

ORGANIZING FOR ADVOCACY*

by Mauricio Vivero

I. Introduction

Every Hispanic leader should have a working knowledge of basic techniques and methods of advocacy. This second issue of the *NCLR Hispanic Leadership Bulletin* provides information useful for individuals, community groups, and nonprofit organizations on organizing people for advocacy campaigns.

Advocacy, the act of promoting a cause, requires careful planning and coordination of activities. Making change is not always quick or easy. Before undertaking any advocacy efforts, it is necessary to have an understanding of what the process entails.

The first phase in any advocacy campaign is to set the stage. That is, identify the issue to be addressed, and become thoroughly informed about the issue. This will help define the advocacy goal and the target population for the effort — the audience. It is also important to assess the likelihood of success, so as not to waste time and efforts on unattainable goals.

Next, design an "action plan." Taking into account the goal set, plan a strategy and the tasks or tactics required to carry out the plan. It is now time for what may be the most difficult phase, mobilizing and taking action. Follow the plan and carry out all of the activities and tasks outlined in the "action plan."

Finally, measure the success of the advocacy efforts. Has any change occurred because of the actions undertaken? Periodic evaluations will provide

information on what does and does not work, and what needs to be changed. Monitoring of the process will allow the advocacy effort to adapt actions as needed, and therefore, improve its overall likelihood of success. Also, this information should be useful in planning and implementing future advocacy campaigns.

Below are a series of steps to effective advocacy. Each step serves a discrete function, and together they represent a logical process for planning and implementing a community-based advocacy campaign.

II. The Steps to Effective Advocacy

1. Identify the Issue

First decide what is the desired change. Start with an understanding of the problems the community faces. Remember that different communities have different needs. For example, one community may have a critical need for low-income housing for the elderly. In another community, the lack of bilingual teachers in the public school system may be the main problem.

The process used to identify

Why is Community-Based Advocacy Important

- ❖ It helps organizations clarify goals and prioritize issues.
- ❖ It can influence decision makers in the community.
- ❖ It reflects the needs of the community.



community needs is very important. It will be the basis for defining the issue that will guide the entire advocacy campaign. Begin to identify the community's needs by bringing people together in small group meetings, focus groups, panel discussions, or workshops, to discuss the problems and/or services needed by the community. Make sure the people selected are representative of the different groups in the community. This will result in a broader perspective and more accurate information.

Once a group has been convened, use the following to facilitate a dialogue and get the most input from participants:

- ❖ Be precise about what is expected — tell the participants what needs to be accomplished;
- ❖ Develop a democratic structure for this process, and allow and encourage all participants to contribute;
- ❖ Allow the participants to feel “safe” in contributing by setting rules on criticism beforehand;
- ❖ Emphasize that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers;
- ❖ Encourage participants to draw on their own experiences for suggestions;
- ❖ Make sure two people take careful notes of the suggestions made during each meeting; and
- ❖ Summarize and restate the main suggestions at the end of the meeting.

The convening of community members for this type of needs assessment will help identify potential members for a community advocacy group. Organizing people for advocacy requires identifying, motivating, and unifying individuals around a particular need or cause. Although no formal organization need be formed, and individual com-

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mitment and participation will vary, successful advocacy efforts require establishing a “cadre” or group of people dedicated to working to achieve a specific objective.

This first step will probably identify many local needs and problems. However, all should not be dealt with at the same time. Effective advocacy requires establishing priorities in order to concentrate resources and efforts on a specific issue.

Do not focus on “problem” identification, but rather move towards “issue” selection. A problem can be very broad; for example, lack of transportation for Hispanic elders in the community. Such a problem may be addressed in many ways: increasing the number of bus routes, giving vouchers to seniors for taxis or other transportation alternatives, purchasing minivans for community organizations to provide transportation services, etc. An advocate needs to be able to identify and focus on an issue — funding for a minivan for the CBO that would provide transportation to local Hispanic elderly — and not get “bogged down” on the larger problem, which may be more complicated to deal with.

When defining an issue, consider its urgency, how specific it is, how easy or difficult it would be to organize people around it, and what are the chances of success.

- ❖ An issue is immediate if it affects people now, and there are ways to resolve the issue at the present time.
- ❖ An issue is specific if it can be described in simple concrete terms.
- ❖ An issue is organizable if enough people know about it, are angry about it, and are willing to take action to resolve the issue. For example, three angry Hispanic parents are not enough to get an elementary bilingual program started in their public school system.
- ❖ An issue is “doable” if there is a reasonable possibility that the community can reach its goal if it takes action.

2. Get Background Information

Knowledge is critical in an advocacy campaign. After the issue to be addressed is identified, gather the facts/data on that issue. An effective advocate must know all the “sides” of the issue, who are the players involved (individuals and/or organizations), and what are the implications of taking a certain position. For example, if the issue to be addressed is lack of funding for a local health clinic’s AIDS prevention outreach program for Hispanics, data on the number of Hispanics infected with AIDS will be needed, as well as the number of Hispanics in the community, poverty rates for Hispanics compared with other population groups, the proportion of Hispanics participating in other local health programs, or the proportion of patients served by the

clinic who are Hispanic. In short, the need of Hispanics for such a service must be documented. Information on organizations getting funded for similar services to Hispanics, and if they are doing an adequate job may also be useful. Other important questions to ask are: Who funds these types of programs? What are the funding guidelines? When are the funding decisions made?

A vital part of successful organizing is effective research. Not standard academic research, but more like “intelligence” — all the things that should be known before initiating a course of action. The first step is to identify how and where to find the information needed — census statistics, needs assessments, surveys, research studies, and/or other data gathered by government agencies, academic institutions, and other organizations. Emphasize a team approach to information gathering by sharing tasks with other advocates; divide the research by area or topic. Keep good records of sources of information for later reference, additional data may be needed at a later date.

Learning how to research/gather information involves not only becoming familiar with the sources, but also using the correct approach. A basic premise to follow is: Be persistent. Think that the information needed can always be obtained, and that it is your right to obtain the needed information. Conveying an attitude of powerlessness allows the “other side” to have the upper hand.

It is also critical, early on in the planning of an advocacy campaign, to identify the “target audience.” Who will the efforts be directed at — the general public, expecting to increase public pressure, or a specific individual or organization or several groups? Who the target audience is will influence almost all the remaining steps.

3. Define the Goal

After gathering information on the issue to be addressed, define the goal — a measurable outcome that will be reached as a result of the advocacy efforts. Having a goal is essential because it allows everyone involved to have an idea of what they are working to achieve. Make the goal specific and measurable, since it will serve as the basis to evaluate the success of the advocacy efforts. That is, were the desired results achieved?

4. Assess the Likelihood of Success

Once the goal has been defined, the possibility of success should be addressed. In other words, can the goal be accomplished? To facilitate this process, ask the following questions:

- ❖ What is the advocate’s level of experience with this issue?
- ❖ What current plan/organizations already exist to address this issue?
- ❖ Who are the “friends” or “enemies” on this issue?
- ❖ Does this issue have local governmental/political support?
- ❖ Is the “timing” right — will there be enough time to meet the goal?

The available and required resources should also be considered. What resources will be needed — phone, office, postage, volunteers. Do the advocates include people with the skills needed to meet the goal? Who is a good writer? Who can help in getting the information? Who is articulate and can serve as spokesperson? Answers to these question can help identify potential roadblocks and devise ways to overcome them in the plan of action. It will also help to assess if the goal established needs to be modified to make it more realistic or attainable.

5. Review the Goal to Be Accomplished

After assessing the goal’s likelihood of success, it may become evident that the proposed goal may not be achievable given the available resources, level of expertise with the issue, or limited support for the issue in the community. In that case, it may be necessary to reconsider and restate the goal in more realistic terms. For example, the goal may be to obtain public housing for 1,000 low-income Hispanic families, but given the resources, this may not be realistic; however, it may be possible to help 300 families. Revise the goal, and again make sure that the new goal is specific and measurable since it will serve as the basis to evaluate the success of the advocacy effort.

6. Plan the Strategy

Next, decide on a strategy — the plan, method, or series of acts or tactics that will lead to achieve the ultimate goal. In designing a strategy, two points should be kept in mind:

- ❖ **Focus efforts on persuading or motivating those with power to make change.** Thus, a clear understanding of who can make change is critical. Advocates need to develop a solid understanding of the decision-making process within the community. Sometimes advocates are over eager and begin identifying issues and organizing meetings long before they have a clear grasp of the

way decisions are made in the community and who influences those decisions. At the opposite extreme, some advocates get “bogged down” in laborious and frequently pointless research — and drag their feet on taking actions in order to tackle the issues.

- ❖ **A strategy should always include a “fall-back” position.** The “fall-back” position is the minimum acceptable if the original goal cannot be achieved. The minimum acceptable should be decided **before** beginning any negotiations. This minimum, or “bottom-line” position, should not be discussed with any outside persons.

After establishing a strategy, define the specific tasks which must be carried out in order to implement the strategy and achieve the goal. There is usually more than one possible course of action for each position. Think through and discuss the implications of the different alternatives in order to make knowledgeable decisions about a strategy. Also, remember to plan a strategy which includes a timeline of activities or actions. Consider the timing of the tactics. Start with actions that involve a lower level of effort and escalate as needed. Coordinate actions. For example, get media attention on an issue around the time of a key meeting of decision makers.

7. Get Support

Advocacy should not be practiced in a vacuum. Alliances with other groups or individuals who have similar goals are important. In order to begin to build coalitions and create relationships, find out who the “players” are in order to identify potential “allies.”

Identifying “Allies”

- ❖ Attend legislative events such as city council hearings or debates on the issues being addressed.
- ❖ Get on the mailing list of other advocacy groups, local social service agencies, and governmental offices that deal with the issues.
- ❖ Monitor the newspapers for articles related to the goal.

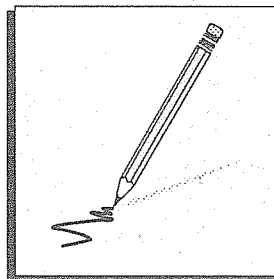
8. Take Action

Once a goal has been defined, a strategy outlined, the tactics to be used identified, and the nature and structure of

the body or person who has the power to make the change understood, the next step is to engage in advocacy. Advocacy efforts can take many forms — sending a letter or calling local city council members, setting up a meeting with the mayor’s staff to communicate concerns on a specific issue, testifying at a legislative hearing, or launching a mass media campaign to focus attention on a particular issue.

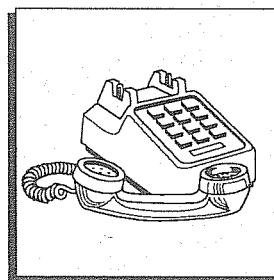
Some basic advocacy “actions” include:

Writing a Letter



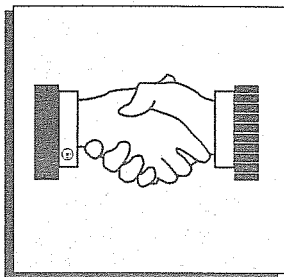
A single letter written in a personal style can be very influential. Make the position clear, and state exactly the desired action sought by the decision maker. Avoid jargon and hypothetical examples, personal experiences make the best evidence. Tell how the changes sought will impact the lives of local community members. Show as much knowledge as possible. Avoid sending a postcard or form letter. Handwritten letters are fine if they are legible. Do not apologize for taking the reader’s time. Do not effect a righteous tone or use threats. Write briefly and only on one subject. If a constituent, be sure to state so. If asking the decision maker a question which later goes unanswered, follow up with another letter, or telephone call, asking for a response. Do not try to become the decision maker’s pen pal, those who write too often may be viewed as a nuisance. If the decision maker acts on a request, send a thank you note. Most letters received by decision makers are critical or ask for something, a thank you note is a nice change that is likely to be remembered.

Making a Phone Call



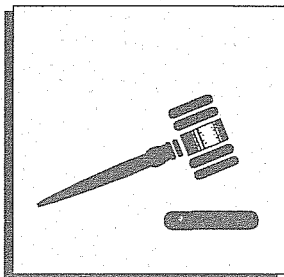
A call to the individual(s) who can make the desired change can be more effective than a letter because it allows two-way communication. Be ready with a clear concise statement of the change being requested, and give all relevant information—name, address, phone number, organization name, etc. If asking for information or a certain action, state that there will be a phone call within a few weeks to follow-up on the request. Document the call, keep records of the date and time of the call, and the name of decision maker or his/her representative.

Making a Personal Visit



First call for an appointment. Be on time, be brief, and keep to the subject. Written information should be left with the group or individual for them to read. It pays to follow up a personal visit with a thank-you note and a reminder of the information or action requested.

Testifying at a Hearing



Be aware when the issue in question will be considered by the decision makers — City Council, County Supervisors, State Legislature, etc. Calendars of activities for these bodies should be available to the public. Use contacts to be **invited to testify** (this will usually entail

contacting staff of a legislator/council member who is sympathetic to the issue and “selling” the advocacy group’s position as being supportive of the member’s efforts).

Testimony is very important in establishing a record on an issue, and in making thorough arguments. The written statement should outline in detail all of the supporting arguments, and state the priorities. Oral testimony should be much shorter than a written statement, usually not more than five minutes. There will only be time to make the main points, therefore, practicing oral testimony is critical. Be prompt and dress appropriately, appearance is important. The speaker should begin by introducing himself, and giving a brief description of the organization or advocacy group. Next, state the issue position and the main reasons for the position. Use every-day language, not bureaucratic words; this will be more authentic and therefore more convincing. Give concrete examples and a case history. Avoid confrontation by staying calm and unruffled. Finally, close by summarizing the main points, thanking the audience/panel, and asking if there are any questions. If asked a difficult or complicated question, do not bluff or make up answers. It is acceptable to respond by stating that further research will be conducted and a follow-up response will be sent to the decision maker(s).

Using the Media and Media “Getters”



Write articles in local newspapers and/or guest editorial pieces. Make appearances on radio and TV talk shows. Time or synchronize media activity when the issue is “hot,” that is, when you will get the most exposure. Using a local, regional, or national “celebrity” can greatly increase media exposure. While Hollywood stars elicit media attention, local athletes, coaches, TV personalities, and well-known community leaders represent good untapped sources of influence. Make them spokespersons for the issue.

No matter what tactics are used, be sure that the person(s) responsible for organizing or carrying out the activity is identified. Make sure each task has a completion deadline. Since people are interested in different things, advocates should self-select the tasks to be accomplished, this will help increase motivation.

Also, always remember to follow up with any action(s) promised — calling back, writing a letter, or making another visit — or if a request or a question was asked and no answer has been received. Decision makers respond best to advocates who are serious and professional and do not just “drop the ball.”

9. Assess Results

Evaluating the success of an advocacy campaign is critical. Don’t wait until the end to find out if the advocacy efforts were effective. Incorporate assessments and evaluations of the effort into the advocacy plan. One approach is to have advocates periodically answer the following three questions:

- ❖ Is the strategy achieving the desired results — is the goal closer?
- ❖ What is working, and what is not?
- ❖ Are the tactics working, are they well-timed and coordinated effectively?

An evaluation of the strategy and its results may lead to the conclusion that the strategy was not fully developed. For example, the “target” of the effort may not have had the power to make the change sought, or perhaps the timing of

the campaign was not right; or maybe the strategy and tactics used were correct but not sufficient in number or frequency.

If an assessment indicates that the strategy is not working, the approach may need to be revised. Re-evaluating and changing tactics is completely acceptable in any advocacy campaign. If it is felt that further work can be done, go back to step six, **Plan Strategy**, and modify the strategy and action plan.

Make sure to carry out internal and external impact assessments. For example, assess whether certain tasks were completed on time (internal). Talk with people outside the advocacy effort (perhaps others with a similar goal) and have them provide feedback on the employed tactics and efforts (external). The bottom line for assessing success is: Did the efforts create the change desired? Also consider what might be done differently next time. Knowing what worked, or did not work, can help in planning other advocacy campaigns.

The process of advocacy is very time-consuming and complex. Advocates should **not** feel discouraged if the exact goal sought does not come about. For example, the advocacy work may not yield the immediate change sought, but it probably can raise the awareness of the general public **and** help educate local political leaders about the needs and desires of the community. This "groundwork" is very important because it will surely assist in any future advocacy efforts.

III. Nonprofit Organizations: The Role and Limitations of Lobbying

When the word advocacy is used many people immediately think of lobbying. However, advocacy and lobbying are not the same. Lobbying, which could be part of an advocacy campaign, is the process by which an individual or organization attempts to influence the content or passage of legislation. Lobbying includes communicating with a legislator or staff member or government employee to influence his/her position on an issue, and/or trying to get the general public to share a particular view on an issue and to take action to attempt to influence decision makers.

There is a misconception that nonprofit organizations are not permitted to "lobby." In fact, there is a broad range of activities that fit the above definition which are permitted with certain limits. For example, a nonprofit organization's

staff or Board may write to or call their legislators, organize a letter-writing campaign, or organize and pay for a trip to the state capital. To a lesser degree, an organization can engage in "grassroots" lobbying — actions aimed at motivating the general public to contact legislators and ask them to act on a certain piece of pending legislation.

Usually, a nonprofit tax-exempt corporation, by filing certain forms with the IRS, can spend 15 to 20% of their total exempt resources on lobbying.* If the organization's budget is \$500,000 or less, up to 20% of its budget may be used for lobbying. If the agency's budget is over that amount, a reduced percent applies. If the organization does not file with the IRS, the organization can still engage in lobbying activities as long as lobbying is "not a substantial part"

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of its activities. Courts have interpreted this to mean less than 5% of the organization's budget. As to funds used for "grassroots" lobbying, organizations usually **cannot** spend more than 25% of their **overall** lobbying expenditures on this type of lobbying. Organizations that operate federally-funded programs must also consider one additional regulation — federal funds cannot be used to lobby Congress or state legislatures.

Some activities are not considered lobbying, and thus are not subject to the above mentioned limits. For example, it is not considered lobbying to prepare or disseminate fact-based analyses on policy issues, to inform members of an organization about legislative events, to respond to written requests from legislators for advice, or to sponsor or attend a workshop on lobbying. An organization should not feel inhibited from engaging in these types of functions.

The words lobbying or advocacy should not deter an organization from getting involved in promoting change. In fact, Hispanic community-based organizations (CBOs), have an obligation to advocate for and represent Hispanic residents of their community. For example, Hispanic organizations can play a valuable role by educating the mainstream community about the needs of Hispanics and their families, and by advocating for programs and services to meet these needs. Hispanic CBOs can and should empower Hispanics to advocate for themselves, and on behalf of their communities.

* This paragraph was prepared with extensive use of the following article: The Final Lobbying Regulations: A Challenge for Both the IRS and Charities, *TAX NOTES*, September 3, 1990, by James J. McGovern, Paul G. Accettura, and Jerome P. Walsh Skelly.

Community Advocacy Campaign

