

Advocacy 101

Children need advocates. Whether it is a parent or guardian, a teacher, a coach or a social worker, children need someone to represent their interests and ensure that their needs are met. Regardless of the venue, a children's advocate is one who actively promotes what is best for a child.

Every year in Albany, the Legislature convenes to conduct its business. Working with the Governor's office, they pass a budget and a variety of laws - both activities that establish spending and program priorities for the state. Children's advocates can and must do more to engage lawmakers so the needs of New York's children are taken into account during this process.

Over the next several months, the **Children's Policy Agenda e-newsletter** will provide information on advocacy at the state level. Our goal is to encourage your participation in these activities. You will receive insider tips to help you to understand the process, connect with others, and use your knowledge and passion to benefit children.

What is Advocacy?

To advocate means "to plead the cause of another." Advocacy is the active promotion of a cause or principle using education, research and background information on a specific topic. Many of you work with individual children and families doing case advocacy. You know that this form of advocating can have a great impact on the life of that child or family. Public policy changes require cause advocacy. This requires promoting the type of change that can impact the lives of thousands of children with just a signature by the Governor on a new law or Budget item. Last year's law to expand public health insurance to provide universal coverage for children is a great example of cause advocacy in action.

Unfortunately, while parents and the professionals who work with children are often witnesses to the need for better public policies, they often do not know how to translate their knowledge into action. This newsletter will provide information on how to take your effective case advocacy to the next level - cause advocacy.

Cause advocacy covers a wide range of activities that allow almost everyone to become involved in some way. Speaking out for children's rights or benefits is advocacy. Educating policymakers about the positive impact of programs is advocacy. Raising awareness when government or institutions are not providing the services they should is advocacy. Using research to request that new programs be created or existing programs be modified is advocacy.

Advocacy is most often done by communicating with legislators, or legislative, Executive branch, or state agency staff. It can take the form of meetings, personal letters, op-ed articles, press releases, e-mails, letters to the editor and rallies. Advocacy can also mean providing information to others about the needs and successes of your programs as well as sharing your ideas. It can be actively organizing events or using your expertise to develop materials. Each form of communication must be designed to inform

policymakers of your position, provide information supporting change and request that they take a specific action.

An election cycle is a good opportunity for cause advocacy. It provides the means to educate those seeking office about children's issues and can turn policymakers into champions for children. Even if you have never done cause advocacy you probably already have the skills and commitment to be effective since most children's advocates are people like you - parents and professionals who are dedicated to helping children grow up healthy, educated and safe. Watch this space in the next few newsletters for more information about children's advocacy and how you can become involved.