

## THE "ABC's" OF LOBBYING

Government today plays an increasing role in the delivery of healthcare —from regulation to financing. This certainly is the case with behavioral health services. As a result, it is the rare activist for persons with mental illness who will never make contact with a policy-maker, whether a member of the Federal Congress or the state legislature.

Most folks are amazed that people actually get paid to engage in policy advocacy. "How hard can it be?" they ask. Actually there's nothing to it as long as you are patient, persistent, prepared and can keep your head when all about are "losing theirs and blaming it on you." In short, it is a challenging activity but often necessary to advance the goals of an organization like NAMI Arizona. To guide you in your efforts we offer some lobbying "ABCs".

### 1. **A**lways Be Honest

The most precious character trait that a lobbyist can possess is a reputation for honesty. It is important to provide credible information and be bound by your promises. Sometimes when you are asked a question for which you don't have an answer, it

is tempting to “wing” one. Better to look unknowledgeable than to provide incorrect information. Just admit you don’t know, offer to provide the information and then make sure you do. Also be certain that you have authority to enter into negotiations. You want to avoid agreeing to compromise only to reverse your position later because your organization or allies can’t support the deal you endorsed.

## 2. **Be Prepared**

Compile information for every possible question that could be raised about your issue. Prepare a simple position paper for your supporters to use. Play devil’s advocate and think about the points of dispute likely to be raised by your opposition. You are wise to inform the policy-maker of any contrary arguments and take the opportunity to respond to them in advance.

## 3. **Contact Other Stakeholders**

Policy makers like nothing better than consensus. Try to arrive at one before you launch into a full-scale battle. Marshall your forces by contacting potential allies. Particularly identify supporters who are constituents or friends of policy-makers. Don’t rule out overtures to the opposition particularly if you think

there are potential areas of compromise. At the very least you will have a better understanding of their position and how to oppose it.

#### **4. Don't Engage in Personal Attacks**

Whatever your frustrations with the process, personal attacks are not only unprofessional they are just dumb. You must always exercise patience and professionalism. In an era of instant computer communication an unwise comment about an opponent can find its way to the recipient of your scorn within hours. You could make an enemy for life of someone who might be an ally the next time around.

#### **5. Educate Yourself About Procedures**

In the advocacy process timing can be everything. Most state Legislatures only meet for a period of sixty to one hundred days and move quickly on introduced bills. Ask for copies of rules and procedures from legislative clerks. Use contacts with other NAMI members in your state who have had lobbying experience. The Arizona and National NAMI website have information resources.

## **6. Find Out About Your Audience**

A legislator from a largely blue-collar district is going to have a different point of view than one representing an affluent silk-stocking area. Each legislator bring his or her own ideology and life experiences. Do some homework about the policy-maker with whom you are meeting. What are his or her priorities? What kind of legislation have they introduced? What organizations or individuals have been important in their political careers? Tailor your arguments to appeal to their concerns.

## **7. Grasp the Big Picture**

Understand that however important your issue is to you and your supporters (Western Civilization obviously hangs in the balance), it is only one of hundreds faced by the average policy-maker. If a state legislator is struggling with a huge budget shortfall your request for millions in housing is not merely ill-timed, it is a fool's mission. Be realistic about what you can accomplish.

## **8. Have A Goal in Mind**

There are generally two types of meetings with policy makers. Some are largely educational. You might, for example, want to introduce yourself to a newly elected council member or legislator and provide information about behavioral health programs. But more often you will have a particular issue you want to address. Be clear about what you want them to do (vote in favor or opposition, sponsor legislation, call a meeting, etc.) and ASK THEM TO DO IT. They may say “no”, avoid your question or offer an alternative. But at least you will get a better idea of where they stand. You don’t get if you don’t ask.

## **9. Identify Lobbying Registration Requirements**

The Congress and most states and political subdivisions have rules regarding lobbying activity. The good news is that contacting a policy- maker as an individual citizen rarely requires registration (thank goodness for the First Amendment). But if you claim to be representing an organization, even as an unpaid volunteer, you may be triggering lobbying requirements. Check with Congressional, state and political subdivision officials before proceeding.

These ABCs are only a starting point. Each lobbying experience has its own challenges, and don't be surprised at the unexpected obstacles. But nothing can substitute for the impact on policy-makers of hearing from a thoughtful and well informed constituent.

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