Nonprofits and Policy Advocacy:

Learning from Success
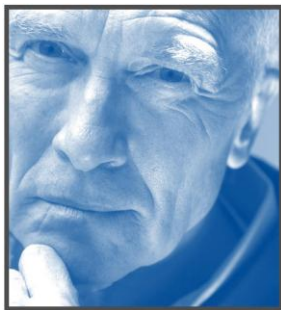
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SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL

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Why talk about policy advocacy?

There are many examples of how policy advocacy has translated into progressive policy change, yet its practice remains a challenge for many organizations that serve or work with marginalized communities. Throughout 2008, the ESPC conducted consultations with social agencies and community organizations in Edmonton to help determine the types of social research that would be most useful for agencies. Policy advocacy emerged as one of a number of key concerns. The consultations revealed that while social agencies acknowledge the value of policy advocacy, there are barriers such as inadequate resources, legal restrictions, the policy-making process, the political context, and others which prevent effective policy advocacy, making these initiatives challenging.

This document, a secondary review of success in policy advocacy, is meant to help. Its intent is to provide examples of policy advocacy campaigns and to highlight some of the characteristics that made them successful. Many non-profit organizations have had positive experiences of policy advocacy. By examining some of the successes in non-profit policy advocacy both close to home and abroad, this document is meant to encourage and inspire agencies to embrace policy advocacy as an important part of their work, and to provide some information and resources to get started.

It is important to note that, for some organizations, there are legal limitations for engaging in advocacy work. Charities and other non-profits should know what they are allowed and are not allowed to do before planning advocacy campaigns. Keep in mind, though, that even charitable organizations with strict advocacy limitations have taken part in successful policy advocacy initiatives. If your organization is subject to legal limitations, know the boundaries and work within them – there is still room to manoeuvre.

This paper begins by defining what is meant by the term 'policy advocacy'. In the second section, it looks at why policy advocacy is so important for the non-profit sector. In the third section, it presents examples of successful policy advocacy campaigns, and draws out some of the lessons that can be learned from these successes. Lists of coalitions and further resources are contained in the appendices.

What is policy advocacy?

Policy advocacy means different things to different groups, but here it refers to **the work carried out in the public interest to change policies and laws for the better**. No two policy advocacy campaigns are identical, as the practice must be tailored to each unique context. Some people may associate policy advocacy with adversarial or antagonistic tactics, but it should be noted that policy advocacy can be designed to accomplish a number of different results (Casey & Dalton, 2006). It need not be oppositional; indeed, many policy advocacy 'victories' have been the result of collaboration, cooperation, and mutual respect between government, the private sector, the non-profit sector, and others. Organizations concerned that engaging in advocacy will damage their relationships with policy-makers or funders will be pleased to know that many advocacy campaigns actually result in better relationships, more collaboration, and enhanced mutual respect between advocates, government and others. So read on!

"Public-Policy Advocacy is about the approach, strategies and tactics employed by external interest to influence the decisions of government". Influencing decisions of government includes:

- Motivating or encouraging
- Being at the table
- Being recognized as a key player
- Successfully gaining franchise, funding, or a mandate
- Educating decision makers about an organization or issue (Moore, 2006).

> *To achieve structural change, policy advocacy targets the roots of the issue in public policy.*

Policy advocacy can be distinguished from advocacy undertaken with and/or on behalf of individuals. The 'macro orientation' looks at structural changes to achieve fundamental change, and recognizes that a focus on individuals or individual cases is not always enough (McCubbin, Labonte, & Dallaire, 2001). To achieve structural change, policy advocacy targets the roots of the issue in public policy.

Other definitions of policy advocacy tie it explicitly to marginalized groups, such as this one: "policy practice that helps powerless, stigmatized, and oppressed populations improve their well-being" (Sherraden, Slosar, & Sherraden, 2002). Another defines advocacy as "a set of organised actions to change public policies and laws in a way that will strengthen marginalised communities", and further notes that advocacy is "a craft with techniques that can be learned and practised" (Opper, 2005). And similar to this kind of policy advocacy is social action, defined in the context of Australian social work as incorporating "all public actions taken to influence social policy programs and promote socially just outcomes including specific expenditure on or policies regarding social work departments and services" (Mendes, 2003).

Policy advocacy can also include the attempt to change rules and regulations of social programs (Hoefer, 2000, pp. 21-22). Sometimes, changes of this nature can have an equal or greater impact on peoples' lives than changes to overarching policies and programs, while still achieving lasting results. And finally, policy advocacy can be defined as a responsibility: "In an open civil society, advocacy is the organized pursuit of positive change in the public arena. It is the act and process of harnessing citizen voices for change, and of bringing a civic agenda to decision-makers for collaborative action" (Wilhelm, 2002).

Why should we do policy advocacy?

There are many compelling reasons why non-profit organizations, social agencies, community groups, and the human service sector should engage in policy advocacy efforts.

To bring about lasting change

Policy advocacy allows organizations to bring about *lasting* change. Effecting long-term change is a part of many organizational mandates; there is recognition that the need for some services and the symptoms of some social problems could be eliminated by changes to policy, improving the lives of marginalized groups and society as a whole. Policy advocacy is one way to do this, although some have noted that policy change itself is no guarantee that on-the-ground changes will occur (McCubbin, Labonte, & Dallaire, 2001). So, good policy advocacy needs to be reinforced with appropriate implementation, monitoring, and follow-up.

To give voice to marginalized constituencies

Non-profit organizations can sometimes serve as "the canary in a coalmine". Social agencies and organizations working on the front lines are often the first to see new problems affecting marginalized communities, notice changes in client demographics, and recognize how gaps in public policy are affecting the people that they serve. It is important for policy-makers to hear from front-line organizations; advocating for changes to policy demonstrates that the sector is committed to a "vision and responsibility that goes beyond the survival of their individual organizations" (Rektor, 2002).

One policy advocate, the founder of the US-based *Advocacy Institute*, states that policy advocacy is not just about achieving favourable policy. It's also about helping to include people who are often excluded from the policy process, in essence helping to balance "the many special interests that, naturally enough, push policy in ways that benefit narrow parts of the population" (Smucker, 1999).

Policy advocacy is about helping to include people who are often excluded from the policy process. No organization can be complacent – we should all be advocates.

There is somewhat of a consensus in the literature on policy advocacy – social agencies need to take part. As an advocate working on multicultural issues in Australia said, "advocacy is a central and critical component for workers in any multicultural setting as people from diverse communities are marginalised and disadvantaged. No multicultural organisation can be complacent – we should all be advocates" (Opper, 2005).

Because government needs us to

Policy advocacy is also a vital component of a well-functioning democracy. Being active participants in government is what democracy – and policy advocacy – is all about. Voting is one of a very few built-in structures for governments to ensure that citizens have the opportunity to be heard. While government consultations with the public do occur, one political scientist contends that these methods for gaining public input have become more sporadic, more unreliable, and less widespread than they were at one time (Curry-Stevens, 2006). At the same time, more and more non-profit organizations are providing services under contract with governments (Casey & Dalton, 2006). These new relationships provide a new, if challenging, opportunity to engage in the policy-making process.

Communicating with government about the unique expertise and experience of non-profit organizations and their client groups is a crucial component of working for a better community. It allows elected representatives to be better leaders. Politicians have a lot on their plates, and tend to be generalists, as opposed to specialists in a particular policy field – organizations that can provide information and analysis about the issues on which they have expertise thus provide an invaluable service (Huston, 2008).

Furthermore, the power of vested interests in the policy process can be great. We can't just assume that the "power of good ideas" in the public interest, or in the interest of marginalized communities, is enough to translate into good policy. Indeed, a number of good ideas – the living wage, a national childcare strategy, and home-based long term care, among others – have failed to translate into government policy (Curry-Stevens, 2006). Just as policy advocacy can give a voice to the people and causes that are often neglected, it also can provide a counter-balance to the messages that government receive regularly from the corporate sector and

other private interests (CLPI, 2006). In fact, one political scientist notes that "special interests tend to control particular areas of policy unless public interests are organized. The role of public interest groups, in this view, is to intervene in politics to redress the balance of power to the benefit of the public" (McCubbin, Labonte, & Dallaire, 2001).

Because it makes our organizations and communities stronger

Engaging in policy advocacy can strengthen other aspects of non-profit organizations and the communities that they work in, as well. Policy advocacy can lead to enhanced collaboration among organizations both within and outside the sector, improved relationships with policy makers and other stakeholders, effective strategic planning and evaluation, experience in media relations, and better communication of needs and priorities for a community or an organization (Curry-Stevens, 2006). In this way, taking part in policy advocacy can build overall organizational capacity and develop community leadership, enabling more effectiveness in many aspects of work. Well-documented and evaluated policy advocacy can also lead to funder interest (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008). As the literature on policy advocacy evaluation suggests, a favourable policy outcome is just one of many important 'successes' that participating in policy advocacy can generate.

> *Taking part in policy advocacy builds overall organizational capacity and develops community leadership – making organizations more effective in many aspects of their work.*

Because it works

Finally, policy advocacy is important because *it works*. Think of the effect of these policy changes on society – they would not have occurred were it not for the dedicated policy advocacy work of many:

- The effect of legislation and health promotion campaigns to curb tobacco use;
- The effect of passing laws to improve car safety and reduce drunk driving;
- The adoption of a 10 year plan to end homelessness in Alberta which emphasizes the Housing First approach.

We may not know definitively the outcomes of some of these policy changes just yet, but we do know that policy advocacy does lead to policy change – we just need to *do it*.

How do we do policy advocacy?

Start with a strategy

Policy advocacy strategy is the subject of numerous books, documents, and other resources. Simply put, there is no one recipe for success – every policy advocacy effort will be dependent upon the specific context that is being worked within. However, most policy advocacy success stories do have something in common – their advocacy work is planned out strategically in advance.

Strategies need to be designed for the long haul. As one advocate noted, "effective lobbying is strongly correlated with a willingness to stay with an issue not just when it's hot, not just for a session or two of Congress, but on an ongoing basis" (Berry, 2001). The US-based *Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest* suggests developing a policy on policy advocacy (CLPI, 2006). This is a way of institutionalizing the commitment to engaging in policy advocacy and laying the framework for policy advocacy activity by stating overall policy

goals, the types of tactics that are desired, and the decision-making process that will be used.

In Australia, a renewed interest in strategic activism has led to the increasing use of 'theory of change', in which organizations set out, in simplified terms, how they believe that change will be won, and what is required to achieve that change (Whelan, 2008). Laying out a strategy could involve articulating a "30,000 foot view" encompassing major campaigns and long-term changes; a "10,000 foot view" including pieces of the work and interim outcomes; and on the ground outcome maps outlining specific short-term goals and activities (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008).

Strategies need to be designed for the long haul. Effective advocacy is strongly correlated with a willingness to stay with an issue not just while it's hot, but on an ongoing basis.

The process of laying out a strategy at the outset can benefit future advocates as organizations evolve and change. Having a policy advocacy strategy in place allows for easier policy advocacy evaluation, as well. Good evaluation can be useful as a means of understanding the costs and benefits of engaging in policy advocacy; it can also help with designing future policy advocacy efforts and demonstrating outcomes to funders and other potential partners (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008). While it's not necessary to go through a complex policy-making process just to engage in policy advocacy, having an overall strategy can help to guide policy advocacy activities, and allow for easier measurement of outcomes.

Political strategy with a vision – the Council of Canadians

The Council of Canadians was founded in 1985 to deal primarily with issues of national sovereignty. The vision at the time was a Canada with a distinctive and progressive political culture, with universal social programs and independent foreign policy emphasizing social justice. For the first decade, the Council worked on free trade issues, but with the ratification of NAFTA in 1994, it was time to rethink the Council's vision and mission.

The new vision of the Council emphasized popular sovereignty, and from 1994 to 2001 the organization worked on issues relating to the fallout of free trade deals: social programs, natural resources, culture, health, and environmental and safety standards. This was also a time of connecting with allies globally, as the commonality of similar struggles around the world began to come more sharply into focus.

In 2001, the 9/11 terror attacks altered the political context, making it again necessary to re-imagine the role of the Council. With American security interests influencing Canadian sovereignty, the third phase of the Council of Canadians was implemented to pursue global social justice. Today, the Council works with a vision statement that encompasses three main goals, briefly:

- Working to foster greater understanding of Canadian democracy and sovereignty in relation to increased pressures for continental integration;
- Working in partnership to reclaim the global and local commons as the shared heritage of humanity and the Earth; and
- Creating a compelling civil society movement seeking social justice both in Canada and internationally.

The Council of Canadians has continually reflected on the relevance of their goals as a movement to the current political and economic realities. This strategic visioning ensures that the work of the organization remains pertinent. (Council of Canadians, 2007)

Connect policy advocacy with social movements

Many of the examples of successful policy advocacy are campaigns grounded in social movements, a broad membership base, or a group of constituents. Having a broad base of support makes messages more compelling and credible – especially when supporters represent diverse interests.

In a comprehensive study of the twelve organizations deemed 'most effective' in policy advocacy through a survey of members of the US Congress and Senate, membership structures emerge as a feature that almost all of these organizations had in common (Rees, 1998). Those without a formal membership structure maintained close grassroots following through facilitating networking and collaboration between like-minded organizations and community groups. Formal memberships have the added benefit of allowing organizations to easily raise funds through membership fees or contributions.

Another method of linking policy advocacy to the grassroots is through engaging members, clients, or constituent groups in direct-action organizing on relevant issues and concern (Brooks, 2005). This kind of engagement allows organizations to quickly mobilise support – individuals and groups can be called on to write letters to the editor in their local paper, organize events or rallies, contact their elected representatives, or distribute news and information.

Keeping close ties to the grassroots also enables organizations to bring their members or constituents into direct contact with policy-makers. These relationships between policymakers and members can have a powerful effect on the policy process. The first-hand experience that members – either individuals or groups – have with the issue at hand makes their messages all the more compelling. Contact between members and policymakers can thus be a powerful strategy in policy advocacy (Rees, 2001).

ACORN: The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now

ACORN grounds policy advocacy in the grassroots by focusing on direct-action confrontational organizing on welfare issues, tenants' rights, predatory lending, child care subsidies, and other issues as a means of empowering low- and moderate-income citizens in Los Angeles.

When US President Bill Clinton signed a welfare reform bill in 1996, ACORN organized a major campaign focusing on welfare issues. Organizers examined and analyzed the new welfare law and forecasted that the bill would lead to an expansion of workfare programs across the country. After establishing a core group of action committee members, they began engaging individuals most affected by the new policy. Over the next four years, ACORN got signed authorization cards from 10,000 workfare workers and organized hundreds of demonstrations on workfare rules and policies.

Eventually, their efforts resulted in a number of policy victories: a grievance procedure for workfare workers was established – the first in the US; priority hiring lists were established at most workfare sites; health and safety procedures at many workfare sites were improved; and most significantly, LA County revised workfare policies, making participation voluntary rather than mandatory.

ACORN's method of community organizing emphasizing door-knocking and recruitment drives enabled those most affected by new workfare rules to become involved in calling for change. In this example, a grassroots focused strategy resulted not only in some major policy victories, but also in empowerment and capacity building for the welfare recipients who were the subjects of these policies. (Brooks, 2005)

Using coalitions to enhance benefits for children – Campaign 2000

When it comes to children's benefits in Canada, coalitions of non-governmental and government players have changed the policy landscape significantly. Campaign 2000 is a network of over 150 national and local organizations that use public education, community engagement, policy advocacy and dialogue with government to advocate for solutions to child and family poverty.

Although improvements to children's benefits are not the only outcome of the work of Campaign 2000, it is one area in which the coalition has been successful in terms of influencing policy change and laying the groundwork for future change. They are credited with:

- Heightening public and political awareness of child poverty.
- Cultivating political will to implement the National Child Benefit and improve federal/provincial relationships.
- Persuading political leaders to proceed with the Early Childhood Development Initiative.

Campaign 2000 makes use of its diverse membership to advance policy advocacy goals. Members of the coalition may be primarily interested in vastly different agendas, but they all come together to work on the issues that they have in common: child and family poverty and well-being. Because the coalition is so broad, Campaign 2000 is able to speak with authority when making presentations and writing policy proposals. At the same time, publications, briefs, articles, and presentations are circulated amongst the membership, providing member organizations with the tools and resources that they need to be effective at the local level, or on their own specific issues. With an office in Ottawa, the national network has better access to policy-makers and staff on Parliament Hill, while member agencies are able to develop relationships with their locally elected representatives. This combination of access to, and contact with elected officials and public servants at a variety of levels is a potent policy advocacy tool. (Gill, 2004)

Connecting to the grassroots isn't just about strategy, though. It's also about *ethics*. It is the responsibility of those engaging in policy advocacy on behalf of a constituent group to consider both how they root their activities in the grassroots – that is, whom they legitimately represent; and secondly, how policy advocacy work, campaign strategies, and social action organizing can itself be exclusive, despite the best of intentions (Curry-Stevens, 2006). This might mean asking and addressing questions such as:

- Who can become a leader, who speaks for the group?
- What are the impacts of the community organizing model used?
- What are the effects of the decision-making structure?
- How are roles being allocated?
- What language and cultural norms are being used?

Policy advocacy can result in many successes beyond just policy 'wins': empowerment, capacity building, grassroots mobilization, and the development of organizations and leaders. By being inclusive and keeping policy advocacy closely linked to the communities most impacted by policy, these benefits are shared.

Take part in coalitions and partnerships

Building relationships, developing partnerships, and forming coalitions can be powerful tools in policy advocacy. Coalitions offer a way for organizations to be involved in policy advocacy without having to provide all of the financial or human resources alone. For charitable organizations, taking part in a coalition can be a good way of engaging in policy advocacy while still adhering to any legal restrictions on advocacy or political activities. Coalitions also provide many examples of policy successes, for example:

- The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness' success in developing a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Edmonton.
- Vibrant Communities Calgary's 'Fair Fares' initiative, which led in early 2009 to the passing of sustained funding for a universal low-income transit pass for Calgary transit users.
- The implementation in Quebec, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Ontario of provincial poverty reduction plans, in part due to the sustained efforts of coalitions of local, provincial, and national anti-poverty organizations.

> *Of all the strategies used to influence welfare program regulations, building coalitions with other groups was found to be both the most common and the most effective.*

One study of effectiveness in human service interest groups on influencing welfare programs found that of all of the strategies used to influence welfare program regulations, building coalitions with other groups is both the most common, and the most effective (Hoefer, 2000).

Coalitions can build relationships with a wider cross-section of individuals and groups, because they enable participants to come together on common issues, and speak with a united voice, while still remaining committed to other organizational goals and activities. It can also be easier for coalitions to engage government than individual organizations. This is useful because good working relationships with politicians and public servants can help to advance a policy advocacy agenda. Working horizontally across sectors requires that governments, communities, and individuals all build their capacities for participatory policy-making processes (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2000).

The diversity that makes coalitions strong also makes them a challenge. For broad-based groups, it can be

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Collaboration in Community Economic Development – an example from the US

Coalition enables different groups to mobilize their own unique strengths towards advocacy efforts. A collaboration between social work students and faculty at four US universities, social work practitioners, community groups, and national social welfare advocacy groups worked together to advocate for policy changes that would better enable communities to pursue community economic development.

Each group had unique roles in the coalition based on their expertise, experience, and goals.

The social work students conducted policy analysis, organized community members, developed policy, and gained firsthand experience through participating in legislative lobbying – contacting members, monitoring the progress of bills, and liaising with the media.

Faculty members acted as expert consultants, and helped to analyze and develop policies, conduct research, and provided access to grants.

Community practitioners and organizations acted as community leaders, running pilot programs, identifying on-the-ground expertise, involving clients and constituents, and educating the public.

With each group contributing what they could, the coalition was able to leverage resources unavailable to any one group. As well, the collective efforts allowed each group to build their capacity in areas where they did not have previous experience or expertise. Together, the coalition was able to achieve their goal of getting asset-based CED strategies on the agenda in many state legislatures. (Sherraden, Slosar, & Sherraden, 2002)

difficult to identify the 'common ground', and to agree on actions and activities that will be collectively beneficial. Partners may find it a challenge to decide how much of their own organizational objectives they are willing to set aside in order to pursue the goals of the coalition.

Partnerships and coalitions can be tricky to negotiate; in these types of relationships, it's important to consider the '3 Ps': the players, the power dynamics, and the politics (Chandler, 2004). While 'partnership' may not imply equal relationships when it comes to resources, power, and responsibilities, success through partnership is achieved when differences are valued and dealt with openly and respectfully.

The strength of coalition is in its ability to unite different organizations, build relationships, provide mutual support, pool resources, knowledge and skills, and more effectively advance an action agenda. There are many coalitions that work on issues in Edmonton, across the province, and throughout Canada. These coalitions operate differently and have had different experiences, but they all recognize the value of working together. A list of some of these coalitions is available in appendix A.

Understand the policy-making process

Logically, a key component of successful policy advocacy is a good working knowledge of the policy-making process. It's not necessary to be an expert, but understanding the basics of the policy process makes developing strategies easier and more fruitful.

This can be a challenge, however, as the policy-making process is complex and constantly changing. Organizations need to be prepared to take advantage of opportunities to participate in the policy-making process when they come up – there are occasionally opportunities to provide input through policy dialogues, community consultations, and other public policy-input processes.

It's not necessary to be an expert, but a good understanding of the policy-making process makes for better policy advocacy strategies and practice.

Policy advocates may feel frustration when evidence and research aren't enough to influence policy decisions. But as one analyst of policy and research proposed, research is only one of "the four I's" – ideology, interests, information, and institutional contexts – which affect policy-makers decision making (Huston, 2008). Sound research is a part of the picture, but good evidence alone is not enough to change policy, and that's what makes good policy advocacy so important. The challenge for busy would-be advocates, then, is to fit in time to learn how the policy-making system works.

In a case study of the role of Canadian nonprofits on the improvement of policies for children, one author describes how successful policy solutions emerge from the 'policy primeval soup': "The proposals that survive to the status of serious consideration meet several criteria, including their technical feasibility, their fit with dominant values and the current national mood (as gauged by elected legislators), their budgetary workability, and the political support or opposition they might experience" (Gill, 2004).

Since 1982, the Maytree Foundation has been working to reduce poverty and inequality in Canada, and to build strong civic communities. In addition to generating research & conducting analysis, and providing funding & other supports for non-profits and community leaders, Maytree provides a number of learning opportunities and training sessions for established and emerging leaders. These include:

- A *Public Policy Training Institute* which provides participants with the skills and knowledge to develop, influence, and monitor public policy issues relevant to their work.
- An archive of *Policy Principles* presentations – a weekly series of public workshops given by leading public policy experts on issues relevant to public policy.
- A new program called *How Government Works* that will familiarize participants with the structure of the public service and the electoral and political processes.
- A nine-month program to train leaders from diverse communities to be ready to organize a political campaign or run for office, called *DiverseCity School4Civics*.
- An annual leadership conference with archived presentations available online.
- A lunchtime learning series called *Five Good Ideas*, in which experts discuss non-profit management issues for small and mid-sized organizations with archived presentations available online.
- A network for past and current participants of Maytree programs to discuss issues, share experiences, and provide mutual support.

The learning-approach of the Maytree Foundation has had a great deal of success in building the capacity of those who would work for change to create more inclusive and equitable communities. (Maytree Foundation, 2009)

As one government relations analyst explains, oftentimes "the challenges faced by sector organizations have less to do with the dynamics inside government than the sector organizations' inability to really understand how government, public policy, and politics work and how one goes about working the system" (Moore, 2006). It's equally true, however, that many inside the government sector do not fully understand the dynamics of working in the non-profit sector.

Many organizations have found that hiring or otherwise engaging individuals with previous government experience can be helpful in navigating this complex terrain. Not only do former political staffers and public servants have firsthand knowledge of how government works, but they also have ready-made relationships with decision-makers. It's also possible to hire government-relations consulting firms. There are an increasing number of these types of services available; they can help the client to craft an appropriate 'ask', and bring it forward through appropriate channels (Moore, 2006).

A more sustainable approach may be to invest in training for staff or volunteers. For example, the Maytree Foundation provides training specifically for non-profits in government relations and the policy-making process. There are also seminars and workshops available from a variety of other organizations that support non-profit work. Training is one way of building organizational capacity in the areas of government relations and policy processes, and can be a good strategy for engaging in successful policy advocacy. There are also many online toolkits, how-to guides, and manuals that can help organizations to understand the policy process and build their capacity to engage in policy advocacy. Some of these resources are provided in Appendix B.

Use thoughtful messaging

Communicating compelling messages is at the heart of successful policy advocacy. Indeed, there is a great deal of literature regarding message development, media advocacy, and strategic communications.

> *Advocates need to be strategic about communicating key messages. This might mean repositioning or reframing the issue to be more in tune with the target audience.*

Those advocating for policies in the public interest need to be strategic when it comes to communicating their messages; if not, the influence of capital interests, with their well-financed research and advocacy practices which have to date been wildly successful, will continue to eclipse the influence of progressive movements (Curry-Stevens, 2006). One way of doing this is by re-framing the issue. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff developed a rubric for distinguishing between three levels of messaging: (1) the expression of overarching values; (2) the general issue being addressed; and (3) the policy details relating to the issue (Dean, 2006). Communicating messages focussed on policy details might demonstrate an organizations' expertise in the issue, but these messages don't resonate as strongly as do messages that express values – it's important to make strategic use of all three levels of messaging. In a case study of six successful advocacy campaigns, *The Center for Nonprofit Strategies* highlights smart messages as a key component. For policy advocates, this might mean repositioning or reframing the issue; and includes developing multi-level messages that are sensitive to the target audience (CNP, 2005).

Another study of the twelve most influential US advocacy organizations observed that successful advocacy organizations use clear and to-the-point messaging, free from empty rhetoric or inflated language (Rees, 1998). Some common forms of framing their messages included:

> *"We were so entrenched with statistics and industry terms. We were great at talking at the policy level. But this isn't **what was going to change people's hearts**…"*

- Explaining legislation and defining the problem;
- Highlighting implications for growth and efficiency and using economic arguments;
- Referring to 'levelling the playing field', or equality-based rationale;
- Citing public support;
- Avoiding judgementalism;
- Pointing out contradictions, predicting outcomes, and extrapolating logical consequences;
- Predicting the 'pocketbook' impact for average families; and
- Backing up arguments with facts from government, academia, experience, and other reputable sources.

There are many methods that these organizations used in their communication, ranging from guest articles in local newspapers, spots on radio shows and press conferences to rallies, public events, paid advertisements, and even seeking endorsement or support from celebrities (Rees, 1998). Strategic use of web-based communication tools can also help to get well-crafted messages out. As internet communications continue to evolve, the opportunities that they provide will shift and change. Organizations that are responsive to changing technology have the possibility of reaping huge benefits.

Communicating messages - the Oregon Housing Alliance

The Oregon Housing Alliance is an example of a successful coalition that came together to advocate for policies that would improve affordable housing in the state. What started as a loose network of housing providers, developers, and non-profit organizations often working at cross-purposes coalesced into a strong and functional state-wide coalition able to notch impressive policy 'victories' through collaborative action. One of the key catalysts for this change: media advocacy training.

Before the genesis of the Oregon Housing Alliance, organizers set up a media advocacy training session for a number of affordable housing advocates. They had heard that another Oregon group had used similar training to improve their policy advocacy outcomes. After the first meeting, a Media Working Group was formed, who went on to meet together monthly to learn about media advocacy, plan successful messages, and consider policy options and political opportunities.

They learned that a successful media strategy requires that the group has a shared understanding of what needs to change, clear policy goals, the ability to identify political opportunities and mobilize resources, knowledge of their allies and opponents – and importantly, that they would need to frame their message effectively in order to communicate their values, the problem, and its solutions.

Through the media advocacy training, the Media Working Group learned that they needed to spend more time communicating their values and principles, and less time explaining the fine details of policy proposals. One group member explained how important this re-framing was to the group's later success, "We were so entrenched with statistics and industry terms. We were great at talking at the policy level. But this isn't what was going to change people's hearts; it was too technical. If we continued to talk on this level, we were going to be trumped by our conservative counterparts". Their new messages were easier for more people to get behind, messages like "Children deserve an opportunity to succeed in school and life, which is tied to having a stable home"; and "Oregonians should not have to choose between paying for housing and buying food and medicine".

The Oregon Housing Alliance linked their new media advocacy skills to an overarching policy advocacy strategy that emphasized building a coalition of diverse support, standing together behind a pared-down policy agenda, meeting with elected representatives on key policy proposals, and working with the media. The new frames and messages began appearing in the media, and advocates began to see that their messages were influencing how others spoke about housing. Policy-makers began talking about affordable housing, their policy goals received political support, they were able to get some of their key policy proposals passed by Portland City Council, and their proposals were being discussed by the Oregon House and Senate.

The Oregon Housing Alliance is an example of a strong coalition, communicating messages grounded primarily in values, linking media advocacy to a larger advocacy strategy, taking advantage of training in media advocacy, and using success to build momentum.

(Dean, 2006)

Provide valuable information

Another thread that runs through many of the examples of successful policy advocacy is the ability of the organization or coalition to provide high-quality, credible information. Whether this information is based on the personal experience of clients or on scientific research isn't necessarily the key question; what's crucial, in this respect, is that influential information is information that is trustworthy, consistent, and that adds something new to the debate.

Influential information is information that is timely, trustworthy, consistent, and adds something new to the debate.

When you're up against a powerful or well-funded opposing lobby, credible data is imperative. For example, health promotion advocates attempting to change tobacco policies in Canada needed absolutely impenetrable data – complete, scientific, systematic, peer-reviewed, and used with transparency – in order to contend with the tobacco industry lobby (McCubbin, Labonte, & Dallaire, 2001).

Incorporating good information lends authority and legitimacy to policy advocacy work. A US-based coalition working on community economic development policy at the state level found that providing academic research and policy analysis was a key factor in convincing legislators to take their policy proposals seriously (Sherraden, Slosar, & Sherraden, 2002). This included expert testimony by university faculty members, data on community economic development, and other information which was provided to legislators throughout the legislative process.

Adding Value - The Rideau Institute

In a few short years, the Rideau Institute has managed to assert a sizeable influence on policy making and the public debate on issues such as Canada's role in Afghanistan, defence spending, Canadian military casualties, and Department of National Defence's non-competitive contracts.

The Rideau Institute has emphasized high-quality, original research and analysis on issues related to Canadian foreign affairs and the role of the military. For example, in October 2007, they collaborated with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives to author a report which analyzed the casualty rate of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan compared to American soldiers in Iraq. The research was rigorous, backed up by solid numbers, and as a result has had a significant effect on the debate over Canada's role in Afghanistan.

Later, the Institute's president Steve Staples spoke in a panel on CBC TV, saying that the Canadian military should reach out in negotiation with the Taliban. While the idea was first seen as outrageous, it later emerged that Canadian soldiers had in fact already been discreetly reaching out to the Taliban, and the idea has now moved to the mainstream. Presenting new ideas is a risk, but moving issues from the periphery to the centre of the debate can fundamentally change the shape of public policy.

The Rideau Institute has accomplished considerable influence in the policy-making process by positioning themselves as informed specialists. They regularly develop reports, both for the public and for policy-makers that are original, sound, based on solid numbers, and that provide an alternative understanding of defence and security issues (Adeba, 2008).

Many other Canadian research and policy organizations – including the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – have similarly positioned themselves to be influential in the policy process through generating high-quality, cutting-edge, original research and analysis.

Adding value to information that already exists by applying new analytical frameworks or examining effects that may have been overlooked can be good ways of becoming a trusted source of information. In a study of how research is used in the policy-making process, investigators found that mental health administrators evaluate information using two main filters: the *truth* test and the *utility* test (Huston, 2008). Not only does the data need to be of high technical quality, but it also needs to be useful, that is, it will help legislators devise viable solutions to the problems at hand.

Presenting new ideas can be risky, but moving ideas from the periphery to the centre of the debate can fundamentally change the shape of public policy.

Furthermore, policy advocates can become the 'go-to people' by providing policy-makers with good information on a regular basis. It's not always the case that decision-makers are experts in the field they're working – so bringing forward research and analysis that is both reputable and insightful can have a huge impact on what policy decisions are made. This might mean generating new research on an issue that your organization deals with frequently, or bringing forward the personal stories from clients or members that deal with the realities of policy on a day-to-day basis. Either way, good information can have a big impact on policy advocacy campaigns.

Summary

Policy advocacy can be a powerful way of building better organizations, better relationships, better public policy, and most importantly – better communities. Documented successes in policy advocacy show that there are many ways to engage in policy advocacy. An overall advocacy strategy, a broad base of support, strategic alliances and coalitions, a good understanding of the policy-making process, thoughtful messaging, and reliable, credible information are some important factors that can lead to policy advocacy success.

Once a policy change is won, however, it is important to stay tuned to the effects of the new policy on constituent groups and the wider community. Organizations and coalitions that have worked to influence the adoption of certain policies may also need to monitor the effects of these changes on the groups they are designed to benefit. Was enough money allocated towards implementation? Do the new rules make it more difficult for somebody else? Have enough staff or infrastructure been provided to make the new program effective?

It's also important to remember that many policy successes came after long, hard, and sustained advocacy efforts. Policy change is rarely won overnight, and often, policy victories are preceded by losses – in some cases, policy victories are later undermined by new policies, governments, or a new politico-economic climate. Case studies from around the world demonstrate that progress takes time – but it does happen. And along the way, policy advocacy has a lot to offer non-profit organizations and the communities that they work within.

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Appendix A: List of Policy Advocacy Coalitions

The following is a selection of organizations, based in coalition, that carry out policy advocacy work.

Aboriginal Peoples
- Congress of Aboriginal Peoples
  http://www.abo-peoples.org/
- Native Women's Association of Canada
  http://www.nwac-hq.org/

Children and Childcare
- Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada
  http://www.ccaac.ca/
- National Children's Alliance
  http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.com/

Disabilities
- Alberta Committee of Citizens with Disabilities
  http://www.accd.net/
- Council of Canadians with Disabilities
  http://www.ccdonline.ca/

Environment
- Sierra Club of Canada Prairie Chapter
  http://www.sierraclub.ca/prairie/

Food Issues
- Just Food Edmonton
  http://www.foodforalledmonton.org/
- Growing Food Security in Alberta
  http://www.foodsecurityalberta.ca/

Healthcare
- Friends of Medicare
  http://www.friendsofmedicare.org/
- Canadian Health Coalition
  http://www.healthcoalition.ca/

Housing
- Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness - http://www.ecohh.ca/
- Homeward Trust Edmonton
  http://www.homewardtrust.ca/

Immigrant/Refugee
- Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers - http://www.emcn.ab.ca/

- Canadian Council for Refugees
  http://www.ccrweb.ca/

Labour
- Alberta Federation of Labour
  http://www.afl.org/
- Canadian Labour Congress
  http://canadianlabour.ca/

Poverty
- Dignity for All
  http://www.dignityforall.ca/
- Campaign 2000
  http://www.campaign2000.ca/
- Canada Without Poverty
  http://www.cwp-csp.ca/

Public Interest
- Greater Edmonton Alliance
  http://www.greateredmontonalliance.com/
- Council of Canadians
  http://www.canadians.org/
- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
  http://www.policyalternatives.ca/
- Public Interest Alberta
  http://www.pialberta.org/

Sexual/Gender Minorities
- Pride Centre of Edmonton
  www.pridecentreofedmonton.org
- Egale Canada
  http://www.egale.ca/

Transportation
- Transit Riders Union Edmonton
  http://www.true.apirg.org/
- Citizens for Better Transit
  http://www.bettertransit.ab.ca/

Women
- YWCA Canada
  http://www.ywcacanada.ca/

Appendix B: List of further resources

Training Opportunities

The *Max Bell Public Policy Training Institute* is a 12-day training program run over 7 months for individuals working in registered charities interested in public policy. More information can be obtained from the Max Bell Foundation, http://www.maxbell.org/mbppti/ or 403-215-7310.

The Ottawa-based *Institute on Governance* offers public policy capacity building courses and workshops. Although designed primarily for public servants, a number of learning opportunities are available for the nonprofit sector as well. See http://www.iog.ca/ or call 613-562-0090 for more information.

The Toronto-based *Maytree Foundation* offers a variety of learning experiences in public policy and non-profit issues for established and emerging leaders. See http://www.maytree.com/training or call 416-944-2627 for more information.

The *Tamarack Institute for Sustainable Communities* offers a number of learning opportunities related to community building, collaboration, leadership, social issues, and other topics. See http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3.php or 519-885-5155. Tamarack is also connected to Vibrant Communities Canada, which hosts Policy Change from the Ground Up, online learning resources regarding public policy - http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2s327.html.

Online Manuals, Guides, and Toolkits

Alberta Teachers Association

> "Advocacy: A Practical Guide" *and* "Political Action: A Practical Guide"
> The first guide highlights advocacy tactics including letter-writing, meetings, town-hall forums, etc. The second discusses participating in politics and running for office. Guides and other information available from the ATA website: http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Advocacy%20and%20Action/Pages/Index.aspx.

Alberta College of Social Workers

> "Advocacy Toolkit"
> This guide, a series of Word documents, defines advocacy, outlines tactics such as phone calls, letters, and briefs, and provides contact information for political representatives and the media. The guide and other resources can be found at http://www.acsw.ab.ca/advocacy/projects_and_activities.

YMCA Canada

> "Be H.I.P.P. Have Influence on Public Policy: A Manual and Toolkit on How Voluntary Organizations Can Influence Public Policy"
> The online manual and supporting e-learning seminar walk you through an 8-step plan for developing an advocacy strategy, and discusses charitable restrictions and advocacy tactics. The resource can be found at http://www.ymca.ca/behipp/hipp.html.

Habitat for Humanity

"The Art of Advocacy: A Handbook for Non-profit Organizations"
This guide discusses the new limitations on advocacy and political activities for charitable organizations in more detail, and outlines advocacy tactics similar to the first two guides listed. The guide in PDF format is available at http://habitat.ca/publicationsc42.php.

Food Banks Canada

"Government Relations Guide"
This document discusses the basic principles of government relations, government processes, and tactics for communicating with government. The guide and other advocacy resources are available on the Food Banks Canada website, http://www.cafb-acba.ca.

The Change Agency

This Australia-based activist resource centre offers a rich selection of online courses, workshops, publications, toolkits, and other resources on strategic activism, evaluation, advocacy and community building, available at http://www.thechangeagency.org.

Nonprofit Library Commons

Public Policy and Advocacy Guides for Nonprofit Organizations
Imagine Canada's online library contains a selection of resources focussed on non-profit advocacy and public policy. The catalogue and links are online at http://nonprofitscan.imaginecanada.ca/en/home.

Voluntary Sector Initiative

"Participating in Federal Public Policy: A Guide for the Voluntary Sector"
The Voluntary Sector Initiative looked at ways that Canadian voluntary organizations participate in the public policy process. The above document and other resources, including information about charitable organization restrictions are available from http://www.vsi-isbc.org/eng/policy/index.cfm.

Independent Sector

"The Nonprofit Lobbying Guide"
A US-based e-book on lobbying for nonprofits, the second edition of this widely quoted guide is available online from http://www.independentsector.org/programs/gr/lobbyguide.html.

The Institute for Sustainable Communities

"Advocacy Resources and Tools"
Although the organization is based in the USA, many of the resources are easily applied to the Canadian context. The toolkit, and a wide variety of policy advocacy resources are at http://tools.iscvt.org/.

Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest

This US-based non-profit organization is dedicated to providing other nonprofits with resources and information to enable them to be effective advocates. A wide variety of resources including workshops, courses, publications, and manuals are available on their website, http://www.clpi.org/.