughout the legislative process. This can offer proponents and opponents alike the chance to have input in negotiations. Make sure you use this to your advantage by asking for more and then compromising for what you really want.

11. Be diplomatic.

Don't burn any bridges. The legislative process goes on indefinitely, and today's foe could be tomorrow's ally on another bill.

Don't act like you are morally superior to everybody else. Don't act as if your adversaries are unfeeling or immoral (even if you think they are). Don't act as if you are right, everybody else is wrong, and if they would just listen to you they would realize that.

You need to give legislators a reason to support you. Being self-righteous and belligerent won't accomplish this. Instead, it might end up making enemies of people who should be your allies.

Persuasion for the Win

For nonprofits, lobbying is a necessary and winnable activity. But keep in mind that lobbying is all about persuading legislators to vote the way you want them to. It's not about promoting your cause or your organization; it's about passing laws that benefit the communities you serve.

To accomplish this, you must respect legislative customs, address each legislator's needs, be diplomatic, and be prepared to compromise. This is how everyone wins.

***Independent Sector* reports that the Return on Investment (ROI) in nonprofit advocacy is \$115 to \$1. Learn how to assure that your organization is a leader in civic engagement/advocacy and is using these powerful tools in the [Discovering Trends Through Civic Engagement](#) class on Saturday, October 21 from 1 – 5 pm as part of the Sunshine Certificate in Nonprofit Management.**

Source: [Blue Avocado](#), the e-magazine of [Nonprofits Insurance Alliance](#)®, offering practical tools and tips for nonprofits, by nonprofits. Nonprofits Insurance Alliance has been a preferred partner of the Florida Association of Nonprofits since 1991, when they were formed by an Act of Congress. They are a group of 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-exempt insurers whose purpose is to serve 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organizations by providing a stable source of reasonably priced liability insurance tailored to the specialized needs of the nonprofit sector. (Find links on FANO.org under Savings.)

<https://blueavocado.org/community-and-culture/legislative-support/>

Author: [David Patt](#) is a seasoned lobbyist with a track record of securing legislative victories for nonprofit causes, including nursing home and electoral reform. He has served in leadership roles in several political and community organizations in Chicago, and has run for a seat on the Chicago City Council.

Articles on *Blue Avocado* do not provide legal representation or legal advice and should not be used as a substitute for advice or legal counsel. *Blue Avocado* provides space for the nonprofit sector to express new ideas. Views represented in *Blue Avocado* do not necessarily express the opinion of the publication or its publisher.

Resources

[1] Not sold on lobbying? Check out [Pat Libby's argument for why nonprofits should lobby](#).