Advocacy for Boards of Human Services Organizations

Questions and Answers

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1. **What is advocacy?**
   Advocacy has a variety of definitions, including:
   - An effort to shape public perception or to effect change that may or may not require legislation (Habitat for Humanity and Canadian CED Network (HH and CED Network, no date, p. 5);
   - Any attempt to influence the decision of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest (Jenkins, 1987, p. 297)
   - The act of speaking or of disseminating information intended to influence individual behavior or opinion, corporate conduct, or public policy and law (Rektor, 2002. p. 1)

2. **What is lobbying?**
   There are a number of definitions for lobbying, including:
   - Communication directly with a policy decision-maker to express an opinion about *specific or proposed legislation* [author's italics]. Grassroots lobbying involves communicating the agency's opinion about specific or proposed legislation to the general public, including *a call to action* [author's italics] (Donaldson, 2010, p. 45)
   - Communication by an individual who is being paid to communicate with government through a public office holder about laws, public policy, programs and possibly about obtaining a grant or contract (Berezan, 2009, p. 1)
   - A small aspect of advocacy that involves a decision and follow up action taken by a board to change public policy (Berezan, 2009, p.1)

3. **Why is advocacy important for human service organizations?**
   - The work of human services organizations is strongly influenced by government policy and regulations. Working to ensure these policies and regulations are in line with organizational service priorities and preferences is important to ensure organizational sustainability and survival (Hasenfeld, 1992, no page number).
   - In era of privatization and increased competition for limited public funding, many organizations see it as being vital they advocate for maintaining or expanding the services they provide (Marwell, 2007, no page number).
   - Advocacy can greatly benefit the well being of clients. By calling attention to problems affecting communities and the populations they serve, human service organizations promote greater equality in a democratic system and further their mission.
   - Because of their numbers and important roles, human services organizations have the potential to be an influential voice in social policy.

- Human service organizations are advocating on behalf of the most disadvantaged members of society (Mosley, 2011, p. 36).

4. **What critical roles do boards of human services organizations play in advocacy?**

   Boards of human services organizations play the following critical roles in advocacy:
   - Board members are a vital resource to gain access to policy makers and funders due to their position and stature as community members. (Berezan, 2009, p.2).
   - The role of the board to champion the mission corresponds with the role and responsibilities it takes on as advocates for both the organization as a whole, as well as its services and programs (Volunteer Canada, 2003. p. 5).

5. **Can boards of charitable organizations advocate?**

   Yes, it is honorable and legal for boards to advocate or lobby for advancing the views of their organization. It includes tasks such as education, skill-building, mobilizing, organization, researching, analyzing, letter-writing, protesting, petitioning, awakening power, building relationships, convening, facilitating, etc., and most of these tasks never cross the line to the legal definition of lobbying or grassroots lobbying. Advocacy does not have to be confrontational, high profile, or controversial. However, registered charities are required to follow rules and regulations set out by Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and the *Income Tax Act*. (Donaldson, 2008, p. 27-28)

6. **What advocacy-related charitable activities can be undertaken by charitable organizations?**

   Charities can:
   - Engage in a limited extent – no more than 10% of the charity's resources – in non-partisan political activities that directly help accomplish the charity's purposes.
   - Respond to issues raised in an election campaign by analyzing and commenting on proposals that directly relate to its charitable purposes.
   - Raise public awareness provided its materials are educational, informative, reasoned and well founded.
   - Seek the support of elected officials if there is a question whether a grant is to be made or continued (YMCA Canada, 2003, p. 11)

7. **What prohibited activities cannot be undertaken by registered charities?**

Charities cannot:

- Persuade members of the public to vote for or against a candidate.
- Support a political party.
- Distribute political literature.
- Advocate in support of policies, nor seek to inform and educate on issues that do not conform to their corporate purposes.
- Participate in political demonstrations.
- Conduct a referendum on a political issue.
- Overstep the boundary between education and propaganda (e.g. by providing one-sided information designed to promote a particular view).
- Finance political activities directly or indirectly. (YMCA Canada, 2003, p. 12).

8. **What is your organization's capacity to undertake advocacy?**

To discover your organization's readiness for undertaking advocacy, complete the "Public Policy Self-Assessment Tool" located in Appendix D of YMCA Canada's "Be H.I.P.P. Have Influence on Public Policy" document located on the World Wide Web at www.ymca.ca/media/59241/be_hipp_manual.pdf

This tool will assess your organization's advocacy readiness through topics as telling your story, understanding the external environment, and relationship building.

9. **What are the major steps in developing a board advocacy strategy?**

The major steps in developing a board advocacy strategy are:

- Identify the issue. This is best done with the organization's stakeholders to ensure the board understands the issue.
- Research. It is vital to get the facts to in order to fully understand all aspects of the issue as well as the potential organizational and public support available to advocate for change.
- Strategize. Create short, medium and long-term goals, select timeframes, and determine how the issue and the advocacy effort for change will be communicated and to whom it will be communicated.
- Implement. Develop a formal advocacy initiative, mobilize support, inform your stakeholders and gain commitment for your initiative, moving from idea to action.
- Organize. Communicate clearly with your stakeholders about the issue and your advocacy initiative.
- Educate. Utilize your advocacy initiative to reach out to new people and gain their support.
- Evaluate. Review the impact of your advocacy initiative during its implementation and after it is concluded. Consider what has been done

well and what could be improved on. (Adapted from Volunteer Canada, 2003, p. 17 – 18).

10. What types of advocacy tactics are commonly used by human service organizations?

There are two types of advocacy tactics: insider and indirect. These are defined as follows:

- Insider tactics are those intended to change policy or regulation by working directly with policy makers and other institutional elites. These can include: participating in government commissions or committees by providing testimony or a presentation, and meeting with elected officials. (Mosley, 2011, p. 439)
- Indirect tactics are a wide range of different activities that generally do not require the type of inside connections as insider tactics. These can include: providing public education, writing letters to the editor, working with advocacy coalitions, issuing policy reports, and conducting a demonstration or a boycott. (Mosley, 2011, p. 440).

Insider Advocacy Tactics

11. What do board members need to know when preparing briefs or position papers to present to government commissions or committees?

It is important for boards to know the following when preparing briefs or position papers for presentation:

- A brief or position paper is a paper that outlines an issue or situation, analyses the failings or shortcomings involved, and offers solutions. Since it is intended to inform and persuade, a brief should be factual, straightforward and unemotional. Briefs are usually written for audiences whose time is at a premium, so they should be short and to the point. Statistics, costs or other relevant figures can be attached in appendices.

- All levels of government sometimes create task forces, commissions or committees to study issues and hear from experts, citizens' groups and individuals before legislation is drafted or final decisions made. When briefs or position papers are used to present material to a task force, government department or commission they are often called submissions, and are usually read aloud by the presenter. (Community Services Consulting Ltd, no date, Advocacy *Handout*, p. 9)

12. What are the key questions that a brief or position paper needs to answer?

The key questions that a brief or position paper needs to answer are:

- Why are we writing this paper? We may be responding to an issue or an action, trying to change attitudes, or putting forward our position as a way of educating or supporting.
- Who are we and whom do we represent (briefly stated)?
- Why is the issue a problem for us? Why are we taking this position?
- How many people does the issue affect? (Give statistics)
- How are they affected? What is the impact on their lives? (Get more specific; consider the practical, social, financial, psychological implications.) How are they deprived? Do they have to seek alternatives? In what ways are these alternatives inferior?
- What evidence do we have to support this? (More statistics)
- What do we suggest as a remedy? (e.g., change legislation, change a company policy) How does our position rectify the situation?
- What benefits does our position or solution offer? (Consider global implications – for all Albertans, for the government – as well as specific implications for constituents: practical, social, financial, and psychological).
- What actions do we recommend and by when? If we can help in getting the actions completed, this is where we offer our support or assistance.
- Who are we and whom do we represent? (More detail)
- Who is our spokesperson and how can the reader contact him/her?
- Where are we located? (Address, phone/email address if different from spokesperson contact information) (Community Services Consulting Ltd., no date, *Position Paper Template*, p.1).

13. What are some tips for writing an effective brief or position paper?

A few tips for developing a brief, position paper or submission include the following:

- Select the basic ideas. Try to keep it to a maximum of three key issues or ideas.
- Use simple, easily understood language and concise sentence structure.
- Have the brief reviewed to ensure accuracy. Look particularly at numbers, tables and graphs or charts. (Community Services Consulting Ltd, no date, Advocacy *Handout*, p. 9)

14. What do board members need to know when making presentations or submissions to government commissions or committees?

Here are eight tips for effective delivering an effective presentation or submission to a government commission or committee:

- Keep your presentation brief (under five minutes) but remember that a longer written statement will be accepted for the record.
- Have a high-ranking staff member or well-informed volunteer make the presentation.
- Provide a one-page summary of your presentation.
- Practice the presentation so it comes across in a conversational tone. Don't read it word-by-word.
- Learn who the committee members are and address them by name.
- Where possible, plant questions with friendly committee members.
- Anticipate and prepare responses for opposing arguments.
- Conclude by asking committee members to support your position. (HH and CED Network, p. 14)

15. What are the major steps for boards to take in meeting with Alberta government Members of the Legislature (MLAs)?

There are four major steps in the MLA meeting process:

- Contact the MLA and arrange meeting
- Prepare for meeting with the MLA
- Hold meeting with the MLA
- Follow up with the MLA after the meeting

Make Contact with the MLA

- Contact your MLA's constituency office by letter or email introducing yourself, asking for a meeting with the MLA, and explaining your reasons for the meeting.
- Follow up a few days later by phoning the MLA's constituency office to ensure the request has been received.
- If you know the MLA personally, ask for him or her. Otherwise ask to speak to the office manager or secretary.
- Be persistent. Call every few days repeating your request for a meeting until it has been arranged.
- Once a meeting has been arranged:
  - Thank the MLA, office manager, or secretary for helping obtain a suitable date and time to meet.
  - Request that an email be sent confirming the meeting date, time, and place.
  - Ask who will be at the meeting besides the MLA.

Prepare for meeting with the MLA

- Plan your discussion in advance. If several of you are meeting, decide who will speak on which issues, or aspects of the issue.
- Research the topic you are presenting on as thoroughly as possible, anticipating the MLA's responses.
- Research your MLA. If possible, review Hansard, the official record of the Legislature, as well as on-line news stories to learn

more about the MLA. Seek ways of relating your request to his/her previous behavior or statements.

- Prepare a short, well prepared presentation. It will be more impressive and effective than a longer, rambling one.
- Send an advance copy of your presentation to the MLA if you receive a request for such information from his/her office.
- Practice the presentation so it comes across in a conversation tone. Don't read it word-by-word.

Hold Meeting with MLA

- Arrive on time and don't prolong the meeting unless the MLA indicates a desire to discuss the matter longer than the allocated time.
- Keep the meeting informal and friendly. Indicate that you would like to make some brief opening comments but desire to spend most of the time having a focused discussion on the topic.
- Make your presentation in a conversational manner. Ensure you are brief and to the point, in order to allow for at least half the meeting time for general dialogue, questions and comments from the MLA and his/her staff. Treat all questions calmly and seriously.
- Invite the MLA to respond to your presentation. Keep notes of questions asked and answered.
- Do not allow the MLA to dominate the conversation or to talk at length in generalities. If necessary, interrupt and re-direct the discussion back to the issues at hand.
- Ask the MLA whether or not s/he supports the position laid out in your presentation and how s/he might support it going forward.
- Ask the MLA if s/he requires any additional information about your agency or the issue(s) being presented. Confirm that any such information will be provided promptly following the meeting.
- If you did not send material in advance, leave a summary of your views when you go.
- Thank the MLA for his/her time.

Follow up with MLA after the meeting

- Email or mail a brief thank you note to the MLA.
- Provide any follow up information as requested.
- Don't let the contact with the MLA end after one meeting. Try to establish regular informal meetings or telephone conversations.

(Alberta Association of Services to Children and Families. *Political Advocacy*. *MLA Visits, Leadership Race and Subsequent Budget Decisions*, p. 5-6; Community Services Consulting Ltd., no date, *Advocacy Handout*, p. 7-8).

16. **What types of misinformed questions about nonprofit human service organizations might be raised by Alberta government Members of the Legislature (MLAs)?**

    Much work has been done to educate Alberta government MLAs about the charitable, nonprofit sector by a variety of Alberta member-based, nonprofit umbrella organizations such as the Alberta Association of Services to Children and Families, the Edmonton and Calgary Chambers of Voluntary Organizations, and Volunteer Alberta. However, there are MLAs with misperceptions or inaccurate information about the charitable human services sector. As a result, an MLA may ask you the following general questions:

    - Why are there so many human service agencies?
    - Given the sheer number of human service agencies, aren't there duplications in programs and services?
    - Why do many human service agencies complain of funding shortfalls but wind up with annual operating surpluses?
    - If funding is an issue, why don't human service agencies undertake community fund raising efforts?
    - Why do non-profit organizations need more funding? (AASCF, 2011, *AASCF Advocacy Strategies- Agency Board Engagement*, p. 2).

17. **What can a board do to respond effectively to misinformed questions that Alberta Members of the Legislature (MLAs) might raise about the nonprofit human services sector?**

    Be prepared for the types of misinformed questions that Alberta government Members of the Legislature (MLAs) might ask about the Alberta nonprofit human service sector by doing the following:

    - Learn about the views of the MLA you will be meeting with by reading "Hansard" or searching the Internet for news stories in which the MLA is featured.
    - Visit the websites of various Alberta umbrella organizations to identify potential questions that might be raised by an MLA in a meeting.
    - Collect statistical information ready to respond to an MLA's potential general questions. Respond briefly and factually. Do not argue with the MLA.
    - If it seems appropriate, follow up later with the MLA by providing documents from Alberta umbrella organizations that offer factual information about the Alberta nonprofit human services sector.

Indirect Advocacy Tactics

18. What are some ways of informing stakeholders about your advocacy initiative?

There are a variety of ways to bring your advocacy initiative forward to educate a variety of stakeholders, including:

- Events such as information sessions, panel discussions or workshops.
- Publications including brochures and newspapers
- Use of media including print, television, radio, and the Internet.

19. What are some tips for writing letters to the editor?

Letters to the editor are the least expensive and fastest way to get your message out to a wide audience. Consider the following tips for writing an effective letter to the editor:

- Keep it short. Don’t go beyond 200 words and focus on one major point.
- Write the way you talk and speak from the heart.
- Don’t launch a personal attack, it will distract from the point you are trying to make.
- Act quickly. The time to write a letter to the editor is the same day or the day after the story appears.
- Always include your name, address, and phone number with your letter to the editor.
- If sending the letter by email, put it in the body of the email, not as an attachment. Most newspapers do not open attachments.
- Encourage others to respond with a letter to the editor on the same subject. There is strength and visibility in numbers. (HH and CED Network, no date, p. 16)

20. What are the advantages of working with advocacy coalitions?

Working within a coalition offers the following advantages:

- Coalitions enable the pooling of members’ resources, thereby lessening the burden on any one;
- Coalitions provide cover from potential retribution by the advocacy target; and
- Coalitions can filter the avalanche of information received through the growing mass of media sources. (Donaldson, 2008, p.35).

21. What are the challenges of working with advocacy coalitions?

The challenges of coalition work can include:

- Greater logistical complications with larger number of organizations.
- Difficulty reaching agreement

- Lack of profile for individual organizations
- Unrealistic concerns that everyone in a coalition must be in agreement on every decision
- Decision making is shared and some organization's cultures have bylaws or board structures in place that prevent it from submitting to group decisions. (Volunteer Canada, 2003, p. 33).

22. What are some ways to create an effective advocacy coalition?

The following suggestions are offered to help ensure the development of a successful advocacy coalition:

- Craft overarching, umbrella statements that can be used by member organizations in their own communication efforts.
- Set up a time-limited, single-issue campaign rather than an ongoing, multi-issue coalition.
- Structure endorsements so that coalition members can opt in or out provision-by-provision.
- Identify a key contact list of decision makers from coalition members who can speak for the coalition on short notice.
- Rotate responsibility for logistical support among coalition members.
- Develop a menu of messages from which coalition members can pick and choose, while holding true to core messages that all agree on. (Adapted from Volunteer Canada, 2003, p. 34; Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2011, p. 12).

23. How can a board's advocacy efforts be sustained over time?

The following options are suggested for boards to sustain their advocacy efforts over time

- Create a Board public policy to enhance and support the advocacy functions of the organization
- Strike a Board Advocacy Committee
- Dedicate funding resources earmarked specifically for organizational advocacy purposes.
- Participate actively in coalition and umbrella organizations.
- Look at a variety of ways to connect elected officials with your agency. This can include inviting them to speak at annual meetings or breakfasts/luncheons, involving them in special events such as annual general meetings, and putting them on mailing lists. (Donaldson, 2008, p. 35-36; HH and CED Network, no date, p. 17)

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