



TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

There are Many Ways to Engage in Grassroots Advocacy

- Write a letter-the-editor (LTE)
- Make a phone call or send an email about a policy issue, bill, or budget item
- Write a letter to your elected officials
- Visit your elected official(s) in person
- Organize or attend rallies/media events
- Lobby day
- Attend a committee meeting of the Virginia General Assembly
- Schedule an in-person meeting with your legislator
 - Best time is when the legislators are NOT in session because they have more time to spend with you!
 - But **DO** go during the session (stop by your legislators' offices even if you don't have a set appointment).
 - The Legislative Aide (LA) is just as important as the legislator! Do not feel cheated if you have to meet with the LA. They are the eyes and ears for the legislator.

Do's and Don'ts of Effective Advocacy

DON'T

- Be confrontational, berate, or yell
- Threaten
- Get off the subject or ramble on...and on...and on...
- Guess or make up data
- Say "this was a waste of my time"
- Blow off a Legislative Aide or other staffer because they are often the eyes & ears
- Talk about how bad they are while at the capitol
- Write a letter to the editor saying how awful they are

DO

- Be positive and friendly
- Be BRIEF and concise; limit the number of issues
- Use fact sheets (leave one behind)

- Give reliable information
- Say “I don’t know” if you don’t know...then offer to find out!
- Be clear about your position (“I support because/I oppose because”)
- Thank them for their time
- Wait until you’re in the car to complain
- Write a thank you letter when you get home

The effective advocate strikes a balance between the “emotional” and the fact-driven appeal. Too much emotion can be a turnoff to legislators and can undermine your message. On the other hand, an overemphasis on data and statistics lacks the personal touch. Try to strike a balance to be the most effective.

In-Person Meetings with Elected Officials

How

- Get a small group together (no more than 4 unless it is a more formal event)
- Plan! Decide ahead of time what your main message will be. Pick no more than 2 items to focus on.
- Preferably all of the people will be from the legislator’s district.
- Call the office and ask to schedule the appointment.
- Explain what you’d like to meet about.

When

- The best time is OFF session. But **DO** go DURING the legislative session, even if you only get 3 minutes, and even if you can’t get an appointment ahead of time. Sometimes you will just need to stop by and wait until the legislator or the legislative aide has time.
- Call early for an appointment. You may have to wait a few weeks.
- Be as flexible as possible with your schedule

Where Will the Meeting Be?

- His/her place of employment
- His/her district office
- Your house
- Restaurant
- If it is during the session, it will be in his/her office at the General Assembly Building in Richmond.

Agenda

- Introduction yourself.
- Describe problem or issue
- Tell personal story. Remember the three keys to successful personal-storytelling:
 - Keep it short (hard as that may be)

- Have a point
- Tie it to a solution or your position (“That’s why I’m asking you to please support XYZ”)
- Offer solutions
- Talk about what is happening in their district and why they should care about the issue
- Ask for their position
- **Thank him/her – no matter what!**

Remember...

- Be succinct – you may only have 15 – 20 minutes!
- Be on time
- Know what committee(s) he or she is on. Look it up beforehand.
- Refer to legislator as “Delegate/Senator ____ Last Name ____”.

GENERAL TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

- Spend time developing relationships with the legislative aides and other key staff members.
- Don’t be offended if a legislator is unable to meet with you and requests that you meet with his/her aide or staff instead. Meeting with the legislative staff can be just as valuable as meeting directly with the legislator.
- Don’t overload a personal visit or phone call with too many issues. One or two topics per contact are appropriate.
- Be courteous, remember names and thank those who help you, both in person and with a follow up note.
- Your word is your bond. Maintain your integrity.
- Never lie or exaggerate your cause.
- Use accurate fact sheets and talking points to explain your position on an issue or proposed policy/law.
- Admit when you don’t know the answer. However, always offer to find the answer and get the information to them. Follow through!
- Don’t make promises you can’t deliver.
- Spend time with legislators even if their position differs from yours. You may be able to lessen the intensity of his/her opposition and perhaps change the legislator’s view of an issue.
- Don’t threaten, pressure, attack or beg a legislator to get a vote.
- Remember, today’s opponent may be tomorrow’s ally.
- Look for friends everywhere. In politics, a friend is someone willing to work with you on an issue regardless of party affiliation or liberal or conservative viewpoint. The person may disagree with you on every other issue.

- Know your allies, inside and outside the field. Use them as a way to broaden your base of support by letting your legislator know the other agencies that are supportive, both in the district and throughout the state.
- Become familiar with the legislative process in Virginia, i.e. how a bill becomes a law, etc.
- Don't expect them to know everything. Legislators in Virginia deal with approximately 2,500-3,000 bills per session. They cannot know everything.