

# BASIC ADVOCACY SKILLS

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- The Public Process
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- How to Follow the Legislature
- Advocacy from Home

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## What is Advocacy?

**Advocacy** is the act of affecting people's lives. Advocacy can be as simple as helping someone fill out an application or speaking on behalf of someone who is unable to do so. Advocacy can be as simple as writing a letter to voice your opinion to reaching out and educating others about something you care about.

**Advocacy** is pressing for changes in policies and laws that protect existing rights and ensures fairness. It's putting a problem on the table and working toward a solution.

**Advocacy** is action.

**All citizens** have the right to speak out and advocate in support for what they want and believe. Public officials—school board members, city council or Assembly members, state legislators and members of the U.S. Congress—are in office to serve us, the public. It is the role of the public official to work for their citizens and it is the role of citizens to communicate what they need and want.



## What is Direct Action Organizing?

**Direct Action Organizing** is getting together with others of like mind and educating and informing policymakers about specific issues. Direct action organizing is based on these principles:

- accomplishing concrete improvement in people's lives
- giving people a sense of their own power
- bringing people together to accomplish the goals they decide on

Whether the issue is better health care, lower insurance rates, street lights, or police protection, direct action organizing brings people together to work on a common goal, while building a strong, united effort that is respected and listened to by policymakers and people in power.

# The Public Process

The United States Constitution guarantees U.S. citizens the right to speak his or her opinion. When you engage in legislative advocacy, you are expressing your opinion and giving your recommendations to the people who have the power to enact them. Our democratic system is built on the rights of citizens to engage in this **public process** as a way to be heard. Some of the bodies that use the public process include village and community councils, school boards, city councils, the legislature at the State Capitol, and Congress at the U.S. Capitol.

The public process is designed for citizens to speak their minds and be heard inside an orderly **respectable system**.

In order to keep things orderly, public bodies are governed by a set of rules, ethics, and customs known as **rules of order**. Rules of order make sure there is no shouting or blaming or talking over each other, and that topics are heard fairly with decisions made in a fair way. Rules of order ensure that no one person or opinion can dominate.

Part of the public process includes having elected or appointed **representatives** who represent you and your interests, who you can communicate through letters, emails, phone calls, or visits in-person.

**Public Testimony** invites members of the community to say their opinion to an entire body. Public testimony usually involves a time limit so that everyone who shows up has a chance to speak.

On the next few pages, we'll offer some guidelines for effective advocacy in the public process, tips for successful meetings with policymakers, tips for advocacy from home, and how to follow bills and access the State Legislature over the Internet.

# Guidelines for Successful Visits with Public Officials

## *Be Prepared*

- **Know who you are talking to**
  - Research the person (or persons) you will be speaking with so that you understand “where they are coming from.” What is public official’s background, education, political party, political history, interests? See “Resources” on page 11 for information on public officials.
  - Understanding a little about who you’re talking to can help you approach the public official in a way that helps, rather than hurts your cause.
  - Public officials are interested in what their constituents care about. Constituents are the people who live in the public official’s district. Constituents are the ones who vote them in or out. Legislators are VERY interested in pleasing their constituents so they will continue to vote them in. If you are a constituent, you will likely get a very warm welcome. If you are not, the reception might be less warm.
  - Get to know the staff. They are the gatekeepers for getting an audience with the official. Learn their names before the visit.
- **Tell your personal story**
  - Be prepared to tell your personal story. Your story is a valuable way to paint a real and honest picture for the public official. Public officials meet with professional people all day and hearing a personal story is a welcome relief from policies and numbers.
  - You will likely only have 15 minutes at your appointment, so it’s important to keep your story short and to the point. Introduce yourself, tell your story, state your “ask,” and say thank you.
- **Know your subject**
  - Narrow your concerns to a few bullet points. If you are with a group, make sure everyone agrees on the key points before going in. Introduce each point one at a time and show the back-up material. Be sure you can speak on each topic knowledgably.

- Be compelling. This engages the public official to see your concerns outside of the numbers and professional perspectives. Make it personal. This helps create a mental picture that will help remind the public official of your issue.
- Leave something written with the public official. A brief position paper including background information on the topic, with information about your organization, and what you want the legislator to do, will remind the legislator later on of what you discussed in your meeting.
- Position papers should have no more than five key points – best written in bullet form. Back-up information can include research, statistics, costs, savings, examples, and anecdotes. Add newspaper stories, research, letters from experts, links to websites, etc. to make it more interesting.
- Before you go in to the meeting, sketch out exactly what you want to say and rehearse it. The better prepared you are, the more smoothly your meeting will go.
- Decide how you will answer any anticipated questions.
- **Know what you're asking for (the “ask”)**
  - Be specific about what you want. The “ask” is the thing you want the public official to do, like vote “yes” on a bill, or support more programs that help people with disabilities, etc. *Asking* for something specific will leave a more powerful impression than if you simply talk about the problem.
  - Be prepared to discuss your issues knowledgably and know how you would like them handled. Is it a budget item? Is it a policy change that needs a new law, ordinance, or regulation? Do you have ideas of how to solve the problem? Or do you want the public official to help you figure it out?
  - Ask the public official to visit a facility where you live or work, and where they can meet with other constituents and learn about what goes on in your world. He/she will likely welcome the chance to learn about what’s going on in their district and will like being seen in a positive light. Also, it helps build positive relationships.
  - Rehearse what you’ll say. If with a group, choose a group leader and/or assign different topics to different people.

## ***Be Brief***

- Don't waste time on long introductions.
- Stay on message – keep it short, focused, and on topic.
- Do not get tripped up by overly detailed questions – redirect to what you know best.
- Be aware of the time allotted for your visit – keep track and make a move when time is up.

## ***Be Real***

- Be honest, courteous, and positive.
- Sometimes a public official can't meet with you and you'll have to meet with staff. Meetings with staff can be just as meaningful because they are watching and learning and reporting back to the legislator. If you end up with staff, treat him/her with the same respect you would give to the public official.
- Be prepared to meet anywhere – standing up in the hallway or in a crowded reception area.
- Do not promise anything you cannot deliver. If you cannot answer a question, don't pretend to know! Instead, offer to deliver the information later.
- Do not threaten or get angry – remain composed and professional. Don't put down opponents or speak badly of others. Keep it positive!
- Find points of agreement to help the official see your point of view.
- Wrap up by recapping your key message (the “ask”) and anything the official agreed to do.
- Thank the public official for his/her time and attention.

## ***Follow Up, Follow Up, Follow Up***

- Send a thank-you letter. Include your key issues, your “ask,” any promised information, and what everyone agreed to do.
- If the public official is not able to commit to a position, contact him/her again to find out where he/she might stand.
- Keep the relationship going with future contact – prepare for next year.

## How to Follow the Legislature

- To follow what happens at the Alaska State Legislature, go to: [www.legis.state.ak.us/basis](http://www.legis.state.ak.us/basis). At this site, you can learn about the legislative process, track bills, follow committee action, read meeting minutes, listen to recordings of past and live public meetings, and set up your own bill tracking system.
  - To read about a specific bill, type in the bill number in SEARCH box (for example, SB56). On that page you can read the bill's committee history, sponsor statement, back-up documents, and copies of the bill. To read a copy of the bill, click on FULL TEXT and when you get to that page, click on the red & white PDF icon. Remember when reading a bill that the text written in parentheses is being deleted, and the underlined text is language that is being added. Sometimes a “new section” is added, and will NOT be underlined. Look for the words “a new section to read” followed by regular text. This is new text to be added to law.
  - Click on BILL TRACKING MANAGEMENT FACILITY (BTMF) to create a bill tracking system that sends you email alerts when the bill you care about has some kind of action.
  - Click on SPONSOR SUMMARY to learn about a specific legislators' bills.
  - Click on BILLS IN COMMITTEE to learn how bills are progressing through the process.
  - Click on MINUTES AND AUDIO to read about or listen to what happened at a committee meeting.
  - Click on SUBJECT SUMMARY to find bills by category, or subject, for example, bills related to education, alcohol or medical.
  - Click on HEARING SCHEDULES to learn when committees meet so you can follow along, or call-in for public testimony.
- For tutorials, publications, getting started, go here: [www.akleg.gov/start.php](http://www.akleg.gov/start.php).
- To learn about state legislators, go to <http://senate.legis.state.ak.us> to learn about the Senators. Go to <http://house.legis.state.ak.us> to learn about the Representatives.
- If don't know who your own legislators are (every Alaskan citizen has one representative and one senator), go to: [www.akleg.gov/lios.php](http://www.akleg.gov/lios.php) and scroll down to the box “WHO REPRESENTS ME” and input your address and zip code.
- Join the Alaska Mental Health Trust's Advocacy Network. Go to [www.mhtrust.org/advocacy](http://www.mhtrust.org/advocacy) and follow instructions to get updates on legislative items that affect people with disabilities and action you can take. See “Advocacy from Home” on the next page for lots of ideas in how to work at home to make changes and get involved!

# Advocacy from Home

*When an interested person commits to perform one act of advocacy, the momentum grows, the effect gets larger, and policymakers pay more attention. We are building a grassroots effort to raise awareness about the needs of Alaskans with disabilities.*

**Following is a list of things you can do to make a change. Choose one (or more), make a commitment and follow-through!**

- Write a letter/email to a public official about a situation that matters to you.
- Coordinate a letter/email campaign. Invite five people to write a letter/email to a public official.
- Make a telephone call to a public official's office (city council, representative, senator).
- Coordinate a telephone-calling campaign. Invite five people to call a public official.
- Write a letter-to-the-editor about a situation that matters to you.
- Coordinate a letter-to-the-editor campaign. Invite five people to write letters to the editor.
- Go to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority's ADVOCACY webpage and learn about action you can take, or organize five people to do it, at: [www.mhtrust.org/advocacy](http://www.mhtrust.org/advocacy).
- Host a reception for a public official in your home or place of work. Show them firsthand what your situation is. A fundraiser is even better.
- Ask five people to host a reception for a public official in their homes or places of work.
- Tag onto a public event, party or reception, set up a table that raises awareness about an issue.
- Visit your own legislator in your hometown and ask others to do it. Go to [www.akleg.gov/lios.php](http://www.akleg.gov/lios.php) to learn who your personal legislators are (scroll to the bottom and input address under WHO REPRESENTS ME).
- Make five personal contacts to friends to spread the word about an issue.
- Post on Facebook a link to a news story or letter to the editor on a topic you care about, or talk with your friends and co-workers about the issue.
- Write a longer opinion piece for your local newspaper, or find someone else to do it.
- Go on the radio talk show and discuss an issue, or find someone else to do it.
- Write a personal story and send it to a policymaker.
- Gather five written personal stories and send them to policymakers.
- Coordinate a local media campaign (with newspaper, radio, and/or TV).
- Attend a Partners-in-Policy Making (PIP) advocacy training workshop through UAA.
- Testify at a public meeting (Assembly, City Council, Rotary, Chamber, School Board, etc.).
- Gather letters of support (on letterhead) from organizations that support an issue. Give the stack (hard copies) to a public official.
- Coordinate a local advocacy effort in your community. Contact the media, host receptions, organize letter-writing and telephone, coordinate volunteers in your area, visit legislators, etc.).
- Other \_\_\_\_\_