
Grassroots Lobbying for Change: *Mobilizing Your Community*

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Some of the most extraordinary policy achievements in recent decades were accomplished because grassroots volunteers lobbied government decision makers.

Consider these examples:

- Nearly all of the 14 state laws banning smoking in the workplace were won by grassroots advocates, who sometimes began pushing their cause at City Hall.
- Colorado laws requiring booster seats in cars, graduated driver's licenses for teens, and increased funding for child immunizations were pushed into place by a network with more than 4,000 grassroots advocates.
- Grassroots volunteers convinced Kentucky legislators to double state funding for low-income housing after a campaign that lasted less than four months.

Volunteers can be extremely effective legislative advocates, and working with them can be dramatic, exhilarating and rewarding. Every successful social movement has relied on motivated volunteers.

Unfortunately, many nonprofits don't understand their own power. They avoid legislative work because they mistakenly believe lobbying activities will jeopardize their tax-exempt status. On the contrary: nonprofits that choose not to lobby aren't taking full advantage of their rights under the broad, flexible laws that govern these activities.

This article explains how any organization with 501(c)(3) status can build a grassroots advocacy network and do lobbying within the confines of the law. In many cases, complying with federal lobbying laws can be as simple as filing a single form with the IRS.

BUILDING YOUR VOLUNTEER NETWORK

Step One: Recruit Volunteers

Begin by considering where you can find volunteers for your lobbying efforts. Start with your organization's strengths — mine your database of donors and volunteers: Who in your organization has relationships with legislators or people with connections to legislators? Who are the effective communicators?

To be successful, you must involve all facets of your organization in your advocacy efforts — including your

board of directors. Board members are the leaders in demonstrating the behavior the organization wants from its members. If members of the board aren't willing to help, it will be difficult to motivate people further down in the organizational structure.

Board members can also be key in recruiting volunteers for the advocacy cause. Too often, boards believe it is the job of staff to recruit volunteers. Although it is appropriate for staff to provide the tools, *ultimately the best advocates are recruited by satisfied volunteers.*

The Internet is the new frontier for recruiting volunteers for grassroots advocacy. Many nonprofits build a database of past supporters and contributors and ask them to join the cause — usually by asking them to send emails to legislators. That's a good first step. But leaders of strong grassroots networks are always looking for ways to have personal contact with volunteers recruited online. Just as important, grassroots leaders don't rely on the Internet to find all their volunteers.

Some organizations ask core volunteers to serve as district captains who then recruit volunteers from their neighborhoods. There might be one district captain for each legislative district or one who is responsible for a few adjacent legislative districts.

The Tobacco Free Mass Coalition — whose mission is to reduce death and disease in Massachusetts caused by tobacco use — hosts house parties to recruit volunteers. A volunteer who's already involved develops a list of friends, neighbors, and other potential volunteers, sends out an invitation, and provides food and drink.

"The night of the party is mostly mingling and very relaxed," said Diane Pickles, executive director of the Tobacco Free Mass Coalition, "then I spend about five minutes making an appeal for funding — I describe Tobacco Free Mass and the work we do and ask each attendee to make a donation. We also urge all attendees to get involved as grassroots advocates by signing up for our grassroots network.

"I love the parties," she went on, "because they are a wonderful way for us to achieve two goals at the same time—raise funds for our coalition from individual donors and recruit new advocates."

Step Two: Retain and Motivate

Be very specific about what you want your volunteers to do and give them lots of support. I've watched advocacy programs struggle because staff members don't set concrete requirements and measure how well their volunteers meet them.

If the volunteers' job is to send letters or emails to legislators, help them get access to websites that provide legislator contact information. (Project Vote Smart is an excellent resource for information about lawmakers and candidates for office.) If you want volunteers to visit legislators or their staff, help them prepare for the meetings with talking points and background information.

For your advocates to be effective when you need them, you have to keep them engaged and involved when you don't. Engage your volunteers throughout the year — not just during legislative sessions. This will help them feel connected and keep them informed about the issues. And don't just send them emails. Invite them to community events or legislative forums.

The Homeless and Housing Coalition of Kentucky worked on homeless and low-income housing issues for years, all the while building and nurturing its statewide grassroots network. For more than a dozen years the coalition used its member organizations and a cadre of loyal volunteers to raise the organization's profile. They lobbied on housing-related issues during each legislative session, held and participated in rallies showcasing the need for low-income housing, and in the last several years, organized an annual conference on housing and homeless issues.

When a bill that would double funding for Kentucky's Affordable Housing Trust Fund was considered in the legislature in early 2006, the coalition used its network to generate scores of phone calls to legislators during each week of the legislative session and staged two rallies at the capitol with about 350 people at each. Throughout the session, core members of the network scheduled dozens of face-to-face meetings in which homeless people, industry supporters, and advocates met with their lawmakers. The bill passed with broad, bipartisan support.

Another way to keep volunteers involved and motivated is to recognize the good work they are doing. Brief thank-you notes as well as acknowledgment at meetings and in your newsletter can serve to reinforce the behavior that gets things done. These efforts can culminate with a volunteer being recognized as grassroots "Volunteer of the Year."

Look for ways to get volunteers who can't make it to legislative hearings or advocacy events involved. A few years ago the Tobacco Free Mass Coalition thought of a novel way of delivering constituents' messages to legisla-

tors. They provided their volunteers with a toll-free number where they could tape-record statements about why legislators should support a bill prohibiting smoking in workplaces, restaurants, and bars. The coalition put the 12 best stories on a CD that they gave to legislators, and mounted them on their website.

"It was a way to get volunteers involved without having them at the hearings," Pickles said, "It is hard to get someone to take a day off of work and come into Boston."

In July 2004 the Tobacco Free Mass Coalition succeeded in helping Massachusetts become the sixth state to pass a comprehensive no-smoking law. The coalition saw the victory as another way to engage their volunteers. The coalition posted a "Thank you journal" on its website and asked volunteers to log on and say why they were thankful that Massachusetts had become smoke free. Volunteers wrote about how the new law had changed their lives — for example, how their asthmatic kids were now able to eat in restaurants. Then the coalition printed copies of the

best stories and delivered them to the state senate and house leadership.

The Grassroots Advocacy Network of the Children's Hospital of Denver is a textbook example of how nonprof-

its can establish themselves as legislative powerhouses. The 4,000-member network is a six-year-old coalition of health professionals, community leaders, educators, parents, and hospital employees whose members have relationships with legislators across the Colorado. Staff at the hospital routinely ask network members to speak to community groups; volunteer at rallies, press conferences, and other advocacy events; and write letters to the editor about issues affecting children — even when proposed legislation isn't pending.

When quick action is needed, these volunteer advocates can be counted on to mobilize quickly. Some of the volunteers even operate at an advanced level — leading recruitment efforts, strategizing about the best way to engage legislators, or participating in meetings with legislators with whom they have personal relationships. Advanced volunteers who are well-informed and can speak articulately about the issues can be a terrific resource when it is time to meet with legislators — or, more often, their staff members — at state capitols or in Washington D.C.

Step Three: Connect with Legislators

The size of your network is not as important as the credibility of the volunteers you have engaged. If they know the right legislators — or more important, if the legislators get to know them — you can get some attention and get things moving. I've seen an advocacy network

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with 12 volunteers get legislation passed and networks with thousands of volunteers flounder. The difference was simple: the smaller network was made up of highly motivated, engaged volunteers with connections to legislators.

Advocacy groups can build their credibility with legislators by providing needed information about an issue, making sure the legislator's staff are fully informed on the issue in question, and scheduling a series of brief meetings with each legislator whose voting record indicates they might be sympathetic to your cause.

Don't repeat the mistakes of many large grassroots advocacy organizations that have over-emphasized email advocacy. These organizations urge their volunteers to use Web-based advocacy to send personalized letters or emails to their elected representative with a few computer clicks. Email campaigns have a place in today's political process, but their usefulness is increasingly limited — especially as far as Congress is concerned. Congressional staff report that they believe much of the email they receive from advocacy groups is not written by the person who sent it. Last summer some members began requiring email correspondents to solve a simple math problem in order for their emails to get through. The idea was to ensure that the emails were coming from actual people, not mass-mailing computers of the kind often used by interest groups.

Email advocacy has a place in grassroots activism — as long as it is part of a plan that includes personalized, customized communications between constituents and lawmakers. Even in today's digital democracy, any credible, experienced grassroots activist will tell you that a good campaign culminates with an old-fashioned lobbying technique — face-to-face meetings with legislators and their staffers. Too often, grassroots organizers have spent too much time organizing their online volunteers and not enough time engaging them personally. Make sure your volunteers understand that meeting with staff is the norm and where much of the action takes place.

Step Four: Make Your Group Memorable

It's essential to have a simple logo or a short phrase or slogan that sums up your organization and its message. The idea is to have a "brand," or an easily recognizable image that volunteers and legislators will associate with the cause.

The American Heart Association's "You're the Cure" slogan is a good example. The Kentucky Homeless and Housing Coalition made up stickers with the phrase "Open the Door" and a simple logo — a keyhole on a bright

yellow door — to summarize its message. When volunteer advocates crowded into legislative committee rooms, the stickers they wore were an easy, quick way to make their presence known. They didn't need to say a word.

LAWS GOVERNING LOBBYING

The rules governing nonprofit lobbying are broad and fairly easy to follow. Federal tax law controls how much lobbying 501(c)(3) organizations can engage in, and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) enforces the law. Based on overall expenditures, most nonprofits can spend up to 20 percent of their budget on direct lobbying activities intended to influence legislation. The limits depend only on the money you spend, so volunteer efforts and cost-free activities — public education work and pro-bono litigation and research, for example — aren't factored in.

According to the Alliance for Justice, an association of public interest organizations that works to strengthen the nonprofit sector's influence on public policy, filing a simple

one-page form with the IRS (Form 5768) is probably the only step required of most nonprofits. Nonprofits that want more guidance on these issues should contact the Alliance for Justice: www.afj.org.

Nonprofits that do very little lobbying may not have to file anything — especially if that lobbying

is limited to an "insubstantial" part of the organization's overall activity. But organizations like Alliance for Justice urge nonprofits to use the "20 percent rule" and file with the IRS, because the law that describes the "insubstantial" lobbying rule offers no clear definitions regarding what constitutes lobbying, what an "insubstantial part" is, or how to measure activities. Filing Form 5768 gives nonprofits a much clearer sense of their obligation.

Overall Lobbying Limit

There are two types of lobbying — direct and grassroots. Direct lobbying is communication with a legislator (federal, state, local) or legislative staff member that refers to specific legislation and takes a position on the legislation. It also includes communication with the general public on ballot measures.

Grassroots lobbying is communication with the public that refers to specific legislation, reflects a view of the legislation, and contains a call to action, such as asking the public to contact their legislators. You can use the entire amount of money available for lobbying on direct lobbying, but you can only use 25 percent of it on grassroots lobbying.

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If your group's budget is less than \$500,000 the amount of money your group can use for lobbying is 20 percent of its budget.

Organizations with budgets of more than \$500,000 may use a diminishing percentage of their budget for lobbying activities. To determine such an organization's lobbying limits under the IRS's 501(h) expenditure test, you begin with the organization's "exempt purpose expenditures," which for most organizations is the amount of money they will spend in the current fiscal year minus some fundraising and capital costs (for more detail, check with Alliance for Justice).

Once you have determined this number, the following formula gives you the amount you can spend on lobbying:

- 20% of the first \$500,000 of an organization's budget
- + 15% of the next \$500,000 of the budget
- + 10% of the next \$500,000 of the budget
- + 5% of the remaining budget

The total of these percentages is your overall lobbying limit — with a cap of \$1 million regardless of the size of the organization.

Election-Year Limits

Nonprofits are strictly forbidden from engaging in any political activity in support of or in opposition to any candidate for public office. Specifically, they cannot:

- Endorse candidates for public office
- Make any campaign contributions or expenditures on behalf of candidates

- Publish or communicate anything that explicitly or implicitly favors or opposes a candidate

Nonetheless, nonprofits can engage in these specific activities related to elections for office:

- Conduct non-partisan public education and training sessions about participation in the political process
- Educate all of the candidates on public interest issues
- Sponsor candidate debates (with certain restrictions)
- Conduct nonpartisan voter registration drives

CONCLUSION

Establishing and maintaining a grassroots advocacy network takes time and commitment. Some of the work is tedious. But using a network to execute a well-run legislative campaign can be extremely rewarding for nonprofit staffers and their supporters. Good campaigns almost always raise and polish a nonprofit's profile, generate community support, and fuel ongoing fundraising efforts. By harnessing the power of the legislative process, nonprofits can get measures passed, laws tightened, and ultimately show why they are relevant. **GFJ**

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