



Advocacy Education Series

What is Advocacy and Why Should I Care?

Advocacy, in its simplest terms, is letting government officials know what you think about current or pending policy or legislation.

Why you should care is also fairly simple and usually falls into one of two general reasons; the government makes the rules, and the government holds the purse strings. Don't like a rule? Talk to the government. Want a new rule? Talk to the government. You like a rule, but someone else is trying to change it? Yup, talk to the government. Need funding? Etcetera ad nauseam, talk to the government.

The good news is that it's relatively easy to influence government policy because not many people take the time and effort to do so. In other good news, a great deal of criminal justice policy happens on the state level, where even less people are involved. A fair amount of policy and legislation happens because one or a handful of concerned citizens decided to have an honest and meaningful discussion with their legislators. They explained the problem and then offered a solution.

Another bit of good news is that legislators want to hear from you. Legislative offices want to meet with you, take your phone calls, and receive your letters, e-mails, and faxes. Legislators need to know what's going on in their districts. The best way to do that is by having constituents tell them. Legislative offices can't read your mind. They would much rather have a conversation with you prior to vote than receive an angry phone call after a vote. A legislator certainly won't always do what you ask, but they *will* always listen.

Some people worry that they don't know enough about a particular issue to converse intelligently with a legislator. If this is how you feel, you couldn't be more wrong. When it comes to political issues, legislators are generally aware of only the broad strokes. There are too many varied and complicated political issues out there for a legislator to be an expert on all of them. It is humanly impossible! A legislator will be passionate and extremely knowledgeable about one or two issues, but that's usually it. For all other issues he or she seeks outside expertise. For criminal justice issues, that's you! Be the resource your legislator needs you to be and there is no limit to what you can accomplish in the legislative arena.



TIP: While you are the expert regarding criminal justice issues for your elected officials, there **WILL** be times when you don't know the answer to a question. Don't be afraid to tell a legislator that you don't know something. Far too many advocates make the mistake of 'winging' an answer to a question. Don't. Ever. Do. This. Ever. If a legislator asks you a surprising question, or if you simply blank on an answer you usually know, admit it! You are human, these things happen. Anything you say (*That information has slipped my mind, I'll research that information and get back to you, I'll have to check those numbers, etc.*) is better than inaccurate information. Policy makers need to trust their resources. Mislead your legislator *just once* and you've damaged your reputation as a reliable and trusted source *forever*.

Something else to keep in mind is that legislators like personal stories that they can relate to, and that they can relate to others. Facts and figures are great for making decisions, and they certainly have their place in the advocacy process, but very few people are persuaded by facts alone. For your best bet, tell a personal story. Use language that your legislator and/or staffers can understand. Make the story relatable to everyday people if you can. If your story is good and evokes emotion, your legislator will retell it during speeches, to the media, and to other legislators.

Data, polls, and research is also often looked at with a grain of skepticism by legislative offices. Special interest groups, think-tanks, and biased research entities are particularly adept at skewing numbers to serve their own interests, be it for public favor, funding levels, or just to make the other side look bad. Legislators also see a great deal of facts and figures on a daily basis. It doesn't take long for this information to become convoluted, confusing, and muddled into a meaningless pile of numbers, charts, and graphs. But a good heartwarming (or alarming) tale will resonate with a legislator for a long time.