

Advocacy: The Time is Now



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Think about the last time you saw a movie you absolutely loved. You raved about it to friends and family. You encouraged everyone you know to see it. You found those who'd also loved it and hashed through every scene with them. Whether you realized it or not, when you shared your love of that film and encouraged others to see and love it as well, you were practicing *advocacy*.

At its core, advocacy is a combination of two things: building a strong case and creating and leveraging relationships. In the movie example, you built a case for the film and created and leveraged your relationships to get others to see it. Those same advocacy activities apply to any cause: education, workforce development, health, human services, early childhood, and anything else.





Anyone can engage in advocacy. It can be as simple as convincing your family to choose your favorite restaurant and as complicated as drafting language for a bill that might eventually become law. Yes, there are rules that provide specific guardrails for nonprofit organizations, but there is a world of opportunity and options within those guardrails.

Advocacy work can take multiple forms, from the simplest grassroots outreach to the most sophisticated direct lobbying effort. In fact, successful advocacy is often a mix of many different approaches, tailored to the specific needs and capacity of an organization.

Why is advocacy so critical?

Whatever need you're working to meet or whatever social issue you're striving to address, some key element likely can be addressed with some kind of policy change. And policy change only happens when people build a strong case and leverage relationships.

The most important thing is to engage in advocacy **now** and on an ongoing basis. Building the relationships needed for successful advocacy takes time. Perhaps your issue will be a hot button in the 2020 election season. Or perhaps you're looking at a much longer time horizon for effecting the kind of change you seek. Either way, you should make advocacy a key part of your agenda **now** if you hope to gain traction later. In the articles that follow, you'll find tips and ideas to help you do just that. And as always, you'll find a wealth of specific [advocacy tools on our website](#).

Easing into Advocacy

For some people, just the thought of advocacy is intimidating. The word conjures up images of testifying before Congress on live TV or standing with a bullhorn in front of a rowdy crowd. But “advocacy” is simply the actions you take when you promote a cause and use your relationships. The vast majority of the time, it’s about sharing your message behind the scenes, in everyday ways, with people who already may have things in common with you. You already have the skills required, so don’t be intimidated!

Have you told a friend about a cause you care about? If so, you’re an advocate. Have you written a letter to an elected official or to the editor of your local paper? You’re an advocate. Have you attended an event to learn more, show support, or tell others about your cause? You’re an advocate! In fact, you probably are already more of an advocate than you think – and you can easily become even more effective in one hour a week or less. Just try the following:

1. Create a contact list. Determine the people you’d like to attract to your cause or issue (your target audiences), then make outreach to them easier by adding them to your contact list. If you don’t have one already, create a mailing list to easily send out updates or issue-specific newsletters.



2. Clarify your purpose. Make sure you are clear about what you want to accomplish, what your audience needs to know, or what you want them to do in response to the information you’ll share. Develop a policy agenda for your organization (see story below). Then create a strong, compelling set of messages to make your case.

3. Introduce yourself. Get to know the people who are most influential for your cause. Ask for a meeting with persons of influence in your community to share information about your issue. Or better yet, find others who know them to make an introduction. If the idea of meeting with influencers is intimidating, start with someone easy, like a neighbor or colleague, then work your way up to individual policymakers or their staff.

4. Attend an event. Attending events where your target audience members are present can help you become a familiar face, so can inviting them to your events.

5. Write a letter. A quick personal letter to a key prospect or influential person can have huge impact. Whether it's an introduction or a thank you, take a few minutes and build some new inroads.



6. Ask your co-workers for help. You may be surprised about the skills or interests your co-workers may be hiding. Ask for help brainstorming ways to reach out or to assist sealing envelopes. When you get the conversation going internally, you help build it externally.

7. Make one phone call. A quick phone call to thank someone, extend a personal invitation to your event, make a new connection, or even ask a favor can pay big dividends down the road.

8. Take someone to lunch. Everyone has to eat. Why not use that time to talk about your organization with someone who could become a valuable supporter, ally, or ambassador?

9. Share what you've learned with others. Spend a few minutes making copies of a helpful handout or sending a group email with helpful tips that your friends and colleagues can use. This small action can get people talking about your organization and help them spread your message further.

10. Tell a friend or family member one great thing about your organization. Practice makes perfect, and the more you share great messages about your organization with your friends and family, the easier it will be to do the same when you're meeting with a potential stakeholder or an elected official.

11. Write a letter to the editor of your local paper. Praise policymakers when they've involved themselves in policy that supports your issue or identifies and illustrates the issue on which you want them to take action.

12. Connect on social media. Every policymaker is on Facebook or Twitter these days. If your organization uses these vehicles, get connected to easily share research and updates about early childhood issues.



Becoming an advocate is easier than you think. Once you've boosted your confidence and comfort level with the steps above, you'll be ready for more! ACS offers a wide range of advocacy tools, from general guides downloadable from our website—including:

- [Advocacy Do's and Don'ts](#)
- [Lobbying vs. Advocacy](#)
- [Advocacy in One Hour a Week](#)
- [Key Tips for Meeting With Policymakers](#)
- [Five Rules for Policymaker Engagement](#)

Don't see what you're looking for? We also create custom toolkits for specific organizations—like the [Advocacy Toolkit](#) we recently created for Idaho AEYC. Whatever you need to ease into advocacy and conquer it like a pro, we are ready to help!

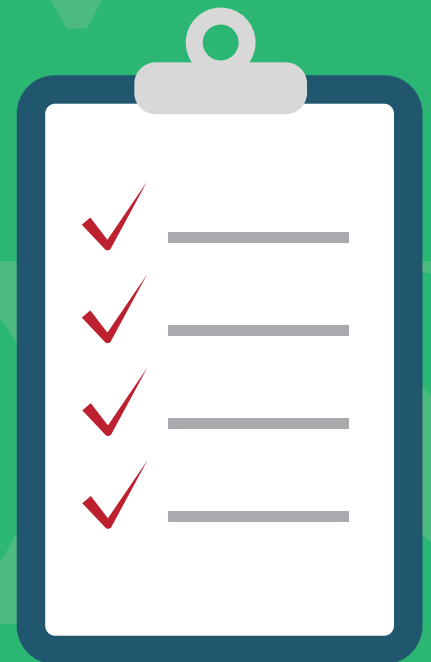
“What Do You Want?” Create Your Public Policy Agenda

Have you ever gone to the grocery store without a shopping list? If so, you probably ended up wandering up and down the aisles, picking up whatever looked interesting, and got home only to find you spent more than you intended and are still missing some critical pantry staples. But when you go shopping with a list, you typically spend less and secure exactly what you need.

Advocating for public policy works in much the same way. If you aren't clear about what you truly want, you may end up with a policy that's not helpful to your cause. But if you spend time learning about an issue—and its champions and critics—you can enter the policy arena with a clear picture of what's possible and what you'd like to achieve. A public policy agenda is a written document (which you can make public or not) that defines the policy issues that are most important for achieving your organizational goals, and what you will do to advocate for policy outcomes. Depending on your organization, your policy agenda can be directed toward local, state, or federal policy—or all three.

A policy agenda should have the following:

- a clear focus; and
- at least one clear goal.



For example, a local homeless shelter might define its policy focus as “securing and protecting the rights of homeless residents.” It might then define its policy goals as **1)** changing local laws to allow for overnight use of public buildings as emergency shelters during extreme weather; **2)** changing state laws to allow homeless shelter addresses in voter registration; and **3)** changing federal housing regulations to make it easier for homeless individuals to secure public housing. (This example includes three goals, but it’s absolutely okay to have on just one!)

If you spend time learning about an issue—and its champions and critics—you can enter the policy arena with a clear picture of what’s possible and what you’d like to achieve.

Whether you have one policy goal or 20, make sure they are all **SMART**:

- **Specific** – the more detail about what you want to do, when, where, and with whom, the better!
- **Measurable** – how will you know when you can declare victory?
- **Achievable** – is now the right time and can you really accomplish your goal?
- **Relevant** – make sure it’s about policy, not other issues (like fundraising).
- **Timed** – How long will it take? (Often, it’s years.) What legislative or other calendars should you take into account?

Need help? **Contact ACS** to learn more about how your organization can create a public policy agenda and put it into action. And remember, a policy agenda is a great tool for strengthening your advocacy work, but should only be one part of a bigger Public Policy Plan. You can also review ACS’ new Public Policy Plan tools, **Identifying Public Policy Engagement as a Strategic Priority** and **Creating a Public Policy Plan** to support your agenda.



Direct Advocacy: Direct Results – Best Practices from the Field

Few things feel as good as a policy “win” that comes from your direct advocacy or lobbying efforts—that is, your conversations with policymakers and their staff to further your cause. Getting—and keeping—a policymaker’s attention isn’t easy. Doing so with multiple policymakers is even harder. But at ACS, we’ve made building relationships with policymakers a cornerstone of our work. As a result, we’ve delivered a number of wins for our clients in 2019. How? By honing and incorporating several direct policy best practices.

Advocacy is an umbrella term, and involves identifying, embracing and promoting a cause. Filling the airwaves with messages broadly supporting public education without targeting an elected official or a specific bill is a form of advocacy. So is educating elected officials about the importance of an issue in general (such as health care), offering training on how to engage in the advocacy process, conducting and sharing research, inviting a legislator to see and tour your organization, and working with the media. Every nonprofit can engage in each of these kinds of advocacy.

Lobbying is a specifically focused form of advocacy, with the purpose to influence legislation. Asking elected officials to support a specific bill about public education is lobbying. So is meeting with those representatives directly to request their support a pending piece of legislation. Nonprofit lobbying activities are defined and guided by IRS rules.

Learn more about the differences between Advocacy and Lobbying [here](#).



Building Long-Term Relationships

Working with policymakers is never a one-and-done situation. As with any relationship, you have to earn trust before you can begin to influence thinking and behavior. That's why our client, **PRE4CLE**, created close relationships with local, state, and federal policymakers right out of the gate. Our initial two-year strategic communication plan for this organization included an advocacy strategy with regular and ongoing outreach and engagement, as well as constant sharing of reliable research and information about the importance of and return on investments in Pre-K. This included providing the resources and grassroots support that elected policymakers needed to make Pre-K a priority in their platforms.



This relationship building paid off at the state level in 2019, as the new Governor of Ohio dedicated nearly \$200 million to increasing rates for publically funded child care providers statewide. The Ohio General Assembly also added \$10 million in “Quality Infrastructure Improvement Grants” to satisfy one-time needs for child care programs to become quality-rated to meet Ohio’s statutory mandate that publically funded providers be rated at least 1-star in Ohio’s quality rating and improvement system, Step Up to Quality, by July 1, 2020.

Creating Partnerships

The Ohio 8 Coalition, which includes school superintendents and teacher union leaders from the state’s eight urban districts, has become a powerful advocacy engine for public schools in its own right. During the past few years, we’ve helped this organization expand its influence by creating several new—and sometimes unlikely—partnerships with other organizations that share The Ohio 8’s commitment to students.

In 2018-19, The Ohio 8 Coalition worked with the Ohio Excels business coalition, Ohio Alliance for High Quality Education (60-school district coalition) and the Fordham Institute (conservative American non-profit education think tank) to help shape state policy around high school graduation requirements, ultimately securing a new law that moves away from “all-or-nothing” graduation testing requirements and providing other ways in which students can demonstrate competency.





The Ohio 8 Coalition also joined forces with the Ohio Mid-Sized Urban Districts [Leadership Collaborative](#) and the Alliance for High Quality Education, and [The First Ring School Collaborative](#) to create alternative ideas to the state's Academic Distress Commissions (ADC), which were charged with turning around low-per-

forming school districts, but are falling short of that goal. Together, The Ohio 8 Coalition and others suggested that the General Assembly place a moratorium on ADCs and create a long-term policy solution that outlines a path forward for schools that are currently in the ADC or on the cusp of falling into it. The moratorium passed, and the long-term process of study is still under consideration.

“The fact that The Ohio 8 Coalition created these new relationships has given all those involved a new center of power that we believe the General Assembly and other stakeholders will listen to,” says ACS Senior Strategist Nikki Reiss, “When different groups come together in partnership and present a united voice, policymakers tend to take notice.”

The Ohio 8 Coalition also saw a policy win on its own, thanks to years of relationship building. When lawmakers were considering a proposal to change the state's school funding formula, The Ohio 8 Coalition was one of the first groups they asked to review and comment. As a result, the proposed formula for calculating high-poverty areas was modified to better align with the realities of urban tax collection and costs for hiring teachers. In addition, the governor proposed adding \$550 million to the biennial budget for wraparound services, and the General Assembly added an additional \$125 million to that original proposal, resulting in \$675 million in the final biennial budget for wraparound services for students and families—something for which The Ohio 8 Coalition had been advocating for years.

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Leveraging the Grassroots

Although advocating directly to policymakers can be effective, you often need to activate grassroots constituencies to push a policy measure over the finish line.

For example, ACS has worked with [First Year Cleveland \(FYC\)](#) to advocate for state policies aimed at reducing infant mortality. Like other ACS clients, FYC has focused its efforts on building long-term relationships with policymakers and on becoming a trusted resource for information for new legislative leadership. In the Ohio House of Representatives, these efforts have paid off handsomely, with infant mortality being named by the Speaker of the House as a top priority. ACS helped draft language for House Bill 11 to provide additional funding for group prenatal programs, dental cleanings for pregnant women, certain tobacco cessation programs under Medicaid, and lead abatement awareness and education. The bill was introduced in the House with bi-partisan support and moved through the committee process quickly. ACS and FYC partners testified in support of the measure and passed the house by an overwhelming margin.

First Year Cleveland:

While the win in the House was a success, now the bill faces the Ohio Senate. To help secure passage, ACS and FYC are activating the grassroots engine.

“Policymakers have many demands on their time, but when local constituents are able to share their expertise and how a new policy will directly affect the work being done in their neighborhood, it makes an impact,” says Reiss. “When they’re hearing that same message from multiple constituents, they are much more likely to support the cause.”

For the remainder of the 2019 legislative session, ACS and FYC will ensure that policymakers hear a consistent, cohesive message from those they represent, making it clear that maternal and child health is a priority for Ohio.





Want more?

Want to learn how communication, strategy development or advocacy can move your organization forward? Need an expert for training sessions or conference presentations?

Contact one of our team members, call toll free at **1-877-372-0166** or visit our [website](#).

[Lori McClung](#), CEO

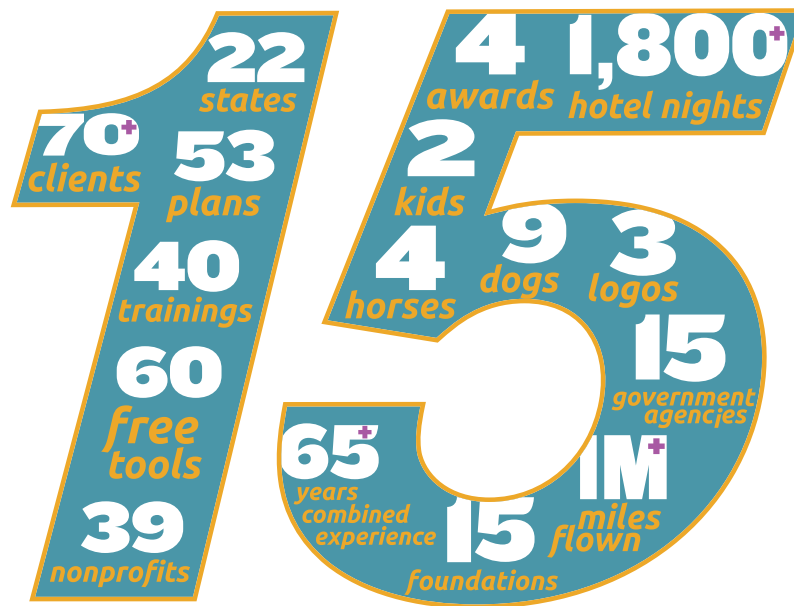
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What does 15 years look like?



...and countless lives improved!

