



# Advocacy Education Series

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## Advocacy Mistakes to Avoid

Engaging in advocacy is relatively straightforward, but there are a handful of mistakes that rookie advocates make. The good news is that these mistakes are easy to avoid.

**Learn the System.** Legislative bodies don't work exactly the way you learned in high school civics class. While the general *idea* of how legislatures work are similar, each state (federal system, as well) all have subtle nuances and particularities that set them apart from others. Many advocates don't take the time to learn how the system works. Not learning the system leads to good ideas failing and a great deal of wasted time. Learn the system by getting involved with more seasoned advocates. Pay attention to what works and what doesn't. Ask questions about previous efforts and where they stalled or were shelved. Find out who the key players are in your legislature. You may think you know, but when you find out who really runs the show you may be in for a big surprise!

**All You Need is 'Yes.'** If you are taking the time to advocate on behalf of an issue, policy, or piece of legislation, then there is a good chance that passion or a sense of duty/fairness is driving you. We all care deeply about our causes, but that doesn't mean that everyone else will. Too often advocates make the mistake of trying to 'convert' a policymaker rather than just getting a 'yes' from them. If you think that legislation should pass because it will make the criminal justice system fairer for persons accused of a crime, but they think the same legislation should pass because it will save the state money, then you should take the yes-vote and stop talking. Agreeing on the overall idea is much more important than agreeing on the reasoning behind it.

**Seal the Deal.** When visiting with a legislator, make sure you aren't just hearing what you want to hear. A legislator saying, 'I want to help you,' is not a commitment. A legislator may nod, completely agree with everything you are saying, note how serious of an issue it is, and empathize with the plight of those affected. But unless you've asked the legislator for *specific* action, and they answered in a yes or no fashion, make no assumptions. Listen carefully to the words your legislator uses, be polite but don't settle for vague answers or



statements. You are meeting with the legislator because you need him or her to do *something*. Don't leave the office without knowing for sure how your legislator intends to move forward with your request.

**Follow up, Follow Through.** Legislators and their offices can easily group constituents into one of two groups: Those who are serious, and those who aren't. Make sure you fall into the 'serious' category by delivering what you say you will, and by not going away. Legislators meet with a great deal of constituents throughout the year, but the vast majority of those constituents don't follow up. During the meeting they may make promises to forward additional information, or to follow up with district staff, or to follow-up with the office after a future date or occurrence. If you make any similar promise but don't follow through, your legislator is not going to chase after you; they are going to write you off as 'not serious' and focus their precious time and energy on those constituents who have proved themselves 'serious.' By doing what you say you will do, you show your legislative office that they need to pay attention to you and your issue. They may not always agree with you, but they will be responsive in dealing with you. Following up, following through, and not going away are what separates the 'serious' and the 'not serious' in the legislative world.

**It's Not Personal.** Legislators are required to balance the differing opinions of competing interests. It's a simple fact of life that not everyone can win all the time. Even if your legislator is 100% on your side, at some point your issue is going to take a back seat to some other group or idea. Your legislator has a lot of people to keep happy. And remember, your issue is a top priority for you, but most likely not for everyone. Be gracious when your legislator is able to help you, but more importantly be understanding when things don't go your way. Never burn bridges. Politics is filled with compromise. If you can compromise graciously and be pleasurable to work with, your legislator will remember and will want to help you in the future.

**Be Patient.** It takes time to change a law or to get a new one passed, and rightfully so. Any adoption of new law or changes to current law needs to be carefully and thoughtfully considered before being implemented. The law of unintended consequences is a powerful force that rarely works to anyone's benefit and is merciless as to who it ensnares in its grip. Government moves at its own pace. It generally moves quickly when we need time, and moves slowly when we need action. Unfortunately, that is the nature of the beast. For the

vast majority of the time, it will feel like nothing is happening. In fact, sometimes it will feel like things are actually being undone. But rest assured that things are happening, just not at a pace the rest of us are afforded to emulate and still remain employed. And remember that bills very rarely pass in one session. It takes hard work and a great deal of effort to pass meaningful legislation, which is a good thing. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it!

**Be Flexible.** Legislation rarely passes exactly as drafted. Once legislation is drafted it is passed around to other legislative offices that all get the opportunity to put their mark on it. Those other legislators have other groups and individuals they represent who have skin in the game and whose concerns need and will be addressed. When meeting with other stakeholders, know where you can compromise and be firm on areas where you can't. If giving up a small piece of your proposal keeps a major point intact, then so be it. It's all part of the legislative process. You should also be ready to work with different legislators and different groups to increase your odds of success. There are often strikingly similar proposals floating around concurrently. Whether one fails and the other gains traction could be due to political reasons, legislative alliances, party power, personal relationships, etc. By being flexible you maximize the potential of victory dramatically.