

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 063

PS 024 497

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 TITLE Raise Your Legislator's Antenna: A Nuts-and-Bolts Guide to How (and Why) To Advocate for Families...with Families.  
 INSTITUTION Family Resource Coalition, Chicago, IL.  
 PUB DATE 95  
 NOTE 7p.  
 PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Activism; \*Advocacy; Community Organizations; \*Community Programs; Family (Sociological Unit); \*Family Programs; Federal Legislation; Laws; Legislation; Lobbying; Nonprofit Organizations; Parent Participation; Parents; Political Issues; Politics; Social Action; State Legislation  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Family Advocacy; \*Family Policy; Family Support; Internal Revenue Service

ABSTRACT

Family service providers cannot afford not to get involved in advocating for family-friendly public policy, in the face of legislation that jeopardizes family programs. Designed for community-based program providers, this guide asserts the importance of advocacy for families at the state and federal legislature level. Sections of the guide are: (1) "What Is Public Policy?" (2) "What Is Advocacy?"; (3) "Involving Parents," giving reasons to involve parents in the advocacy process; (4) "A Step-by-Step Guide to Advocacy"; (5) "What's the Occasion?," detailing steps for advocacy, including forming an advocacy team, finding out who represents you, and meeting with your lawmakers; (6) "The Pay-Off," asserting that advocacy is the way to make government responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families; and (7) "Lobbying Rules for Tax-Exempt Nonprofits." Short case studies of three different advocacy efforts are included. (BGC)

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# RAISE YOUR LEGISLATOR'S ANTENNA

## A Nuts-and-Bolts Guide to How (and Why) to Advocate for Families ... with Families

by Shelley Peck and Kathy Goetz

**A**s a community-based program provider, you've got your hands full. Whether you run a welfare-to-work program, provide adult education or parenting classes, offer child development programs or childcare, or make it possible for families to navigate their way through the public service system, one thing is sure: there aren't enough hours in the day to provide families with all the support and services they need and deserve.

So who has time for legislative advocacy?

You—and the families who participate in your program—do.

As state and federal legislatures consider bill after bill that jeopardizes *your program* and *your community's families*, you can't afford not to get involved in advocating for family-friendly public policy.

### WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?

Public policy is the laws and programs that legislators—the people on the Hill or in your state congress—make, which govern us and the families in our communities. It may seem like lawmakers have all the power. But while we depend on them to create laws and programs that keep families strong, they depend on us for something else: votes. Your lawmakers care about what you, their constituents, have to say—because if they don't, they're out of office. Legislators spend literally most of their time thinking about how they can please people like you.

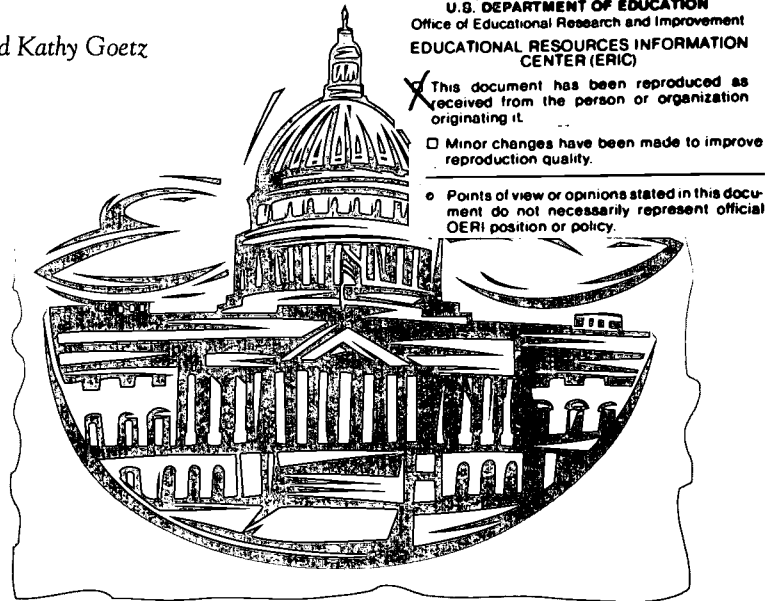
Right now the people that are speaking the loudest to lawmakers are not those who are advocating for programs to strengthen and support families.

### WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

Advocacy is promoting the interests of a group (in your case, the families in your community) among lawmakers. Its goal is to get policies passed that serve the interests of that group.

The good news is you don't need to wear a three-piece suit or be a well-paid, politically connected lobbyist to influence the laws and programs that affect your community. You don't even have to know the details of the legislative process. The best kind of advocacy is finding out who represents you and, in partnership with the families in your program, telling (or showing) that person what you, as a community-based family support advocates, are more qualified than anyone else to describe: who the families in your community are, and why they are best served by preventive, strengths-building services and supports. Too many who are responsible for making the rules never see what you see, hear what you hear, or know what you know. It's up to you to tell them.

What can you accomplish through advocacy? You can build a relationship with your legislators, to raise their "antenna" about issues that affect families. You want a picture of the issues in your community to pop up in your representative's



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mind whenever a law or program is discussed that will affect your community.

### INVOLVING PARENTS

Community-based program providers committed to parent and community empowerment can and should advocate for families, **with families**. There are lots of reasons to involve parents in the advocacy process.

1. Parents can be their own best advocates and the most effective spokespersons for their needs. The most powerful testimony about the difference family support programs can make in people's lives will come from those who have benefited. Similarly, the most persuasive picture of a community's needs will be drawn by those living—and struggling—in a community.
2. Advocacy really is a more-the-merrier activity. As the number of advocates increases, so the impact and effectiveness of those advocates. Teaming up with parents can multiply your capacity to protect and increase the availability of family support programs in communities a hundred-fold.
3. Working with parents is an important way to further your mission and your goals. As an excellent family support program, you seek to establish relationships of equality and respect with parents, and you attempt to engage them as partners. Most family support programs facilitate parents' ability to serve as resources to each other, to participate in program decisions and governance, and to **advocate for themselves in the broader community**.

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## A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO ADVOCACY

In the case of advocating for public policies that are good for families and for family support programs, parents and program staff clearly have common interests and goals. Learning together how to become better advocates inevitably offers opportunities to strengthen your relationship with the families participating in your program, and to build that fundamental partnership.

This how-to guide is FRC's first tool for helping program staff and parents team up in order to communicate with and educate political institutions and elected officials. Although it focuses on working with the federal Congress, the same principles apply to state houses and legislatures, city councils, and county commissions.

Call the Family Resource Coalition for more tips, encouragement, and information to help get you started.

## WHAT'S THE OCCASION?

When is it appropriate to contact your representative? Anytime. Certain times are strategically "hot" because of approaching legislation, and there are ways of finding out what's in the hopper. You can call FRC to find out the names of advocacy organizations that monitor your state's legislation, and you can keep your eyes open for FRC's *Policy Beat*, a newsletter that the Coalition sends to members when federal legislation developments affect family support programs. You know what issues affect your community. If many of the families in your community use food stamps, for example, watch out for pending programs that would affect food stamps.

But a sure-fire way to advocate for families any time is to use the methods described below to tell your representatives how your program works for families—and what would happen to your community if funding to programs such as yours were cut.

### 1. Form an Advocacy Team

The first step is to get together with what will become the nucleus of your new advocacy team. As with any new project, you'll need to talk it up while assessing and generating enthusiasm and interest. Some parents and staff will immediately understand the power and importance of advocacy and will be excited about participating from the outset. These people can help convince other parents and staff of the value of investing time in advocacy efforts; they'll underscore the real possibility of success. You'll need to schedule a preliminary meeting to discuss the issues your community faces and to get started on a strategy for getting public officials to help you address them. Meetings of the advocacy team are good opportunities to brainstorm creative ideas and figure out how to implement them, including dividing the work realistically.

### 2. Find Out Who Represents You

Someone on your advocacy team will need to call your community's voter registrar, the local Democratic or Republican party headquarters, or your local League of Women Voters to find out about your state and local reps. To learn who represents you in Washington, call Capitol Hill Information at the numbers below and provide your zip code.

Senate operator: (202) 224-3121

House operator: (202) 225-3121

PLUS ...

Find out about your representatives' personal histories. Does he or she have young children at home? Has your rep ever worked with families and children as a school teacher, minister, health care provider, etc.—or does he or she have a spouse that does? Do any two of you belong to the same religious denomination, community group, or civic club? These things may make him or her sympathetic to your point of view.

You can find such information in the *Almanac of American Politics* and other books in your library or bookstore.

### 3. Meet With Your Lawmakers

The most effective way to influence policymaking decisions is to get to know your legislators and their staff personally so that they may better understand what you represent. Anyone can make an appointment to see his or her legislator. You can schedule a meeting to discuss a particular piece of legislation or just to generally educate that lawmaker about family support or your particular program or organization. Here are a few pointers to make your meeting effective:

- **Make an appointment in advance.**

Call your lawmaker's local office. Say that you would appreciate the opportunity to meet with the lawmaker the next time he or she is in town, and state the subject you wish to discuss. It is often possible to get an appointment for a Friday afternoon or Saturday morning. If the legislator isn't due home again for a long while, or if he or she already has a full schedule, ask to meet with the staff person who works on family issues. Staffers generally are more accessible and have a great need for information to enable them to advise legislators properly.

- **Prepare.**

Plan a short presentation before your meeting. Have your advocacy team decide who in the group will represent them at this meeting. One person can go alone, or you may want to designate two or three: a least one parent and one program staffer.

Agree in advance who will do the talking and what approach you will use. Collect or prepare information that may be helpful to the representative or staff person:

- Literature about your organization and what you do
- Relevant articles from the local newspaper
- Statistics you have collected about your community and its families
- Fact sheets about legislation you are asking the legislator to support or oppose
- Related FRC materials (call FRC for more information)
- A business card or some other material with your name and address on it

- **Talk about what you know.**

The most important thing you can do is to share your own expertise with the legislator or staff person. Program staff can describe how the principles of the family support movement are put into practice at their agency. They can talk about the families they see and work with in a typical day. Parents can talk about the program's impact on their lives and discuss the special challenges that you and your neighbors experience raising children today. Talk about the resources your community has and does not have for ensuring that the children and families who live there are strong and healthy.

- **Be specific as possible about the action you want from the legislator.**

Describe the legislator's role in promoting family support programs and practices. If you want him or her to support or oppose a proposal, say so. Relate how that proposal would negatively or positively affect the families you know.

- **Encourage questions.**

Answer factually and not argumentatively. Don't worry if you don't know the answer to every question. It is much better to say you don't know and offer to get the correct information than to give an incorrect answer.

- **Listen carefully.**

Let your legislator or the staff person share his or her views on the subject. If you do not agree, listening carefully will make you familiar with his or her arguments so that you can refute them with additional facts or personal knowledge, either at the meeting or in a follow-up letter.

- **Leave promptly.**

At the end of the time allotted, thank the legislator or staff person for her or his time and courtesy and then leave.

- **Follow up.**

Send a thank-you for the meeting when you get home. Enclose any information you promised to send or provide additional arguments to support your viewpoint.

### 3. Invite them to a site visit.

Because the look and feel of the family support movement varies widely from community to community, politicians and others often don't "get it" until they see it. The best way to educate your legislators about the necessity of a preventive, family-supportive approach to services is to invite them to see first-hand how the principles of family support translate into practices in your community. Use a site visit as an opportunity to let them see what your program is doing. Let them hear directly from parents and front-line workers.

Call your legislator's local office to arrange a visit. Offer to invite members of the local press as well. It could be good publicity opportunity for both your program and the legislator, and a chance to educate members of press about family support.

### 4. Write a letter

Without a doubt, politicians read and count their mail. If you ever wondered if a single letter can make a difference, you're not alone. Most state legislators consider 15 letters on any single

topic "a lot." For federal legislators, a few dozen letters feels like an avalanche. So why not incorporate letter writing into your program activities? Writing letters could be incorporated into a family literacy or G.E.D. program. You could also set up a letter-writing table at a social event. Facilitate the process by providing pens, paper, envelopes, and stamps. Rely on your advocacy team to generate other creative ideas.

Personalized, handwritten letters on stationery are the most effective. Form letters, postcards, and petitions are read and counted, but don't carry the weight that a personal letter from a constituent does. Try to keep letters as simple and clear as possible, and follow these pointers:

- **Be brief.**

Write only one or two pages. Legislators and their staff are busy, and anything longer may not be read carefully. Limiting yourself to commenting on just one bill or topic is helpful. Write two different letters if you wish to comment on two different subjects.

- **Be specific.**

State the action you want your legislator to take in the very first paragraph. If you want a yes or no vote on a bill, say so. ("I urge you to vote for H.R. 1 ...") If you want to relay opinions and information, do it. ("At the family resource center where I have worked for five years, I have learned much about the hopes, dreams, and struggles of low-income families who live in [your district]. Because of those experiences, I am writing to express my strong concerns about welfare reform legislation currently being debated in Congress ...") or ("As the working

## Families Get Their School Bus—FDP Parents' Campaign Nets Concrete Results

When the families participating in the University of New Mexico's Family Development Program (FDP) lost school bus services due to a city shortfall, they wanted to voice their objections. Some wanted to surprise the city council at their next meeting by marching in mass, petitions in hand, to demand that service be restored.

But other community members, including FDP staff, who had been invited to give their input at a community meeting, raised some questions. Would surprising the council really help parents' cause? What if council members reacted negatively to the "big fuss" approach? What if they just needed more information to make the right decision?

Parents decided that the march to city hall should be peaceful, and that they would tell the city council of their plans as soon as possible. This would allow the city council to search for solutions prior to the meeting.

Families and staff discussed the plan in depth and determined everyone's role in carrying it out. Staff would draft the petitions, parents would visit all their neighbors and gather signatures, and still other parents would make signs for the march—in which parents, children, and staff would participate. A letter was drafted to apprise city hall of FDP's intentions. In the process each person learned much about the others' strengths, and about the strategic planning necessary to carry out a grassroots advocacy campaign.

After the march—which drew much media attention—and the parents' subsequent testimony at city hall, the city council restored bus service for that year. Also, they suggested that parents submit a proposal for the preschools run by FDP during the city's next funding cycle. FDP followed the council's recommendation and received funding, and continues to receive money from the City each year.

mother of two small girls, living in [your district], I am writing to express my strong concerns about welfare reform legislation currently being debated in Congress"). If you want the legislator to cosponsor a bill or support a specific strategy, identify it. ("I urge you to do everything you can to end the filibuster that is preventing a vote on S.B. 1 ...")

- **Use personal experiences and facts.**

State how the legislation or action will affect your own family and/or the families with whom you work or who reside in your community. If you have data, use it, especially if it documents how the decision affects the legislator's constituents ("At the family resource center where I work, more than 80 percent of the families receive food stamps. I believe the bill under consideration would affect those families in the following ways ...") or ("I am writing on behalf of my children and all of the other children in our community. More than 80 percent of us rely on food stamps to feed our families. I believe the bill under consideration would affect us in the following ways ...").

- **Start with a positive attitude.**

Legislators, like you and I, respond better to politeness and praise than to anger and criticism. Remind them how you have supported them in the past (if you did) and how you are counting on them. Remember, legislators need votes in order to keep their job, and they have an interest in keeping their constituents satisfied. Voting and being involved in the political process gives you clout in a legislator's eyes. Use this clout in your letters.

- **Neatness counts.**

Write neatly and put your name and address on both the letter and the envelope. In case the letter gets separated from the envelope, your legislator will still be able to reply.

You can obtain the mailing addresses of governors and state legislators from your local voter registrar or League of Women Voters. When writing to federal lawmakers, use the following forms of address and salutation:

To the President or Vice President:  
The President or The Vice President  
The White House

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President or Dear Mr. Vice President:

To Senators:  
The Honorable [full name]  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510  
Dear Senator [full name]

To Representatives:  
The Honorable [full name]  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515  
Dear Representative [full name]

## 5. Pick up the phone

A telephone call to a legislator's local or Washington, D.C., cannot take the place of a letter, but it can serve as an

emphatic follow-up or a quick way of informing a lawmaker of your opinion.

Telephoning is most effective during the 48 hours that precedes a vote. This is when many highly organized groups and movements utilize telephone trees to get a large number of phone calls into a legislator's office. Your advocacy team could assemble one of these telephone trees. Lawmakers and their staff cannot help but get the message from a constantly ringing telephone. A few hours of steady rings have been known to change the response from, "Thank you for calling," to "Representative so-and-so is definitely backing that measure."

You can reach your Senators through the Senate switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and your Representatives through the House switchboard at (202) 225-3121. To find the numbers for your legislators' local offices, call your local Democratic or Republican party headquarters, the League of Women Voters, or directory assistance.

When calling, give your name, address, and a brief message, such as "Vote yes on H.R. 1."

## 6. Organize others

If several letters, telephone calls, or personal meetings are helpful, then imagine how effective many letters or calls or meetings can be. Contact a group of like-minded professionals, parents, religious groups, agency staff, or organizations. Then involve them in your advocacy team:

### Justice RAINS in South Miami Beach— RAINMAKERS Parents Challenge Unfair Housing Policies

Ten years ago South Miami Beach welcomed recent immigrants of Cuba and South and Central America and others with little money. Rent was inexpensive and although most of the apartments were small, families found housing easily.

But in 1990 family advocates at Fienberg-Fisher Elementary School's Healthy Learners' Project noticed that more and more parents were coming to them with problems caused by lack of housing. Parents and staff felt they had to do something about it. RAINMAKERS, a group made up of Fienberg-Fisher parents who receive training in parent advocacy, was the perfect vehicle.

Their first priority was to measure how bad the housing crunch really was. Parents split up, 10 to each neighborhood, and interviewed landlords about their policies. No wonder families were complaining: rents were skyrocketing, landlords were rejecting families with children, and the pool of affordable housing had drastically diminished.

Armed with statistics, they applied for federal funding so that Legal Services of Greater Miami could co-locate with the Fienberg-Fisher school. The Legal Services attorney counseled them on how to bring their concerns to the Miami Beach Board of Commissioners and get results: an extension of the 15-day eviction notice to 30 days. The group had started out demanding rent control; their strategy of asking for more than they could get, and then "settling" for less, worked.

Other victories followed: a traffic light at a busy intersection near the school (also good publicity for the city Commissioners who authorized it); a school-located, parent-run childcare program funded by the Danforth Foundation; and a Head Start program.

It has taken a few years for lawmakers and the parents themselves to realize parents have a right to advocate for their families' needs in the policy arena. But now RAINMAKERS regularly mobilizes up to 60 parents, children and youth, and elderly people for Commission meetings when demolitions and evictions are scheduled, and one of its veterans, Teresa Martiato, regularly counsels the Commission on housing and parents' issues. Former Healthy Learners' Project Family Advocate Tania Alameda says the parents know it doesn't matter how loud they talk, just how consistent they are.

- **Arrange a group meeting.**

Arrange for a diverse cross-section of parents and others from the community to meet your legislators.

- **Launch a letter-writing campaign.**

Ask everyone in your agency, parent group, or coalition to write a letter. Set a goal for the number of letters you want the legislator to receive, and don't stop until you've reached that goal. Avoid form letters and petitions. Facilitate the process by providing pens, paper, envelopes, and stamps.

- **Organize a telephone tree.**

When there isn't time to write a letter, a telephone call—or even better, a continuous stream of telephone calls—has been known to persuade a wavering legislator. You can organize your group, agency, or coalition for such events beforehand by developing a telephone tree. Working much like a chain letter, a telephone tree ensures dozens of calls to a legislator's office without any single person having to make more than

## **Letter-Writing Empowers Rhode Island Parents—Members of Congress Know All About HIPPY**

Parents in Rhode Island met with success on the federal level with a letter-writing campaign to their Senators and Representatives, spearheaded by the national office of HIPPY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters) and organized by the state's HIPPY office.

The 140 Rhode Island parents who wrote letters encouraging their Senators and Representatives not to cut Title IV funding for Parental Assistance were excited when they all got responses from the lawmakers' offices. And soon after, staff at their HIPPY program received a Request for Proposals asking them to apply for Title IV funds, which, if granted, would allow the program to open a Parent Information Center. The parents also were writing to urge Members of Congress to vote against welfare reform legislation that would negatively impact poor families.

Parents' level of interest in what was going on on the Hill skyrocketed; many of them now pick up the federal policy section of newspaper or turn up the radio or television when legislation that would impact families and children is in the news.

Just as important, the campaign raised the awareness of their Members of Congress about families' needs and concerns: when Rhode Island HIPPY Director Mary Doyle was introduced to Senator Patrick Kennedy recently, he immediately recalled all those letters from HIPPY parents.

In their responses to parents, the Members of Congress commended them for caring so much about their children's education and praised HIPPY as a program that would help create a bright future for children.

"It was very easy to coordinate," said Doyle. Staff distributed 200 pre-addressed letters (they received a template from HIPPY USA) at parent meetings; the program's paraprofessional staff also distributed letters while on home visits. Many parents simply completed and mailed the form letter, but some personalized it with their own text. "Now there's a whole cadre of parents ready to write letters whenever it's necessary," said Doyle. "We'll probably do another campaign this fall."

three or four calls. Designate a lead person to activate the system before crucial votes. That person calls his or her legislator, and then calls three or four others on the tree. Those others then call the same legislator, and then call three or four others, and so on.

- **Reach other voters through the media.**

You can multiply the impact of your letters, calls, and visits to legislators with just a little bit more time and energy by using the media. Turn your letter to a legislator into a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. Use the same message you conveyed in a call or meeting with a lawmaker to reach the audience of a radio call-in show or the editor or editorial board of your newspaper (use the "Meet With Your Lawmakers" pointers, above).

## **THE PAY-OFF**

Advocacy works. Public education and advocacy efforts can change the way America works for families by encouraging a government that makes family and youth needs (including economic security, adequate housing, and the viability and safety of every community) a priority. The time and energy you and like-minded others invest in building relationships with policymakers and educating lawmakers can pay off in public policies that help to strengthen and support families and communities. Advocacy is more than a way to be heard—it is the way to make government responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families.

Advocacy work has other smaller-scale, concrete benefits for your community and your program as well:

- Engaging in advocacy efforts helps build your image in the community by showing your program playing a role in supporting all families.
- Advocacy is a chance for you to educate the general public (not just lawmakers) about your work, perhaps increasing funding for and community participation in your programming.
- Joining with parents, family advocates, and other program providers to advocate for families provides opportunities to enhance your relationships with community institutions—relationships that can have many other benefits.
- For families being involved in advocacy efforts it can be empowering. If your program strives to help families realize their power to set their own priorities and pursue their own goals in their lives and in running the program, advocacy can extend that empowerment to their community, city, and state—and beyond!

Advocacy requires some hard work, some creativity, and some vision, but more than anything else, it requires the conviction that the world should be changed and that together, we can do it.

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# LOBBYING RULES FOR TAX-EXEMPT NONPROFITS



**Y**ou see big changes in the way family support programs could be funded. You want to give federal and state lawmakers the introduction they need to advocate for programs that strengthen and support families. But as a nonprofit, how can your agency make sure you're within the laws that regulate lobbying?

Below is a short and simple guide for tax-exempt groups whose activities include legislative advocacy by members, staff, or clients. The following description of federal rules applies to groups that are tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code. Be sure to check the laws in your state also. Some states have no additional restrictions, while others require registration of all charitable organizations that lobby frequently. Federally funded programs must also consider the additional, very strict limitations that generally bar the use of federal funds to lobby Congress or state legislatures.

## 1. Tax-exempt, private, nonprofit organizations can spend some of their resources lobbying Congress and state legislatures.

Within reasonable limits, you can:

- Write your members of Congress or state legislature on organization letterhead.
- Call long-distance to the Capitol at agency expense.
- Take a carload of people to the Capitol to meet a legislator or staff and get mileage paid by the agency.
- Engage in other activities generally considered "lobbying" or "grassroots lobbying."

The limits are:

- If the IRS is informed in advance, and certain simple forms are filed, small agencies can spend up to 15 to 20 percent of the agency's total resources on lobbying. If the organization's budget exceeds \$1 million per year, the 15-to-20-percent figure decreases according to a formula. If you do not file the forms, your agency is still allowed to spend up to about five percent of its resources on lobbying, which permits most groups to do all the lobbying they need and want to do.
- There is a special, smaller limit on "grassroots" lobbying—lobbying whose purpose is to get the general public to contact legislators and ask them to act on a bill. It is capped at one-fourth of your overall lobbying limit.
- You must be able to show that no employees or clients were coerced into lobbying.

## 2. Under IRS rules, the following activities are not even considered lobbying. You are permitted to:

- If you are a membership organization, inform your members (not the general public) of legislative issues critical to the goals of the agency and take positions on them (but telling people to write to Congress is considered lobbying).
- Research and conduct nonpartisan analyses of legislation and state your position on such issues in the analysis, as long as you give complete information so that people can draw their own conclusions.
- Invite legislators or their staff to visit your program to learn about your work or explain current legislative efforts.
- Attend workshops on how to lobby, generally.
- Respond to official written requests by legislative bodies for advice or testimony.

As a private citizen, you can:

- Work on legislative issues during lunch hours or after work. In public, you should state explicitly that you are speaking as a private citizen, although your argument can be based partly on your experience with the agency.
- Put bumper stickers on your personal car, even if it is used in business.
- Participate on your own time in other groups that actively discuss politics and issues and lobby in those groups' names.

*Adapted from An Advocate's Guide to Lobbying and Political Activity for Nonprofits (Children's Defense Fund, Washington, D.C., 1991; \$5.95 postage-paid). To order, call CDF at 202/628-8787.*



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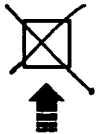
## I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: <u>Raise Your Legislator's Antenna: A Nuts-and-Bolts Guide to How (and Why) to Advocate for Families... With Families</u>	
Author(s): <u>Shelley Peck and Kathy Goetz</u>	
Corporate Source: <u>Family Resource Coalition</u>	Publication Date: <u>1995</u>

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