

# 10 Tips for Local Advocacy

From the Women and Girls Foundation  
of Southwest Pennsylvania  
[www.wgfpa.org](http://www.wgfpa.org)

## 1. Know your rights.

If you are a non-profit leader learn everything you can about the 501(c) 3 election. Contact the Alliance for Justice, download FAQs from their website, provide info to your board, and make sure that you know your legal rights and limits in regard to your involvement in advocacy.

## 2. Get your Board on Board.

Again make sure you give your board enough information so that they can feel comfortable and excited about your organization engaging in advocacy. You want the board involved so that you have organizational buy in, so that if you experience backlash they are prepared, and so that you can leverage and activate their relationships with elected officials too in your advocacy efforts. When working at the local level this is especially the case.

## 3. Build a Coalition, Join other people's coalitions.

Start building a broad based coalition in your community of people concerned about your issue. Include people from all sectors – non-profit, corporate, and government, men and women, young and older people, different religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, politics, as varied as your coalition is the stronger its roots in the community will be and the broader your base. Keep the coalition updated and acknowledged in your activities. Also, join other coalitions in your area that are related or of interest to your organization. This is a great way to meet more people and learn what others are doing.

## 4. Make friends with the media.

At the local level this is so much easier than at the National level. Get to know which reporters cover which topics, get to know the editorial staff, position yourself as a resource of information and an expert in your area. If you consistently give members of the media relevant accurate information that is newsworthy, or assist them in gathering data for a story, they will remember that and call you the next time. Also, when you get a media call, after you give them your quote refer them to three other non-profit leaders you know who can also speak to the issue.

## 5. Attend City Council, County Council Meetings, and Public Board Meetings and Hearings

Get to know the players, who they are, what is important to them, what the dynamics of the group are. Any new effort you pursue will need local champions and getting to know what people have sponsored in the past can help you discover who natural allies might be. On the flip side, watching elected officials in a public meeting can also help you see how they work with one another. Who might be able to easily influence whom, who might choose not to work on your project because of their personal or professional conflicts with your sponsor or champion.

## 6. Cultivate relationships with all of your elected leaders and their staff.

Between you, your staff, your board, and your coalition members you should have constituents in your group (and perhaps corporate and/or personal donors) of every elected official that you would want to engage in local advocacy efforts. In this way, you can always request a constituent meeting with the elected official or her/his staff.

### 7. Know what board relationships you can leverage

Look at public campaign finance records to learn more about your board members, their party affiliations and their donation histories in political races. This is very relevant information when determining who on your board might be helpful in arranging a meeting or spearheading a topic.

### 8. Research and Learn about the Local Political Landscape, Landmines, and Buzzwords

Your issue is your first priority, but the elected officials and civic groups you will be meeting with have other priorities and concerns. Before you engage them in discussion about your issue think about whether this is the right time to be raising this issue, if there might be a more strategic time over the next year, also is there a larger political crisis or shift going on, what are the buzzwords that elected officials and the media are consumed with in your region (workforce development, economic development, mining disasters, national security). These will be different in different communities but you should attempt to frame your issue in these terms. Example: How will your effort help "grow the regional economy?"

### 9. Figure out who has the power to make the decision or make the change you want to see happen.

Don't waste time meeting with your U.S. Congressperson if the policy change you need to happen is at the State House Level. Likewise, if there is something going on at the Prisons related to prisoner rights, you need to figure out who has the power to make the decision – the warden? The Sheriff? The Mayor? The State House? You want to make sure that you are meeting and talking with decision makers who can effect the issue of concern to you.

### 10. Be persistent and consistent.

Social change even at – or perhaps especially at – the local level takes time so you need to be patient but persistent. It is important not to let small missteps, or obstacles stop you completely. Also, once you have developed relationships with local media and local leaders sustain them. Take people to lunch even when you are not asking them for anything. Drop a reporter an email just to say you liked her recent story on Afghanistan, or send a letter to the editor occasionally in support of the paper or a local leader taking a stand you agree with. Send newsletters or short email updates to staff of elected leaders and to key reporters updating them on your progress and your next steps.

This list was created with input from tons of people through the years that have helped teach us about best practices in advocacy. If you have any questions about who we are or what we do please check out our website [www.wgfpa.org](http://www.wgfpa.org) or call us at 412-434-4883.