

## You can do it too!

It isn't hard to be an advocate. It takes commitment, a little time and an understanding of what to say and to whom.

Elected officials do not expect citizen advocates to be experts on budget details or the nuances of bill drafting. Actually, elected officials want to hear your stories, so don't let inexperience hold you back. They need to understand the problems you face as a parent or what makes you successful in your work with children. It's vital for them to hear your questions about what they are going to do to help children.

You can advocate on your own or join an organization—and there are many in New York State and nationally that advocate for the issues that concern you. Each has information that you can use to educate yourself. The Internet and library are also great resources. Being armed with facts will help you make your case.

It is important to understand what level of government will be able to respond to your concerns. Funding decisions, regulatory oversight or program management may be controlled at the local level, the state level, the federal level or some combination. For example, much of the Medicaid program is controlled by the state, but Medicare is controlled by the Federal government. Likewise, funding for your local school may be set at the state level, while policies affected by "No Child Left Behind" are controlled at the federal level.

Now that you have background information, what do you want your elected official to know; what makes you concerned enough to want to be an advocate? First, think about the story you want to tell. It could be about a lack of resources or it could be that your community doesn't have enough trained workers or financial resources to start a program. Perhaps you have identified a barrier that families encounter when they try to access a service. Maybe your family is dealing with a particular burden and you can't find the right services. You can advocate for any situation that requires government to make a change.

Next, package your story. Effective stories are brief, but with clear messages. Think about what you want to ask the elected official to do for you. Be specific in your request. Maybe you are looking for more funding, better program accountability, new regulations or a new law. Don't let policymakers guess what you need to fix the problem. Armed with your background information, your story and your request, you are ready to approach your elected official.

**Public Forums:** Elected official and candidates for office make appearances at town hall meetings or forums, especially during an election year. These events are tailor-made opportunities to ask questions of both incumbents and candidates. Prepare your story and questions ahead of time. You may also want to practice if you are not used to speaking in public. Make sure your story is very concise so you don't lose your audience before you get to the question. Make your question very specific and politely request a specific answer. Let elected officials know that you will follow their actions and hold them accountable for promises they make.

**Meetings:** Most state and federal representatives have district offices, as well as offices in Albany or Washington. It is often easier to get a meeting in the local district when the Legislature or Congress is not in session. Given elected officials' hectic schedules, you may meet instead with a member of their staff, who are really their eyes and ears. In fact, the staff person is often the expert in a particular field and may be very helpful to your efforts.

Have a game plan before the meeting. If multiple people are attending, assign roles (speaker, note-taker) and make sure everyone knows their tasks. Each person who speaks should stick to the message and avoid acronyms and jargon. If you do not know the answer to a question, promise to get the information to the office. Always be polite, honest and straightforward.

Before leaving, find out where your legislator stands on your issue and be clear about next steps. If necessary, be direct about getting an answer. Leave vital information such as handouts and contact information. Don't forget to thank the elected official or staff person for the investment of time.

Send a thank-you letter soon after the meeting, while the conversation is still fresh. Summarize the points covered in the meeting and remind those with whom you met of the actions they promised to take. Send requested follow-up information and the answers to any lingering questions, if any. Keep current with your legislators' actions and make sure they know you are following progress on your issue.

**Letters:** Keep written letters concise. Tell your story and make your request without flowery language, jargon or extensive prose. Remember that offices receive hundreds or thousands of letters. So yours should be easy to read and direct. You can also offer to provide additional information and make yourself available to answer questions. Ask for specific follow-up and contact the office if you do not get a responsive answer in a reasonable amount of time.

If going it alone doesn't appeal to you, there are many opportunities to belong to organizations that advocate for your interests. Many groups schedule "advocacy days" that bring people to Albany or Washington during the legislative sessions. These events are good places to learn the ropes and meet like-minded people from around the state or nation. You can also show your support for issues by participating in events that raise awareness about issues in the community.

Finally, don't miss opportunities to thank your elected officials for things that are working or for their support for a program. Everyone appreciates a pat on the back. Therefore, look for ways to show your appreciation when an elected official gets things done.