



Overview: Getting an Advocacy Campaign Off the Ground

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Main Section

What is advocacy?

How is it different from other types of strategy?

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Advocates plead in favor of a cause. They work--often in the face of opposition--for the things that matter to local communities.

This chapter will give you an idea of the different tasks involved in getting an advocacy campaign to fly. Its main job will be to prepare you for the very specific actions outlined in the following three chapters, which will tell you in detail how to prepare for, and carry out, a direct action advocacy campaign. In many parts, we'll refer you to other corners of the Tool Box, where you will find advice to help you go into an area in depth.

What is advocacy?

Before direct action comes planning, and before planning comes an understanding of what needs to be put in the plan. So first, here's a reminder of what advocacy is (as well as what it's *not*). For more information, see [Chapter 5, Section 4: Systems Advocacy and Community Organizing](#).

- Advocacy is *active* promotion of a cause or principle.
- Advocacy involves *actions* that lead to a selected goal.
- Advocacy is one of many possible strategies, or ways to approach a problem.
- Advocacy can be used as part of a community initiative, nested in with other components.
- Advocacy is *not* direct service.
- Advocacy does not necessarily involve confrontation or conflict.

Some examples may help clarify just what advocacy is:

- You join a group that helps build houses for the poor--that's wonderful, but it's not advocacy (it's a service).
- You organize and agitate to get a proportion of apartments in a new development designated as low to moderate income housing--that's advocacy.
- You spend your Saturdays helping sort out goods at the recycling center--that's not advocacy (it's a service).
- You hear that land used for the recycling center is going to be closed down and you band together with many others to get the city to preserve this site, or find you a new one. Some of you even think about blocking the bulldozers, if necessary. That's advocacy.

Advocacy usually involves getting government, business, schools, or some other large institution (also known as Goliath) to correct an unfair or harmful situation affecting people in the community (also known as David, and friends). The situation may be resolved through persuasion, by forcing Goliath to buckle under pressure, by compromise, or through political or legal action.

Several ingredients make for effective advocacy, including:

- The rightness of the cause
- The power of the advocates (i.e., more of them is much better than less)
- The thoroughness with which the advocates researched the issues, the opposition, and the climate of opinion about the issue in the community
- Their skill in using the advocacy tools available (including the media)
- Above all, the selection of effective strategies and tactics

For some people, advocacy is a new role. It may be uncomfortable--particularly if confrontation and conflict are involved. But, for others, advocacy is more attractive than setting up and running service programs in the community.

Advocacy can be glamorous: the David vs. Goliath image, manning the barricades, making waves. But the decision to put major resources into advocacy is not one to be taken lightly. If it doesn't work--if you stick your necks way out and don't succeed--not only will you fail, but you may do so in public, discrediting your cause, perhaps making conditions worse for the people you set out to help.

Does advocacy always involve confrontation?

Advocacy can be confrontational, but conflict is usually a bad place to start. Good advocates know they must think very hard about any confrontation that's going to be necessary. That's one reason for careful planning of strategy and tactics. Even if the issue seems as clear as a bell, and your choice of actions seems just as obvious, it's a good idea to take another long, hard look.

Why and when would you choose advocacy?

Advocacy is best kept for when "routine" work such as gathering support for a cause, raising money, and recruiting members of a community initiative or program won't get you where you want to go.

In most cases, it's a good idea to think twice before launching yourselves (or your group) as advocates, because it's a strategy that's more effective if there isn't too much of it around. Imagine a city where there were public demonstrations every day, where City Hall was besieged constantly by groups with special petitions, resolutions, and assorted agitations. The community would quickly develop advocacy fatigue. So would the advocates.

The best time to start planning for an advocacy campaign is:

- When your direct experience or preliminary research shows you cannot achieve your goals in any other way;
- When you are sure you have (or will have) the capacity to carry it through;
- When you have enough enthusiasm and energy to last for what could be a long haul!

This chapter will help you get launched. And this particular section will give you a taste of what's coming up in the seven remaining sections of the chapter, where you will gain a deeper understanding of the issue, identify allies and opponents, plan out your strategy and tactics, and evaluate your efforts.

Survival Skills for Advocates--Section 2

Once you go public with an advocacy campaign, you may draw the attention of a number of people, not all of whom will wish you well. If things go wrong, you could end up looking very silly in the local news, which would not be good for your future campaigns. Even worse, in some circumstances a wrong step could land you in court. At the very least, there's a risk of spinning your wheels if you don't go about the many tasks of advocacy efficiently.

For example, to look at a worst-case scenario, think of what could go wrong with a campaign to promote better health for the poor:

- You accuse the local hospital of turning away a sick patient, without checking your facts. The hospital proves that it treated the man, but he discharged himself early.
- You push your allies out of shape by launching a press release that uses their name, without checking the wording with them first.
- You announce a big demonstration outside the hospital, and only three people show up.

It's amateur night!

In Section 2 of this chapter: [*Survival Skills for Advocates*](#), we've gathered 20 tips that will help members of your group avoid disasters. They'll be able to take on their tasks efficiently, confidently, and with a low risk of tripping over their shoelaces.

Understanding the Issue--Section 3

You probably already have a pretty good idea of what the issue or problem is. For example:

- You are aware of a growing problem of homelessness, particularly among people with small children;

- You feel that not nearly enough is being done in your community to prevent youth smoking;
- Your group is afraid that a new industrial park up river will pollute the water.

In Section 3 of this chapter: [Understanding the Issue](#), you'll learn how to find out much more about the issue, developing the type of deep understanding that you will need for advocacy. Part of your research will involve an analysis of who has power. Remember, advocacy is about power--who can influence things that matter. You will need to know where the power of your opponents lies, and how you can most effectively influence or confront it.

In addition to the material in this chapter, we suggest you check other parts of the Tool Box that can help provide the groundwork for your research. For example, [Chapter 3: Assessing Community Needs and Resources](#), has an analysis of community problems in [Section 5: Analyzing Community Problems](#), and a needs assessment survey in [Section 7: Conducting Needs Assessment Surveys](#). [Chapter 17, Section 4: Analyzing Root Causes of Problems: The "But Why?" Technique](#), will help you analyze root causes of problems and [Chapter 18, Section 3: Identifying Targets and Agents of Change: Who Can Benefit and Who Can Help](#), will help you identify targets and agents of change.

[Recognizing Allies--Section 4](#)

If you are the only people in town who want something done about the problem you have identified, your cause could be in trouble. It's one thing to fight city hall: much harder to take on a whole community of hostile or indifferent people. If there are only a handful of people on your side, it may be all too easy for those in power to dismiss you as the lunatic fringe. One of your jobs will be to make that "fringe" start to look like a representative slice of the whole population affected by the issue--more like the dog and less like the tail. Then people in power will take notice.

Somewhere, there are allies--people who can band together with you and give your cause bulk, visibility, and clout. The question is how to identify them? That's what you'll find out in Section 4 of this chapter: [Recognizing Allies](#). It will tell you how to use a "power grid" that will help you pinpoint those groups and agencies in town that have the power to help your group. This grid will also help you identify specific ways in which these potential allies can help.

Of course, you'll need to be careful about who you invite on board--some allies may bring baggage that you don't need. We'll help you balance potential benefits against potential risks, and come up with some useful backers who will help, rather than hinder, your cause--whether you want to build a full-fledged coalition (see [Chapter 5: Choosing Strategies to Promote Community Health and Development](#)), or an informal alliance or network.

In addition to deciding whether other groups have an interest in your cause, it's important to find out if an alliance with them is in **your** interest. For example, suppose you are planning to make life difficult for retailers who sell cigarettes to kids, and you know that the American Cancer Society, a couple of local youth groups, and a pair of enlightened churches have the same goals. Just how can you best help each other? Do you want a close relationship? Suppose these people are limited by their own charters in the type of action they can get involved in? Suppose they might want to take over the direction of the whole campaign? Suppose they are with your interests on some matters, and against you in others? All these

questions will need to be thought through, and Sections 3: [Understanding the Issue](#) and 4: [Recognizing Allies](#) can help.

Identifying Opponents and Resistance--Section 5

Although it's possible to advocate without having an opponent (for example, you may be working largely to overcome ignorance and inertia), most advocacy campaigns have a recognizable Goliath--or even several big (and potentially mean) kids on the block. Who are your opponents? Why are they putting up resistance? And what can you do about it?

As you will see in Section 5 of this chapter: [Identifying Opponents](#), those questions should be answered together. There's not much point knowing the names of your opponents unless you also know why they are opposing you. Sometimes, this may not be for the most obvious reasons, so you'll need to know what's going on.

Starting with the **cause** for resistance is often more fruitful than starting with a list of people you expect to be bad guys: you may get some surprises. For example, a big developer might turn out to support your drive for more low-cost housing, because he recognizes that the presence of homeless people in the neighborhood can deter rich people from buying his expensive houses. Similarly, people from whom you might expect support might turn out to oppose you. Perhaps a big agency that seems to share your goals is bent out of shape because you seem to be trespassing on their turf or accusing them of ineffectiveness in the past. You can't take anything for granted.

In [Section 5](#), you'll find worksheets that will help reveal the true identity of your opponents, and the reasons for their opposition. You'll also find guidelines for dealing with those opponents.

Encouraging Involvement of Potential Opponents as well as Allies--Section 6

Once you have a plan, you'll know where you are going, and how to get there. That will give you confidence, and that confidence will give you clout. Armed with that, you may be able to approach certain groups or individuals whom you thought were opposed to you. Maybe they still are, but you may find that you can find help in unexpected quarters. Now that your plan makes you more business-like, people may decide to cut a deal. Or, now that your position can be made clear to others as well as to yourselves, you may find that although a certain group still may oppose you on some issues, you are on the same side of others.

That's why we've included [Section 6: Encouraging Involvement of Potential Opponents as well as Allies](#).

Developing a Plan for Advocacy--Section 7

In a sense, this whole Tool Box is one big plan. Dipping into it almost anywhere could produce something that can help with planning. (Chapters [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [14](#), and [15](#) come to mind).

So what's new now? Advocacy. Planning for advocacy is often a complex program because we have to deal with power and opposition. As you know by now, an advocate will usually have to overcome obstacles much greater than "mere" inertia, or lack of funds, which are often the main barriers where other types of community development projects are concerned. In advocacy situations, there are likely to be well-prepared opponents waiting in the tall grass. And they will need to be out-planned.

Section 7 of this chapter: [Developing a Plan for Advocacy](#) will help you to develop a plan based on your knowledge of who those opponents are; and knowledge of who can help you. To help in your planning, Section 7 will also dwell in some detail on selection of strategy and tactics, and the way they fit into the overall scheme.

For a useful analogy, we'll invite you to think of the overall campaign as a building project:

- Your vision and mission is to provide a place to live that is warm and safe.
- Your objective is to build a house.
- Your strategy will take the form of blueprints for the house.
- Your action plan will include the specifics: who will pour the concrete for the foundation, put up a frame, add the roof, et cetera, and when will they do it.

And all will go together as part of one big action plan.

To sum it up

Advocacy is exciting work. You get the pleasure of fighting the good fight, and sometimes, the thrill of victory. In order to have that, though, you need to get through all of the day-to-day details and specifics. You'll need to keep an eye on the forest while working on the trees individually. By going through the following sections carefully, we think you will be better prepared to bring about the changes that matter to your community.