

SMALL AGENCY LEGISLATIVE TOOL KIT

A Step by Step Guide to Advocacy



A Minnesota NAHRO Publication

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STEP 1

WHO REPRESENTS ME?



Small agencies, including commissioners, staff and residents, are a valuable and reliable resource for legislators to make informed decisions. Your voice matters!

The first step for advocacy is to find out who our state and federal legislators are. This section provides you information for federal and state legislators.

FEDERAL

At the federal level, Minnesota is represented by two Senators and eight Representatives. The link below will take you to Minnesota Senators and Representatives.

<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/MN#representatives>

The Legislative branch of the federal government is one of three branches. The link below will provide information about the roles of the three branches of the federal government.

<https://www.usa.gov/branches-of-government>

STATE

The Minnesota Legislature has an easy way to find out who represents you and how to call, email or write to a legislator, with helpful guidance as to how to address letters. The first link will enable you to enter your zip code to determine your State Senator and State Representative. The second link provides information as to how to contact them.

<https://www.gis.leg.mn/iMaps/districts/>

<https://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/faq/faqtoc?id=47>

GUIDANCE FOR WORKING WITH CONGRESSIONAL AND STATE STAFF

It is important to work with the staff who works on housing issues or is responsible to provide information to the legislator when the legislator is not available. You may need to call the legislator's office to find out who key staff people are; they do change often. Once identified, offer that you are available for information if needed. If possible, be familiar with the bill number for relevant legislation. They are called House Files or Senate Files. Minnesota NAHRO can assist with this.

STEP 2

WHAT DO I SAY?

Build a positive relationship with legislators as you would any customer of your agency. Be a resource. Don't underestimate your ability to educate and inform. Be yourself!



The second step for advocacy is to shape your message. This section provides a basic template to shape your messaging as well as some guidance when writing or speaking to a legislator.

TALKING TO LEGISLATORS

First, it is best to address legislators with their title, for both state and federal offices. “Senator _____, I am calling today to talk about housing in my community”. Or, “Representative _____, thank you for meeting with me”.

In general, be direct, yet conversational without jargon or too much detail. Always be honest and admit problems where justified. Relate an issue through a specific “story” associated with the issue at hand, and have some data to back it up.

START POSITIVE AND THANK THE LEGISLATOR

Next, it is always appropriate to thank a legislator for their advocacy on behalf of your jurisdiction, and especially if the legislator has been a supporter of housing legislation affecting your jurisdiction.

SHARE SOME FACTS

The most persuasive arguments show the impact of legislative proposals on your legislator’s District or State. You can use data and real life stories. Your direct experience is always a good place to start and preparing some basic facts about what is happening is very effective. Sharing stories about the people you serve “puts a face” on the issue and can be a powerful way to explain the impact.

Preparing a one page handout with local impact data regarding the potential benefits and harm of legislative proposals is a good way to back up your message. It also established credibility to your position while informing the legislators. The handout can be attached to an email or provided to the legislator/staff in person. Here are some ideas of data that may be useful:

- Agency program data;
- Minnesota Housing Partnership information profiling the housing characteristics by legislative districts at

<http://mhponline.org/publications/legislative-districts-profiles>;

- Data from local studies or housing market data;
- National, regional and state legislative positions (e.g., NAHRO, other affiliations) ;
- Timely legislative updates and action alerts through the year (often contains helpful talking points);
- Traditional or social media.

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT; “THE ASK”

Be specific as to what you want to happen. Here is an example:

- I am writing to request that you vote for/against House File/Senate File No. 1234. There are many benefits to this proposal, including....-OR-.....I have many concerns about this legislation because.....

Provide specific examples of the impacts of the proposal. Some ideas are:

- Identify a recipient of the affected program and share their story.
- Share a recent media article which accurately represents the issue or impact of the legislation.
- Specific data points as discussed above.

Messaging should follow a basic template of stating the position first, then following it up with supporting facts. Here is an example:

- Over 100 families will not be able to live in an affordable home because of the reduction in administrative fees.
 - Reducing the fee to 75% means eliminates flexibility to serve more families.
 - This will affect over 50 children.

STEP 3

HOW DO I SAY IT?



Contacting your elected officials on a regular basis can be done in many ways; email, phone calls, and in person meetings. The more they get to know you the better. Many legislators hold local meetings or have local offices, so you do not have to go to Saint Paul or Washington DC to meet them in person.

The third step for advocacy is to figure out the best way to convey your message, either in person, in writing or on the phone. This section recommends tips on different forms of communication and how to communicate with legislators.

WAYS TO COMMUNICATE

Contacting your elected officials on a regular basis can be done in many ways; email, phone calls, and in person meetings. The more they get to know you the better. You do not have to be in Saint Paul or Washington D.C. to meet with your legislator. Many legislators hold local meetings or have local offices. When it comes to fast and timely communication, emails are the best. Letters are best attached to emails permitting you to convey the bottom line in the body of the email and then attaching the letter along with a handout or other informative piece. Phone calls too are appropriate for follow up or to convey a position. Legislators often count emails, letters, and calls when deciding on legislation.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

No matter in person, in writing, or on the phone, it is always helpful to prepare. The first piece of information is to find out legislator committee assignments and bill sponsors. The links in Step 1 will be helpful to finding out your legislator committee assignments and the sponsors of legislation. The second piece of information is simply to understand how long they have been a legislator and what their interests are, including special causes, charities, or philosophical approach. It is also wise to spend some time anticipating questions from legislators. Sometimes the back and forth of responding to questions is just as compelling as the message itself. Additionally, it will be helpful to know their legislative record on past decisions; voting records can be obtained at:

<https://votesmart.org/>

IN PERSON MEETINGS

The personal visit is very effective. It helps connect your message with names with faces. In communication afterward, you will have established yourself as a known concerned constituent. If your legislator is not available, ask to meet the legislative assistant. She/he can generally be expected to be at least as well informed as your legislator and may have more influence that you suspect.

Be prepared that the length of the in person meetings at the state or federal capitols, can be short, ten to fifteen minutes. It is therefore important to be brief and concise, but be conversational. Avoid the jargon and tell them your "ask" and why. Share the story and share a handout if necessary.

Finally, it is very important to be honest, but not argumentative. Legislators do want to hear your point of view.

Here are some do's and don'ts for in person meetings:

Do:

- Address your Senator or Representative properly. Make eye contact as opposed to taking notes.
- Identify yourself immediately. Public officials meet too many people to remember everyone.
- Know the status of the legislation. Refer to a bill by number when appropriate.
- Practice saying what you've got to say so that it's fluent.
- Stay on message especially if your time is limited.
- Be conscious of time, be courteous and reasonable.

- Provide easy to read literature, and highlight important facts and arguments.
- Follow up with representatives, especially those who were undecided or needed more information.
- Write a thank you note after the meeting.

Don't:

- Don't apologize for taking his or her time.
- Don't exaggerate or mislead legislators or staff.
- Don't be afraid to defend an issue.
- Don't limit your options.
- Don't get wordy. Keep it simple.
- Don't argue or back recalcitrant legislators into a corner as they may cause them to take a definite position against you.
- Don't deliver ultimatums.
- Don't pretend to speak for everyone.
- Don't give up!

PHONE CALLS

Phone calls can be an effective tool to remind the legislator of previous contacts or to follow up on a request for information. If the legislator is not available, speak with the legislative assistant. When the legislator or his/her assistant is on the line, give your name, where in the district you live, and any other pertinent information. State the reason for your call and use bill numbers when appropriate. Briefly state your position and explain what action you wish the legislator to take. If the

legislator is undecided, offer to furnish information that relates to your views and then follow through. If the legislator supports your position, express your appreciation and thanks. If the legislator opposes your position, do not argue or be antagonistic. Simply request that he/she give your view further consideration.

Timing is everything. Make your call at a strategic time - just before a vote, for instance, or immediately following action by your legislator in support of your cause. Write when you know a particular piece of legislation is pending before a committee or when a bill is about to come before the full House or Senate. Many of the same Do's and Don'ts for face-to-face meetings are applicable to telephone calls.

EMAILS AND LETTERS

Emails and letters are frequently used as a main source of assessing the views of their constituencies. The amount of mail on a particular piece of legislation frequently helps determine the legislators' approach to an issue. One well-written letter will often prove weightier than a formal petition with many signatures. For this reason, it is generally considered better to express your opinion as an individual rather than as a member of an organization whose positions may already be well known to legislators.

Basic Do's of Corresponding with your Legislator:

- Do use the appropriate title of the person you are addressing.
- Do identify yourself in the first paragraph. Personalize the letter as much as you can (avoid form letters).
- Do identify your reason for writing. State your position on the legislation and include a bill number whenever possible.
- Do use facts, but don't overload the letter with them. Facts tend to validate a letter and illustrate that your position has been thought out.

- Do keep it short. Write the letter about one issue.
- Do include your return address on the letter.
- Do ask for a reply. Indicate that a reply including the legislator's position on the issue would be appreciated.

Where Do I Find Information to Send Emails to Legislators?

For federal legislation, the national NAHRO website has an easy to use "advocacy center", which prepopulates the body of an email and enables you to personalize it to local circumstances. This will take less than five minutes to send an email! This site is available to non-members as well as members.

<http://www.nahro.org/nahro-advocacy>

For Minnesota legislation, go the Minnesota NAHRO website for the state's annual "Legislative Platform" and other relevant information about various issues. The website will also have sample language for emails on proposed legislation: <http://wmmnahro.com/> See Step 1 to locate your legislators and their email addresses.

How Do I Address a Letter or an Email to Legislators?

If you are writing a letter

STEP 4

WHEN DO I SAY IT?



Building a positive ongoing relationship with legislators is important and easy to do!

The fourth step for advocacy is to establish a consistent positive relationship with legislators. This section recommends some ideas to educate and inform legislators about the relevance of your work.

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP

A positive, ongoing relationship with your legislators and staff helps during “crunch time” while they are in session. They will know who you are, and you will know if they support or are against certain issues. This will be important when time is limited during legislative sessions and when you are busy at work. It also helps to establish the agency as a reliable resource for information.

Here are some ideas to consider:

- Inviting legislators to your agency for an event or just to introduce the Board and staff is important. Hold the meeting while they are not in session to provide an atmosphere of learning about an issue versus debating legislation.
- Invite legislators to take a tour of a property or other site related visits; residents vote!
- Make it a routine to celebrate community successes;
- Create brief handouts with data/facts about programs, including:
 - Who you serve (numbers & types of families, elderly, persons with disabilities, children, etc.);
 - Needs in the community (waiting lists, requests for shelter, home repair assistance, etc.);
 - Programs and services offered, including positive information about economic outcomes, housing

improvements, job growth, or other community impacts;

- Create a routine of “checking in” with legislators; a short email about how a program helped a local senior or family or sharing media articles.

BUILDING A LOCAL PARTNERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Make sure your community is aware of how important your services are. Celebrate the successes and use city newsletters, social media and other public relation tools to convey the value and impact. Publish one page annual reports on your website. Talk to city leaders. In the long run, creating a positive public perception of the need for your services will help educate legislators.

Are there partnerships with public, non-profit, private or other community organizations that can be tapped to provide additional voices on legislative issues? Odds are members of these organizations are well known to the legislators and these community members can provide another “lens” as to why your agency is vital for community success.

STATE, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL NAHRO RESOURCES

Minnesota NAHRO provides these resources:

- Minnesota NAHRO hosts an annual “Day at the Capital” event which provides an easy way to meet your legislators in person. Often times, you are paired up with fellow colleagues who have similar interests.
- The Minnesota NAHRO Legislative Committee is open to all members. They meet routinely via conference call before, during, and state and federal sessions.

- Information sessions and updates at conferences. Consider these events for both commissioners and staff to attend.
- A dedicated website page to legislative issues [INSERT LINK]

North Central Regional Council (NCRC) provides these resources:

- Become a NCRC member; only \$75/year.
- Sign up for e-list alerts.
- <http://www.ncrcnahro.org/Advocacy-Action-Center> provides up to date information on legislative information, tips to contact congressional leaders, Capitol Hill Basics, and summaries of past votes on relevant legislation.

National NAHRO provides these resources:

- Become a NAHRO member; only \$1.41 per unit, with a minimum of \$100.
- Annual Legislative Conference in Washington D.C. A delegation of Minnesota members attends on an annual basis.
- Sign up for Action Alerts, the NAHRO Monitor, and the blog site, <https://nahroblog.org/>
- Professional development webinars.

STEP 5

KEEP AT IT!



What's at stake here? Strong relationships with state and federal legislators can lead to a better understanding of community needs, which in turn creates an opportunity for legislation that helps your programs and community.

Legislation affects your operating budgets, for better or worse. These decisions can also affect the ability of your agency to start other programs your community may need or want.

If you do not tell "your story", someone else may tell it for you.

Small Agencies understand the housing and community development needs and the challenges at the local level, and you are in the best position to tell the story.

APPENDIX

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

- 1. Form letter to a legislator*
- 2. An example template of a handout*
- 3. How a bill becomes law; state and federal*
- 4. Advocacy versus lobbying*

1. Form letter to a legislator

[Date]

[Your Name]

[Address]

[City, State, Zip]

[Email ID]

[Phone Number]

The Honorable Senator or Representative [Name of Senator or Representative]

[Room #] [Name] _____ Office Building

United States Senate [or State Office Building Address]

Washington, DC 20510 [or Saint Paul, Minnesota 55155]

RE: _____

Dear Name of Senator or Representative],

I am writing to you about the

I urge you to [support/oppose] [House File or Senate File No. XXX] because
_____.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Your Name]

2. An example template of a handout

ORGANIZATION LOGO

XXXXX HOUSING AND REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

[INSERT PROGRAM NAME]

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Public Housing was established to provide safe, decent, and affordable rental housing for eligible low-income families. The clients we serve include but are not limited to the elderly, persons with disabilities, persons with mental illness, and families with children. Residents pay 30% of their income towards their rent.

SUBTITLE TALKING POINT [Describe how the program meets a local need]

TEXT

SUBTITLE TALKING POINT [Describe positive impacts]

TEXT

SUBTITLE TALKING POINT [Describe other relevant information]

TEXT

CONSIDER INSERTING A PHOTO OR A TEXT BOX FOR CONTACT INFORMATION OR QUICK FACTS ABOUT YOUR AGENCY

3. How a bill becomes law; state and federal

Minnesota:

<https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hinfo/govser/GOVSER6.pdf>

Federal:

<https://www.usa.gov/how-laws-are-made>

4. Advocacy versus lobbying

The following is an excerpt from national NAHRO's Advocacy Toolkit

Education vs. Public Relations vs. Advocacy vs. Lobbying

Often, the terms "advocacy," "education," "public relations," and "lobbying" are confused. Following are the definitions we'll be using for purposes of this workbook:

- Education: In many cases, a better understanding of what you do to promote decent, safe, affordable housing and economic opportunity in viable, sustainable communities. Education involves providing general information about the services you provide in the community. The goal here is to be sure people know what you do.
- Public Relations: Experts look at public relations in a variety of different ways. For our purposes, we'll consider public relations to be one step beyond education. Instead of simply putting information out there, the goal in a public relations effort is to promote a positive impression. One of the strategies most associated with public relations is media outreach, although

testimonials from supporters and engagement of outside groups can be helpful as well.

- Advocacy: For our purposes, advocacy is different from public relations in that it is about pleading or arguing for a specific cause. The key here is the term “specific.” Effective advocacy campaigns are oriented around a need, whether it’s funding, policy change or even just attention from a decision maker.
- Lobbying: Finally, lobbying is, for our purposes, even more specific than advocacy. In the vast majority of cases, lobbying is usually done by professionals whose role it is to keep track of the many legislative activities happening in a state capitol or Washington DC. They meet individually with key legislators and staff to discuss the merits (or downsides) of minute details of legislation. Lobbyists may often inform advocacy efforts (for example, by providing details on the status of legislation).

Note that while federal law clearly states that no federal funds may be used for lobbying, ***it does not in any way restrict the PHA’s traditional role of educating and advocating on critical issues.*** Government officials rely on your expertise and insights as they make decisions about housing policy and funding. Without you, they will have little or no idea how their actions will impact their constituents. See the NAHRO site at www.nahro.org for more on this important issue. State laws differ as to these issues, so be sure to familiarize yourself with them as well.