



Legislative Advocacy

A Brief Guide for FCBH Members

A Florida Council for Behavioral Healthcare Toolkit

Legislative Advocacy: A Brief Guide

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Get to Know Your Legislators

A key to successful advocacy is knowing your legislators and establishing a relationship with them. Doing your homework before contacting an elected official will help you craft your advocacy strategy and avoid political pitfalls.

As a first step, be sure you know the following about the legislators you plan to contact:

- Their political party
- The legislative committees on which they serve
- Any leadership positions they hold in the Legislature
- Their voting records on the issues that concern you
- Personal facts, such as their profession, education, organizational affiliations and civic work in the community.

In small communities, if you do not know your state representatives, you probably know someone who does. These people may be able to offer helpful insights into

legislators' areas of interest and how to best present your issue.

Your legislators are also your neighbors. You may share many of the same interests and concerns, so make a strong effort to build on the common ground you both hold.

Here are some tips for building a relationship with your legislators:

- Introduce yourself to candidates and legislators at public events, such as campaign appearances and the legislative delegation meetings held each year to gain citizens' input. Give the legislator your name and contact information and let the legislator know your areas of interest and expertise.
- Start making your legislative contacts at the local level. Arrange a meeting at your legislators' local offices well in advance of the legislative session.

- Invite your elected officials to take a tour of your facility. Keep the tour brief but informative.
- Ask the legislator to address your board of directors or a group of local provider agency representatives.
- Stay in touch. One way of doing this is to send items of interest, such as a newspaper clipping of a successful program, the announcement of your organization's accreditation or a summary of a national study on the effectiveness of treatment.
- Develop a relationship with the legislator's professional staff members, especially the aide who will have the lead on your issues.
- Legislative staff members face an incredible amount of issues that they are obliged to understand. They always appreciate people who are credible resources and who can respond to requests for help in a timely manner.
- Attend legislative delegation meetings. Try to get on the agenda to educate legislators about issues of concern to your organization and the benefits that your services bring to the community.
- Offer your assistance in helping answer requests for information or complaints they have received involving mental health and substance use services.
- Develop success stories that demonstrate the good work of your organization. If a particular program or service was made possible because of a certain law

and/or funding from the Legislature, include this information.

Do The Research

Advance research and planning is essential to effective lobbying. Before you begin your advocacy, be sure you are able to:

- Define your issue clearly. Can you state the issue in three sentences or less? If not, practice until you can.
- State the problem as well as the solution. For example, does the solution require a budget appropriation or a change in a current statute? Knowing this up front may determine whom you contact for support and what approach you take.
- Determine what existing statutes, rules and agency policies are relevant to your issue. Call Florida Council staff to acquire background on the policy issues involved.
- If yours is a funding issue, be sure of your cost projections and be prepared to justify them. Check with state agency staff for updated budget information or ask the Florida Council, if needed.
- Know all sides of your issue and be able to discuss how it affects your organization, your colleagues, and your community.
- Know who your opponents are. You may be asked, and knowing who may be opposed to the issue will also enable you to be better prepared in presenting your issue.

- Identify other organizations in your area or at the state level that share your concerns and invite their participation in your advocacy efforts.
- Invite and encourage individuals served by your organization and key supporters from the community to participate in your public policy work. Their perspectives can strengthen your position.
- Alert these people when an important issue surfaces and provide them brief details.

Getting Your Message Across

Here are some useful tips for delivering your message to legislators:

- Put a human face on your proposal. Facts and figures alone will seldom convince a legislator to support an issue. Translating those facts and figures into human terms is critical to successful advocacy.
 - Explain the impact of your proposal. How will what you're asking for affect the people you serve? How many people will benefit? Will your ability to deliver services improve? Will there be related savings down the line? What will happen if the action you're proposing isn't taken?
 - Give a "real life" example and, if possible, have that person available to talk to your legislators, preferably during the initial lobbying visit.
 - Talk in layman's terms. Avoid acronyms, abbreviations and professional "buzz words."
- Be brief and to the point. Legislators have a host of issues to juggle and many constituents to heed. Focus on a single issue when you contact your legislator.

The Lobbying Visit

Your concerns, expressed simply and sincerely, can be very persuasive. If you know what the issue is and have prepared for your meeting, you'll have a distinct advantage.

You can make a lobby visit individually or with a group. A group can demonstrate the breadth of support for your position, but it should be kept small. For example, you might arrange for a treatment provider, a consumer, and an independent advocate—such as a local official or a mental health advocacy organization representative—to attend.

When you call for an appointment with your legislator, clearly identify who you are and what organization you represent. Briefly explain the issue you wish to discuss with the legislator. Indicate if others will be coming with you.

Don't try to lobby the person who answers the phone. Ask for an appointment with the legislator. If that's not possible, ask to meet with a legislative assistant.

Try to see the legislator in his/her district office prior to the legislative session. If your visit will take place at the Capitol, call or write for an appointment as soon as you know when you are going to be in Tallahassee. And be prepared for your Capitol meeting to be a brief one, possibly preceded by a lengthy wait for the legislator.

At the meeting:

- Stay focused. You will be more effective if you keep to the point and discuss only one issue.
- If you are making a team visit, meet with your team members prior to the meeting to discuss what information each will provide.
- Be professional and factual in your approach. Don't be argumentative. Leave your emotions parked in your car.
- Never provide a legislator with inaccurate information. If you are asked a question you can't answer, tell the legislator you will follow up with the needed information. Then be sure to do so.
- Listen closely to what your legislator/legislative aide says, especially for hints your issue isn't being understood so that you can clarify it before leaving.
- Take notes on any questions asked or follow up needed. Note the legislator/aides' responses, questions or comments.
- Ask your legislator if he or she will support your issue. State your question clearly, so that there's less ambiguity in the answer you receive. Don't say, "What do you think of our proposal?" Instead ask, "Will you introduce a bill on our behalf" or "Will you vote for this funding issue?"
- If the answer is "No," don't be offended. Thank the legislator for spending time with you. Even if

you're turned down, the legislator may look favorably on your next issue.

- Follow up with a letter thanking the legislator for the meeting. Use the letter as an opportunity to reinforce your message and, if appropriate, thank the legislator for his or her commitment of support.

Remember to Say Thanks

Remember to thank legislators regularly and publicly for their work, their support, and their votes. Few people remember to thank their legislators and they clearly remember those who do.

In addition to a thank you letter after a critical committee vote or when a bill has passed, find other ways to express your thanks.

Recognition at Council meetings, presentation of certificates or plaques or a letter to the editor praising the responsiveness of legislators to local needs can be effective public ways of saying thanks to your representatives

Communications Checklist

Never underestimate the power of the written word in gaining legislators' attention. Your legislators do want and need to hear from you. One well-written and persuasive letter will stand out from the stacks that arrive at the legislator's desk each day.

Here are some guidelines for effective communications with your legislators:

- Think brevity. Limit your letter or e-mail message to no more than one page.
- Be sure you spell your legislator's name correctly. Check the phonebook or a legislative directory if you are uncertain.
- Identify yourself as writing on behalf of your organization or your community.
- Identify the issue or problem in the first sentence of the letter, and state your position. Example: "I am writing to ask that you support (name of bill or other measure). I believe this proposal will result in better services for people with mental illness and substance use disorders."
- If you are writing in support of—or opposition to—a particular bill, include the bill number and its title. If you have Internet access, you can get the bill number, a copy of the bill, and its status via the Internet at www.myfloridahouse.gov or www.flsenate.gov.
- Explain how the bill will affect you, your family, your business or community.
- Support your position with a few key facts. Check any facts or figures first to be sure they are accurate.
- Limit your communication to one topic. If there is another issue of concern to you, write another letter or e-mail
- Keep your sentences short and to the point. Translate bureaucratic or clinical terms into everyday language. Avoid acronyms or abbreviations.
- Ask the legislator for a reply to the letter to help ensure it will be read and noted. Example: "Thank you for taking the time to consider my concerns. I would very much appreciate a reply indicating whether you can support this proposal."
- Sign your letter and type or print your name under it. Include your name, physical address and email address, and telephone number.
- Handwritten letters are okay. In fact, some experts say that in this day of e-mails and computer-generated messages, a handwritten letter may get more attention. But, please, write legibly.
- An email may be appropriate for simpler issues or providing legislators with information for their knowledge.
- Write a personalized letter to each legislator. Don't send copies of a letter addressed to one legislator to another member. Even if you repeat the body of the letter, address each letter individually.

- If you are working from a model letter from the Florida Council or other organization, be sure to tailor the letter to your organization, including local information and making it as personal as possible.
- Remember that e-mails pile up as the legislative session progresses. A personal letter will generally have more impact. If time is of the essence, send your letter by overnight mail. The extra expense may get your letter more attention.
- Address letters to members of the House of Representatives as follows: The Honorable John Doe, Florida House of Representatives, The Capitol, Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300.
- Letters to senators should be addressed: Senator Jane Smith, The Capitol, Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100.

When Lobbying Doesn't Work

The old adage of "try, try again" is a good lobbyist's rule of thumb.

Some longtime Florida lobbyists believe that it takes three years to get a bill passed or amended—unless the issue is one that has captured great public interest and demands immediate attention.

Don't write off a legislator who fails to support or voted against your interests. The legislator who voted down one bill may be your best ally on the next issue.

Political writer David Yepsen had this advice for citizen lobbyists:

"Stick with it. Stick with it. Some issues come up year after year. It is a fact of life in public policy-making that some things just take time. Consistent participation ... year after year, is essential to long-term success in the Legislature."

Staying Informed

Here are ways you can learn about issues:

- Read your local newspaper, listen to local radio news shows, and watch your local television news.
- Watch "Today In The Legislature" on your public television station.
- Monitor legislative committee meetings and floor action via the Internet. Check the House and Senate websites for a schedule of webcasts.
- Watch for E-Mail Alerts and Capitol Alerts from the Florida Council on developing issues that require your action.
- Read fact sheets and issue papers provided by the Florida Council.
- Check the Council website at www.fccmh.org for background reports, policy papers and letters to legislators.
- Contact Florida Council staff for background information or to share information about an emerging issue.
- Read the Florida Council *Billtrack*, which will give you a brief

summary and the latest status of bills relevant to member agencies.

Go to the source. The websites of the Florida House of Representatives and the Florida Senate contain timely and easily accessible information.

You can obtain copies of bills and track their progress, view and download legislative calendars, obtain committee agendas and meeting packets and get information about legislators and the committees on which they serve.

The legislative website addresses are:

Florida House: www.myfloridahouse.org

Florida Senate: www.flsenate.gov