Anyone can be an advocate—you just need to engage face-to-face, on the phone or via e-mail

This is the last in a six-part series on advocacy: when to do it, where to do it and how to do it effectively. Our thanks to the Legislative Coalition for People with Disabilities and the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council for providing source information.

Anyone can follow these basic guidelines for advocacy, and everyone—including the least experienced—can learn to be effective.

1. Advocacy means being engaged

Simply by being involved, you will bring attention to your cause or priority. You do not need to orchestrate large events or sponsor legislation to be effective. By taking time to meet with your local legislator, write a letter on behalf of your priorities, or placing a call to a legislator’s office, you bring attention to your cause and increase the likelihood that your legislator will support your position. The only thing you CAN’T do is stay silent.

2. Advocacy can occur outside the Capitol

Let your elected officials, and their staff, know how you feel and the reasoning behind your position. Many times, you need to demonstrate to your legislator that a significant number of his or her constituents feel the same way. Effective advocacy includes telling your story to other people, too. The most effective advocacy often takes the form of having a conversation with a friend. By engaging in conversations at the grocery store, coffee shop or public library you can mobilize community members and generate support for your cause.

3. Keep your audience in mind

Not all legislators think the same way or support the same concepts. To maximize your efforts, do some general background research about the person you will meet. Democrat or Republican? Rural or urban? Have they supported your cause in the past? If a legislator has a history of fiscal conservatism, you may wish to speak about the cost-saving aspects of your cause. If the legislator was a community activist, you may want to speak about local community support. Legislators usually want to help, so make sure you choose an approach that allows them to do that.

4. Be sure they hear you.

Bring a one-page fact sheet or photo that you can explain to the legislator; this can often ensure that you will be the one talking and they will be the one learning. Memorize the key information you want to start with: your name, where you live, organizations or coalitions with which you are affiliated, what you’re there to talk about, and what you want them to do. If you have time, go into more detail. Talk to legislators the way you would talk to anyone else. A personal story and genuine interaction will go a long way toward getting a legislator to support your cause.

5. Establish as many relationships as possible.

Some people will tell you not to worry about legislators who are your “friends,” or on legislators you know will support your cause—to just concentrate on “swing” votes. This is not true. First, your “friends” need to hear from you, hear you say “thank you,” and hear the newest, best information and arguments. They need to be reminded why they support us and we need to know how we can help them. Second, in politics it is very difficult to predict how someone is going to vote; few votes are certain in advance, so we need to make sure our “friends” have all the information they need. Third, don’t ever write anyone off because there is a good chance your interests will align at some point in the future. It is important to remember that people can respectfully disagree on one issue and later become strong allies on another.