

Dear Board Member... Tapping the Advocacy Power of Your Board

Board members of nonprofit organizations have a unique standing in the community and in the eyes and hearts of legislators and other elected officials. Why?

- Board members are community leaders, business owners, constituents, active citizens, and they represent the voice of reason and responsibility, dollars and cents (and sense).
- Board members are heroes. They have committed their time and energy to an organization that serves the community, and are doing so without pay.
- Board members have integrity. Because they are working without pay, board members are perceived as walking the “high road” with less of a vested interest than an employee of the organization might have.
- Board members are ambassadors. Boards are committed to their organization’s mission, and therefore have a responsibility not only for governance and guidance, but for building public understanding and community support for the organization and the mission.

In the current climate of severe state budget crises and cuts in government services to those most in need, nonprofit participation in the public policy process has never been more important.

Elected officials need to be educated about issues and solutions about which YOU, dear board member, are the expert. Asking a public official to learn about and to get excited about your organization and your mission is the most natural thing for a board member to do. It is only a simple next step to asking for support, for assistance, for action on policy that will make a positive difference to the community you serve.

The survival of many programs and services depends on partnering with legislators to propose policies and protect funding.

How to Engage Your Board

Agendize. First of all, put policy and advocacy on the agenda. On a regular basis. Update board members on the progress of state or local budget debate, policies and legislation that will have an impact on your organization and the people you serve.

Plan. Have an advocacy plan and keep your board apprised of it. Engage them in the next phase (a simple “who would like to...” is all that is needed). As they learn more about policy issues, they will step up.

Partner. Look to the strongest, readiest advocate on your board, cultivate that person and let them help you communicate enthusiasm and the compelling need for your advocacy plan.

Educate. Make sure that information about nonprofit advocacy and lobbying is in your board orientation materials and training curriculum.

What Can Boards Do?

Once an understanding of their advocacy role takes hold in a board, there is no stopping them. In the meantime, bring opportunities for advocacy to the board, coordinate activities and include activities at the board meeting when possible. Activities that board members can do include:

- Handwriting letters to legislators.
- Co-signing a letter from the Board to a policy maker.
- Making calls to legislators (call every week until the problem is solved).
- Requesting meetings with policy makers.
- Visiting policy makers.
- Writing letters to the editor of local papers.
- Writing or signing an opinion editorial to be placed in a local paper.

What Can You Do?

- When you are scheduled to provide testimony at a hearing, call or email all your board members and invite them to go with you. Acknowledge their presence when you are testifying. If a board member would like to speak, work with them on their written testimony and help them practice.
- Let your board members know about scheduled legislative visits as far in advance as possible, and welcome their attendance. Be sure to include them in the pre-visit planning meeting.
- Consider including policy updates and discussion of critical funding issues in your organization's newsletter. Include reports about board members who testified, spoke with public officials about a key topic, etc. Publicly thank board members who have served as ambassadors for your organization and your mission.