

Working with your Legislators

If you don't have one already, draft a simple, one-page communication plan. It gives you a basic direction in the event you want to provide information about your organization or your organization's position on a piece of legislation or appropriation.

Follow the outline below to develop your simple communication plan. Create a board task force or council to help you answer the follow the questions and develop your plan:

Who Speaks for You?

- ✓ Who speaks for the organization?
- ✓ Who speaks when the designated speaker is not available?
- ✓ How do board members, other staff, or outside voices fit (or not) into the overall communication strategy?
- ✓ What's our process when we are called upon to take a position quickly and/or draft a response? Who is authorized and essential to participate in the conversation? What's our method for contacting participants?
- ✓ How will we ensure that organizational spokespersons are informed?

How Will We Communicate Our Position(s)?

- ✓ Do we have a simple, visually appealing, digestible, one-page description of our work? (Note: This can be general in nature if you are not addressing specific legislation. If you *are* addressing legislation, your literature should be issue-focused).
- ✓ Are you taking a position? Be sure there is agreement in your group about the position taken and how it is described.
- ✓ Your message should include the following:
 - So what and who cares? Why do we do our work and who does it impact?
 - Impact data about our work, not just output data – how many lives are impacted *and* how are they impacted, as well as, what's the difference it makes (is making, will make, etc.).
 - Also, include information about the **cultural** value of your impact on individuals, community, quality of life etc., as well as, the value of your work in **economic** terms. Is your program a low-cost solution to a potentially expensive community problem?
 - In addition to information about need, state your leadership's expertise and experience to address the need – how might you be uniquely positioned to tackle the problem.
 - A list of partners, collaborators, coalitions.
 - Graphic illustration along with text.
 - Contact information.
 - If you are working on a proposed bill (including appropriations), state how its passage or failure to pass will positively or negatively impact your work.

Get to Know Thy Legislators

- ✓ If you plan to address specific legislation, make every attempt to meet your legislators prior to the start of session, the sooner the better. Once elected, veteran and new legislators are busy and have numerous demands on their time.
- ✓ Be brief, ask for a small amount of time, 15-20 minutes, and be flexible and accommodating in the date, time, and location of the meeting.
- ✓ Ask questions – it's not only ok to get to know your legislators, it is important to learn if they are supporters, opponents, or undecided. Find out if your legislator has a personal or political reason for supporting you, or may be someone who will support you if other legislators do. This information will become part of your strategy.
- ✓ Spend time cultivating the legislator in the middle, and strengthening your relationship with the supporter.
- ✓ Spend little to no time trying to persuade your opponent; it simple won't make a difference and will be a waste of your time. (Do be polite and that you don't act as a resource if called upon)
- ✓ Let legislators know that you are happy to serve as a resource and can be called upon during the session to answer questions and provide information. Don't forget to let them know how to reach you.
- ✓ If you can't get a meeting, take what you can get, talk by phone, email the information, build a relationship before it gets crazy!

Be Known as an Expert

- ✓ This is not vain; you're a valuable educational resource! Who knows more about the work you do and the services you provide than you do? Position yourself as the resource.
- ✓ Montana legislators don't have staff, so they depend on the expertise of others to help them understand complex issues confronting them.
- ✓ See the above item for details of how to position yourself.

Listen and Learn

- ✓ Be professional, polite, succinct, and sincere.
- ✓ If you don't know something, don't fake it. Say you don't know, that you will get the answer, and get back to them. Then, get back to them ASAP.

What Exactly Can a Nonprofit Do?

- ✓ What is the difference between lobbying and advocacy? Lobbying is an attempt to influence a specific piece of legislation; advocacy is influencing and educating people about your cause. Advocacy aims to change beliefs and behaviors which in turn could impact legislation and laws. Nonprofits can and should do both.
- ✓ If you speak to a specific piece of legislation, you're lobbying – remember, that's ok, but you do need to follow lobbying rules.
- ✓ Know the IRS reporting guidelines! A good source of information is Alliance for Justice and the IRS. Include links.