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ADVOCACY RESOURCE GUIDE

This resource guide will assist community advocates in identifying and engaging in key advocacy strategies to help reduce the burden of childhood obesity, especially in low-income communities and communities of color. The epidemic of childhood obesity has been escalating over the last three decades; and left unchecked, this will be the first generation to not outlive their parents.¹ Individual education and personal behavior change are important components of the overall solution, however advocating for comprehensive policies in schools, improving built environments, and reducing food deserts that are prevalent in vulnerable communities is critical for ensuring that people have opportunities to make healthy choices. Engaging in advocacy gives communities a voice in the public debate about how to improve children's health outcomes. Long-term health improvements can be achieved when residents are involved in the decision making process and communities and policymakers work together to bring about change.²

What Is Advocacy?

Advocacy is essential for achieving economic and social equity, particularly for residents in low-income communities and communities of color. Advocacy is about identifying an issue, organizing and coalition building, making a case by compiling facts and data, and drawing attention to the issue in order to work towards a solution. The ultimate goal of advocacy is to influence the policymaking process. Support from advocates helps assure that policymakers will adopt, implement, and maintain important obesity prevention policies. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity has compiled a listing of a variety of advocacy tools and resources to help support advocacy efforts at all levels of policymaking. The information contained within this guide will help strengthen the advocacy skills of community members, coalitions, researchers, clinicians, policymakers, and others who serve as champions for improving opportunities for healthy eating and active living – especially for the children who are at greatest risk for obesity.

What Is an Advocate?

An obesity prevention advocate strategically influences the way the public and policymakers think and act on policies that affect the health of children and communities. By definition, *an advocate* is a person who supports, defends, and speaks out for a cause. *To advocate* is to act in support of a particular issue or cause.³ Of central importance to advocates is organizing and mobilizing others to take up the cause and work together to achieve change.

Below are some general guidelines for consideration when engaging in the advocacy process⁴:

- A coalition consisting of many diverse constituencies carries more clout and can demonstrate that there is a consensus regarding the best solutions to address specific problems.
- Facts are the fuel of advocacy. Facts prove there's a problem, convince decision-makers of the best solution, poke holes in the arguments of the opposition, and otherwise make a case and build support for a particular cause.

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- Social change depends on broader public support and sustained pressure on public officials to act. Through advocacy, the issue can be framed, public awareness increased, public opinion shaped, and public pressure created, in combination with other action to advance advocacy goals.

Additional information is available in the PolicyLink [Advocating for Change](#) toolkit.

Advocacy vs. Lobbying: What is the difference?

Because lobbying and advocacy are similar tactics there can be confusion or uncertainty about what activities are permissible within the boundaries of advocacy. Lobbyists communicate with legislators about specific legislation and express the view or opinion of the organization they represent. Often, a lobbyist is a paid representative of a group, organization or industry. To be a federal lobbyist, the individual or entity must be registered and comply with federal law requiring submission of regular reports detailing lobbying activity.⁵ On the other hand, anyone can be an advocate, either for themselves, a certain cause, policy, a piece of legislation, or for another individual. Advocates are citizens exercising their right to participate in the democratic process.

What Lobbying Does and Does Not Include

Many professionals and citizens who work for government agencies, school districts, non-profit organizations or foundations may worry about violating anti-lobbying laws if they get involved in advocacy. However, there is actually significant leeway in the range of activities advocates can engage in to influence healthy changes in the environment and policy.

The Alliance for Justice, a national association dedicated to advancing justice and democracy, has developed the following examples of advocacy that are *not* lobbying.⁶

- Talking with a senator or representative about a specific piece of legislation, as long as an explicit position or action on that legislation is not voiced; OR discussing a general position or opinion as long as it is not related to a specific piece of legislation.
- Providing a legislator with non-partisan educational materials about specific pieces of legislation without calling for specific action.
- Responding to a request from a legislative committee for information about a specific piece of legislation.
- Commenting on the regulation or rulemaking process for a piece of legislation that has been passed into law, and advocating for enactment and enforcement.

For additional clarification on advocacy versus lobbying visit the Alliance for Justice [website](#).

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The often-repeated phrase, “*All politics is local,*” holds true in the field of obesity prevention advocacy. At all levels of government, constituents who make an effort to develop a relationship with and act as a resource to their elected leaders can have a real impact.⁷ Here lies the power of grassroots advocacy-- individual action and groups of committed constituents joined together to provide policymakers with the expertise needed to make decisions that benefit the health and well being of all people.

¹ S. Jay Olshansky, Douglas J. Passaro, Ronald C. Hershov, Jennifer Layden, Bruce A. Carnes, Jacob Brody, Leonard Hayflick, Robert N. Butler, David B. Allison, and David S. Ludwig, “A Potential Decline in Life Expectancy in the United States in the 21st Century,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 11 (2005): 1138-1145.

² Community Involvement in the Federal Healthy Start Program. PolicyLink. 2000

³ “Merriam-Webster definition of an Advocate,” Meriam Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advocate> (accessed June 2011).

⁴ “PolicyLink Advocating for Change,” PolicyLink, http://www.policylink.org/site/c.lkIXLbMNjRE/b.5153195/k.8981/Getting_Started.htm (accessed July 2011).

⁵ “National Conference of State Legislatures definition of lobbying,” NCSL, <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=15344> (accessed June 2011).

⁶ “About Advocacy and Lobbying,” Alliance for Justice, <http://www.afj.org/for-nonprofits-foundations/about-advocacy/lobbying.html> (accessed July 2011).

⁷ “Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr. Papers Biographical Note | John J. Burns Library, Boston College,” Bc.edu. http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/ulib/oneill_findingaid2.html (accessed July 2011).