



Tool: Basics of advocacy

Note: This document is provided for information purpose only. Health professional associations making use of this resource should revise and modify it for use in their specific circumstances.

What is advocacy?

Although there are many definitions for the term ‘advocacy’, it is generally about winning support of key constituencies in order to influence policies and spending, and bring about social change. Advocacy refers to the efforts of an individual or group to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert the interests, desires, needs and rights of themselves or of another group. These efforts are often undertaken in order to influence public-policy and resource allocation within political, economic, and social systems and institutions.

Influencing decision makers or changing national health policies can seem like an impossible task, but it is important to realize that, increasingly, public pressure is affecting and re-shaping government decisions and actions. Health professional associations are especially well positioned, since health policymakers depend on the expertise of health specialists. Advocacy is not only important for incurring positive change, but also results in increasing the visibility, reputation, and credibility of the association.

Advocacy can take many shapes and be done in many different ways. The hardest part though is getting started. Below is a list of steps to help initiate advocacy efforts within your association.

Steps to advocacy cycle:

- Identify the issue
 - Depending on your association’s capacity, prioritize or limit your efforts to addressing only one issue at a time and make sure your association is knowledgeable about the chosen issue. Gather research and statistics, and develop supporting documents, such as presentations or fact sheets, to defend the issue at hand.
- Set goals and objectives
 - What are you hoping to achieve as a result of the advocacy efforts (a change in national health policy? Increased resource allocation to support health systems? Increased awareness of a largely neglected issue?)
- Develop the message and identify target audience
 - It is important to establish key messages regarding the issue and to keep the messages as simple and concise as possible. Be straightforward in identifying what the problem is and how you suggest it be improved. Continuously repeat the key messages throughout your advocacy efforts.

- When developing your key messages, first identify who the target audience will be and adapt your messages to suit this audience (e.g. if the audience is mostly politicians, don't use clinical terminology that only physicians would understand).
- Build support
 - Advocacy is about raising your voice. The messages are heard much louder when the voice of many is combined.
 - Before moving forward with advocacy efforts, try to build support among stakeholders and the public. This can be done by approaching the media, launching public campaigns, or promoting the issue through social media. It is also worthwhile to consider forming a coalition by bringing together likeminded organisations who share the same opinion on the issue.
- Develop an implementation and activity plan for your advocacy work
 - Decide what types of activities will be included as part of your advocacy efforts. Depending on the urgency of the issue or the extent of your supporters, activities could range from writing a letter to a member of parliament, organising a public event near parliamentary offices, face-to-face meetings with decision makers, or it could involve a combination of activities over a longer period of time.
- Implement the plan
 - Once you have established the key messages and a group of supporters, you are ready to move forward with the advocacy activity plan.
- Monitor and evaluate
 - As like any project, it is important to continuously monitor progress and evaluate the plan put forth. Are you on your way to meeting the set goals and objectives? How are the messages being received by the target audience? Have the advocacy efforts been contested, causing setbacks?
- Revise the advocacy plan
 - If after evaluating your initial advocacy efforts you find the need to make changes or improvements, return to the activity plan and revise it accordingly. Remember that advocacy is not always successful after one try; it often involves many attempts over a long period of time. Be consistent with your messages, persistent with your efforts, and remain optimistic.

There are numerous tools and resources available on the Internet to learn more about advocacy. A selection of these is listed in the 'Other Useful Resources' section at the end of the chapter "Improving Functions".