

POLICY ADVOCACY 101

University of San Diego
Policy Advocacy Collaborative

The solutions to many if not most of the problems that face our communities, society and environment involve advocacy to influence the decisions, or “policies”, made by governments and other powerful institutions (e.g., large corporations). This is true for problems ranging from:

- a disproportionate number of children in low-income communities are suffering from asthma and other health problems due to the pollution of local industries, diesel truck emissions and other environmental hazards.
- survivors of childhood sex trafficking are not only traumatized, but also criminalized and as a result are limited in their efforts to find jobs and take advantage of many other opportunities.
- the planet is in crisis due to climate change and requires massive investments – global, national, and local – in mitigation and adaptation to avoid unparalleled levels of human suffering.

However, many if not most people believe they need specialized knowledge and skills to influence the decisions of government and other powerful institutions. “We’re not lawyers. We don’t have graduate degrees in public policy.” (In fact, few lawyers or policy analysts have ever had a course in advocacy.) “Where would we start? What would we do?”

Actually, the process is not so complicated. The most essential qualification is personal commitment. Thus, knowing some basic concepts and learning from experience will go a long way. The USD Policy Advocacy Collaborative (UPAC) created this resource guide to provide basic concepts.

UPAC can also provide case study resources that will help you learn from the experiences of others in San Diego that have successfully influenced the policy decisions that affect them. In addition, UPAC offers workshops and coaching that will help you join campaigns or begin your own advocacy related to the issues that impact you and those you support. To go deeper, you may want to enroll in one of USD’s graduate courses in policy advocacy (some are open to advanced undergraduates and community members). However, even without more input, this guide can get you started.

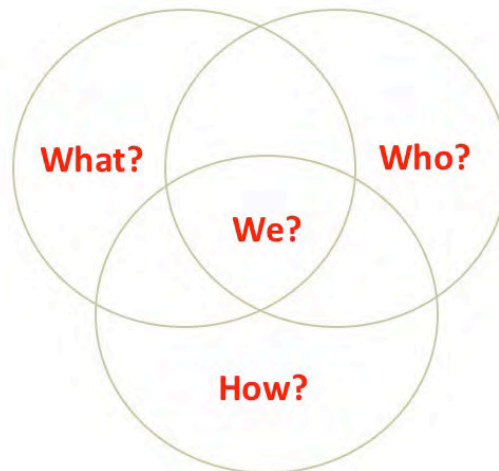
The basic concepts are organized around answering four sets of questions:

- (1) **We?** Are we already part of a group or organization that is ready to be engaged in policy change, or do we need to create a new group? What capacities and resources does our group have now? What can we do to fill in any gaps?
- (2) **What?** What are the problems we wish to solve and what are their causes? What policy decisions do we need to change or to create in order to resolve the problems? What evidence do we have to support our arguments?

(3) **Who?** Who exactly (which specific person[s] in which institutions) has the power to make those decisions? Who will work with us to influence those decisions? Who will oppose us?

(4) **How?** How will we persuade and/or pressure the person(s) with the power to make the decisions we want? Which actions, in what order, will most effectively and efficiently influence them? How will we monitor progress and make adjustments as necessary?

Rarely will you be able to answer all of these questions before you begin or in that order. For example, as you learn about the “who” you need to influence, you may need to modify the “what” you will attempt to change - at least in the short run. And your plans for “how” will be either be shaped by your group’s resources and capacities and/or inform what new ones you need develop – the “we.” For that reason, we use the following “circles diagram” that emphasizes how all of the above overlaps.



All of the back and forth might seem challenging. However, it is not only necessary; it can be exciting and empowering. The key is to start. You can then learn more as you go, using the concepts in this resource guide to ask and re-ask the questions that will help your group or organization address the problems you most want to solve. In fact, no matter how experienced they are, good advocates realize that no two situations are ever the same and thus, to succeed, we must always be questioning and learning.

Further reading: *The last three sets of these questions (what we have labeled the “what,” “who” and “how”) are the focus of publications by Jim Shultz, the founder/director of the Democracy Center, an internationally recognized advocate and trainer, including as the primary consultant for UNICEF’s global advocacy, and a UPAC advisor. We recommend supplementing the following with Jim’s “[The Art of Advocacy Strategy: A Small Book About How to Make Big Change.](#)” It and other great resources can be accessed at:*
<https://www.democracyctr.org/advocacy-resources>

WE?

Are we already part of a group or organization that is ready to be engaged, or do we need to create a new group?

“People power” is the most essential ingredient of successful social justice advocacy. That requires working as part of a group or organization, often in coalition with others, that is committed to solving problems. You may already be affiliated with or can join an ongoing group – a grassroots association of community members, a student club, a university initiative, a nonprofit service organization, a professional association, union, or social action group. If not, don’t try to go it alone; you can start small, but work with friends and neighbors, fellow students, or colleagues to start a new group.

What capacities and resources does our group have now? What can we do to fill in any gaps?

Every group or organization has some of the capacities (membership, leadership, skills, connections, credibility, etc.) and resources (supporters, funds, materials, etc.) that are important for successful advocacy. Very few groups have all of them. As you seek to gather the information and plan the actions that correspond with the What, Who and How questions that follow, your capacities and resources (as well as your gaps) will become more clear. Where there are gaps, the process of gathering information and planning will itself help you expand your capacities. You will also likely need to reach out to individuals and organizations that share your goals and will offer their support.

WHAT?

What are the problems we wish to solve and what are their causes?

Communities, nations and indeed the planet face many problems, and these problems are often inter-related. So too are their causes. To be successful, advocates need to discuss, prioritize, and clearly describe a problem and the cause that will at least be their starting point. They ask: What is most important? What will have the greatest impact? What will most likely lay the foundation for solving other problems?

What policy decisions do we need to change or to create in order to resolve the problems?

In some cases, past decisions by governments and/or other powerful institutions may in fact be the cause problem. In other cases, the cause is the failure to implement a policy decision that should protect society or the environment. In still other cases, the cause is the lack of a needed policy. Thus, to be successful, advocates need to clarify and focus on a specific decision that they want made by a specific government body, agency or other powerful institution.

What evidence do we have to support our arguments?

If your group does an effective job of prioritizing a problem and determining the cause you wish to address, you will inevitably be gathering “evidence” - that is, data that help you assess the size and severity of a problem, as well as the stories of families and persons that have been impacted.

There are many sources and methods for collecting such evidence, for example: published research reports, information available from public agencies, interviewing experts, and doing your own research. The process of gathering the information will give you confidence that the problem is important and that solving it will have a significant impact, as well as lay the foundation for solving other problems. That evidence will also be very useful as you persuade others, especially policy decision makers, to support the change you seek.

WHO?

Who exactly (which specific person[s] in which institution[s]) has the power to make those decisions?

Effective advocacy is focused on influencing decision makers. Begin by identifying the relevant institution. Does local government have the authority to make the decision you want? If not, what about regional, state or even federal government? (Note that in those situations, you will need to work in coalitions with other, like-minded advocacy groups.) Or do you need to influence a school board, a corporation, or some other institution?

Next, identify the specific person or persons in that institution who have the authority to make the decision. She or he may be an individual, such as the mayor or a department head. Or they may be a group of persons, such as a commission, city council or legislature. Or some combination. Then learn as much as you can about each person you need to influence, including their background, their knowledge of the problem you are addressing, and any past support or opposition to the type of decision you want.

Who will work with us to influence those decisions?

Effective advocacy also involves making connections with individuals, groups and organizations that will be willing to lend their support. These “allies” can often help with the above process -- that is, identifying and learning about the decision makers. More generally, advocates prioritize allies who have knowledge, skills, resources, contacts, credibility and/or other qualities that are may be influential when approaching the decision makers.

Who will oppose us?

Most often there are individuals, groups and organizations that will disagree with the decision you are seeking. It is helpful to know who they are, what they believe, their strengths and weaknesses, their relationships (if any) with the decision makers, and how likely they are to actively oppose you.

HOW?

How will we persuade and/or pressure the person(s) with the power to make the decisions we want? Which actions, in what order, will most effectively and efficiently influence them?

Once you know what you want and who you need to influence to get what you want, it is time to develop a plan (or a strategy) based on that knowledge.

A good strategy requires a careful assessment of what is most likely to influence the specific decision maker(s). Your arguments and evidence? Direct contact with community persons impacted by the problem? Meetings with influential allies? Media coverage? Mobilizing voters who she or he needs to get reelected? Blocking or discrediting the efforts of those who oppose you? Boycotts? Public protests? Litigation? (And that's just a partial list!)

Most often, it is wise to begin with the most collaborative actions and only add more confrontational ones if and when the decision maker(s) do not respond. This approach demands the least amount of effort by the advocates and, more importantly, gives them the moral high ground when forced to be more confrontational.

A good strategy also requires a careful assessment of how, in the process, you will build and maintain a level of community engagement needed to not only influence the decision maker(s) but then to also hold them accountable for its implementation.

How will we monitor progress and make adjustments as necessary?

Effective advocates are always learning. They discover new information and evidence about the problem and its causes, gain new insights about the institutions and decision makers, or have new ideas for influencing them while carrying out a strategy. They also encounter setbacks, often due to factors that advocates cannot control, which they must overcome. Thus, it is important to regularly pause, assess progress and, as appropriate, revise your strategy based on what you have learned to date.