

Advocacy at All Levels

Spending and policy decisions are made at all levels of government. Whether it is the federal government determining how to expand the State Health Insurance Program or a local school board deciding how to implement No Child Left Behind, there are many avenues advocates can use to influence how children are treated by government.

Advocacy at the federal level involves contacting New York's two sitting Senators and your Congressional representative. Each legislator has one or more offices in their district and a Washington office. Contact information and the websites for each federal representative can be found at:
http://www.ny.gov/congress_delegation.html.

At the state level, you are represented by a state senator and an assembly member. Don't know who represents you in Albany? The Assembly and the Senate websites have "look-up" features so you can find your representatives. The sites also contain biographies and links to websites that can help you become familiar with the issues that are important to your representatives and the positions they have taken on legislation. It is a good idea to bookmark these sites. Visit them often to become familiar with the information they contain and with the legislative process. The Senate site is: www.senate.state.ny.us and the Assembly site is: www.assembly.state.ny.us.

Local government structures vary around the state, and may include county, city, town and/or village officials. You can familiarize yourself with key players and issues of local concern through newspaper articles and your personal contacts. Starting at the local level can make a big impact. For example, the move to ban smoking in public places started at the local level and rose to become statewide initiative.

Get involved with local opinion-makers so they become your allies in influencing your city or county government officials. Find someone in city or county government who will be a champion for children and cultivate their interest with information and ideas. Who knows – they may rise to higher office and take your enthusiasm for children's issues with them.

It may also be advantageous for you to join an advocacy organization that represents your concerns at the federal, state or local level. For example, the New York Children's Action Network (New York CAN) works in Albany to raise the priority of a wide range of children's issues among elected officials and policymakers. You can also explore the Internet for information on legislation that impacts children and resources to help your own program. SCAA provides an extensive list of children's groups and web resources at:
<http://www.scaany.org/resources/links.php>

Remember – there is nothing wrong with telling elected officials about your program. If they don't know how successful your program is and what you need in order to continue that success, they can't help you. Your stories, your ideas and your commitment to children are what advocacy is all about.

Advocacy at any level of government means that you will compete with numerous individuals and organizations for your representative's attention. Your first contact will often be with a legislative staff person. Staff members are very important to the workings of legislative offices and function as the eyes and the ears of their boss. Don't feel slighted or disappointed about talking to a staff person. Use the opportunity to educate them about your issue and take the time to develop a working relationship. Staff are a valuable source of information and can help open doors for you.

Finally, don't forget to invite legislators at any level of government to visit your program. Show them what you do and how important your program is to the community. We all know that hands-on experience can promote real understanding about the way something works; it isn't any different for legislators. Chances are they have never visited a program like yours and have difficulty relating to what it does, what it needs and how it is successful. Give them an opportunity to learn from you.

Educating elected officials about your issue or cause takes some time, effort and patience. Use every contact as a step toward developing a long-term relationship with that office. Be prepared, be persistent and be polite. Bear in mind that alienating those in government who influence the policy process rarely advances your cause. The more that effective advocates for children's issues are seen and heard, the more powerful we become.