

Section 6:

Leading

An Advocacy Event

Mobilization and Activation: Getting Ready to Advocate

Congratulations. If your group is meeting regularly, you're past the hardest part of building a volunteer advocate network. Now you can plan and carry out your own advocacy activities.

As the coordinator of an advocacy activity, it'll be your job to do two things: **give people the opportunity to speak up**, and **help them be the best advocates they can be**. This next section will lay out a few of the basic keys to successfully mobilizing and engaging low-income volunteers in advocacy. At the end of the section, there's a list of resources that can help you with some of the more complex aspects of organizing a campaign. Please note that this Section 1s not intended to explain mobilization and activation completely, but it should give you an introduction into how you committee can engage in a campaign during its first few meetings.

Giving volunteers an opportunity: Planning and Mobilizing

Making the Choice. In planning an advocacy event or campaign, the first thing you'll want to do is make a decision on what to advocate on. A facilitated discussion can bring out each member's priorities. From there, you may move to have the group decide what its priorities should be, if you believe the group is ready.

After you've agreed on your top priority, you're next step is to plan an advocacy campaign. Planning an advocacy activity or campaign may also require guidance from a manual like [Organizing for Social](#)

[Change](#). See the references at the end of this section for some worksheets that could help you through the process.

Outsource Your Planning. When you're just starting out, the easiest, if not best, way to decide what to do and plan a campaign is to have someone else do it for you. Latch on to a campaign that's already underway. Your organization may also have

The Butter Myth: A Lesson in Advocacy

(Note: There are many interpretations of this story in the advocacy community, but I think this version is most instructive. I think I heard this version from Ed Cooney, the director of the Congressional Hunger Center.)

A Junior Senator is at his first big Washington dinner. A waiter is passing out butter to all the guests, and the Senator asks for an extra pad.

The waiter refuses to give him any more butter. "1 per guest," he says. The Senator is indignant. "But you don't understand. I'm a United States Senator," he says.

To which the waiter replies: "No, you don't understand. I'm the guy who gives out the butter. And you get what everyone else does."

The Senator never received the butter he wanted. The lesson of the story is, it doesn't matter who you are: if you want to get what you want, you have to know a) *who best to ask* and b) *how best to ask*. An advocate has to know both of these things to be successful.

activities or a campaign planned for the group. If you're located in Oregon, Oregon Food Bank in Portland has a permanent staff of three professional advocates whose job it is to constantly run some campaign- they'll have ideas for you.

Mobilization

Here are some tips on how to make sure that volunteers attend an advocacy event.

Mobilize at your meeting. A great opportunity to mobilize is at a meeting. As you know, that's the whole point of giving an "advocacy alert" or a "legislative update."

Mobilize through your communication structure. Always support the mobilization you've done at a meeting with your communication structure. Send out emails about an advocacy event. Make calls to likely volunteers. You may want to purchase the program CapWHIZ, which makes it very easy for people to email or write their representatives.

What do I say? In your advocacy pitch, try to be **brief** and **engaging**. You have about 30 seconds to get somebody's attention. If you lose them in the beginning, you may not get their attention back, so get to the point quickly. A mobilization material that's too "wordy" may turn people off right off the bat. Keep your wording to a minimum, and make the material eye-catching with pictures, frames, and different font sizes, etc.

Furthermore, everybody engages in advocacy for different reasons. *Focus your material on the **impact** participation will make, or the moral reasons why you should participate.* If you single out a few reasons, you may miss people who would participate for other reasons.

Ensuring engagement. As with all volunteer advocacy, you can't be sure that everyone will show up to an event. Some volunteers may not have reliable transportation, or they may have a hectic, unpredictable schedule to deal with. **You will probably want to give some people a**

ride, especially if you're traveling a large distance.

And you have to be persistent. **Call them again and again and again.** Call them the day of the event. Call them the day before. You may alienate some more sensitive volunteers, but most people like the attention. It shows that you really do care about their participation.

Advocating:

Some Tips

Most of the advocacy a volunteer does revolves around their experiences. A volunteer's story will serve as the basis of testimony, writing a letter, talking to the media, and when meeting with a legislator. Your job will be to help them shape those experiences into a good story, and to make sure that every story asks for a change of some sort.

Shaping a Story. First, check for literacy and disability. Some volunteers could have difficulty with seeing, reading or writing. Then ask the volunteer to type up what they want to say. Ask them to do it in their voice, and if possible, to make a request of the person they'll be taking to.

Next, after they've given you the story, **edit** it. Try to make it pretty short and snappy- cut out irrelevant information and boil down the story to its essential elements.

Find what's compelling in the story- what's emotionally moving, or what's new and interesting. Some compelling things are the struggle that a volunteer has gone through, or the impact a policy has had on them or their children. Make that compelling aspect stand out.

Furthermore, try to make the story both universal and unique. Keep the story

unique; it should have a human face. But make it illustrate a larger problem in the community. This may be hard to do. When people get in crisis mode, it's hard for them to think about other people. Try your best, but there's only so much you can do.

Then, add anything they left out. Sometimes, it's good to add something about how the volunteer doesn't like getting help, but has to. Some advocates speak more about their problem than what they want changed- the "ask." **It's your job to make sure that they ask for a policy change of some sort.** What you ask for should be specific and obtainable. If many advocates are speaking to legislators, it helps if everyone is asking for the same specific policy change, though not completely necessary.

Send your changes back to the volunteer advocate. Explain why you made the more significant ones, preferably over the phone. They may not accept everything you suggested, but most likely, you'll have made an impact. If an advocate doesn't accept your changes, ask them if they'd like to testify how they'd like to, and submit your version in writing. Find a suitable middle ground. And it will get easier with time. As advocates gain more experience, they'll be able to tell their stories better.

Stories in Action: Testifying and Visiting a Legislator. Testifying in front of a committee of powerful, often hostile, people is hard no matter what your income is. Even talking to your legislator is hard. In fact, some people may not want to testify- ask them if they'd be willing to submit something in writing instead, which most committees accept.

Try to **rehearse** the speech or testimony with the volunteer. Coach them on proper attire and formalities. Give them constructive suggestions on how to improve their body language or speaking. Try to anticipate the questions they might be asked, and work on possible answers. Let them know to not be afraid to be rude. Sometimes, that's the only way to have your voice heard. Otherwise, it's best to be respectful and polite.

As a volunteer is answering question, there's a chance they might veer off topic, or "off message." That's not entirely a bad thing. Speaking off the cuff seems more credible than a scripted speech. **More importantly, a volunteer doesn't need to sound professional- one of their greatest assets is that they aren't professionals.** You may want to discourage off-topic discussions, but there's no need to be too strict about it.

Also, let them know that **it's ok to say "I don't know."** You don't have to answer every question. You could even say "That's a really good question. I'll get back to you on that." An unanswered question may give the volunteer an opportunity to follow up with the official, which could build strong relationships.

Support them every step of the way. Give them a pep talk right before the meeting, and lay the praise on thick afterwards. Be their cheerleader. If they seemed really nervous, you might say "Sounds like you had a hard time. I'd feel the same way." However, if someone gave damaging testimony, you should let them know that you were disappointed. Sometimes, if an advocate says too much of the wrong thing, you may have to forget about having them testify again. Don't be

afraid to set some boundaries. After all, it's your organization's money and time that's supporting what they're doing.

Finally, never set anyone up for failure. Make sure that they'll be speaking to people who'll listen to them, and not try to score political points by saying hurtful things to them.

Writing letters and calling. It's much easier to write letters or call, so it might be a good activity to start off with. Check out one of the resources listed in this section for guides on this subject.

Support/Follow-Up. Make sure that you follow up with an advocate after they've completed an activity. Ask them how it went, and if they enjoyed it, or whatever else you'd like to know. Giving them individual attention shows that you cared that they participated. They should know that your values their participation

Also, make sure to reward people when they make an extra effort. Gift cards seem to work very well. Even if somebody just submitted written testimony, they probably deserve a gift card.

Finding the right role for an advocate. Some people might not be comfortable speaking in front of a large group of people. Or they may not have enough time to participate in an involved advocacy activity. It'll be your job to try to plug them in somehow if they're interested in advocacy. You may have to get creative.

Submitting written testimony is a good option. You can sometimes read testimony to public officials on behalf of a volunteer. You can almost always submit a written copy of a testimonial to whoever is recording the event. Or you can have the volunteer write a letter.

Mobilization and Engagement Resources

Regional Organizations

Our Oregon. A great resource for mobilization and engagement materials. www.ouregon.org.

Rural Organizing Project. An Oregon organizing project. www.rop.org.

Western States Center. A resource and training center for the western U.S. based in Portland, Oregon. www.westernstatescenter.org.

Children's Alliance. Based in Washington State, an advocacy group that offers many useful resources. www.childrensalliance.org.

National

NP Action. A website hosted by OMB Watch that posts great resources on nonprofit advocacy. www.npaction.org.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. A Washington DC-based think-tank that provides great information and strategies on state and federal poverty issues. www.cbpp.org.

Food Resource Action Center. A Washington D.C. think tank that provides information on state and federal anti-hunger issues. www.frac.org.

So You Want to Make A Difference: Advocacy is the Key by Nancy Amidei. A very helpful guide to all things advocacy. Available at www.ombwatch.org.

Midwest Academy. An anti-poverty advocacy institute. www.midwestacademy.com.

Media tips for Volunteer Advocates

We all love hearing stories. Stories draw us in, help us get our arms around a big problem and visualize an issue, help us understand it in concrete terms, make us laugh, make us cry and move us to action.

One of the most effective ways for an agency to convey its message to the public is through stories told by people who have experienced hunger and poverty. It's one thing to hear that hunger, for example, is a huge issue. But it's much easier to believe the problem is real when you hear a mother tell her story about her daily struggles to feed her family.

Often, when you go to the media to convey a message, the reporter will ask you to find an individual or family who exemplifies the problem and is willing to tell his or her story.

What you need to know about the news media

If you decide to ask volunteer advocates to help you tell their stories to the media, there are some important things you and your advocates need to know about the media:

- *News is news because it is new, has conflict, is unusual, tells a human story or affects a large number of people in the community. "An elephant on the playground will always make the news."*
- Some news days are filled with "breaking news" (for example, a jet crashes into a neighborhood), and a reporter or editor will have no time for you at all. Some news days are slow with little breaking news, which means you may get a longer story than anticipated. *News is relative.*
- *Reporters work on a short timeline.* They work on many stories a day and must work very, very quickly. An hour to find a family may seem very short to you, but an hour is actually a very long time for a reporter. Reporters' timelines may seem totally unreasonable to you, but that is the nature of their job.
- News priorities change throughout the day. It's not unusual for a reporter to set up an interview and then cancel because of a major breaking story. It's also not unusual for a story that has already been prepared for broadcast to get "bumped" for another story. The bottom line is that there are no guarantees in the news business. *No reporter can promise you a story and guarantee it will air.*
- Don't expect reporters to know your issues. Most reporters are generalists. *It's your job to explain the issue, briefly, succinctly, accurately, clearly so reporters get it right.* Stay focused. Stay on message. Repeat your essential message at least three times.

- It's unethical for a reporter to show you a story before publication. But give the reporters your phone number and tell them to call you to check facts or to ask additional questions.
- Thank the reporter for helping readers understand an important issue. Avoid complaining about tiny errors. Save your complaints for big errors.

How to prepare volunteer advocates for a media interview

- Talk to the public relations professional in your organization in advance. If your organization has a public relations professional, work closely with him or her. It is his or her job to contact the news media. Public Relations professionals have spent years working with demanding reporters and editors have lots of experience and can give you good advice.
- Talk to your volunteer advocate in advance.
 - Is the volunteer advocate willing to tell his or her story?
 - Does the volunteer advocate understand your message?
 - Does the volunteer advocate agree with your message?
 - Is the volunteer advocate a believable spokesperson?
- Put "the portrait" in "the frame." In other words, make sure you add context to the story.

When people hear stories about an individual's problems, they may "blame" an individual for his or her situation. But you want people hearing the story to understand that *the system, not the person*, is to blame. "Bad things happen to good people"

When people hear stories about an individual's problems, they may want to write a check to the individual or offer the individual a job. That's great. But you may want people to write letters to their Congressman, write a check to your organization or respond in other ways.

The important thing is to put the "portrait" (an individual's story) in "the frame" (context of the issue).

For example, "Mary tells a moving story. But she is not alone. She is one of millions of people who work hard at low-wage jobs with no retirement benefits or no healthcare coverage. We have a system that has disenfranchised millions of hard-working people who are doing all the right things but still can't make it. That's why we need this program that I'm describing."

- Protect your volunteer advocate
 - Add context (see above)

- Find out if the volunteer advocate's situation really is an example of the message you are trying to convey. (i.e. It not only wastes the time of the advocate and the reporter if the reporter, but it also undercuts your argument if the reporter later learns, for example, that the advocate makes too much to be affected by the budget cut you are trying to fight.)
- Find out if the volunteer advocate has a criminal record, a child custody issue or anything that would hurt the volunteer advocate or your agency if that information becomes part of the news story.
- Prepare your volunteer advocates
 - Give them a list of questions that a reporter might likely ask
 - Make sure they know that reporters may ask probing questions
 - Let them know that they have the right to decline to answer a question.
 - "I'm not the expert on that." "I can't answer that question, but I will find out who can answer that for you." "That question is just too personal, but what I can tell you is ... that money was very tight during that time."
 - Have them practice telling their story to you.
 - Make sure they have realistic expectations and that they understand that a reporter can't guarantee when a story run or if it will air or be published at all.

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