



AMERICAN
NUTRITION
ASSOCIATION

Beginner's Guide to Advocacy

for Nutrition Practitioners

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The Importance of Grassroots Advocacy

Grassroots advocacy is the act of passionate individuals contacting policymakers to advocate on behalf of a particular issue they care about. Advocacy raises awareness amongst legislators and their staff, which can help build support for your cause and can ultimately result in a positive policy change. Additionally, it can serve as an opportunity to develop a professional relationship with a legislator and/or their staff.

For nutrition practitioners, it is an easy and effective way for people to get involved in changing policy in order to improve the health of fellow Americans. This type of advocacy enables you to be a part of promoting change you care about.

Nutrition providers know that nutrition is a powerful tool that should be at the core of our healthcare system. Yet most policymakers are unfamiliar with the variety of nutrition practitioners, the proven outcomes of teaching people how to use nutrition to promote health, and the impacts their votes on nutrition policy have on public health.

Our collective mission as advocates for nutrition practitioners is to share with legislators your perspective on the effects an existing law has, or that a pending piece of legislation will have, if passed. Your ability to share your and your clients' stories helps legislators understand how their constituents are affected by legislation. You have the unique ability to speak effectively and credibly regarding a policy's impact on nutrition jobs, consumer access to nutrition practitioners, insurance reimbursement of nutrition, and the promotion of health through sound nutrition policy.

Legislative Nutrition Policy

The practice of nutrition is regulated in almost every state. State legislatures and the elected officials who serve in them, state legislators, make laws that create the general regulatory structure for the practice of nutrition – including the type of law, the parameters of that law, and the scope of practice for practitioners regulated by the state.

Legislators also make policy that affects the nutrition of people in their state in other ways-- including through the establishment of taxes on certain foods and beverages; menu labeling requirements for restaurants; low-income nutrition programs; coverage of nutrition care in state insurance programs, and more.

Regulatory Nutrition Policy

Appointed public officials, known as regulators, are charged with creating rules and regulations that implement the bills legislators pass. These rules typically serve as a second layer to text within the bill, creating more specific guidelines and frameworks for the issue being regulated.

Legislative v. Regulatory Advocacy

The policy produced by both legislators and regulators can impact your practice and the health of people in your state.

Grassroots advocacy can occur at the federal, state, or local level, but for nutrition practitioners interested in improving their ability to practice and/or the health of people in their state, the best place to focus your advocacy is usually at the state level.

Because legislative matters often take years and have the most significant policy weight, most grassroots advocacy focuses on the legislative, rather than the regulatory, realm. Because of this, this guide will focus on state legislative advocacy, but many of the same principles can be applied at other levels of government.

How to Advocate

You can communicate with legislators in a variety of ways. The most common methods are face to face meetings, phone calls, emails, public hearing testimony, written public comments, and action alerts.

Face to Face Meetings:

Face to face meetings are the most effective way to share your opinions with legislators. They give you the highest likelihood of meeting with the policymaker directly, signal a high level of commitment to the issue, and allow for 2-4 people to visit as a group if there are multiple interested parties in the district. If you have the time and ability to meet with your legislator or their staff in person, here are some guidelines:

Scheduling:

Scheduling a meeting can be done via call or email. You will likely speak with a person on the legislator's staff when you write or call. Let this person know that you are a constituent, what type of nutrition professional you are, and briefly explain why you want to visit with the

legislator. If you are considering going in a group, be sure to provide the names and information of everyone planning to attend, and ensure that the office has space for all of the attendees.

- Meeting Preparation:
 - Before you go, take some time to learn more about the issue, about the legislator you're meeting with, and to prepare your 'talking points'. Your talking points are the specific points of information or personal stories you want to share to educate and persuade the legislator.
 - Review the legislator's state and campaign websites to learn their partisanship, what prior votes they've taken on health related bills, what committees they serve on, what their educational background and profession is, where they went to school, and where their hometown is. Establishing something in common, such as a shared alma mater, is a great way to build rapport in advance of communicating about the nutrition issue.
 - Review the ANA website for information on the bill or topic. You don't have to know everything about the issue, but you should be prepared to talk about how it will affect you/your practice.
 - Once you've got the necessary background information, create some bullet points for yourself so you remember which key points are important to cover. You can practice these alone or with someone else before you go to ensure smooth delivery and to help anticipate what questions the legislator may have.
- At the Meeting:
 - Arrive a few minutes early.
 - Prepare to be flexible. Anticipate that the meeting might get cut short, that you may end up meeting with only staff members or someone different than you anticipated, or that they might already have a pre-formed opinion on the issue that could differ from yours. Legislators' schedules often change at the last minute, but rest assured that any meeting with their office helps raise awareness and can make progress.
 - When the meeting begins you and anyone joining should introduce yourself/themselves, briefly explain your training/education, and what you do in working with clients. As the conversation continues, you will want to explain the issue or bill and how it affects you. If appropriate, ask them to vote a certain way on a bill.
 - Once the meeting ends you should thank them for their time. Be sure to give them a business card, if you have it, and to ask for theirs so you can stay in touch. A great way to maintain a connection is to offer to be a resource if they have follow-up questions.
- After Meeting
 - Send a thank you email after the meeting. In it, ask to be updated as the bill progresses, and again offer to be a resource.

- Share the details of the meeting with us. If the legislator had questions that you didn't have the answer to, this is a great place to let us know about that.

Action Alerts:

The American Nutrition Association's Action Alerts are a great way to take action on active issues. The Advocacy Center allows you to connect to the appropriate legislators in just a few minutes, with just a couple of clicks.

These alerts provide a completely customizable email template that summarizes the important points on an issue. We highly encourage you to take the additional time to personalize these messages to highlight your education and training, your personal story, and why the issue matters to you, as this will result in maximum impact for the legislators reading them.

You can also share links to these alerts via social media or email to recruit additional people to take action!

Email:

If we do not have an active action alert on an issue that you're interested in, and you don't have the capacity for a face-to-face meeting, you can craft an email and send it to your legislator directly.

When emailing, keep the same principles in mind from a face to face visit: introduce yourself and your background; explain why you're interested in the issue; explain the issue; ask them to vote a certain way on a bill if appropriate; and keep it concise.

Phone:

The same face to face and email principles should be replicated here, but keep it even shorter! Typically, a member of the staff, and not the legislators themselves, will answer. They will record your information and your opinion and report it back to their boss.

Advocacy Goals and Outcomes

Your voice can make a difference in the outcome of legislation and rules. Here are some outcomes your communication can have:

- Provide the policymaker with accurate facts and data regarding an issue;
- Educate them on the negative impact of the status quo;
- Educate them on unintended consequences of proposed legislation;
- Provide them with a personal story about your connection to the issue;

- Allow them to see how issue relates to residents of their state (jobs, freedom to choose the right practitioner for them, increased access to services, etc.);
- Help them form educated opinions before they are asked to vote on a bill;
- Answer questions they may have about the profession, the issue, etc.;
- Clarify the similarities and differences amongst types of nutrition practitioners; and
- Identify you as a credible source of information about your profession.

Knowing some of the potential outcomes can help you set goals that are in line with the topic and issue you wish to discuss with the legislator.

Conclusion

Grassroots advocacy is a fantastic way to supplement the work you do with clients to improve their health directly. When your state makes laws that make access to healthy nutrition easier and more affordable, you have taken part in a movement that extends far beyond your practice and into every corner of your state.

Resources

- Identify your legislators
 - State Level: http://openstates.org/find_your_legislator/
 - Federal Level: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members>
- ANA Action Alerts: theana.org/actionalerts
- ANA Policy Principles: [https://theana.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ANA Policy Principles.pdf](https://theana.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ANA_Policy_Principles.pdf)