How to be a Grassroots Advocate

The following is modified from The Early Years Advocacy Groups Advocacy Toolkit, developed with participation from CT Parent Power by the CT Early Childhood Alliance.

Part 1: Getting Started

**How to Advocate**

Advocacy is one of the ways citizens support issues they care about most. Elected officials and candidates base their political decisions on a variety of factors: party politics, personal experience, special interest groups, advocacy organizations, media coverage, party leadership, campaign donors, and, most importantly, the people. If concerned citizens speak to their elected officials about the issues they care about, their representatives will be more inclined to make decisions in favor of those issues.

Advocacy is most effective when it is well-planned and ongoing. If you’re just starting to advocate, consider getting involved with an existing organization that already conducts advocacy and outreach on your issue. Do your research by asking friends and colleagues and searching the internet. Many advocacy organizations hold annual lobby days at the state capitol to highlight their issues to legislators. If you are comfortable advocating as an individual, establish initial contact through a meeting and work to communicate regularly with your public officials through additional visits, phone calls, and letters year-round. You want your elected representatives to use you as a resource as they make decisions on your issue, so consider each contact you have with them as a step toward developing a working relationship. Don’t be intimidated by their title; remember, they were elected into their office to serve the needs of the people. That’s you!

As you continue to connect with your representatives, invite others from around the community to join you. Building a sustained, active base of advocates is the most effective way to get what you want out of government.

There is no exact right or wrong way to participate in grassroots advocacy. The key is to let policy-makers know what their constituents and voters think about an issue. The most important thing is to build an on-going relationship with policy makers, especially the ones who represent you and are likely to support your issue.

**Know Who Represents You**

Elected officials shape policies that affect many aspects of our lives, so it’s important to know who they are, from members of your local school board to the US Congress. Many organizations provide lists of local elected officials on their website, searchable by address. One to start with is [www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov). A Google search will reveal many more resources, some specific to your state.

It’s worth knowing the names of every elected official representing your area from local boards and commissions to your state’s governor and state and federal lawmakers.
Part 2: Making the Case

Tell Your Story

Think about which arguments will make the most impact on a particular legislator. Narrow the information down to three or four key points that accurately and thoroughly express what you want your elected official to understand about your issue.

In addition to using key messages, it’s helpful to begin from your personal experience: how has or will your family be directly impacted from the program/policy? Then, broaden your scope and ask other advocates how the program/policy has impacted them. Finally, draw on any available research that helps you make your case. But mainly, tell your story. Laws are made by and for everyday people.

Part 3: Take Action

YOU are a Grassroots Advocate

A grassroots advocate is someone who cares enough about an issue to speak up about it. The point of grassroots advocacy is to demonstrate to policy-makers that particular issues have deep support in their home districts, with voters, employees and community members. A grassroots advocate is anyone who has an interest in the issue. A grassroots advocate is you.

There is no exact right or wrong way to participate in grassroots advocacy. Strategies vary by organization, region and issue. The key is to let policy-makers know what their constituents and voters think about an issue. The most important thing is to build an on-going relationship with policy makers, especially the ones who represent you.

When selecting tactics for grassroots contact with policy makers, follow the principle that the more personal the grassroots contact, the lower the number of grassroots volunteers needed to make contact. Conversely, the less personal the contact, the more grassroots volunteers are needed to make an impact. For example, a generic postcard campaign in which volunteer advocates simply stamp and sign a preprinted message and mail it to their legislator will be recognized as generic and orchestrated. Therefore, you will need to generate a very high number of them to get on a policy maker’s “radar screen.” Conversely, a personal visit in a legislator’s home district with five constituents who tell their personal story about the issue has very high impact, and requires fewer grassroots advocates.

Consider the Grassroots Contact Pyramid*, as a guide:

Highly personal tactics --> Small number of people needed to have impact
(visits, handwritten grassroots advocates personal letters, etc.)

Less personal tactics ----> High number of people needed to have impact
(petitions, Day at the grassroots advocates Capitol, etc.)

* The Grassroots Contact Pyramid was created by Grassroots Solutions, Inc. (www.grassrootssolutions.com)
Grassroots Advocacy Strategies

Grassroots advocacy relies on certain skills and strategies that are used in a systematic way. It is not enough to get people who agree about an issue together to talk about that issue: grassroots advocacy requires action that produces concrete results. This section gives you tools for how you can work to make your grassroots action more successful.

The goal of grassroots advocacy is to build an ongoing relationship with the elected officials who represent you. Policy-makers are just like the rest of us; when they have a personal relationship with someone, they rely on that person’s opinion and judgment to help them understand policy issues and choose the best policy options. There are several good ways to build an on-going relationship with policy-makers, including:

- **Meetings:** A group meeting with your legislator or other elected officials is the most effective way to communicate your message. Whether it’s held in someone’s home, at a program’s site, at the Capitol, or at a neutral setting, a meeting with your representative or a member of her staff is a chance to connect on a personal level and should help you and your official gain knowledge about the other’s perspective.

- **Phone calls:** Phone calls are best utilized when you want to let your elected representatives know whether you support a piece of legislation or to have a one-on-one conversation. It also allows you to connect more with the office staff, who are key allies when working with elected officials.

- **Email:** Email is probably the least time-consuming method to deliver your message, but it is the least personal and, therefore, a less effective way to connect with public officials. The same is true of the “click-and-send” electronic postcards available on some organizational websites.

- **Letters:** Letters provide much of the fuel that powers the legislative process. A stack of mail relating to a particular issue, especially if the letter is handwritten, is very influential with a policy-maker, so if possible, send letters regularly and in mass.

- **Media:** Media attention is a great way to get noticed by both elected officials and the community. Your representatives and their staff monitor hometown newspapers, so any mention of a program in a letter to the editor, an editorial, a featured article, or in photos can be clipped and sent to your official’s office.

- **Elections:** Connecting with candidates for public office and participating in elections – by getting involved in your party’s precinct caucus, attending candidate events and voting – are all important ways of influencing policy decisions. Get involved early and often.

Ready to take your advocacy to the next level? Consider running for a board or commission in your school district, your county, or at the state level!