

WEEK 9 – EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

Professors: Bruce Lubotsky Levin, DrPH, MPH & Ardis Hanson, PhD

Earlier this semester, we examined the status quo as individuals and groups accept certain ideological constructs, frames, and language as their reality. Justice White reminds us, "Once I know who I am, then I know what is out there." Our identity as a researcher, a petitioner, an advocate, a family member, or a person is constructed through and by our own interactions with others as well as with texts.

Advocacy is not neutral. It, too, has its own political actor with a policy agenda supported by selected experts and evidence. However, the one thing all advocacy efforts have in common is the desire and need to be effective.

To become an effective advocate, it is important to decide at what level do you wish to advocate. At the individual level, at the systems level. And, too, what is your definition of advocacy?

At the individual level, advocacy is often seen as speaking up for oneself. We agree that this is valuable, as long as you are able to achieve a positive outcome, that is, you are able to achieve an outcome you want for yourself. At the systems level, you are advocating for others, being their voice. That is also valuable, as long as you effectively achieve their expected outcomes using their voice.

There are a number of effective advocacy strategies. We'll provide some resources in the references, but here are a number of the ones we consider important. First and foremost, always clarify your outcomes before you start worrying about how you will effect that change. Too often we worry about how we will get that change accomplished rather than what it is specifically we want to change. Methods are secondary to the primary concern. Again, what specifically do I want to change?

Second, prepare yourself to remain calm when you are involved in debates and heated discussions. Stay focused on your outcomes and stay on track. It is good to identify your triggers, those words or communication strategies that can make you angry or lose focus. Being aware of those triggers can help you remain calm and collected.

Third, know your players. Who is involved in decision-making and at what level is key. Making contact with the right person saves both of you time and energy. It also shows that you have knowledge of an organizational structure and/or the decision-making process. Knowing who has authority also helps you respect the process, the office, and the representative of that office.

Fourth, learn the language. Yes, people use institutional shorthand. But they also need to be gently reminded of the consequences when they dismiss an idea or a person or an action due to a diagnostic text or a quick read of an intended legislation. Show them how a change of language can provide necessary supports and services that can leverage existing resources or funding.

Fifth, invite discussion. This can be tricky because people often focus on the person asking the questions as a problem. Remember the earlier discussion on impression management? People become combative or argumentative when threatened. It is all like to respectfully disagree. Keep the focus on discussion at hand and remember that as an advocate, your conversations and your actions affect people's lives. Connect suggestions and actions to the person or people for whom you are advocating.

Sixth, keep a record of your discussions. Document your requests and decisions that are made before you leave the meeting. Be sure you have a shared understanding of next steps, responsibilities, and any other actions, as well as the time that may be required to complete these. Clarity is important when advocating. Always ask for explanations and examples. And conversely, provide clear explanations and relevant examples when asked.

Seventh, hone your communication skills. When challenging an issue, politeness and flexibility are key. Politeness theory-- and yes, there is such a thing-- formulated in 1978 by Brown and Levinson, addresses how everyone in the conversation can save face. Earlier when we discussed Goffman and impression management, that is, how we appear to others in public, we are really talking about face, the public self-image that we try to protect.

Positive faces win self esteem. Negative face is freedom to act. Both are important components at any social interaction. Hence, cooperation is needed among the participants in a conversation to maintain each other's faces. Knowing politeness strategies can help alleviate tension or conflict in a meeting. Something as simple as shifting the focus of a question from why, which can be seen as an offensive or face-threatening move, to how, which is inviting information and engagement, is one such strategy.

Finally, remember to follow up with actions and stakeholders after participating as an advocate. We'll use the example of a public commission meeting to illustrate. If you are part of an organization, remember to update the members of your organization of what happened at the meeting. If the commission talked about next steps, this should be reported as well so you can prepare for the next series of meetings or deliberations. That is the point of documenting the events of the meeting.

Not only does documentation provide a history of what happened, what was done, and what was not done, it can help you build strategy and provide additional context, perhaps by liaising with other attendees or commission staff. If you attend a public commission meeting as a member of a group or as a single representative or as a public citizen, follow up with a letter to the commissioners thanking them for their time they spent on discussing and/or listening to the issues, and include a few words about the decision if one was made. If you disagreed with their decision, you can gently point out one or two talking points specifically geared to the topic that they may not have considered or they may want to consider in the future.

The same applies when invited to give testimony at a public hearing or when providing comments to agencies. It never hurts to acknowledge the opportunity to provide information or to give comments, and it shows that you have more of an interest in the issue than the general public. People remember people who say thank you for their time.

So where do we advocate? There are a number of different avenues open to you as an advocate. In addition to policy briefs, there are public meetings, invited testimony, and public calls for comments. Similar to the list above, it pays to know what result you want from the meeting.

Public meetings are often announced in newspapers as well as websites of advocacy organizations, and local, state, and federal government sites. Many times, the local cable channel may broadcast public meetings, so keep an eye out for those announcements. If you cannot attend, watch the broadcast and then send a follow-up letter to the group, again thanking them and asking them to read any attached information you are sending to them.

When you are invited to give testimony before a public commission or work group, it is critical that you are cognizant of the players and their public record on the issue or on similar issues. Read, watch, and/or listen to their news coverage. And if they use social media, read and watch them there, too. Again, be clear about your position, what you want to accomplish, and the audiences you want to influence.

Stick to the time limit you are given. And, more importantly, prepare for a shorter time limit. We have found that an original time is usually five minutes. However, if one person goes over by a few seconds, and then another person also goes over, schedules are thrown off.

We have been told to keep our comments to under three minutes or even to one minute. Knowing that in advance, we prepare three versions, all timed for one minute, three minutes, or five minutes. We also limit our handouts to a one-page document with a brief rationale for our argument, three to five key points, a few key references, including URLs, and our contact information.

One avenue for advocacy that is little used, unfortunately, is responding to federal agencies calls for input on state and federal guidelines, as well as treatment protocols and outcomes. For example, the SAMHSA Center for Mental Health Services, CMHS, has had a number of public surveys on how the quality of mental health care is measured. The Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality, AHRQ, which advises the Federal Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services on the efficiency and efficacy of treatments and administrative procedures, also asks for calls on protocols and guidelines.

Currently, AHRQ is asking for comments on Title IV of the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act specifically to identify an initial core set of children's health care quality measures for voluntary use by Medicaid in CHIP programs, implement the CHIPRA Pediatric Quality Measures Program using grants and contracts, evaluate CMS's Quality Demonstration Project awards and create a model children's electronic health record format.

When a federal or state government requests data, particularly for performance measures, it is critically important that these proposed measures capture the needs of consumers and family members. The data collected is used as a basis for the federal grant programs to the states by federal funders to measure the type, quantity, and outcomes of the services that are provided. This is an example of when advocacy is more than just writing a brief or providing testimony. This is providing input to what services are needed so that the states will know how well they are doing at providing these services to children and adolescents with behavioral health problems.

Understanding the scope and impact of a protocol or guideline is a particularly good opportunity to learn about how these policy documents are delivered and to practice developing arguments that will carry weight with policymakers. It is also a way for you, as an advocate, to learn how to wend your way through an issue from a policy perspective. So what does this all mean? What are the implications for child and adolescent behavioral health policy?