



Advocacy Education Series: Navigating the Legislative Process

Each legislature has subtle nuances and particularities that set it apart. Take the time to develop an understanding of these particularities and the history of your issue to ensure you are as effective as possible in your advocacy.

Be patient. It takes hard work and a great deal of effort to pass meaningful legislation. For the vast majority of the time, it may feel like nothing is happening or that things are being undone. Remember that bills very rarely pass in one session and trust that you are making progress. Celebrate the small, incremental victories.

Build relationships. Having a solid relationship with your elected officials is by far the most successful way to influence policy. If your initial interactions with your legislator go well, it may be the beginning of a long-term relationship. Be as helpful as possible and encourage legislative offices to use you as their go-to resource.

Learn from experienced advocates. Each legislature has nuances and processes that will not be immediately noticeable to first-time advocates. In order to be as successful as possible, defer to the expertise of those with more experience as you learn the ropes.

Tailor the issue and your message to the legislator. If possible, try to frame your issue in a way that positively affects your legislators' priority issue(s), personal passion, or career prior to becoming a legislator. A 'Yes' vote is what matters; the reason why they support it is less important.

Learn the history of your issue. Most likely, this is not the first time your legislators are hearing about your issue and what you are asking them to do. Learn why previous attempts failed, who the opposition was, and what their talking points were. Once you know the history, be prepared to address it with data to back up your position.

Understand the current political climate. Political and economic climates within a legislature, state, or county can have a dramatic effect on what passes. While criminal justice reform is a fundamentally bipartisan issue, the political makeup of the legislature and the individual backgrounds of key legislative players, such as committee chairs, should be taken into consideration when developing messaging and other key points. Pinpoint the specific arguments most likely to persuade your audience.

Choose your targets wisely. Know where your bill is at all times and know who is overseeing its progression so that you can target the right people at the right time. Gaining the support of legislative committee chairs is key to advancing any bill. Don't ignore the legislators that are onboard with your issue, but also focus your time educating and persuading those opposed to your position about why they should agree with you.

Offer solutions. By offering a solid solution, you are able to steer the issue to your preferred resolution and show the legislator that you are willing to work with them to implement change.

For additional guidance or questions, please contact Monica L. Reid, Senior Director of Advocacy, at mreid@nacdl.org.