



Statewide Parent
Advocacy Network

35 Halsey Street 4th Floor
Newark, NJ 07102
(973) 642-8100
(973) 642-8080 - Fax
E-Mail address: span@spannj.org
Website: www.spannj.org

Empowered Parents: Educated, Engaged, Effective!

PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY: A GRASSROOTS GUIDE



Excerpted from
A Grassroots Guide to Public Policy Advocacy

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Our Mission: To empower families and inform and involve professionals and other individuals interested in the healthy development and educational rights of children, to enable all children to become fully participating and contributing members of our communities and society.

Introduction: Why this Guide?

We are at a sad place in our nation's history. "Advocacy" is a dirty word. "Advocates" are "special interest groups." (Somehow, CEOs and lobbyists for corporations and the wealthy escape this negative definition). Political involvement of average citizens is falling. We even have the lowest voter turnout in the world.

But you are reading this guide because you want to make a difference. You know that democracy is not a spectator sport. You want to change things for the better. You know that you can't score points – or make change – by sitting on the sidelines.

We wrote this guide to help you use the skills you already have to change government actions that affect your life. As an individual, you may wonder what you can do to change things. As a grassroots group, you may think that the deck is stacked against you. There are many things that may stand in your way. There are people and organizations that oppose justice. There are elected officials who listen to money instead of their constituents. But this guide, and the companion Guide to Media Advocacy, can help.

You may ask, "There are so many things that need to be changed. Where do I start? I'm just one person, or a member of one small group. How can I make anything happen?" It's important for you to become familiar with the critical advocacy steps that lead to the changes you want, and help you build a larger network of people who will share the burden- and joys! - of advocacy with you. That's the purpose of this guide: *to help you strengthen your individual and group capacity to engage in effective public policy advocacy to make our society more just.*

In our work, we are always guided by the words of Margaret Mead. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Small groups of committed individuals succeeded in passing the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Small groups of committed individuals got the vote for women. Small groups of committed individuals established Social Security, public schools, and labor rights. Your small group of committed individuals can make a big difference! *(See Appendix A for Selected List of Reference Organizations and Publications on Advocacy Issues.)*

Chapter I: What is Advocacy?

Webster's New World Dictionary defines "advocacy" as advocating, speaking, or writing in support of something. An "advocate" is a person who speaks or writes in support of something. Under this definition, we are all advocates. Our child advocates for a later bedtime. We advocate with a neighbor to quiet their dog so we can sleep.

Our every-day advocacy often changes over time. We ask our neighbor politely to quiet their dog. If they don't, we might write them a letter. If that doesn't work, we might call or write the landlord. If we still don't get results, we might call the police, moving up the "chain of command."

Public policy advocacy works on the same principles. In public policy advocacy, we use a *variety of organized tactics to achieve our goal*. If we aren't satisfied by the answer we get at the first step, we move up the chain of command until we reach the person or institution that has the final say. In public policy advocacy, we aren't asking for a change to just benefit our family or ourselves. Instead, we are asking for a change that will improve the lives of many people, including people that we will never meet.

Characteristics of Public Policy Advocacy

Public policy advocacy has several important characteristics.

- Advocacy *asks something* of others – individuals, groups, or institutions.
- Advocacy *puts the demands of people* into political and policy systems.
- Advocacy *deals with issues and conflicts* that might otherwise be ignored.
- Advocacy *involves people* who have an interest in a government decision.
- Advocacy *creates a space* for public argument and discussion.
- Advocacy *finds solutions* to problems.

Focus for Public Policy Advocacy

Three branches of government set public policy in the United States. The *legislature* (the U.S. Congress, State legislatures, City Councils, etc.) passes laws. The *Executive Branch* signs legislation into law (President, Governor, Mayor) and administers or enforces laws (departments, agencies, commissions, Boards). The *judiciary* (courts) interprets the laws and makes sure they are consistent with the United States and state constitutions. Depending on our goal, the focus of our advocacy will change. But the tools we use will often be the same.

Chapter 2. An Advocacy Overview

This guide is about *social justice advocacy* - making changes that improve the lives of people who are unfairly treated in our society. Social justice advocates are not like lobbyists for corporations, who act solely out of self-interest. Social justice advocates work toward a *vision of a just and decent society for all people*. We see firsthand the direct impact that unjust policies have on our communities, and why. We see that our stories, experiences, and ideas are not usually part of the public conversation about public policy. So we use numbers, analysis, experience, interviews and information from our communities to tell the untold story. We use these stories to influence public attitudes that have been shaped by a society that is not about justice. We don't just complain about the way things are, we also offer workable solutions.

But we aren't naïve. We know that social change doesn't happen just because it's right. Our arguments for change must be both compelling on the merits and have the political punch to support our demands. We organize our advocacy strategies to take into account power relationships – who has the power? how can they be pressured or persuaded to act in a more just way? We use the *instruments of democracy* – elections, lobbying, mobilizing, organizing, civil disobedience, negotiating, bargaining, and litigation – to reveal and influence issues that are too often ignored or misrepresented. Our sources of power in these battles are our persistence, our people, our creativity, our hands-on knowledge, and the emotional pull of our stories.

Social justice advocacy is also about making sure that the people who are directly affected by an issue are part of the process of change. Social justice advocates strive to reflect the kind of society we are working for. We draw our strength from and are accountable to our members, constituencies, and affected groups. We work to gain access and voice for affected groups in powerful institutions, challenging the power of those institutions. And we are willing to take the risks – physical, emotional, psychological, economic, political, and/or organizational - that challenging power entails. At the same time, we take steps to assure that we – ourselves, our organizations, our members, and our constituents – are supported as much as possible.

Finally, we hold ourselves to high standards. Are we changing the public debate? Are we bringing new voices in? Do our solutions work? Are we improving people's lives? Are systems becoming more just and accountable? If not, what else must we change?

[Adapted from Critical Lessons Learned in Social Justice Advocacy, by David Cohen, Director of the Advocacy Institute]

Chapter 3. Vision, Mission, and Goals

Every effective advocacy campaign starts with a shared *vision, mission, and goals*. Your *vision* is your picture of what the ideal situation would look like. For example, your vision may be that every family has decent housing, medical care, and employment. Of course, that is a long way off, and it doesn't tell you how to get there. Your *mission* is a summary of what you or your organization will do to make that vision a reality.

The **vision** of the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network of New Jersey (SPAN-NJ) is a world that maximizes the healthy development and education of every child, so that all children are fully participating and contributing members of our communities and society. The **mission** is to “empower families and inform and involve professionals and other individuals interested in the healthy development and education rights of children.”

You also need to decide on short- and long-term *goals and objectives*. *Goals* are significant steps toward reaching your vision. A *long-term goal* might be legislation guaranteeing universal healthcare, which could take years. A *shorter-term goal* might be to expand State Children's Health Insurance Programs (SCHIP) to include the parents of eligible children. A *very short-term goal* should be something that you can accomplish in the next three months. An example might be to increase the percentage of eligible children who are actually participating in the SCHIP program.

Your *objectives* are the means by which you will accomplish the goals. They are short-range, expected outcomes that are specific, measurable, achievable, and consistent with the goals. *Activities* or *action steps* are the actual concrete steps to be taken to carry out the objectives. Activities are tracked by *action plans*, which identify the resources, constraints, and timelines needed, as well as clear indicators of success by which the accomplishment of the activities can be measured. *Action steps* answer these questions: What is to be done? Who is responsible? When is it to be accomplished?

As you develop your *vision, mission, and goals*, you need to identify each level of the institutional system that is relevant to your advocacy effort, for example, federal, state, county and local. Look at your *priorities for change* in policies, practices, and resource allocations. What are the most critical and problematic current situations that need your attention? What are the desired changes that you most want to bring about?

Remember, effective advocacy campaigns don't just complain about existing problems. They also offer solutions. That's why a *vision and goals* are so important. They help people understand what they are working *for*, not just what they are fighting *against*.

Chapter 4. How Change Happens and Who Makes it Happen

The Stages of Change

In today's world, it is not enough to have a vision, goals, or even passion. You must also understand *how change happens* and *who makes it happen*.

As Frederick Douglas said, "Power concedes nothing without a *demand*. It never has and never will." The status quo is like a huge rock that will never be set in motion without a push. Once the demand for change has been made, powerful institutions typically go through a series of stages aimed at avoiding or minimizing change.

The first stage is usually *denial* of the need for change. "If I wait long enough, the demand for this change will go away."

The second stage is *resistance* to the change. Resistance can take many forms, but it usually includes attacking the people who are suggesting the change, and blaming the people who would benefit from the change for their own problems. "You must be a communist if you think the taxes of the wealthy should be given to the poor." "Poor people are lazy, and should just pull themselves up by their bootstraps."

The third stage only happens if enough pressure has been put on the decision-makers. *Exploration* involves asking questions about how to make change within the confines of existing government budgets; whether and how specific laws or regulations will need to be revised; and the best way to build wider public support for the change.

Policy-makers often also seek to *manage* the change. This can involve trying to limit the extent to which the change really affects the root causes of the problem(s). It can also mean trying to limit the structural changes that have to be made in affected government agencies (the number or roles of staff, etc.), the laws or regulations that will have to be rewritten, and/or the number of people who will be "adversely" affected by the change (for example, the number of people whose taxes will have to go up).

The final stage is *collaboration*, *compromise*, and *maintaining momentum*. Once you have persuaded the policy-makers that change is needed and inevitable, you work closely with them to help shape the new policy, rules, and structures. You may find yourself collaborating with the very people and institutions you were attacking at earlier stages of your campaign. This stage also involves *compromise*, which can be very difficult, especially when the end result is not as positive and far-reaching as your vision.

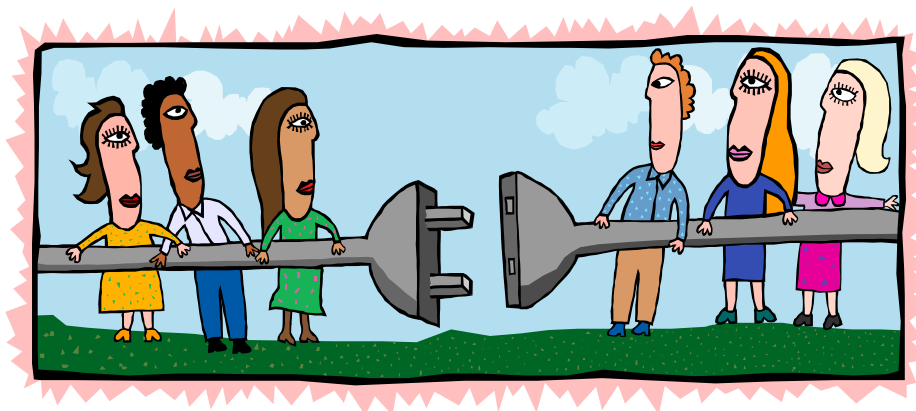
This is why it's so important that the final stage also focus on *maintaining momentum*. You may have won key concessions, and it's important to recognize the improvements that will be made. But it's also essential to keep an eye on the prize, to regroup, and to figure out what your next step is to keep you moving toward your vision. If you don't, you run the risk of losing everything you have accomplished as opposing advocates work to undermine or reverse the changes. *Effective advocates never rest on their laurels!*

Agents for Change

You are reading this guide because are interested in advocating for larger change that improves the lives of others. *You are a "change agent."* "Change agents" may:

- Advocate on an individual basis (i.e., go to a fair hearing for another recipient).
- Act as a catalyst for new ideas.
- Think about systems that affect poor people and how they fit and work together.
- Help others understand how change happens.
- Coordinate activities aimed at making change.
- Help others work as a team.
- Facilitate the sharing of information with decision-makers.

"Change agents" also *listen, learn, respond, advocate, pursue, intervene, team* and *facilitate*. You *listen* to your constituents, staff and administrators of government agencies, legislators and other policy makers, and other organizations and advocates. You *learn* about social, economic, political, historical, and other factors that affect individuals and groups because of their identity. You *respond* to important questions and needs. You *advocate* for constituent concerns. You *pursue* multiple channels for change. You *intervene* at the system level, not just in individual cases. You *team* with others interested in change. You *facilitate* needed discussions and actions. You help *build the consensus and momentum needed for change*.



Chapter 5. Implementing Advocacy Strategies

Advocacy can be aimed at the national, state, county, or local legislature; regulatory and administrative agencies; the courts; and the grassroots. Advocacy activities might include pressing for formal policy decisions by state agencies, lobbying for legislation, pressuring for regulations to interpret a law, filing formal complaints with government agencies, filing lawsuits, using investigative reports to dramatize problems, and mobilizing large numbers of people to rally, participate in a legislative day, march, call, or write decision-makers. Your organization needs to “make space” for people to be involved at all different levels, depending on their available time, expertise, and comfort level.

Which strategies you use will depend in part on the strength of your support. If you have a group of 50 committed members who will come with you, you probably don’t want to have a demonstration or a march through wide city streets. Your group will be overshadowed by the environment, and you will appear weak. However, a group of 50 people in a City Council chamber that seats 30 can leave a very powerful impression!

When you are thinking about how to influence public policy, it’s important to understand how public policy is set.

Passing a Law – The Legislative Branch

The first step is getting a law passed. The U.S. Congress, each state, and county and municipal bodies have their own specific legislative rules. The normal process starts with a legislator deciding to sponsor a bill, sometimes at the suggestion of a constituent, interest group, public official, or the Governor or President. The bill is then drafted and prepared in proper technical form. It’s important to influence this stage of the process, because the first draft of the bill usually sets the stage for legislative discussion. If you have been working with a legislator on an issue, and they have agreed to sponsor a bill, you may want to draft the bill yourself. Or you may ask the legislator to set up a meeting with the people who will be drafting the bill so you can share your ideas.

The bill is introduced in a house of the legislature; it may be referred to an appropriate committee for review. When scheduled by the chair, the committee considers the bill at a meeting open to the public. The committee may report the bill to the full legislative body as it is, with amendments, or by a substitute bill. If it’s not considered or “reported out,” the bill remains in committee. Because the committee chair often has a lot of power over what bills get considered, it’s important to meet with them about your position.

Most states have two legislative bodies, a State Senate and State House or Assembly. When a majority of the members of one legislative body approve the bill, it is sent to the other legislative body where it goes through the same process. If the second House amends the bill, it is returned to the first House for a vote on the changes. A bill receives final legislative approval when it passes both Houses in identical form.

In the U.S. Congress, when two bills that are not identical pass the Senate and the House of Representatives, a conference committee of appointed members of both houses works out a compromise bill, which is voted on by members of both houses.

Signing a Law – The Executive Branch

Once a law is passed by the legislative branch, it moves on to the executive (president, governor, county executive, mayor). The Governor may sign it, conditionally veto it (returning it for specific changes), or veto it absolutely. If vetoed, a bill may become law if the legislature overrides the veto by a super-majority vote of both houses.

Check out your state’s legislative website or talk to your legislator to find out exactly how a bill becomes a law in your state.

[Adapted from New Jersey Office of Legislative Services, How A Bill Becomes Law]

Regulations and Implementation – The Regulatory Branch

Once a law has been passed, it has to be interpreted and enforced by a government agency. For example, your state Department of Human Services may be responsible for implementing laws about child care for women transitioning from welfare to work. But the law, or statute, doesn’t always contain enough details. It is the result of a very political legislative process that requires vagueness to ensure passage. So it is left to the relevant “regulatory agency” to define in more detail what the law means and how it is going to be interpreted and enforced.

The legislation is sent to the head of the appropriate agency (for example, the Commissioner of Education). That person then sends it to the appropriate department or section. (Most agencies have more than one component). The head of that department or section then assigns a team or an individual to draft regulations to “flesh out” or define the legislation. This is another important opportunity to influence policy. You can draft and submit your own regulations, or you can ask the legislator who sponsored the legislation to request a meeting with the agency staff who will be drafting the regulations.

Most states have laws, sometimes called Administrative Procedure Acts, requiring an opportunity for public comment on draft regulations. By reading the Federal Register or your state register, you can keep track of when those public comment periods are. Many states require agencies to respond to suggestions or recommendations made by public commenters, including explaining why they did or did not accept the recommendation. It is important to read the agency responses to recommendations. They help you learn about the other organizations that are interested in this issue, and what they recommended. They also help you understand the agency's approach.

Reaching Legislative, Executive, and Regulatory Policymakers

When you want to reach a policy maker, you should plan to

Call * *Write* * *Visit*

If policy makers are to represent your wishes in the policy process, they need to hear from you. This is true of the executive branch (the President, Governors, mayors, etc), national, state, and local legislatures, and regulatory agencies. When contacting policy makers, whether in person, by mail, fax, or e-mail, or by phone, keep these hints in mind:

- **Be brief and to the point, and stick to one subject.**
- **Identify yourself and how you (and people you know) will be affected by what's being proposed.**
- **Be clear about what you want.** Name the law that's being discussed or the rules that are about to be changed, and specifically what you want the policy-maker to do.
- **Be accurate,** about the problem, its impact, and possible solutions.
- **Be specific.** Mention provisions that you agree and disagree with, and if possible, offer some alternatives or solutions.
- **Be polite and positive.**
- **Offer your assistance.** Let them know how you can be reached for further information, clarification or help.
- **Follow up.** After expressing your views, follow up on the policy maker's vote or action. Always send a thank-you note if their vote or action was in your favor – even if the overall vote didn't go your way. A polite note expressing your disappointment if the policy maker acted against your position is also important. Your appreciation or disappointment can also be expressed in more public ways, such as writing letters to the editor of your paper or putting an article in your newsletter. [Adapted from Association for Children of New Jersey]

Reaching the Grassroots

In addition to reaching policy makers directly, you need to keep in mind the general public. If enough of them are aroused, they will help make your case and your job will be easier. The same basic tools apply.

Write: With a few minor changes, the letter you send to a legislator can also be sent as a letter to the editor. That way your message may reach many other people.

Call: The same message you leave on your Congressperson's message machine or with their legislative aide can be called in to a radio call-in show. That's another way your message can reach a wider audience.

Visit: Or you can take the "little speech" you memorized to speak to the county commissioner the other day and repeat it at your church group, PTA, neighborhood organizations, etc. That's one more way your message can get wider exposure.

Advocacy Actions

When deciding what kind of action you are going to take, remember that legislators know how much time it takes to make a phone call, write an e-mail or letter, send a fax, and make a visit. ***The more time you spend on your legislative advocacy, the more it means to the legislator.*** A personal visit is worth a dozen letters; a letter is worth more than a phone call. That doesn't mean that phone calls and e-mails aren't important, just that they need to be combined with other advocacy efforts to have maximum effectiveness.

Phone Calls, E-mail, and Faxes to Elected Officials

Phone calls, e-mails, and faxes can be effective, especially when timing is critical and a policy maker's support or vote is needed immediately. Keep the following tips in mind.

- When phoning, ask to speak directly to the legislator or to their aide who handles that issue. You want to speak with someone who is knowledgeable about the issue, rather than the receptionist.
- When e-mailing or faxing, address the lawmaker and copy their aide.
- Explain you are from the lawmaker's district – or that you are from a group that has members in their district.
- If there is already a bill, give the bill number and name.

- Explain why the issue is important to you, your group, and your constituents.
- Ask the legislator to vote in your favor on a pending bill.
- If you are going to call on the phone, jot down your speaking points in advance. That helps you when you get nervous!
- If you are talking on the phone, write down notes on what is said during the conversation. Then you can write a follow-up letter summarizing what happened.

A telephone tree increases the number of contacts with policy makers. (And you want to get lots of contacts – you want the policy maker’s folder on your issue to be bulging with phone messages and letters on your side of the issue!). This system allows a few lead callers to generate responses from a large number of constituents or coalition groups. In a telephone tree system, lead callers have a list of members who have agreed to make a call to their legislator(s). It’s important to have reliable lead callers and accurate, brief information to pass along. (See *Your Action Alert Network*, page 18).

Letters and Postcards

Letters and postcards alert policy makers to your views. They also help educate your members and constituents and involve them in advocacy. A letter has an advantage over a phone call because the legislative office will keep a hard copy of the letter, so that your arguments can be read and reviewed. Also, a letter will generally evoke a response from the legislator or administrator, forcing them to give some thought to the issue and perhaps to go on the record in response.

Often people don’t feel they have the time to write letters on their own, or they may feel that they aren’t good writers, which leads some groups to use form letters. A Gallup Poll found that over 70% of all lawmakers said they pay a great deal of attention to personally written letters, while only about 20% pay great attention to form letters. (Legislators know how easy it is to just sign your name to somebody else’s letter!) There are ways you can generate lots of letters from members without having form letters. You can develop some “writing points,” a point-by-point summary of key issues that can easily be used by members and constituents to draft their own letters. You can also develop 5-10 sample letters or postcards that people can either write in their own handwriting or adapt. Make sure you give people ideas about where they can personalize the letter. (See *Appendix D for sample postcard messages*).

When writing letters to policy makers, try to make them as personal as possible, based on your own experience and/or the stories of your constituents. Think about what you can say about yourself that might represent the legislator’s constituency. Are you a

voter? A minority? A member of the representative's political party? A parent? A taxpayer? A person directly impacted by the policy? In a particular age group? Just a few letters can embody an entire legislative district's demographics.

Make sure you refer to any legislation or regulation by its correct number and title. State your position both in the first and last sentence of your letter, and address your letter correctly. Type or write legibly. Be brief and respectful. Try to fit your message on one page (sometimes they don't turn the page over!) A well-written one page letter can have a greater impact than a lengthy three or four pages, so don't include volumes of extra materials or put down every argument you can think of. Stick to one or two key points, and express those points well. Send your letter in a timely fashion, and follow it up with a phone call. (*See Appendix E for sample letter*).

Effective Writing for Public Policy Advocacy

Types of Advocacy Writing

There are many ways in which writing is used for public policy advocacy. Some common types of advocacy writing include:

- An Op-Ed piece (opinion piece on a newspaper's editorial page)
- A press advisory or press release
- A letter to the editor
- A letter to a legislator, administrator, or other policy-maker
- A letter of complaint, or requesting an investigation by an oversight agency
- Public testimony before a legislative or regulatory hearing
- An investigative report (facts, analysis, conclusions, recommendations)
- Letters to inform, mobilize and organize your constituency, allies, and the general public
- A notice of a meeting, training, forum, or action.

Purpose of Advocacy Writing

Advocacy writing often shares facts and tries to guide the reader to a clear understanding of the subject, but advocacy writing has one main purpose: to persuade, to convince your readers to think the way you do about a subject, or act the way you want them to. Thus, effective advocacy writing contains facts that effectively support the writer's opinion, and presents them in a way that convinces their readers.

The key to successful writing skills for public policy advocacy is to be clear about what you want to say and about how it will be received. Your choice of words, the length of sentences, the tone of language you use, all reflect the relationship you want to create with your reader or audience. Often reading out loud what you have written can help capture the tone that you want.

The Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How of Advocacy Writing

- **Who** is the audience? **Who** is the writing intended to affect?
- **What** is the issue? **What** message or information are you trying to convey?
- **When** are your opportunities for conveying the message?
- **Where** are your opportunities for conveying the message?
- **Why** are you writing? **What** is your purpose?
- **How** can you most effectively convey your message?

Ten Tips for Effective Advocacy Writing

- Keep it short and simple!
- Punctuation, spelling, and organization are important; jargon is deadly.
- Know the intended recipients of your message.
- Have a clear goal; know why you are writing.
- Understand the environmental context.
- Be sure you know what you are trying to convey.
- Catch them in the beginning. If you don't, they may never get to the middle or end.
- Summarize/introduce, then explain, then summarize/conclude.
- Remember that communication is a process designed to convey messages, information, viewpoints and perspectives, insights, and persuasive reasons.
- Always have someone read your work and give you their thoughts and suggestions.

Editing and proofreading help you check your writing to make sure that you have tied up any loose ends and clarified all your important points. Reread your final draft aloud to test it for sense and sound. Replace any words, phrases or sentences that are awkward or confusing. Use a dictionary and thesaurus to check for errors in usage, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Ask a reliable friend or colleague to check your writing for clarity, persuasiveness, or errors you may have missed. Prepare a final copy of your writing, and then proofread the final draft before submitting or sending it.

Testifying Before Policy Makers

Public testimony can be before a legislative body, an administrative agency, or at a public forum. It can be about a proposed bill, proposed regulations, or a topic of great public interest on which policy makers want to collect information and ideas. It is always important to have constituents with personal experiences or expertise testify at public hearings. For example, someone who depends on Medicaid for dental care is best able to discuss what effect cutting this type of care from Medicaid coverage could have on her/his life. Public testimony gives you and your constituents the chance to make a statement in front of an entire committee of legislators or administrative agency officials all at once – often shortly before the decision will be made.

Information about public hearings will be found in the Federal or State Register. The Registers will also contain information about who to contact to request a chance to speak. Request in writing to testify, by the deadline given in the Register, explaining why you want to speak and the perspective you can bring. Provide written testimony for filing with the group (ask in advance how many copies you should bring). You can expect to be limited in the amount of time you and each other constituent will be allowed to speak – usually no more than five minutes. Find out in advance exactly how much time you will be allotted, then plan to speak for a slightly shorter length of time. A half-page single-spaced will equal about one minute of oral testimony.

Oral testimony should be brief and have a central purpose and clear talking points. Your written testimony can be longer. Identify yourself, name your legislative district (if relevant), identify your group, state your position, your reasoning, and how you want the policy makers to respond. Use committee members' titles, i.e., Mr. Chairman, Senator, etc. Avoid writing complex sentences, and don't try to address too many issues!. Be short and concise. You may be given less time to present your testimony than originally planned, so make your main points at the beginning of the testimony.

Content: Speak from personal experience whenever possible – your own, or that of your constituents. Speak on policy issues as they apply to your life, or their lives. Know your audience and speak about things that are important to them. While emotion-filled testimony can be effective, it should be neither planned nor contrived. If speaking as an individual, don't substitute describing your group for something more personal. Talk about yourself, your friend or family member, your constituent. Be honest and natural. Use your own words, voice, and style. While someone else can help you to organize and type your testimony, sincerity and truthfulness are extremely important.

Be substantive. Describe how the current policy is harmful, or prevents good things from happening. Give examples of barriers that you know are responsible for the problem. But don't make negative remarks about people who are testifying against your side of the issue – you don't want to make the policy makers sympathetic to them! Avoid rambling or repeating yourself, and try to use sound bites that can be picked up by the media.

When you are preparing your testimony, type one single-spaced copy for the committee record and make as many copies as needed for the entire committee or panel. Make additional copies to distribute to the media and to other participants who are interested in your comments. Make another copy for yourself to read, annotated (with stress marks or emphasis), double-spaced and in larger type so you can read it more easily.

Delivery: Practice your testimony in front of a group of people (or at least a mirror!). Practice, practice, practice! Remember that *proper preparation and practice prevents piss-poor performance!* If possible, watch yourself delivering your testimony in video tape, or in front of a mirror. Rehearse possible questions with someone, because the committee might actually ask you a question. Don't simply think through possible questions and answers. You'll find it much easier to respond to policy makers' questions if you have practiced it earlier. Study how the pros (anchor-people, for example) deliver written information. Pay special attention to eye-contact and hand movements. Think about using visual aids (charts, pictures, etc.) if that would be helpful.

Dress appropriately for the forum. If the hearing will be televised, avoid wearing clothes that will distract the viewer from your message (like stripes or complicated patterns).

Arrive before your scheduled time to speak, so that you can meet with other people who are testifying on your side of the issue and familiarize yourself with the surroundings. If possible, come at the beginning of the hearing and stay through the end. You can always gain valuable information about how the other side is presenting the issue – and who is on the other side! If you are told that you have less time to speak than you originally planned, or your testimony is taking longer than you expected, be prepared not to be able to finish reading your entire testimony. Remember that your written testimony will become part of the hearing record, even if you can't read all of it at the hearing.

While testifying, try to relax. Speak slowly and clearly; don't rush to get in a few more words that nobody will understand because you are speaking too fast! Read with meaning and emotion. Look up from your written material as much as possible, and make eye contact. If you've said everything you wanted to cover, don't keep talking to fill the time— and never speak beyond the allotted time. Don't disparage legislators, administrators, or testifiers who disagree with you – before, during, or after presenting testimony (at least until you are back with your group!) Thank the policy makers for listening to your ideas and for providing this forum for public comment and discussion.

Meeting with Elected Officials

Most people, including many activists, have never met with a legislator. It can be very intimidating. But if you don't share your ideas with legislators, you lose a powerful opportunity to persuade them to adopt those ideas. Speaking up won't guarantee that you will win, but not speaking up guarantees that your wishes won't be known

One critical step is to know your legislators and let them get to know you. Find out their committee assignments. Know their background. Know their positions and voting records. Get on their mailing lists. Find out if they have websites. Get acquainted with their staff and visit them in their district office. Know who handles specific issues. Communicate regularly. Begin the lobbying process early, before any bill appears on that issue. If your issue is already in a bill, know the bill name and number.

Practical Tips to Prepare for a Visit with Elected Officials

1. Decide who you are going to visit. In addition to your own legislator, you may want to speak with the Chair and/or other members of the committee that has oversight responsibilities for your issue(s). Or you may need to speak with the leader of the legislative body, if they have power in determining what issues come up for a vote. You may want to meet with the governor or mayor.

Sometimes when you call up for an appointment, the legislator is not available. (It's rare that you will get to meet with the Governor!) You then want to meet with the appropriate aide. If your target issue is improving job training opportunities, you will ask to meet with the aide who handles those issues. Don't be disappointed if you "only" get to meet with the aide. Legislators and executives rely very heavily on their aides, who often do the real work of reviewing bills and drafting positions. Meeting with aides and developing relationships with them is just as important as meeting with the legislators.

2. Establish your agenda and goals. What do you want to talk about? Are you going to support or oppose legislation that has already been introduced, or are you asking the legislator to introduce new legislation? What are your reasons for your position? Are you trying to get the legislator to vote a particular way, or to persuade his/her fellow legislators to vote that way, too? Are you trying to find out the legislator's views, or what the chances of passage are for a particular bill? You also need to find out how this legislator has voted on this issue in the past. Are they likely to be supportive of your position? Are they personally affected (for example, did they grow up on welfare?)? This information will help you decide exactly what you want to say and what you think you will be able to accomplish. Allow time for small talk at the beginning, but not too much.

3. Plan your visit. When are you going to visit? Are you going to visit the legislator in the state capital, when the legislature is in session? Or would you prefer to visit the legislator when they are in their home office in their district? Is there a particular time that you need to visit, for example, before the bill will be voted on in committee?

4. Determine the group composition. It helps to go along with someone more experienced the first few times. It won't seem so intimidating, and having someone else doing the talking helps a lot. Much of learning involves watching (and imitating) others. Advocacy is no different.

There are several important things to keep in mind when deciding who is going to visit the legislator with you. Legislators are more likely to meet with your group if it includes at least one person who lives in their district – one of their immediate constituents. It can also be helpful to include someone who has met the legislator before. You don't want a group that is too big – 4 or 5 people is the maximum number for an effective meeting – but you do want a group that is representative of your issue. You should also try to include someone who might not be seen as a natural ally. For example, it can be very helpful to bring a supportive senior citizen to a meeting where you are asking for more funding for after-school programs. A senior citizen isn't perceived as having a "vested interest" in programs for children, so their support can be very powerful. You can also use your group composition to combat stereotypes based on race and class. For example, the majority of people receiving welfare benefits are white, but welfare is often perceived as a "minority problem." Also, in the public policy debate about welfare, the voices of people receiving welfare are seldom heard. So you may want to bring a diverse group of welfare recipients to the meeting to smash both these stereotypes.

5. Listen well. A visit to a legislator can be very informative. The legislator's response to your issue and the points you are making can tell you about more effective approaches, the positions that your "enemies" are taking and what you need to do to combat them, where you do and don't have support, and what your chances are. Remember that legislators are people. They don't like to be lectured at, talked over, interrupted, or iced out of the conversation. If you listen well to them, they are more likely to listen well to you.

6. Be prepared, but don't feel that everyone needs to be an expert. When you meet with a legislator, you want to have a good understanding of your issue. But you don't have to present a doctoral dissertation on the subject! Remember that most elected officials are "generalists." They probably don't know all the ins and outs of the issue. Don't be afraid of being asked something you can't answer. And if you *are* asked something you can't answer? Simple. Do as the politicians do: say you don't know, but you'll find out and get back to them. Don't try to bluff or fake it. "That's a very good question, Senator. We hadn't considered that issue before, but we will. And we'll get back to you very soon with our thoughts." Then make sure you do!

It's a good idea to be able to talk about the issue in "expert" terms (statistics, for example) as well as "authentic" terms (actual impact on real people, individual stories, etc.) If the issue is complicated, you may want to divide up the various parts among the people who will be on the visit. You may introduce the topic and give an overview of why it's important to your group. Someone else may give a few key statistics and the results of any studies that have been done. Another person in your group may tell their real-life story. Someone else may give a few other examples of how people in your group have been affected. Another group member may ask the legislator for a commitment to vote a certain way, or to introduce legislation. Be open to counter-arguments, but don't get stuck on them. Don't be argumentative or confrontational. Finally, you or someone else closes the meeting by thanking the legislator for meeting with you.

Be prepared to have less time than you think to talk to the legislator or their aide. Prepare for two meetings – the 20-minute one you think you are going to have, and the 10-minute one you may end up with. Prioritize what you want to say, so you can easily switch to the shorter version if needed. It's helpful to have a summary of your points in writing so you can hand it to them even if you don't get to talk about all of them in person. It's a good idea to practice or role-play before your visit, especially if you are a novice.

7. Don't get intimidated, frustrated, or blow your stack. Legislators are very busy people. You may have to wait past your scheduled meeting time to get into the legislator's office. They may receive an urgent phone call, or even a call to go to the floor for a vote, while you are in their office. They may say something that you find offensive. You need to be prepared to take all of these things in your stride. If the meeting starts late, go to your shorter agenda. If the meeting is interrupted and the legislator has to leave, ask if you can continue to meet with the aide. (The legislator is likely to have the relevant aide at the meeting already). If not, ask if you can reschedule the meeting in the very near future. The answer is likely to be yes. If the legislator starts spouting offensive statements, or speaking impolitely to anyone in your group, you should politely but firmly let them know how offensive they are being. "I know it's not your intention, Assemblyman, but that statement is hurtful to our group. Let me tell you why." You can use these challenges as opportunities to educate the legislator. Blowing your stack will just get you escorted out of the office, never to be invited back!

8. Be on time, and don't stay too long. Be respectful of all the demands on the legislator's time, and don't be late or overstay your welcome. If you are late, you may find that they have moved on to someone or something else. Also remember that legislators and executives have lots on their plate, and limited attention span on any one issue (unless it's a real hot topic at the moment). Give them your key points, demonstrate your commitment and the strength of your movement, get an idea of their position and reasoning, and let them know that you are not going away. Once that has been accomplished, you've achieved your goals.

9. Remember you are there to build a relationship. It's very seldom that you will meet a legislator or executive who agrees with you - or disagrees with you - on every issue. There are no permanent friends or permanent enemies in public policy advocacy. The same person who voted for welfare "reform" may also be a strong supporter of quality job training, child care, and transportation to help people transitioning from welfare to actually be able to get and keep good jobs. No visit is a one-shot deal; each visit is just one of many. Try to get closure on your issue. If you hear what you had hoped for, express your thanks and leave. If you reach an impasse, thank her/him, even if disappointed, and say so. Leave room to continue the discussion at another time. You may find that the more information and ideas you bring to the legislator, the more receptive s/he is. The more they get to know you and your group, the more they will come to understand your issues and respect your commitment. Then they will naturally reach out to you when those issues are being discussed and they are trying to develop their positions. The more you get to know individual legislators, the better equipped you will be to persuade them.

10. Follow-up is important. Send a brief thank-you note to the legislator, their aide, whoever met with you. Forward any information you promised, or other information that is relevant to your discussion. If commitments were made in the meeting, repeat your understanding of them. Invite them to come speak to your group. Let them know about your activities, forums, trainings, conferences, studies, etc. Keep them informed. Even if they don't read the information right away, it will get put in their folder on that issue, and when they have to consider their position, it will be there to influence them. Keep track of their actions, too. Let them know if they disappoint you by the way they vote. But also let them know you appreciate them when they vote in favor of your position! Remember that they will be hearing from people on the other side of the issue, too! *[Adapted from Common Cause, 1989]*

Regulatory Advocacy

1. Determine the agency or agencies with “jurisdiction” – the agency or agencies that have the responsibility to develop regulations and implement and enforce the law. Sometimes the law itself will tell you the responsible agency. The announcement of draft regulations in the Federal or State Register will tell you where to send your comments and the responsible agency.

2. Identify the “point person” or “point people” within the agency who are responsible for writing or revising, interpreting, and enforcing regulations. You want to develop an ongoing relationship with the people within the agency who are responsible for writing or revising regulations, interpreting regulations when there are questions, and enforcing the regulations. You want them to know who you are, your position on issues, and the power you bring to an issue. You want to know who to call when you want to influence regulations. You want to know who can interpret the regulations in a favorable way, and who has the power to enforce regulations when they are ignored.

3. Develop relationships with government officials and agency staff. It is important to determine which government agency (Department of Health, Department of Human Services, etc.) will be responsible for establishing regulations to implement the law or program. Meet with staff members of that agency and also the governor's office. Maintain friendly contact and be as helpful to government officials as possible. Often they can use your information and advice on technical matters – give it to them willingly! Try to identify at least one key contact person in each agency that can assist you. Talk with them about problems that concern you and that are having an adverse effect on your constituents. Also talk to them about what is working well.

Invite representatives from those agencies to meetings, conferences, and special events. Educate them about your work. Provide them with brochures, fact sheets, newsletters.

4. Know the relevant laws and procedures governing regulations. Check out both the federal and state administrative codes. They will tell you when administrative regulations are required, when they are prohibited, who has the authority to promulgate an administrative regulation, and the process the agency must go through (public notices, hearings, etc.) to promulgate an administrative regulation.

5. Monitor the media, State and Federal Registers. Watch for actions by government agencies that affect your organization, constituents, or community. Designate someone to regularly read sections of the Federal and New Jersey Registers that are likely to affect you. Look for announcements in major newspapers.

6. Develop a plan of action for regulatory advocacy. Include:

- Comments (positive and negative) on each component of the draft regulations, specific recommendations for improvement, and justification for those recommended changes;
- Individual and organizational responsibilities;
- An assessment of potential opposition to your proposals;
- A plan to deal with opposition; and
- The compromises you can live with.

7. Develop relationships and coalitions with interested organizations. Whenever possible, work with other groups to spread your message and also share the work. Try to build consensus among professional groups and among consumers/ constituents and grassroots organizations. Include usual and unlikely allies in your coalition.

8. Get broad endorsement on your comments on proposed regulations. Discuss the proposed regulations or problems with existing regulations with a broad cross-section of impacted parties before developing your comments on regulations. Distribute a draft of your comments to targeted groups and individuals to get their suggestions and or endorsement. Request letters endorsing your comments. Encourage other organizations and affected individuals to develop their own comments. Include the reasoning behind your recommendations in your comments.

9. Use legislative oversight to impact regulations. When the government agency in the executive branch is intransigent, and needs some extra motivation to change, you

can request that state legislators conduct an oversight hearing. Remember to have an outcome in mind for these hearings, before you begin. Work with legislative staff to put the hearing together, identify witnesses, and develop their questions for witnesses. Organize targeted groups and impacted individuals to testify at these hearings.

10. Mobilize grassroots support. Develop a response network that is easy and effective to use. Provide network participants with sample letters with clear concise messages that are easily conveyed and understood by participants and regulators. Use technology to your advantage (web sites, e-mail alerts, list serves, etc.). Numbers are important!

Adapted from Regulatory Advocacy at the State and Federal Level, ASHA's Ad Hoc Committee on Member Education on Advocacy (1996)

Spreading the Word: Grassroots and Media Advocacy

Everyone gets their information through the media – you, other members of your organization, funders, your constituency, policy makers, and opinion leaders. **Media advocacy** is the strategic use of mass and community media to advance a social or public policy initiative. You use the media to communicate with your own constituency and supporters (through your organization's newsletter); potential supporters (other organizational newsletters); and the general public (community and other newspapers, radio, Television). You use the media to forward your **grassroots advocacy** efforts. Getting your story in the papers or on radio or television can move people to support your case and perhaps even to take positive action.

Conclusion

As parents, employees, and community members, we are directly impacted by the policies of our elected officials and the regulatory agencies responsible for implementing the laws that they pass. The decisions that our elected officials and regulatory agencies make can be more effective if our voices are part of the conversation. What's going right with the systems that currently serve children and families? What needs to be improved? Our direct experiences can help shape systems that are more responsive to children and families in our state – but only if we stop sitting on the sidelines and get into the game! Remember – democracy is not a spectator sport!

Appendix A: Selected List of Reference Organizations on Advocacy Issues

Advocacy Institute
1629 K St. NW #200
Washington, D.C. 20006-1629
202-387-9177
www.advocacy.org

Alliance for Justice
2000 P Street NW Suite 712
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-822-6070
www.afj.org

Center for Community Change
1000 Wisconsin Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20007
202-342-0567
www.communitychange.org

Children's Defense Fund
25 E St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20001
202-628-8787
www.childrensdefense.org

Human SERVE
622 West 113 Street, Room 410
NY, NY 10025
202-387-9177

Independent Sector
1828 L Street NW Suite 1200
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-223-8100
www.indepsec.org

Nat'l. Comm. For Responsive Philanthropy
2001 S Street NW Suite 602
Washington, D.C. 20009
202-387-9177
www.primenet.com

Nat'l. Ass'n. of Child Advocates
1522 K St. Suite 600
Washington, D.C. 20005-1202
202-289-0777
www.childadvocacy.org

Appendix B: Selected List of Publications on Advocacy Issues

Public Policy Advocacy

Citizens' Handbook: A Guide to Building Community; www.vcn.ca/citizens-handbook

Community Tool Box: Building Capacity for Community and Systems Change;
<http://ctb.ukans.edu/tools/EN>

How and Why to Influence Public Policy: An Action Guide for Community Organizations
Center for Community Change (see Reference Organizations, previous page)

People Power: Service, Advocacy, Empowerment
Brian O'Connell c/o The Foundation Center; 212-620-4230; www.fdncenter.org

Lobbying

Being a Player-A Guide to the IRS Lobbying Regulations for Advocacy Charities
(see Reference Organizations, previous page)

Lobby? You? Yes, Your Nonprofit Organization Can! It Should!, Nonprofit Lobbying Guide: Advocating your Cause – And Getting Results, and Tax-Exempt Organizations' Lobbying and Political Activities Accountability Act of 1987: A Guide for Volunteers and Staff of Nonprofit Organizations (see Reference Organizations, previous page)

Voting and Political Campaigns

Handbook on Tax Rules for Voter Participation Work by Section 501(c)(3) Organizations, by Thomas A. Troyer et al of Caplan & Drysdale, Independent Sector (above)

Permissible Activities of 501(c)(3) Organizations During a Political Campaign, an Independent Sector Issue Brief, Independent Sector (see Reference Organizations, previous page))

Seizing the Initiative (on ballot initiatives and referenda), Alliance for Justice (see Reference Organizations, previous page)

Voter Registration Implementation Guide for NonProfits, How to Monitor Voter Registration in Public Assistance Agencies in your Community, and Contact Information for Election Officials in All 50 States (see Reference Organizations, previous page)

Appendix C: JOIN SPAN's E-ADVOCACY NETWORK

Postage costs are up and “change” barely describes the dynamic political landscape of Trenton and Washington. So, SPAN must find an efficient and effective way to inform and activate your participation in the public policy process. As parents and advocates for improving the lives of our children, we must pay close attention to what will be an important year for public policy. SPAN anticipates that issues will be upon us fast and furious in this new millennium and the best way for us to keep in contact with you is through the new **SPAN E-Action Network**.

AT THE STATE LEVEL: We have a new Governor, who has just replaced the Commissioners of Education, Health and Senior Services, Children and Families, and Human Services. And the Governor has proposed major changes to healthcare, education funding, and other supports and services for families.

AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL: The Obama Administration is seeking to make sweeping changes in health, human services, and education. Will your voice be heard?

SIGN ON AND JOIN THE NETWORK: SPAN wants to make sure that parents and advocates have up-to-the minute information on these and yet-to-surface issues. So, join our E-Action Alert Network by logging into our website at www.spannj.org and signing up! We also offer tips on contacting legislators and links to help you find your local representatives. If you prefer “snail mail”, please call Debra Jennings at 973-642-8100 x 106 and leave a message including your name, its spelling, your address, city/town, county and zip. Or you can also send a postcard via Pony Express ☺.