

Becoming an Effective Legislative Advocate:

9 Steps to Legislative Advocacy

Content adapted from document created by Representative Jacqueline Sly



Step 1. Develop your understanding of the problem.

It's not hard to drive down an urban neighborhood street and see problems all around us. We see things from stray dogs, open air drug dealing, policy abuse, vandalism and many more... Although these problems people in communities face are real, you can't just go to the legislature and say, "I saw a stray dog in my neighborhood and I want you to put it in a bill to do something about it". Bringing a problem to a legislator without careful analysis of the root cause of the problem will be a waste of your time and your legislator. Most importantly, you will never get your issue solved. Basically, step 1 is a research step. What's often not immediately apparent when we see problems are why these problems exist, how serious these problems are and what it will take to fix them. Research can be an excellent tool to help you understand the problem and the environment that causes or perpetuates it. In many cases, the best way to organize your research is by putting together a Fact Sheet. Fact Sheets help inform you on the depths of your problem, they can also be key in identifying who else is experiencing the problems, who's responsible for the problem and who can successfully address the problem. Knowing the ins and out of your issue is the key to any legislative advocacy effort and your legislative campaign will live or die based on your understanding of the problem.

**Fact sheets should be no more than 1 page front and back written in plain English.*

Step 2. Identify what the Legislature can do to solve your problem...can the Legislature get you to the change you seek.

As part of your ongoing research about your problem, do a power analysis of who is responsible for the problem and who can help you solve the problem. They may not always be the same. An understanding of these elements is critical to any civic advocacy effort. You don't want to put three months of work into changing a problem and find out the person you've been talking to cannot get what you want. Always negotiate with who can get what you want. It will be important for future advocacy efforts to understand what entity as well as individual(s) inside the entity is responsible for addressing the problem. Determining the legislature is key to helping you solve your problem, develop a power analysis that clearly explains what the legislature can do to solve your problem and write up the solution in the form of legislative bill language.

Step 3. Determine who all is impacted by these issues and at multiple levels...i.e., youth, families, communities are all impacted by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.

It is important always to build your network to meet the demands of your legislative advocacy effort. One way to do that is to identify key allies and partners. A way to identify allies is to identify who else is being impacted by the problem and work to develop collaborations and partnerships with those individuals around addressing the problem.

Example:

1. What is the problem(s): impact of FASD on society
2. Who all are impacted: youth, families, schools, communities, and business. By doing your homework on who else is responsible in building the necessary alliance to bring attention to the issue, you not only grow your advocacy effort, you increase your ability to address and reach as many legislators as possible.

**Correctly identifying who is also impacted by your issue/concern could help you build a solid coalition of people that are directly affected by your issue who shares your concerns and desires change. Look to those you identify to work with you on public event, meetings with those that can get you what you want, the media and contacting your legislator etc.*

Step 4. Identify how multiple audiences perceive your problem or what they know about the problem so you can craft an appropriate public perception campaign.

Groups with successful advocacy efforts understand that influencing multiple audiences is key to addressing any public issue or concerns and putting pressure on your legislator. The public perception battle is an important and often undervalued aspect of legislative advocacy. Understanding how multiple audiences perceive your issue will help you present your issue and personal stories in ways to gain favor among the public at large. If you get the public on your side, legislators must follow.

**Today's world of blogs is helpful tools to gauge an issue or concern. Nearly every article written is followed by blogging by the public. Other ways to check the pulse of the public includes: Opinion polls, focus groups, community surveys or just go out and talk to people. Always have a sense of how the public views your issue.*



Step 5. Do analyses on how multiple audiences get information about your issue.

In developing a public perception and media strategy, it will be important to infuse your concepts and ideas into every communication channel currently informing residents and legislators about your issue or problem. Using research and personal stories go a long way in communicating the need to address your issue but they do nothing if people are not being reached and reached often.

**Establish good relationships with local media outlets such as newspaper, radio stations, blogs as well as social organizations and churches so that they can help you get the word out.*

Step 6. Developing your campaign.

Develop a campaign based on the resources you have, bring attention to your issue and hold elected officials accountable. Your campaign should be designed to escalate based on the level of resistance you get from elected officials.

Some key pieces to include are: developing a campaign include: knowing your mission, vision and goals, putting your facts in order on fact sheets or in ways that legislators can easily understand, develop and execute a media and communications strategy, identify and work with allies and partners, public education strategies including community meetings etc...and be ready to take that fight to legislators in their home district.

Step 7. Build a database and website.

Establish a database that will inform your network of the status of you or your organizations efforts and when it's time to take collective action and mobilize people to go the capital. Think of your website as your 24 hour marketer that communicates what you want communicated about your issue/problem and the steps you are taking to address it.

**Don't hesitate to ask people to do something when they view your website i.e., sign up for more information and alerts, call a legislator or forward the website information to someone else that may be interested.*

Step 8. Establish a timeline and assign activities to responsible parties.

Just like everything else in life, having a plan and executing it are important parts of being successful. A timeline is a document that lays out what strategies are needed to obtain success, when you are going to execute those strategies and who is responsible for that execution.

**Significant coordination and sophistication is needed in developing a timeline and sticking to it. Groups that have a good sense of where they are on their timeline are also well organized and have a number of leaders sharing the load and exhibiting leadership. When timelines are not being followed, it's usually a sign that the group is unorganized and or overwhelmed.*

Step 9. Build evaluation tools into your work.

Simply put, an evaluation lets you know if you are accomplishing the goals you set out at the beginning of your campaign. Evaluations are critical to making sure you are on track and how well you've been doing at planning and executing tasks. Take your evaluation just as seriously as you take other components of your work because if an evaluation is not done, you risk ruining your entire campaign by never hitting your target and or accomplishing your goals.

**It's always better to identify an outside person/organization to conduct your evaluation to limit bias and to ensure that what is needed to be communicated is actually done.*