

THE INDIVIDUAL'S ROLE IN LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

Introduction

The American political process not only provides the opportunity for citizen involvement, good government demands it. Perhaps Plato's analysis says it best: *"The punishment of wise men who refuse to take part in the affairs of government is to live under the government of unwise men."*

Many times individuals feel they are outside the political process and should not be involved in legislative advocacy. They may view the political process negatively. They may think political causes are unworthy of involvement. They may think their work is not affected by politics. They may think that their employment rules prohibit involvement. Often, they pass their prejudice about political involvement to others, if only by their lack of involvement.

Non-profit organizations and their board members often ignore political action. They may be so wrapped up in the work of the organization they don't see the relevance of political advocacy. They may think it is someone else's job. The unfortunate aspect of a lack of political awareness is they will be ill-equipped to participate in politics when it becomes unavoidably necessary.

Employment rules may prohibit involvement in partisan political action (such as working directly on a campaign) and it may be smarter to maintain an objective or neutral position on a particular political issue, but every citizen retains the right to communicate his or her concerns to legislators. As long as communication is professionally presented and nonpartisan — in other words, information and education about ideas and ideals — association professionals and non-profit organizations and their boards are within the bounds of citizenship. It is part of the political process to attempt to influence the passage or defeat of proposals believed either beneficial or detrimental. In Kentucky, lobbyists are recognized as a part of the political process. Their job is to influence legislation on behalf of an organization's or business' goals. They must register with the state, and they receive employee-like badges for access to the capitol and legislative offices. There are similar processes in most states.

Sometimes, individuals may think their voice is not strong enough to be heard. That no one cares. That legislative advocacy is just a waste of time. A U.S. Senate staff member once advised senators how to vote based on the height of the piles of constituent letters received on the issues before the committee. The highest pile got the recommendation. This demonstrates that individual action does count, even something as simple as writing a letter, sending a fax or posting an e-mail.

Consider, too, the 1998 efforts of the Alabama Vocational Association (now the Alabama Association for Career and Technical Education). It was asked to help secure \$5 million more for vocational (now career and technical) education from the Alabama legislature. The association decided to ask for \$20 million. The legislature appropriated \$15 million — three times what originally was considered. It was achieved through grassroots legislative advocacy emphasizing the success of career and technical education programs and how those programs were absolutely critical for Alabama's youth and re-skilling adults to obtain the jobs of the future. The request was framed not only as an educational issue but also as an economic development and standard-of-living issues.

Kentucky is facing the same challenges. Studies, reports and analyses from government and private-sector research indicate the amount of problem and pathological gambling and in impact on society. The question is how the state, which currently neither appropriates dollars nor provides for any direct services in this area, will address the challenge? The task must include legislative advocacy.

Individuals at the forefront of this effort understand Kentucky's future will be better with programs available to serve those in need. They are the best people to convey the message. If you don't speak for yourself, who will?

An Example

An event occurring in 1993-94 proved that grassroots action does work. Kentucky's governor proposed splintering of the Employment Security System, making Unemployment Insurance part of welfare and privatizing the Employment Service. Labor Market Information was to be cast into a conglomerate agency of workforce programs. A group of Kentucky Employment Security employees developed a statewide, grassroots strategy to convince the public and the legislature the proposal was ill-advised and there was a better alternative to serve the Commonwealth's citizens. An alternative suggestion advocated change but emphasized fiscal and organizational efficiency.

This effort convinced the public, the media, statewide organizations, and the legislature, and did so in a manner leaving the employees' organization with a higher level of respect, even from the governor's office. Dedicated and organized people can make a difference at the grassroots. Building broad-based coalitions brings more support to an issue and often opens new contacts with legislators and public officials. Fact-supported belief and truthfulness are the paths to success. This booklet is designed to offer suggestions for managing public advocacy, whether dealing with such crises locally or statewide if and when they occur, or in maintaining regular issue awareness.