

NONPROFIT ADVOCACY: Nonprofit Advocacy Overview

Purpose: Your work creates positive change for people in the community you serve. You can have an even bigger impact by bringing social change through advocacy. Advocacy means “speaking up with” the people you serve and the issues that are important to their well-being. You can advocate by sharing evidence-based solutions with the community and people who create policy (policymakers).

Check out these emPower tools for additional advocacy support: [Levels of Nonprofit Advocacy in Washington State](#), [Using Data in Advocacy](#), and [Policy Basics for Nonprofits](#).

More emPower Tools
+ learn more about each topic
thecapacitycollective.org/resources

What is Nonprofit Advocacy?

- Any effort by a nonprofit organization to influence public policy.
- Any nonprofit work aimed at getting leaders and the community involved to change the minds of policymakers.
- Any deliberate effort by a nonprofit organization to directly or indirectly influence other people in the policymaking process.

KNOW THE LAW:

A 501(c)(3) organization “**may not** attempt to influence legislation as a *substantial part* of its activities and it **may not participate in any campaign activity for or against political candidates.**”—US Internal Revenue Service

Words for Direct Advocacy

- Campaigning
- Lobbying (direct and grassroots)
- Organizing

Words for Indirect Advocacy

- Disseminating (sharing) information
- Educating
- Innovating policy solutions

- **SOME lobbying is allowed**, as long as you don’t do it as a “substantial part” of your activities...
- **What is “substantial”?** “Substantial” is generally interpreted to mean 10 to 20% of the work of your organization’s activities.
Example: If your organization’s total budget is less than \$500,000/year, you can spend up to 20% of your expenditures on lobbying.
- **Stay NON-PARTISAN!** (Not connected to a political party)

DO NOT support or campaign against any political party or candidate in your work.

Rules and Restrictions on Advocacy

NOT ALLOWED

Directly or indirectly participating in, or fighting against in any candidate’s campaign for elective office.

Giving money to political campaigns, or making public spoken or written statements representing your organization, in favor of or against any candidate for public office.

MAY BE ALLOWED

Certain voter education activities done in a NON-PARTISAN way (not supporting a candidate or party).

Activities to encourage people to participate in the voting process, (but not for a specific party or candidate).

TIP:

Track your lobbying activities and expenditures! Bolder Advocacy has a guide called “Keeping Track” at bolderadvocacy.org

More details on nonprofit advocacy law:

- “Advocacy and Lobbying Rules for Nonprofits” from washingtonnonprofits.org (under Public Policy > Advocacy Resources)
- “Measuring Lobbying Activity: Expenditure Test” from the Internal Revenue Service (www.irs.gov) and (www.irs.gov/charities-and-nonprofits)

Put Advocacy into Action

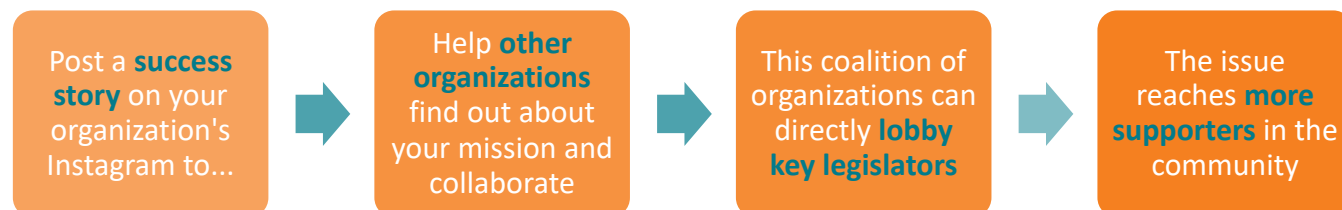
Let's say the state legislature is proposing a bill (a possible new law) to offer health services to everyone in the state. The services in the bill would include home visits to new parents by public health nurses.

- ✓ Your organization has experience and knowledge on this issue, and your clients may be affected by the new bill if it the legislature votes for it to become law.
- ✓ You can help make sure your clients get what they need by working with the people creating the policies, including your local representatives in the legislature.
- ✓ Talking with your representatives also raises their awareness of your organization's mission and impact in the community, so they can become advocates for you in the government!

TYPES OF NONPROFIT ADVOCACY

Type	Example Activities	Notes
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Build and maintain coalitions (cooperative work) with other organizations who have similar interests. ✓ Educate communities about the issue by using online or print materials in a non-partisan way. 	This may mean having a designated person(s) (staff, volunteer, or intern) dedicate time consistently to do research and outreach on other organizations and public policy issues.
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Join/start public interest litigation (court case) as a named party. ✓ Submit an amicus curiae ("friend of the court") brief in public interest litigation that may affect your organization. ✓ Providing expert testimony in court. 	The first activity is more direct than the last two activities here; when you are a smaller organization with limited resources, you are more likely to be involved in the last two.
Legislative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Direct lobbying: For example, meet with state representatives who have not yet decided about an issue and urge them to vote "Yes". ✓ Grassroots lobbying: For example, send an email to clients to urge them to call their state representatives to vote "Yes". 	Be careful to distinguish between lobbying and non-lobbying advocacy; obey restrictions for certain lobbying activities. The designated policy person(s) (from above) can also identify laws and regulations that affect your organization.
Digital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Share the importance of passing the legislation. Put a few short stories on your org's social media sites. Use stories that show how clients were helped by the kinds of services the bill would provide. Make the posts shareable so the message goes farther. ✓ Use digital advocacy petitions as part of your organization's outreach strategy, which will help grow your community of supporters and help define your organizations identity. 	REMEMBER, if you choose to send out an online petition, it doesn't matter if it's asking for signees to support or defeat the proposed legislation, the <i>act</i> of sharing the petition will be considered lobbying.

The more you thoughtfully you combine different ways of advocating for the causes you care about, the more effective your message is!



We encourage you to share these resources with your organization, and other local social service organizations. PLEASE NOTE: this handout is the intellectual property of The Capacity Collective. Please do not duplicate parts, or adapt, without the express permission of The Capacity Collective. Thank you for supporting our work! **Special thank you to Joice Chang for her work on this tool!**