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Advocacy Inspired by Personal Passion

Editor's note: Before I had a child with Down syndrome, the last time I visited the state capitol was in 1974. I was nine years old and my mother decided to spend a mid-winter break from school visiting museums and historic places around the Twin Cities. A few years ago, I began to realize how public policy on education, health care and more affected my daughter and our family. Now I'm on a first name basis with my state representatives, testify before legislative committees, speak at news conferences and — something really important — know where to park when I go to the state capitol. (It's amazing how worrisome that is for first-time advocates!)

You don't need a law degree to become an effective advocate. You just need a few passionate people who can engage and motivate people to come together for a cause. Here are stories of people that fit the bill.

Heidi Moore, Atlanta, GA

Heidi Moore is the mother of five-year-old Jacob. She has no formal public policy training; but, back in 2003, she and another mom sprang into action when they saw a threat to their families' well being. In an effort to increase revenue without raising taxes, the Georgia legislature proposed parental fees for the families of more than 6,000 children with special needs who are in the state's Katie Beckett Waiver program and receive therapy and other medical services paid for by Medicaid funds.

In three weeks, Moore put together a rally that brought more than 200 people to the steps of the state capitol to protest. The proposal was defeated. A modified proposal, one that would require only families making more than \$100,000 per year to pay a fee, was introduced this year. It, too, has been defeated after an organized call-in to the governor generated more than 1,000 phone calls in just a few hours. This same group of parents also prevented cuts in reimbursement rates to Medicaid providers.

To what does Moore attribute the success? Personalization. By educating a few key people about the issue, she's been able to have some legislators who will champion the issue. By telling her family's story in newspaper articles and other media coverage, she's putting a face on people who benefit from vital services. Moore makes a point of keeping in touch with both legislators and members of the media by sending her family's annual Christmas newsletter and birthday cards from Jacob and also contacting legislators when they aren't in session. The efforts have paid off as reporters now seek her out for comments, and legislators trust her as a reliable source for credible factual information.

She also sends out action alerts to more than 1,000 addresses in her own e-mail database and connects with several other organizations that have extensive e-mail databases too. “I make the e-mails easy to understand so that people can quickly read them and understand what they need to do. If you make it too hard, people may not take the time to act quickly.”

Troy McCarthy, Ainsworth, Iowa

“Before I became a dad, I voted and followed the issues. All that changed after Nathan was born. He’s taught us what he can do and what we need to do so he can have those opportunities,” says McCarthy, who contacts legislators on issues that are important to him.

When the IDEA reauthorization was being debated, Iowa’s Republican Senator Charles Grassley sent a copy to McCarthy and asked him, as a parent, to comment on it. McCarthy also is a member of the state Governor’s Early Access Council, which gives him another opportunity to directly affect public policy.

“People might not feel they can make a difference, but you never know until you try. Our voices do count.”

Grassroots...From the ground up

Grassroots advocacy engages everyday people, not legislative professionals, in shaping public policy. Grassroots organizing builds a permanent infrastructure for grassroots advocates to take collective action on an issue and develop local leadership. Here’s a how-to plan for mobilizing people for a cause, involving once-reluctant advocates and keeping volunteers coming back.

Mobilization 101

When deciding the mobilizing activities that you will undertake, it’s important to keep volunteer advocates engaged but avoid burning them out. Consider these tips for ensuring that your mobilization strategy hits the mark:

- 1. Dominate something.** Choose tactics that will help set you apart as the dominating force on your issue.
- 2. Do a few things well** rather than many things poorly.
- 3. The more personal the strategy,** the fewer volunteer advocates you need in order to make it effective.
- 4. Force multiply.** Find ways to leverage your existing volunteer advocates to get more volunteer advocates.
- 5. Keep recruiting.** Keep a laser focus on building, sustaining and expanding your base.

6. Follow up. Select strategies that are conducive to reporting back to volunteer advocates. Remember the Planning Ground Rule: If you can't count it, it doesn't exist.

Six Steps for Effective Mobilization

The nuts and bolts of effective mobilization require the following six steps:

1. Recruit: Convince grassroots people that they should get involved. Develop a strong organizing message that inspires advocates to commit. Make sure they know why this is so important.

2. Record: Put systems in place for tracking activity. Make sure you are always building and updating your list. Get e-mail addresses, phone numbers, advocates' interests. Know who is responsible for what.

3. Prepare: Convince volunteer advocates that they can be effective. Give them tools (such as training, sample messages, role play exercises, opportunities for feedback) to be effective.

4. Engage: Ask volunteer advocates for action. Be specific. Give them every detail. Be meticulous about every piece of information. Anticipate questions and answer them in advance. Ask for hard commitments. Give deadlines. From the total number of advocates who give you a hard commitment, expect half of them to follow through.

5. Remind: Even your most committed grassroots volunteers can forget. Remind everyone the day before an action.

6. Report: Let volunteer advocates know the results of your mobilization. Tell them how many people acted with them, how much of an increase that is, how it will build to the future, what the legislator or staff's reaction was, what the legislator's vote was.

Ten Reasons People Don't Advocate

- 1. Time.** Grassroots advocacy is competing with many other demands on people's time. In order to engage grassroots advocates, they must feel that their time is well spent.
- 2. Nobody asked.** Many people have strong feelings about issues and want to be advocates, but they aren't given the opportunity. It's rare that a person will initiate or sustain grassroots advocacy on their own.
- 3. The importance of grassroots advocacy isn't clear.** In times when people are cynical about politics, many grassroots advocates aren't told that their efforts can make a difference.

4. **The activity itself.** Grassroots advocacy can be intimidating. Public policy and the legislative process need to be demystified so that people are not afraid to get involved.
5. **Overburdening grassroots advocates.** Some grassroots mobilization efforts make the mistake of finding good grassroots advocates, only to mobilize them over and over again in a short period of time. This burns out and overwhelms grassroots advocates.
6. **Not reminding grassroots advocates.** It isn't enough to send one e-mail, fax or letter. If grassroots advocates are going to be active, they need reminders and follow-up. The more personal (phone calls rather than additional e-mail), the better.
7. **Unrealistic expectations.** Grassroots advocates want to succeed and feel that they are contributing. Giving advocates activities that cannot succeed will push them away.
8. **Changing expectations and assignments.** In the fast-paced world of public policy, grassroots advocates can be nimble...but they can't be magicians. Well-planned grassroots advocacy efforts mobilize with this in mind, so that a balance is struck between responsiveness and consistency.
9. **Poor mobilization environment.** If grassroots advocates never have the chance to connect with other advocates, receive incomplete or poor instructions, or never hear back about how the issue fared after a mobilization, they will not continue to advocate.
10. **Lack of appreciation or recognition.** Everybody wants to be appreciated. One can never be thanked too much.

Ten Ways to Keep a Grassroots Advocate Coming Back

1. **Make sure the advocate's first experience is a rewarding one.** Train them thoroughly before they begin their task and take the time to answer any questions they have. Give them ongoing direction and lots of positive feedback.
2. **Make the environment as comfortable as possible.** If your grassroots effort requires that the advocate come to your space, provide a comfortable, clean and well-lit space that is conducive to the work that needs to be done.
3. **Make sure adequate support is available for advocates at all times.** Be available in person or by phone; provide materials that support their efforts; if the advocate is on-line, provide Web-based resources that will help them succeed.

4. **Take special care of your most productive advocates.** All advocates are not created equal. When you find your best people willing to do the toughest jobs, hang onto them and treat them like gold. Avoid over-mobilizing or otherwise burning them out.
5. **Listen to input from your advocates.** Advocates should always feel valued. Ask them how you can do better and take their answers seriously.
6. **Make ample use of thank you notes, your Web site, and if you have one, newsletters.** The more advocates feel connected and supported, the more active they will be.
7. **Maintain consistency in who is communicating with advocates.** Continuity is important to volunteers. People feel more comfortable when they deal with the same person time after time.
8. **Don't become impatient with inexperienced advocates.** There's a good chance they are intimidated by the process, and with some adequate guidance, training, and a couple of successful experiences, they will improve. Consider pairing them with a more experienced advocate for mentoring.
9. **When possible, have VIPs visit with grassroots advocates on occasion.** A visit with VIPs helps rejuvenate, inspire and motivates grassroots advocates.
10. **Make good advocates into an advocacy leader.** The key to organizing is always getting people to take on more responsibility. Make your best advocates coordinators of other advocates. The more people you have recruiting additional advocates, the more advocates you'll have!

*Editor's note: Thanks to **grassroots solutions** for providing these tip lists. Grassroots solutions is a consultant group that teaches people how to engage, organize and mobilize other people to win policy victories, campaigns and shape public opinion. Learn more about them by visiting www.grassrootsolutions.com*