

Working with Nonprofit Organizations in Community Settings: Preparing your Organization to Lobby

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Rationale

Nonprofit organizations can effectively lobby for their issue. In fact, they are often in an ideal position to do so because they already have many resources to get started—especially much needed information about the issue. The Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest (CLPI) lists ten reasons for nonprofits to lobby (CLPI, 2004a):

1. You can make a difference.
2. People working together can make a difference.
3. People can change laws.
4. Lobbying is a democratic tradition.
5. Lobbying finds real solutions.
6. Lobbying is easy.
7. Policymakers need your expertise.
8. Lobbying helps people.
9. The views of local nonprofits are important.
10. Lobbying advances your cause and builds public trust.

Preparation

There are several different steps that your organization can take to prepare for, and engage in, lobbying. These include the following missives (CLPI, 2004c):

- Get motivated and educated.
- Prepare for legislative advocacy (get a phone, internet access, etc.).
- Study the legislative process.
- Review the relationship between your organization and government (all levels).
- Create a who's who list (of government officials).

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- Prepare your board of directors.
- Connect legislative advocacy with governance (define/discuss how public policy affects your organization).
- Take stock of your human resources (time, money, staff, etc.).
- Develop useful data (about the organization that can be used for lobbying).
- Look for allies.
- Develop a public policy agenda (2-3 most important legislative changes the organization wants to lobby for).
- Review the law. (Lobbying on issues is legal! Supporting candidates for office is not.)

Strategies

There are many ways to successfully lobby for your cause that are inexpensive yet effective. Your strategies might include writing a letter to your elected government official(s). Do not underestimate the power of personal letters. On the same token, a personal visit is also an effective way to lobby. It is a powerful statement of your interest and commitment. You may not be able to see the official but his/her staff person can typically be relied on to deliver your message. The important thing is that your position and purpose are delivered. Presenting testimony at a public hearing is another very effective strategy. Here, your message will reach a wider audience, one that usually includes elected or appointed officials; plus an agenda and a record is kept of what was said. The press is a frequent visitor to public meetings, thus presenting a good opportunity to speak to them about your issue (CLPI, 2004b).

References

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