

Advocacy Ambassadors Toolkit

It takes engaged and relentless advocacy to ensure that home and community-based (HCBS) disability service providers have the resources and regulatory environment necessary to deliver quality services to people with a diverse range of support needs. All significant policy victories are the result of a proactive constituency, ready to lend their voice at every turn.



What is 'Political Advocacy'?

Political advocacy is an act of supporting a change or creation of an issue on a local, state, or federal level. When participating in political advocacy, people voice their opinions through emails, letters, calls, social media posts and more directed towards their elected officials. Even if a legislator supports your issue, participating in political advocacy can drive them to prioritize your issue over others if you drive enough engagement in a campaign.

How does political advocacy relate to Home and Community-Based Services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)?

Our services are almost exclusively funded through Medicaid. Medicaid operates as a partnership between states and the federal government. States determine the scope and payment for HCBS services and the federal government provides matching funds at a predetermined rate. This combined funding is then used to reimburse HCBS IDD providers.

The reimbursement rate set by the Nebraska state legislature (often referred to as the Unicameral) must cover every expense necessary to provide support for people with I/DD: operational costs, facility and vehicle maintenance, program development, and all employee-related expenses.

Elected officials determine how much funding our services receive.
Political advocacy is how we increase access, improve quality, and raise wages.

In order to be successful, political advocacy needs to have meaningful and well-planned content. Advocates must be able to effectively highlight and explain why elected officials should care about our issues.

Advocates must be able to articulate clear recommendations (actions) desired from the elected officials. The most successful advocates do not work alone; they develop a network of passionate champions.



The Big Picture

Nebraska's short state senator term limits make it difficult to keep legislators well informed on our specific issues. Once we finally get senators up to speed and ready to champion our cause...they term limit out and we have to start the process over with fresh new lawmakers.

It is also challenging to keep legislators focused on any one topic. They have a lot to learn in a short amount of time and often come into office with their own passion projects at the forefront of their attention.

It is important to maintain regular contact with legislators and their staff.



***Relationship building is critical.
Stay on their radar!***

- Invite your representative and their staff to any and all community events in your district.
- Invite them to tour your agency and meet staff and the individuals supported in their district.
- Email them quick thank you messages when they stand up for an issue you care about.

The work starts at the polls.

Ensure everyone in your workplace is registered and excited to vote.

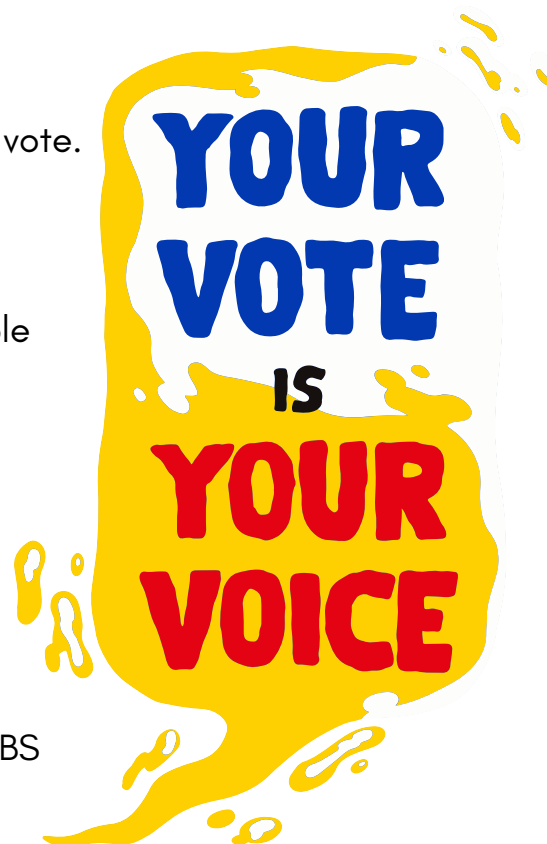
Mark important election dates on the community calendar.

Invite nonprofits like Civic Nebraska and The League of Women Voters to come to your site or community events and help people register to vote.

Disability Rights Nebraska or Nebraska Appleseed can present information on the rights of people with disabilities to vote and accommodations that are available for voters with disabilities.

Help the people you support get to the polls on election day or complete early voting.

While you should never tell someone WHO to vote for, helping someone exercise their right to vote is absolutely within the HCBS provider job description.



Effective Communication with Elected Officials

- **Introduce yourself.**

Open the dialog by introducing yourself with a (very) brief bio, one or two sentences max.

- **Make a connection between your issue and their district/state.**

Highlight the number of people our services support and employs in the member's district/state. Give a brief overview of the services and supports you provide/utilize and how they benefit the member's district/state.

- **Be concise.**

Meetings with elected officials and/or their staff are often brief. Conveying your messages in a succinct manner will ensure you can cover all the topics in the time allotted, but don't feel pressured to cover all topics in one meeting if time runs out as you can always follow-up with staff at a later date.

- **Staff are important too!**

If you have a meeting with staff instead of a legislator, please know that they are issue experts and trusted advisors to their bosses. Staff-only meetings usually last longer than meetings with the member and give you the opportunity to go into more detail about our issues. In turn, a staff member will brief their boss on the issue. Staff are pivotal in determining whether the legislator will support a policy or not.

- **Focus on key issues.**

Focus on the reason for your meeting. For example, focus on the impact of the workforce crisis on your services. Explain the effect the workforce shortage has had on your ability to provide/receive services. Details and personal stories will help bolster your description of the real impact.

- **Divide speaking roles among meeting participants.**

Before your meeting begins, take time to discuss with your group what roles you want each person to play. For example, one person should begin the meeting and make introductions, one or more people can talk about the workforce crisis and its impact, and one person can be prepared to talk about relevant legislation and make the ask.

- **It's okay to not know all the answers.**

If you are asked a question and don't know the answer, don't feel pressure to respond right away. Please tell the staff member you will follow up with the answer. You can also let NASP know to follow up with the office.

- **Close the deal.**

Be sure to end the conversation with a specific request. For example: "Please help us continue providing critical services in our communities by supporting legislation to bolster the direct support workforce. Please support increased funding for home and community-based services."

- **Say thanks.**

Do remember to thank the legislator and/or staff for taking time to meet with you and let them know that you will follow up. Also, feel free to extend an invitation for them to visit one of your facilities in the district/state or ask NASP to follow-up.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid



- **Industry jargon and acronyms.**

Avoid using industry-specific terms or acronyms without explaining their meaning. Don't assume the office is familiar with our issues.

- **Keep personal politics out of your visits.**

Please remain respectful and remember that despite personal political beliefs, HCBS IDD services are (and should always be) a nonpartisan issue.

Seven Steps to Great Storytelling

A good advocate is a good storyteller. We need to help elected officials and their staff better understand our issues and the reasoning behind our asks. By the end of a day, they may have had a dozen different meetings on widely varying topics. You've got to have a story strong enough to leave a lasting impression.



1. The Want - Begin with the end in mind.

You should know what the "ask" is. Lay the groundwork with what you want in mind.

2. The Opening - Set the stage and establish the stakes.

Your first sentence or two should be a hook to make the listener want to know more. Establish context for the life that you are describing. What was at stake for the person, their family or yourself? Keep in mind questions like, "why does this matter? Why should this person care?"

3. Paint the Picture - The details and the scene.

Describe what you saw, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. Remember the adjectives of the situation you are describing. Be sure to make it real, be practical, specific and graphic. The details provide an emotional hook to the situation.

4. The Struggle - Define the fight.

Identify the struggle. Play the underdog and turn weakness into strength. Think about what it is that is stopping this goal from happening.

5. The Discovery - Surprise the legislator and/or their staff.

Wait until it has the most impact and balance the past and present. Think about what you learned: how that learning impacted your life and others like you now. How will it affect others in the future?

6. We Can Win! - Introduce the potential of success and joy.

Show that your goals are achievable and outcomes can be improved.

7. The Button - Finish with a hook.

Have your ending sentence clearly memorized and know when to use it. Turn your "ask" into something they will remember.



Attending Town Halls

Town Halls are an opportunity to interact with elected officials. In a typical town hall, the elected official will start with a speech and then hold a question-and-answer session.

The Q&A portion is your opportunity to bring issues to their attention.

Sign up for your representatives' newsletters and/or follow their social media accounts for upcoming events.

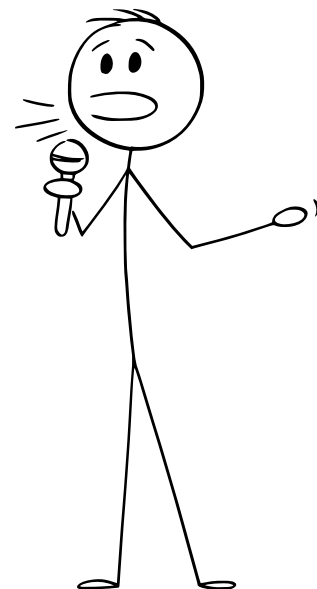
If the information shared does not make it clear how to ask questions, either call their office to find out or arrive early to sign up to ask a question. If there is no sign-in sheet, please find a staff member to ask them how to ask a question. Make sure you follow all instructions.

Think about your question in advance. You will want to be succinct, polite, and make what you are asking for clear. If you can add a short sentence about why the topic is important to you, it will make your question more compelling.

When asking your question, state your name and city of residence. Thank the official for hosting the event, and once they have responded to you, thank them for answering your question. Officials often arrive early or stay on after their town halls have ended to talk further with their constituents. As such, consider bringing hand-outs.

Sample Script for Addressing an Elected Official During a Town Hall:

"My name is [your name] and I serve people in [your town] with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I appreciate you coming to speak to us and thank you for taking my question. The challenge my organization and many like it have is that we need to recruit quality employees for our essential work, but we are almost exclusively funded by Medicaid. We operate on fixed rates, so inadequate funding in addition to unfunded mandates makes it hard to keep our organization afloat. This could affect the quality of our services or our staff's wages, which will harm our ability to remain competitive employers and service providers. Would you be willing to support fiscally responsible legislation that would increase Medicaid funding for people with disabilities so we can pay our staff and keep services intact for the people who depend on us?"



Get the Talking Points

ANCOR, the national association of HCBS providers, houses a repository of resources for the HCBS/IDD community. We recommend spending time on their website to familiarize yourself with best practices for successful advocacy as well as current issues:

www.ancor.org/advocacy/toolkit/

Op-Eds & Letters to the Editor

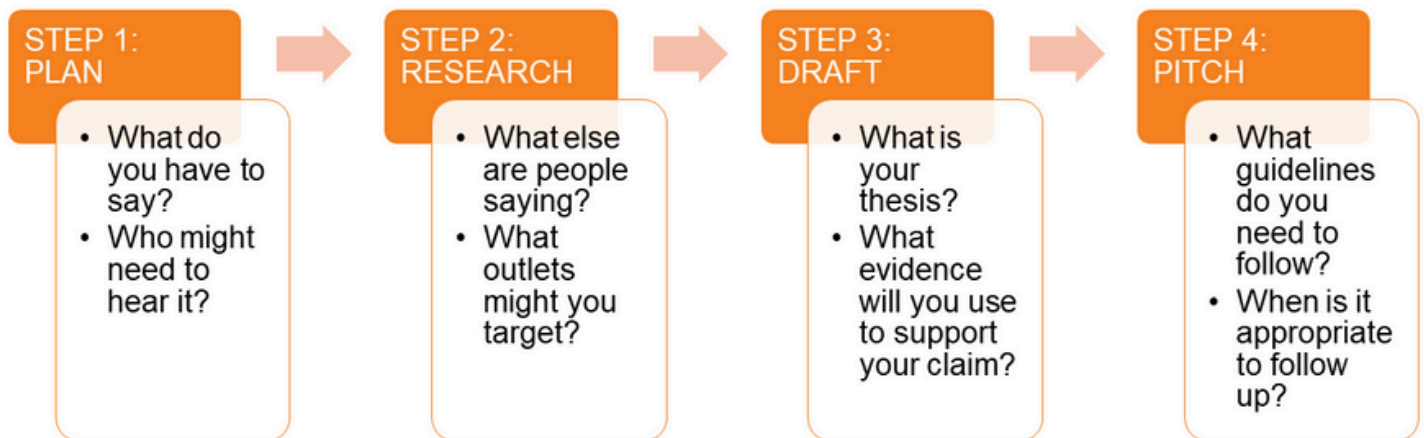


Opinion pieces in the form of op-eds and letters to the editor are a great way to raise awareness about a problem or policy that is of interest to the readers of a particular news outlet. In the context of public policy advocacy, op-eds and letters to the editor can help lawmakers understand the need for action and build support for a particular course of action among lawmakers' constituents.

An op-ed is a short essay articulating an opinion that is authored by a guest contributor. Op-eds are typically 500–750 words in length. Although not every news outlet welcomes op-ed submissions, those that do will have their own stated preferences and requirements regarding the desired length of op-ed submissions.

Similar to op-eds, letters to the editor briefly articulate an opinion about a particular issue, typically voiced by a reader in reaction to the news outlet's coverage of that issue. Whereas op-eds tend to be 500–750 words, letters to the editor are usually much shorter—typically in the range of 150–250 words.

Four Steps to Leveraging Opinion Pieces in Your Advocacy



A good op-ed or letter to the editor will:

- Articulate an opinion that is unique, or founded on a uniquely valuable perspective, and well-evidenced.
- Capture and sustain the reader's attention by employing an engaging hook and describing issues in a way that is concise and accessible.
- Be written from the perspective of someone who has credibility on the topic at hand, generally due to their expertise or lived experience.
- Call attention to a problem or issue that is relevant to—even if not necessarily obvious to—the news outlet's audience.
- Be timely, articulating an opinion at a time when that opinion matters, such as when a legislative body is considering a particular bill.

Social Media

Social media isn't just for memes and vacation photos. It's where people get their news, form opinions, and rally behind the causes they care about. Whether raising awareness, rallying support, or driving action, social media gives you the tools to instantly connect, inspire, and mobilize. The goal is to get more people to care – and act.



Social media advocacy bridges the gap between the public and policymakers.

- **Direct communication:** Citizens can engage with lawmakers through comments, mentions, and direct messages.
- **Public pressure:** Viral campaigns can prompt responses from officials and influence policy decisions.
- **Transparency:** Lawmakers' activities and stances are more visible, allowing for informed advocacy.

This direct line of communication enhances democratic participation and accountability.

Tips to Amplify Your Messaging

- **Utilize Tagging:** Tag other advocates, community groups, geolocations, and incorporate hashtags to expand the reach of each post. Find the official social media handles for your representatives and tag them as well.
- **Press engagement:** Journalists track social platforms for trends and public opinion. Tag or message media personnel to highlight issues.
- **Utilize interactive platforms:** Features like groups, live sessions, and forums encourage real-time dialogue and collaboration. Take advantage of polls, stickers, and questions in stories to boost interaction.
- **Share personal experiences:** Personal stories foster empathy and solidarity.
- **Keep it visually interesting:** Captions should be concise. Avoid text-heavy graphics. Take and share photos if you attend in-person events with your representatives or their offices (e.g. you attend a town hall or they visit your organization for a site visit).
- **Develop a schedule:** Consistency is key. Regular updates keep your audience engaged and informed, increasing the likelihood of shares and interactions.

Example Post/Caption: "Millions of people with disabilities are able to live full and included lives in their communities thanks to Medicaid community-based services. We must invest in—not divest from—the Medicaid program. Real people's dignity, independence and well-being are at stake. [@insert Rep handle], we urge you to reject cuts to Medicaid and protect I/DD services. #SaveMedicaid"

Who & How

You might be surprised to learn how many elected officials you influence! Any address in which you (or your employees) live and provide or receive services is a district in which you hold sway.

Federal: [congress.gov/members/find-your-member](https://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member)

State: nebraskalegislature.gov/senators/senator_list.php

Inspire Others

- Pass your knowledge and skills onto others! Host an in-person or virtual training session in your local community about the importance of advocacy.
- Organize a letter writing campaign. Partner with your local Arc chapter or just get together with friends to send hand-written messages to elected officials.
- Help people get to the polls or complete early/mail-in voting.

Nebraska Resources

You don't have to have all the answers – you're not alone in this fight. We are fortunate to have a strong network of organizations with subject matter experts who keep up to date on important issues, events, and opportunities. Connect with your allies. We all do better when we lean on and learn from one another. Uniting our efforts reveals key intersections that drive systemic progress.

Nebraska Association of Service Providers

www.neserviceproviders.org

Disability Rights Nebraska

www.disabilityrightsnebraska.org

The Arc of Nebraska

www.arc-nebraska.org

Civic Nebraska

www.civicnebraska.org

Nebraska Appleseed

www.neappleseed.org

League of Women Voters

www.lwvgo.org