



How to Advocate for Counseling

Being an advocate for counseling is not difficult and it is not just for political experts. You are an expert in counseling. You just need to know a few basics about how Congress or your state legislature works and what motivates legislators.

You will either be supporting a bill in the legislature, opposing a bill, asking for a bill to be introduced, or asking for something from the governor or a state agency.

Know the issue as much as possible, and know how counseling and counselors are involved. No one expects you to know everything, and everyone finds bills difficult to understand because of the format used to write them. You can explain the *counseling* side of the issue. If it is not a new issue, try to know some of the history behind it from previous years.

Use personal stories to demonstrate your position, or why you support or oppose a bill.

Use data from an official source if possible, or from some source that will show the need for what you are requesting.

Let representatives know how many people you are representing, either officially or unofficially. If the issue affects school counselors, let them know how many there are statewide. Let them know, subtly, that you would be happy to give them credit in your group for whatever they do to help you.

Find a champion in the legislature who will support you. Start with the ones who represent you, but look for others if your members aren't in the majority party or on the appropriate committee. If you aren't a constituent of a potential champion, try to find someone who is to ask them for help.

Pay attention to the committee that your bill was/will be referred to, and the members and the chair of the committee. They are going to have the most say about what happens to the bill. Have your members contact committee members right before a committee hearing on the bill.

When meeting with a legislator or staffer, **know your audience**. Look up his or her background, his or her district, and find reasons he or she would respond to your request.

Your representatives should be happy to see you because **you are the expert on counseling**. You can explain how a bill that affects counselors or the state licensure board would work in the real world, and why it's good or bad. Legislators have to vote on many bills that involve areas they aren't experts in, or know much about. And frequently they don't have much time to learn. If you are explaining something to them in advance, you have a big advantage in getting your point of view across over those with an opposing viewpoint. You can also bring a legislator's attention to an issue that they otherwise wouldn't pay much attention to among the hundreds of other bills under consideration. And remember, most state legislators are doing it as a part time job. You're the expert on counseling.

Two things that often motivate legislators are job creation/retention and saving the government money. Try to frame your request with one of these if possible. Or look for an issue that is currently getting a lot of attention: opioid abuse for example. Try to relate your request to one of those.

Not everyone can go meet with their representatives in the state capital. **An email** combining the issue, why it is important to counselors, a personal story, some data, something relatable to the member (for example, “As a veteran, I know you see the need...”) and a clear request about what you want them to do can be productive.

A phone call can be more productive. Emails can be ignored or answered with software that figures out the issue and sends an automated response. Social media can also be ignored. Phone calls can’t be ignored as easily. And if you are polite and reasonably informed you can learn things from the staffer you are talking to and get your message across. You can call the representative’s local office and the office in the state capital. Not that emails and social media are a bad idea, but taking the time to make a call, or keep making a call until you get through to a person, is probably the best way to make an impression on behalf of your issue, especially if many people do it. Then you can follow up with an email and social media.

State laws on lobbying: Basically if you aren’t getting paid, you aren’t officially a lobbyist. As representatives of a nonprofit counseling organization, you can provide information and either support or oppose a bill. As an association you can’t officially support a candidate or a party. Check the state regulations for details.

Candidates appreciate contributions. It’s just a fact that they will pay attention to people who donate to them. But it can be a barbeque that costs \$20 to attend, or an inexpensive get-together at someone’s house. Each legislator has a campaign website where you can find out about upcoming events, or get on a mailing list. These events are a good time to simply mention your issue to them, not to make the whole pitch (unless they seem completely interested.) It is much better to donate by attending an event than just making a contribution on the website or mailing a check. You should follow up by calling the representative’s chief of staff and saying, “I mentioned a bill I’m supporting to your boss at the _____ event last weekend, could I talk to you about that?” This way you get the ball rolling and let the staff know you were at a fundraiser. The money has to come from you personally, and you can’t say you’re representing ACA. If you are active in your local party you will see your local representatives at party meetings/events that are free. This is also a good way to get to know them.

Getting and keeping informed:

You can get on the email list from your legislators.

You can follow them on social media.

You can get emails from your state party organization.

You can check the ACA government affairs website.

You can set up Google alerts on important issues

If you Google “(your state) political news” you can find a number of websites to follow.

You can follow a particular bill at the state legislature’s bill tracker feature on its homepage, or use legiscan.com or openstates.org to follow bills.

In most states you can find out about who is making donations to what state representatives at a state website. For federal representatives the website is opensecrets.org.

