

What is Advocacy? Definitions and Examples

Effective advocacy enables nonprofits to shape the public debate on important social issues and ensure that underserved communities have a voice in the policies that impact their lives. The term “advocacy” encompasses a broad range of activities (including research, public education, lobbying, and voter education) that can influence public policy. Advocacy is the number one way nonprofits can advance the issues they care about and help bring about systemic, lasting change.

How is advocacy different from lobbying?

Lobbying is only one kind of advocacy. There are many avenues of advocacy that nonprofits can engage in that do not constitute lobbying. Federal tax law defines lobbying only; “non-lobbying advocacy” is often used to refer to those activities that don’t meet the definition of [lobbying](#).

What kinds of activities comprise advocacy work?

- ✓ **Organizing: Build power at the base.** Communities United Youth Leaders in Chicago, IL mobilize young people in their communities to speak up and advocate for a campaign to [increase investment in teen programs](#).
- ✓ **Educate Legislators: Provide information on issues.** The [North Carolina Civic Education Consortium](#) sent all North Carolina legislators their study on citizens’ understanding of the state government when a civic education bill was being considered. The group was successful in getting funding for civic education activities in North Carolina schools after the mailing of the report.
- ✓ **Invite Legislators to Your Facility: Leave a lasting impression.** The American Health Care Association encourages its members to [invite legislators to visit their facilities](#) because they understand these visits play a critical role in educational and legislative efforts (to avoid lobbying, do NOT discuss specific legislation).
- ✓ **Educate the Public about the Legislative Process: Introduce communities and constituencies to the legislators who represent them.** Utah Issues: Center for Poverty Research and Action sponsors an annual [Citizens Day](#) during which the organization’s members and other Utah residents come to the state capitol to meet their legislators and learn about the legislative process. When community members have the opportunity to meet legislators face to face and discuss the issues that affect their everyday lives, not only do legislators receive the tools they need to represent their communities, but those communities are empowered to invest more heavily in the outcomes of policy debates, giving them a stronger hand in their own future.
- ✓ **Research: Produce relevant resources that reflect the real story of your community.** The Center for Digital Democracy released a [report](#) titled “YouTube, Big Data, Big Brands = Trouble for Kids and Parents” to educate families about the ways YouTube markets to children using the YouTube Kids app.
- ✓ **Organize a rally: Mobilize for your cause.** The Center for Reproductive Rights and many allied organizations stood up outside of the Supreme Court during the oral arguments for *Whole Women’s Health v. Hellerstedt* to [rally for abortion access](#).
- ✓ **Regulatory efforts: Take action at the agencies.** Consumer Action has [pushed](#) the U.S. Department of Labor to update a rule on fiduciary duty that would require investment brokers working with investment accounts to act in the best interest of their clients.

- ✓ **Public education: Educate the community on the issues.** Salud America! provides information, resources, and tips on [how to fight Latino childhood obesity](#).
- ✓ **Nonpartisan voter education: Inform the electorate on the issues.** National Council for Jewish Women published a “[Promote the Vote, Protect the Vote](#)” 2015 resource guide to highlight the importance of voting, access to the polls, and educating voters on issues and candidates.
- ✓ **Nonpartisan voter mobilization: Encourage citizens to vote.** [Nonprofit Vote](#) works with nonprofits across the country and provides resources on how to conduct nonpartisan voter outreach to increase voter participation.
- ✓ **Educational conferences: Gather, network, share information, and plan for the future.** The National Alliance on Mental Illness [organizes a convention](#) each year to connect researchers and advocates and discuss advocacy strategies for mental health reform.
- ✓ **Trainings: Asian Pacific Islander American Health Forum (APIAHF) leads a [leadership training](#)** to provide individuals with the skills needed to be spokespersons on issues facing Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities.
- ✓ **Litigation: Win in court for your cause or your community.** The Women’s Law Project acted as [co-counsel for Tara Brady](#), a student who was involuntarily dismissed from her university basketball team and forced to withdraw from her university because she was pregnant.
- ✓ **Draft a Petition: Demand change.** Alliance for Justice drafted a petition to [urge Spotify](#) to remove their forced arbitration clause and urged the public to sign on to the petition.
- ✓ **Write an Op-Ed: Share your expertise on an issue.** The National Employment Law Project wrote an op-ed on [the importance of a living wage](#) in Baltimore.
- ✓ **Lobbying: Advocate for or against specific legislation.** 501(c)(3) public charities can engage in a limited but generous but limited amount of lobbying. Clean Air Carolina and coalition partners organized [a lobby day](#) in North Carolina on the importance of energy efficiency.

How can your organization get more involved in advocacy?

- ✓ **Educate.** Inform your organization about the current policies and problems affecting your community.
- ✓ **Evaluate.** Evaluate your organization’s mission and goals, and examine whether current programs involve advocacy as a means to address problems or grievances in the community. If not, how could advocacy play a larger role in your organization’s programs?
- ✓ **Collaborate.** Work in coalitions with groups whose philosophy and goals resonate with yours. Together, pooling staff and resources, all parties involved in the coalition should be better equipped to take on campaigns and work for change.
- ✓ **Assess.** Use AFJ’s free online [Advocacy Capacity Tool](#) to assess your advocacy skills, identify specific gaps and strategic opportunities, focus resources to strengthen your organization and achieve the best advocacy results possible.

The information contained in this fact sheet and any attachments is being provided for informational purposes only and not as part of an attorney-client relationship. The information is not a substitute for expert legal, tax, or other professional advice tailored to your specific circumstances, and may not be relied upon for the purposes of avoiding any penalties that may be imposed under the Internal Revenue Code. Alliance for Justice publishes plain-language guides on nonprofit advocacy topics, offers educational workshops on the laws governing the advocacy of nonprofits, and provides technical assistance for nonprofits engaging in advocacy. For additional information, please feel free to contact Alliance for Justice at 866-NPLOBBY.