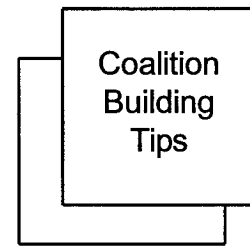


Coalitions and Advocacy: Working with Your Legislators

by Tom Wolff and Bill Berkowitz



Coalitions and community partnerships can and should develop close and productive relationships with their state and federal legislators. Yet some coalitions have hardly made legislative contact at all, while others work with their legislators routinely. Why have they made the effort? What's in it for a coalition?

Coalitions wanting to improve community life or target any community problem ultimately face issues of policy and funding. Both directly impact upon the coalition's capacity to achieve its goals. But policies and funding are the domain of our policy makers — our state and federal legislators. Partnerships between coalitions and legislators therefore make enormous sense. When you see these successful relationships, you wonder why every coalition doesn't have them. So let's look more closely at how they work.

What does a coalition have to offer a legislator? One answer is "a broad audience representing the many sectors of a community." When you think about how unique coalitions are as multi-sectoral forums for community discussion, you can realize what a wonderful opportunity they present to politicians — certainly to get their message out, but also to hear about community issues. Legislators find it extremely informative to hear even a single issue discussed from the coalition's point of view. If the coalition can take the next steps — by indicating community needs, then showing how legislators could address those needs, and then working in partnership with those legislators — you begin to see the formation of a wonderful marriage.

But a good marriage between coalitions and legislators, like any other marriage, requires communication skills. Often in coalitions we hear about how community members are not engaged in the political process, and how they need education. But sometimes coalition members themselves are just as naive; they have never met or called a legislator. They need an education too, on how to communicate, and on how to become politically involved. What form should that education take? How should coalitions stay in touch with their legislators?

Laying the Groundwork

Before getting in touch, you may want to lay some groundwork, within your own coalition — because when you do make contact, you want to be as informed about your issues as possible. A few basic suggestions:

- To begin with, learn who your legislators are. Can you name your own? Even if you can, see the last resource listed below.
- Follow your issues closely. Through metropolitan and local newspapers of course, but also through specialized newsletters; a subscription or two may pay off. There may also be regional e-mail networks or web sites with up-to-the-minute news on your issues; do a little research.
- Create a "public policy" committee, whose special job it is to track selected policy issues and recommend actions to the full coalition. Alternatively, one interested person can tackle this large responsibility.

Making Contact: Getting Off the Ground

When you are ready to make legislative contact, there are two basic ways of going about it. Legislators can come to you, or you can go to them. Let's consider these in turn.

A legislator can come to your coalition meeting. Not possible, you say; he or she is far too busy. But have you given your legislator a good reason to be there? And have you asked? The answer may surprise you.

It may not be realistic for your legislator to attend all the time, but don't yet a year slip by without creating an occasion for a legislative visit. Some ways to encourage visits are to arrange special events — legislative breakfasts, meet-the-candidate nights, panel discussions, even a legislative awards dinner — where your legislator will feel motivated and/or obligated to attend. An added option is to arrange for a meeting in your common

home district, during district office hours; this is a good place to get acquainted, if you haven't met already. And don't neglect the legislator's aides; some aides want to attend coalition meetings, and attend regularly. Their presence can have nearly-equivalent impact.

But you can also make contact on the legislator's home ground. And if you remember that legislators expect to be contacted, and actually need to be contacted to do their job well, that may make your job easier. Many methods are available: a meeting in the legislator's office, a phone call, a letter, a fax, e-mail for a few. These methods can and often should be used in combination, but the "Ten Commandments" below apply to each:

1. **Keep it short.**
2. **Be respectful.**
3. **Mention your connection to the issue.**
4. **State your concern.**
5. **Request a specific action.**
6. **Give your reasons.**
7. **Cite your expertise.**
8. **Ask for a commitment of support.**
9. **Express your appreciation.**
10. **Encourage your colleagues to follow # 1-9.**

Three More Points (Among Many)

Aides. Get to know the legislator's aides, simply because legislators are busy. An aide will be handling your phone calls and inquiries, rarely the legislator directly. So build a mutually-helpful relationship; that's hard to overemphasize. An aide can also advise you on the legislator's preferences and idiosyncrasies, and on how to make your actual contact with the legislator most effective.

Thank-you's. After you've won, or even if your legislator has gone to bat for you and lost, show your gratitude. A simple and straightforward thank-you, in person or by note, is both thoughtful, effective, and the right thing to do.

Multiplying your efforts. All your actions will have more impact when multiplied many times. Ultimately, legislators need your votes. They respond to coalitions because they perceive coalitions as influential. But unified coalition action is no substitute for the individual actions of coalition members, nor for the mobilization of support outside the coalition itself. Another job of the coalition, then, is to mobilize that support.

We'll close by mentioning four useful and inexpensive sources that will help in mobilizing community support, that expand upon the tips given here, and that belong in any advocate's library:

Judy Meredith's Real Clout: Influencing Public Policy in the 90's is an excellent lobbying primer. Single copies are available without charge from Meredith & Associates, Inc., 30 Winter Street, Boston, MA 02108, (617) 338-0954.

How — and Why — to Influence Public Policy has a national emphasis. This 40-page guide is about as sophisticated a publication as you'll find short of a full-length textbook. It's available for \$5 from the Center for Community Change, 1000 Wisconsin Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20007, (202) 342-0567.

The 20/20 Vision Education Fund publishes two- to four-page fact sheets on specific advocacy topics. Among them are Writing Letters to the Editor; Taking Action to the Airwaves; Tips on Making Letters and Phone Calls Effective; Getting Active On-Line. Single copies are free of charge from the Fund, at 1828 Jefferson Place, NW, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 833-2020.

Finally, Massachusetts residents should check out the Massachusetts Legislative Directory, which lists all legislators, with phone numbers and committee assignments, plus sections on how a bill becomes law. Send an envelope with 78 cents postage to the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, 24 Province Street, Boston, MA 02108-5105.

So to sum it up: A successful relationship between the coalition and its legislators is a win-win situation. The coalition gets the legislators' ear, plus access to resources the legislators control; while the legislators get an audience, and indeed, proper credit for the work they are doing. To us, this is one basis of democracy in action.

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