

*Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good – Vaclav Havel*

## SECTION 4 HCH ADVOCACY IN ACTION

*In order to achieve positive change in society, we need to take the first step. The noblest arguments and the most insightful analysis are made more effective when individuals and communities are organized to translate words into action. This section of the Advo-Kit provides specific strategies to maximize the effects of your advocacy.*

### Develop a Plan

You wouldn't build a house without a blueprint. You wouldn't treat your client's illness without following established clinical guidelines. Advocacy is no different, and, thankfully, it's much less complicated than engineering or medicine. The following steps will help you (and your colleagues) focus your advocacy work.

#### **Identify key issues.**

Through your daily endeavors, you've developed first-hand knowledge of what works well, what could work better, and what *really* doesn't work at all. Use your experience to pinpoint where you want to focus your energy. Formal avenues for staff and client feedback, such as surveys or focus groups, can help identify agency-wide advocacy issues.

---

You have support!  
The National HCH Council policy and advocacy page [www.nhchc.org/Advocacy](http://www.nhchc.org/Advocacy) contains dozens of publications on current policy issues and recommendations. Use this information to inform your advocacy priorities remain up-to-date on policy developments.

---

### Identify solutions.

While it's often helpful to point out systemic problems, it's even better to prepare yourself with specific solutions. Determine what common sense changes would make programs work better for those they are intended to serve. Identify "bright spots" that policymakers might use as a model.

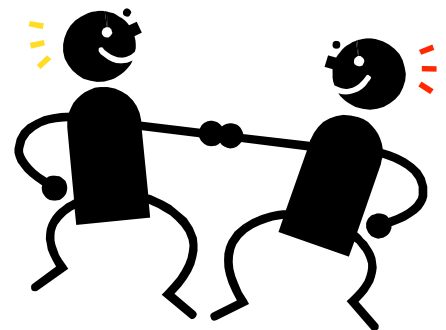
### Identify key players.

Quite likely, many individuals or organizations already are involved in any issue you choose for your advocacy: other agencies that do similar work, politicians, public employees, or people in the community who recognize the need for policy change. Do your research, and reach out to form alliances. Public officials or community stakeholders that strongly agree with your position can be important resources for your efforts. It's equally important to identify potential opponents and develop answers to their arguments.

Which policymakers are best positioned to advance your issue? In some cases, you might know the Chair of the appropriate legislative committee and can get in touch with that office directly. In other instances it may take longer to know where to go. Policy decisions rarely rest with just one person, but certainly some legislators are more influential than others (see Advo-Kit section 3 for more information). Contact those you already know and work from there. Ask them to recommend other points of contact and to help arrange introductions.

### Build relationships ahead of time.

Don't wait until there's a crisis to contact public officials. Make the effort to establish relationships now. Contact the office of your legislator to introduce yourself and your project. Express appreciation for any past support. Inform the office of relevant news articles or events. Invite lawmakers to attend tours or other events at your organization. Simple communication can establish rapport and trust that will pay dividends in the future.



---

### **Make use of what gets attention.**

External events – planned or unexpected – often open windows of opportunity for policy change. Perhaps a news story points out the dysfunction of particular program or highlights a local family in need. Maybe a local organization releases a new report or the legislature holds a hearing about a particular problem. If an issue of interest is suddenly hot in your area, jump on it as a way to advance your priority issues.

### **Put the Plan into Action**

*Advocacy can take many forms depending on your time, resources and goals. The following provides strategies and considerations for some common advocacy activities.*

#### **Write to your elected official.**

Actual mail sent to public officials is often delayed for weeks due to screening, so submit your letter by email or fax (you can find this information on their websites). Be clear and succinct in your letter: identify who you are, that you live in his or her district, the issue or legislation that you are concerned with, the action you request, and the rationale for your request. You generally do not want to go over a page. Using any statistics you may have and personal stories in your letter will be most compelling, as will providing information on the impact of the issue or legislation in the official's district. Use the sample letter in figure 1 to guide you.

#### **Call your elected official.**

Do not be intimidated by the prospect of calling your representative's office. Your opinion as a constituent is incredibly important and it is taken very seriously.

Begin your call by introducing yourself and indicating you are a constituent in his/her district. Briefly explain the purpose of your call and ask for the appropriate staff person who handles that issue. . (Note: staff are key allies in developing relationships so get to know them, and do not expect to speak with the member directly). Describe your issue to the staff person, your position, and your request and gauge how much more information is needed based on his/her response. From here, the conversation

---

Find your legislator by calling the Capitol Switchboard toll-free at 1 (877) 210-5351 or by going to [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) or [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov). Save the number in your phone and bookmark your Representatives' pages!

---

---

If you would like to email Congressional Staff, do not ask for the email directly. Offices often will not give this information out. Instead, ask them to spell the name of the staff and use the following standard formats to determine the email address.

#### **House of Representatives:**

firstname.lastname@mail.house.gov

#### **Senate:**

firstname\_lastname@

lastname of senator.senate.gov

---

may develop into a longer one, or it may be over in a few minutes. If there is no policy staff available, leaving a voicemail or a message with the receptionist is appropriate, although you should follow up within a day or two.

### **Invite a public official to tour your project.**

The services provided by your project are invaluable to the community and will be compelling to policy makers—make sure they can see your work for themselves. A tour of your facility is a very effective way to demonstrate the positive impact of your project as well as highlight barriers to access and unmet need.

To invite a policy maker to a tour, contact the official's office. Each office has its own process for formal invitations but the receptionist (or staff person you've gotten to know) can provide the needed information. A formal invitation letter that includes an agenda is generally acceptable but make sure to check with the office and work with their schedule.

The visit agenda should be tailored to the issues you want to discuss, the services you provide, and the official's time constraints. As you walk through your project, introduce members of your staff and describe the work they do, making sure to highlight relevant policy issues and any problems you are having providing services to your clients. Invite relevant staff and consumers to join you for a discussion and allow for questions. Depending on time, a formal presentation of accomplishments, issues, or experiences by stakeholders at your project can also be effective. Most importantly: Ensure a policy discussion during the site visit. The tour is an excellent way to build a relationship, but it is also an opportunity to come back to identifying key issues: what is working well, what could be working better, and what is *really* not working at all.

### **Testify at a public hearing.**

There are many opportunities at the state and local level to testify publicly. Public hearings on proposed legislation are common and easy to join. Determine when and where these hearings are held and try to make the time for them. Often hearings are published in local newspapers or on

---

### **Consumers make excellent advocates!**

An individual currently or formerly experiencing homelessness commands credibility on the issues of homelessness that simply cannot be replicated. Facilitating consumer involvement is also empowering, clinically helpful, and consistent with the principles of self-determination. HCH projects should provide the support needed to include consumers in the activities listed throughout this section, such as opportunities to learn about policy issues, assistance in writing letters or testimony, and transportation.

---



legislative websites, or advocacy groups may circulate a notice. They can be an excellent opportunity to publicly advocate directly to government officials in a formal setting. Being present to counter the testimony of potential opponents is also critical. If you are unable to attend in person, consider submitting written testimony ahead of time.

### **Comment on proposed regulations.**

Many laws require executive agencies to develop regulations that provide further detail on how programs will be implemented. These regulations are often overlooked opportunities, but can be equally important as laws themselves. Regulations are published in a formal registry by the relevant agency and are followed by a comment period during which the public can voice concerns. Signing up to receive emails from relevant agencies can help you stay informed about upcoming regulations. Take advantage of the opportunity to comment formally if regulations impacting your project or your clients are released.

### **Develop or join coalitions.**

Working together with other organizations is an effective way of maximizing impact, being efficient with time, and combining a wide range of expertise. Join forces with local homeless coalitions, poverty advocates, and health care advocates and communicate with policy makers as a group. If there are no such coalitions in your area, establish one and invite other like-minded organizations to join you.

### **Distribute a petition.**

Petitions can be quite effective, both to gauge public opinion and to organize consumers who may not have the resources to engage in other forms of advocacy. A thousand signatures can certainly get an official's attention, especially on the local level.

### **Organize a voter registration drive.**

Many of the people served by our project (and some of the staff) are not registered to vote. The result is that their voice is often not considered by public officials. Many consumers are unsure if they are even eligible to vote. An organized voter registration drive can combat this. Consumers make very effective volunteers for the registration drive and can empower others to remain active in advocacy. As a non-profit organization, do not provide explicit support for a candidate or specific legislation, but there are no restrictions on facilitating voter registration.

---

Note: 501(c)(3) organizations cannot explicitly endorse candidates and have limits on endorsing specific legislation. But there is **no restriction on voter registration or on educating people about issues.**

---

## Mobilize others.

Homeless service providers are not the only community members concerned about social policy. Many of our friends, family, and neighbors have similar beliefs and many others have not thought much about the issue. Take the time to discuss advocacy issues in your community and forward information and action alerts to those who are interested.

---

Sign up for *The Mobilizer* to stay informed and receive action alerts on advocacy opportunities!  
[www.nhchc.org/mobilizer.html](http://www.nhchc.org/mobilizer.html)

---

Figure 1. Sample letter to elected official

Dear Congressman Van Hollen:

My name is Mary Smith. I am a constituent in your district and an outreach worker at a federally qualified health center (FQHC). Our clinic provides medical care and behavioral health services to individuals experiencing homelessness throughout Maryland – services critical to all areas of the state.

I am writing today to urge you to oppose cuts to Medicaid and health centers, which are currently being considered as part of deficit reduction. These programs not only provide needed services but also help reduce federal and state expenditures on health care, and are very cost-efficient programs. Any reductions in federal funding only pass these costs onto states, beneficiaries, and providers, and ultimately make it more difficult for people to remain stable in health, employment and housing.

Medicaid and health centers are essential to a wide range of individuals and families. Through my work, I see the great difficulties my uninsured patients have obtaining access to specialty care, surgery, and other basic services that we cannot provide in a primary care setting. I also see many more people coming to us for services, but we simply don't have the resources to meet the current need. Please help health centers continue to provide these services and ensure that Medicaid remains a strong program.

I appreciate your past support of health centers and Medicaid and am hoping this support will continue. Reducing our deficit is important but we cannot do so by cutting programs that are literally saving the lives of people in our communities. As a health center employee, my job, my patients, and the health of my community depend on continued federal support. Please oppose any cuts to health centers or Medicaid and use your leadership position to encourage your colleagues to do the same. Thanks so much.

Mary Smith  
123 Main Street  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
(410) 555-1212



## Next Steps

Now that you have a plan in mind, let's put it into action by contacting a key policymaker. Section 5 of the Advo-Kit will give you helpful tips on how to schedule, prepare for, and conduct a successful meeting.