



A national coalition of parents, educators, mental health professionals, and physicians united in ensuring the mental health and well-being of our nation's children and adolescents.

Tips on Effective State Legislative Advocacy

The Legislative Process

Your advocacy efforts are key in helping to shape both state laws and budgets. There are many points in the legislative process at which you can become more involved--from the drafting and introduction of a bill to its passage and enactment into law. The importance of getting involved cannot be overstated. Most state legislators know very little about mental health related issues and the impact that they have on people's lives. They have much to learn from you and other key stakeholders.

It is important to remember that your state representatives work for you and the other constituents in their district. They are elected by a majority of their constituents and remain interested in local issues and how they can work to benefit the community. Most also want to be re-elected so recognize the need to keep constituents happy. At the same time, they must balance competing interests, including the need to support effective programs while remaining fiscally responsible.

The following is a summary of the typical¹ legislative process for bills and suggestions on how you can become more involved in the process:

- **Bill Drafting** – a legislator must sponsor a bill in order for it to be drafted by legislative council. Legislators often work with advocates to craft the language that will be included in legislation or to draft amendments to a bill that has already been introduced. This is most common and successful when advocates have an existing relationship with a legislator.
 - *Getting Involved:* Advocates can go to a friendly legislator and request that a bill be drafted to fund services, address a problem, change policy, etc. Advocates can also work with legislators to influence proposed or existing bill language.
- **Bill Introduction** – when bills are formally introduced, they are assigned a bill number and referred to committee(s). To learn more about a bill introduced in your state, you can visit your state legislature's website. In order to find the website, you can insert your state's name and "state legislature" into a search engine, for example, "Utah State

¹ There is some variation in the legislative process from state to state. Every state legislature has a web site with information about the legislative process in the state.

Legislature.” Once you access your state’s legislature website you can find a specific bill using the bill’s assigned number or text in the bill.

- *Getting Involved:* When favorable legislation is introduced, advocates can issue a press release and/or write letters applauding the bill’s introduction. Legislators appreciate public acknowledgment of their work, especially when it comes from constituents and is shared with others in their district.
- **Bills Referred to Committee(s) of Jurisdiction** – most of the work done on a bill happens in committee. Committee Chairs and ranking minority members decide which bills will receive the most attention. Committees may hold hearings on a bill, propose and adopt amendments, and vote on approval of a bill—or they can let a bill die by failing to take action. If a bill is voted on and approved at the committee level, it is reported out to the full House or Senate for consideration. For hearings, advocates may be asked to suggest witnesses and may be asked for input on witness testimony.
 - *Getting Involved:* Advocates may write to Committee members and encourage a hearing on a bill or bills that are important to them. For hearings, advocates may prepare oral and/or written testimony and can benefit from lining up good speakers in advance. Advocates may also provide suggested questions or comments for a friendly legislator on the committee to ask of witnesses. It is also important to recruit fellow advocates or allies to pack hearings on mental health budgets and key legislation and, especially, to wear buttons, stickers, or t-shirts that convey your position or organizational affiliation.
- **Floor Action on a Bill** – bills reported out of committee are placed on the House or Senate calendar for debate by the full chamber. Legislators that support and oppose a bill are given a chance to speak about the bill during the debate. If the bill is not placed on the calendar, then action may not be taken on the bill. When debate concludes, a vote is taken to either approve or defeat a bill.
 - *Getting Involved:* Advocates have the opportunity to contact key legislators in advance of a floor vote to ask them to speak either in favor of or in opposition to a bill. Advocates may provide talking points or even draft and distribute a very brief “floor letter” outlining your key points.
- **Conference Committee** – sometimes similar, but not identical, bills pass in the House and Senate. When this happens, a conference committee must be formed to reconcile the differences in the bills. Once differences are resolved, the House and Senate must again vote to approve the legislation.
 - *Getting Involved:* Advocates may petition legislative leadership to appoint friendly legislators to the conference committee.
- **Action by the Governor** – when a Governor receives a bill, they may sign the bill into law; veto the bill or veto and send it back to the legislature with suggestions for reconsideration; or take no action (in some states that will lead to the bill becoming law after a specific period of time). If a Governor vetos a bill, the legislature may override that decision, typically by a two-thirds vote in both the House and Senate

- *Getting Involved:* For bills that a Governor signals hesitancy about signing, advocates may write letters or op-eds and/or issue a press release. When a Governor signs an important bill, advocates may issue a press release and pack a signing ceremony, if one is held. This helps build goodwill and generates positive publicity for elected officials.

Finally, advocates may also wish to give an award to legislators or other elected officials who support their work and mission.

Building Effective Relationships with Legislators

It is extremely helpful to have strong allies in the legislature. Get to know where legislators stand on issues and find those who are sympathetic to mental health issues. Legislators interested in working on these issues often have a personal connection to mental health. Building relationships with legislators opens the door to work more closely with them to get bills introduced, to help in drafting the language, in shaping the debate on the issues, and in getting legislation signed into law.

It is most beneficial to establish and maintain a consistent relationship with legislators in between sessions, when your legislator has more time, so that when a bill becomes active you can easily contact your legislator for action.

Attend candidate forums or town hall meetings that are held by legislators and candidates. Raise mental health issues and ask questions. Hold elected officials accountable to promises made.

Communicating with Legislators

Legislators are extremely busy during session and cover a multitude of policy issues. This makes it essential that you craft brief, simple and concise messages about the issues that matter most to you to increase your chances for legislative success.

The following are some tips on communicating with legislators on legislation and policy issues:

- **Share personal stories.** Facts, data and figures all help to make the case for your issue. Family and personal stories are also extremely powerful and are often remembered. These stories tend to have a deep impact on how a legislator feels about an issue or bill, particularly during oral testimony. It is important to keep stories very brief (less than two minutes) and tied to pending legislation and policy issues or budgets. Personal stories can also be shared during a scheduled meeting with a legislator (group meetings have greater power) or via a letter, email or phone call.
- **Identify constituency.** Constituents are given top priority by legislators. In all communications with legislators, advocates should identify themselves as a constituent whenever applicable. Legislators want to feel like they have a good handle on what is going on in their district and will be more likely to focus on a legislative issue if they hear from their constituents on it.
- **Increase Contacts.** The more calls, letters, and emails that a legislator receives on an issue, the more likely they are to act on that issue (drafting legislation, pushing for a hearing, casting a vote, etc.). To increase the number of contacts to a legislator, advocates often

form coalitions with organizations that have similar interests. Coalitions can provide additional resources, more constituents, and broader expertise. This may lead legislators to be more confident in supporting the coalition's cause.

- **Repetition.** The number of times that a legislator hears about an issue, from the time they are elected to office until they leave office, plays a key role in whether they favor a cause or issue. Therefore, it is important that advocates communicate on a consistent basis with their legislators and keep them updated and informed about an issue during all stages of the legislative process. Advocates should craft key messages and consider asking friends and family to help in contacting legislators on important issues.
- **Keep materials brief, straightforward and simple.** When sharing printed materials with a legislator, try to keep it to a one-page, bulleted fact sheet that reinforces the key points on the issue. Lengthy materials are often not read.
- **Clearly communicate what you are asking for.** Whether it is support for a bill or asking a committee chair to hold a hearing or move a bill -- be clear on the action you want taken.
- **Stay informed.** Advocates should keep their legislators informed about their issues and how they want the legislator to vote, if there is an impending vote. On the flip side, advocates should also stay informed on where their legislators stand on issues, the actions they have taken, and any debates they have participated in on the issue. If legislators know their constituents are watching, they are more likely to vote in favor of the issues that matter most to their constituents.
- **Follow-up.** Advocates can never thank a legislator enough for supporting their cause, especially since they get pushed and pulled in many directions. It is essential for advocates to thank legislators when they are supportive of their issue by voting in favor of it, taking a public stance on it, or promoting the issue during a debate or speech. If a legislator is not supportive, a relationship can still be formed by providing education and resources on issues; the relationship that is established as a result will likely be beneficial when in the future when the issue comes up again.
- **Media Coverage.** Legislators are often interested in the issues covered in the media. If there is an article in your community paper or in a newspaper that covers the state -- mail or fax a copy of the article to your legislator with a note attached. If the media story covers an issue that you have previously raised with the legislator, remind the legislator about the previous communication on the issue. Also, if major reports are released on a topic that you have previously discussed with your legislator, you may wish to send the legislator a short summary of the report, especially if it comes from a well-respected research agency (like NIMH) or a well-respected academic center in your state. This helps position you as a credible resource on mental health issues.

Legislative Leadership

Committee chairs and ranking members play a key role in the legislative process and can—and should—be targeted in advocacy efforts even when they do not represent your district.

Advocates have much to gain from learning the legislative process, building a relationship with elected representatives and speaking up for children and families. The frequently quoted wise words of Margaret Mead ring true in legislative advocacy...

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

Thanks for all that you do to improve the lives of children and families!