

Advocacy: Taking Action to Make a Difference

Many parent groups are organizing their efforts to help guide social service administrators and policy makers to be more responsive to the needs of foster and adoptive families. Parents want to make sure that the needs of foster and adopted children will be a priority and that services for their families will receive necessary funding, now and in the future.

When you pool the talents, knowledge, and skills of your group members, you can help determine how public policy outcomes affect the lives of foster and adoptive families. You can influence the distribution of resources, and you may even help transform attitudes and beliefs about foster care and adoption.

There are many ways to become an advocate for children. If your group is small or just getting started, you can begin by advocating for the needs of foster and adopted children in your local schools, community centers, or neighborhood places of worship. If your group is more experienced, and willing and able to take on a bigger task, you may be interested in working for change on a statewide legislative level.

To effectively get started, you need to find your focus. You may feel frustrated when you see the many ways systems fail to serve families, but your desire to want to fix everything can paralyze your efforts. To be effective, you need to identify the specific problem you want to try to solve and move on from there.

Identify the Problem

To help your group identify the issue you want to address, you need to set aside time at one of your next meetings to list the problems that your members feel are affecting foster and adoptive families. Plan a brainstorming session where you don't limit the suggestions. Accept all ideas, even those you don't believe are a high priority, so that you don't alienate anyone who risks sharing an opinion. Remind members to frame their suggestions in terms of children's needs. Once you have your list of possibilities, look for connections among the ideas to see if some of them can be combined to address a single issue.

After you combine the original ideas into a new list, display and read this version to the group. Allow the group time to react to the new list, without trying to prioritize or solve the problems.

Next, facilitate a more guided discussion to help your group choose which problem to focus on. Have group members prioritize the problems and then vote to determine which one you want to solve. You may need further discussion and a second vote if a majority is not determined. The priorities for each group will be different, depending on what members believe is important and what they think they can handle at this time. A less experienced group may choose to resolve a problem in their local school district, while an experienced group may be ready to tackle a more complex problem at the state level.

When you become an advocate, always nurture the relationships you develop and do not take your contacts for granted. When and if you ever disagree with a policy maker, learn to disagree amicably. There may come a time in the future when you are both on the same side of an issue and you can be of help to each other again.

Problems Groups Might Want to Solve

Problem 1:

Local school administrators and teachers are unaware of or unresponsive to the issues that affect foster and adopted children. For example, teachers assign family tree homework projects that marginalize foster and adopted children.

The Problem from the Child's Point of View:

All children deserve a quality education. To ensure a quality education for all foster and adopted children, administrators and teachers need to:

- provide support, assistance, and alternative assignments that relate to a child's lack of personal history information; and
- have a better understanding of attachment issues and other special needs common to foster and adopted children.

Problem 2:

State legislators are considering making cuts to residential treatment services for adoptive families. They may tighten eligibility criteria or reduce the pool of funding available to adopted children.

The Problem from the Child's Point of View:

All children deserve a permanent family, including those who experience mental health problems. Children who are adopted from the foster care system sometimes have severe mental health problems. Many of these issues are genetic or stem from abandonment, abuse, and trauma that occurred in their pre-adoptive lives. Access to mental services will help prevent adoption disruption and allow parents to nurture their children as they address their mental health issues.

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Once you choose an issue, be sure to restate the problem from the point of view of the children who are affected by it. Most decision makers value taking care of vulnerable children. Look at the box above to see example problems groups might choose to solve.

Collect Data to Document the Problem

Once your group has chosen its problem, you need to collect data to verify that the problem exists on a wide scale, and to identify the scope of the problem. There are four types of information that you may need to gather to complete the picture:

- relevant laws (local, state/provincial, or federal)
- relevant rules and regulations
- demographic information on the children affected by the problem
- testimonials illustrating exactly how the problem affects specific children and families

Lead the group in a second brainstorming session to help clarify what kind of information you need and how to get it. Post the following questions and have the group answer them as they apply to your problem. Have someone in the group record the group's responses.

- What do we need to know?
- Where can we find the information we need?
- What access do we already have to the information?
- Where do we go to get additional information?

For example, a group that is trying to solve problem 1 in their schools might come up with the following list of ideas for gathering information to document the problem. They might want to find out:

- the number of foster and adopted children in the school system and the special needs they have
- examples of inappropriate assignments and how they affect children's performance in school

A group trying to improve access to mental health services might want to find out:

- the number of youth adopted from the foster care system who have been denied mental health treatment
- the number of adoptive families who are on waiting lists to receive mental health services for their children
- if the waiting lists are longer than in the past
- the number of families who have had to relinquish custody of their children in order to get mental health services for them

Additional helpful information, which may be difficult to get, are anecdotal examples of:

- assaults occurring in families due to their inability to access mental health services
- the breakdown of families due to lack of mental health services, such as separation, divorce, violence, and more

When group members start sharing what they know, they often discover that a wealth of information exists within the group. Each member has had a variety of experiences and usually knows a number of contact people in the community. Collectively, most group members know where to find resources to get a good start on finding ways to solve their problem. Each has contacts with other organizations, and most have a personal story related to the problem. Once you sort through the data, reports, and material you have, organize your materials to build your strongest case. Then, decide what information is missing and figure out what your group has to do to get it.

Try to determine to whom you need to talk to get additional information, such as legislators, heads of committees or task forces, key people from agencies, and other bureaucrats. Some of these people may be sympathetic to your cause, but are unable to do advocacy work because their jobs prohibit it. They may be willing to channel information to your group as long as you do the advocacy.

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Child welfare data is public information. If you request totals or summary data, public agencies cannot refuse to supply you with this information. Get a copy of your state's "right to information" law.

In the United States, since May 1995, states have been required to submit foster care and adoption data to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as required by the Adoption and Foster Care Data Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS—www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/). While data is still incomplete, AFCARS is an excellent place to start since these reports include summary information about case plans, length of time in care, and age of children in care. The Child Welfare League of America (www.cwla.org) and the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC—www.naic.acf.hhs.gov) also have data from most states.

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SMART Goals and Objectives

When you plan your strategy for how to achieve your goal, you need to make sure your action plan includes objectives that are:

- **Specific:** Include information that will state the who, what, when, where, why, and how of your plan.
- **Measurable:** You need to be able to measure your efforts to know if you achieve your goals.
- **Achievable:** Keep your volunteers willing, motivated, and able to do advocacy work by making your goals possible to achieve.
- **Realistic:** Think of the time, money, and people you have to do your work and make your objectives realistically match the resources you have.
- **Timebound:** Your long-term goal or vision may take time to achieve, but your smaller goals and objectives should be achievable within three months.

Tips for Working with Legislators

Writing Letters

Consider the following guidelines for letters:

- Be clear and brief. State the problem simply and include only pertinent data to get your point across. Show that you have done your research and you know the problem well.
- Include the bill number and a brief description of the subject of the bill (if you are writing regarding a specific bill). Give the information up front to let them know what you are talking about.
- Discuss only one bill or one issue in your letter. If you have several issues, write separate letters.
- Set a sincere and polite tone in your letter. Do not be sarcastic, threaten, or whine.
- Make your letter personal. A legible, handwritten letter often makes the most impact. Avoid form letters or preprinted cards.

For maximum impact, include these components:

- A brief statement (10 words or less) on the subject and bill number (if it applies).
- An introduction of yourself.
- A personal anecdote about how the bill will affect you, your family, and your community.
- Facts and data to support your position.
- An invitation to contact you to discuss the bill.
- A request for a reply, if you need one.
- A statement of appreciation for consideration of your position.

Advocacy can be seen as a process of amplifying the voice of the voiceless or the marginalized.

Meeting with Legislators

Think about employing the following tips when you meet with legislators:

- Work with legislators on a one-to-one basis. Target those legislators who make policy or work on the issues you plan to address.
- Be concise and clear about your interests.
- Be a good listener. Hear what the legislator has to say about the issue. Respect the right of the legislator to disagree with you and vote against your issue.
- Offer to serve as a source of information to the legislator on your issue.
- Be polite and keep your appointment to the time you agreed on unless the legislator initiates spending more time.
- Provide written materials and follow up immediately on any commitment made during the visit.
- Don't visit the same legislator more than once for the same issue unless you have something different to say.
- Don't be sarcastic, critical, or threatening, or embarrass the legislator in any way.
- Don't tell legislators how to vote. Instead, tell them how a given vote will affect their constituency.
- Don't show anger or resentment toward a legislator who votes against your cause. Look for ways you can work together next time and make it happen.
- Thank the legislator for time and interest in your issue.

Adapted from Making Your Case written by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, Department of Administration.

Identify Decision Makers

Once your group has developed its recommendations, you will need to determine what person, agency, or group can make the changes you need. First ask yourself if you need legislative change or administrative change. In most cases, the answer is administrative change. If you need administrative change, find out who actually makes the decisions that affect your problem. If you are advocating for a change across a school district, for example, you may need to work with the superintendent in some districts and the school board in others. In other cases, the decision may be left to individual schools, so your target would be the principal.

If you seek to improve access to mental health services, you may need legislative change or administrative change at the county, state, or provincial level.

It is important to understand how the system works in your area. In the U.S., some states have county-administered systems so the critical decisions are made by the head of the country agency or by the board of commissioners. In other states, decisions come from the state agency in charge of child welfare. Before you begin your advocacy effort, be sure you have done your research to identify the right decision makers for your particular problem.

Once you have determined which agency or organization makes the decision you need made, it may help to have an organizational chart showing which staff members have what responsibility. In state agencies, you may want to work directly with the commissioner, who typically has the ultimate authority. It will also help to build relationships with other staff members who understand the issue you are addressing and are involved in rule writing. These staff are key players and may well be supportive of your position. Child advocates typically have the most contact with staff members who are several levels down in the hierarchy. You should ask these people how best to bring about change. They are often your best allies.

Don't forget that, as advocates, you are very important players in this process. Personal experience gives you

credibility and knowledge. Experienced advocates emphasize their expertise and first-hand knowledge.

Gather Support

It is important to identify your supporters. Make a list of people you believe can give you additional information, help you with your cause, or join your efforts. Although you may not always need them to be involved in your efforts, it is useful to know who supports your work so you can solicit help when you need it. There are three categories of potential supporters:

- Groups that have similar interests (other parent groups, nonprofits, or associations of disabled people)
- Groups that have power in the community and may also have a soft spot for kids (labor unions, retired people, or business groups)
- Groups that have a skill you need (lawyers, educators, or accountants)

Sometimes to bring about change, you need a united voice from many groups. Building a coalition can demonstrate a strong case to decision makers because your cause is supported by numerous qualified people who are united in their goal. The talent behind the plan and the number of people who can help carry out the plan increases your potential power when you build a coalition.

Plan to develop media contacts and be ready to provide them with background information on the problems you want to solve. These contacts should be nurtured in case it is necessary to go public with your information.

Finally, you may want to identify a lawyer. In a number of cases, advocates are monitoring problems that are caused by potentially illegal actions, in which case a lawyer will be helpful.

Develop Recommendations

Once you have gathered the information and support you need, arrange for another group meeting where you can review the information and develop recommendations to solve your problem. Sometimes the process of making recommendations involves further conversations

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Advocacy Strategies You Can Try

Below are advocacy strategies that parent groups have tried. Some may seem too big to be taken on if your group is just getting started. Begin at the level your group can handle and move on from there to more complex strategies when your group is ready.

Raising Public Awareness

Make a Shopping Mall Display

Many shopping malls allow community members to set up a public display. You can display cardboard cut outs or foster dolls (both described below), while volunteers distribute materials and talk to shoppers about foster care and adoption.

Use the Media

Tap into local television, radio, or print media for special events and especially take advantage of Foster Care Month in May and Adoption Month in November. If you are coordinating an event with children or families who would photograph well or be a good human interest segment, contact your local television station or newspaper to see if they will cover your event. Try to find out if local news anchors or reporters have a connection to foster care or adoption. Think about scheduling a radio interview with a spokesperson from your group. When you consider print media, think beyond traditional newspapers. Many community newspapers will give you space for articles you have written. Search for those serving communities of color, the elderly, or disabled.

Raising Awareness with Legislators

Set up Legislative Open Houses

Think about hosting an open house when your elected officials are not in session and have more time to meet and talk with constituents. Invite six to twelve parents from your voting district to your home to share their family stories with legislators. This setting offers more time to talk about issues, and allows policy makers to see constituents in their home district. It gives you an opportunity to get to know your officials, and when a bill comes up in the next legislative session, you will have already established a personal relationship. Your state or provincial foster and

adoptive parent association may be able to coordinate these open houses statewide.

Organize Parent Day at the Legislature

Ask your group members if they are interested in organizing a day at the capitol for foster and adoptive parents. You can coordinate a rally at the capitol and have parents and youth tell their stories. Have parents schedule a meeting with their legislators in advance of the event.

Create a Visual Display

Parent groups have tried many ways to get the attention of legislators. Some have collected shoes and teddy bears to represent the number of children in foster care in their state or province. Parents attending a conference luncheon were once asked to write the name of each child who had lived in their homes on separate paper dolls. Different paper colors represented foster, adoptive, kinship, and biological children. The dolls were hung hand-to-hand throughout a ballroom at an evening political event. This same idea could be used at the capitol during the legislative session or at a conference for social workers. One parent suggested placing larger cardboard cut outs attached to painting stir sticks in the grass at the capitol or department of social services—one for each child in care.

Plan a Foster Doll Project

A number of advocacy groups have collected used dolls and have given one to each legislator. Legislators become the doll's de facto foster parent for a specified period of time. The dolls are given a name, life story, and placement folder and brought to the capitol in strollers and wagons. During the campaign, volunteers make regular visits to legislators, spending time educating legislators about foster care and adoption. Legislators can receive mail from foster and adopted children, data on foster care and adoption statistics, the number of children in the counties represented by the legislators, and more. Some of the states who have been successful with this project are Nevada, Alabama, Kansas, and Minnesota. ✧

Adapted from a fact sheet by Jeanette Wiedemeier Bower, NACAC.

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with people from the state or province, county, or other organizations. These conversations are important to help you determine what goals and objectives are realistic to pursue given the players involved, turf issues that arise, and the likelihood of drawing in others to cooperate with your efforts. When you are dealing with complex issues, it is important to think ahead about what your bottom line is, so that you don't lose sight of your needs when you negotiate with others.

Develop a Strategy

Now you are ready to organize another group meeting to plan your strategy. Make sure your strategies are:

- targeted to the right decision makers
- appropriate for solving your problem
- adequate to sufficiently address the problem
- effective in helping you achieve your objectives in a reasonable time
- a wise use of time, money and energy
- sensitive to side effects that could generate resistance by special interest groups or cause negative responses or consequences

Once you decide what you want to do, how you want to do it, and who will be involved, your group will need to plan how to build from there. Maybe you want to start by meeting with a key administrator, writing a letter to the editor, or initiating a public awareness or a legislative campaign. See page 6 for some examples of larger strategies that groups can take on.

The complexity of your problem will dictate the complexity of your strategy. If you are trying to solve a local problem in your school, your efforts may be confined to dealing with school district administrators and won't require using all the strategies mentioned. If your group is involved in trying to secure funding for mental health services, you may need to use all the strategies.

Identify a deadline by which you want the problem solved. The timeline should be realistic, allowing for a reasonable response time by decision makers. The length of time it will take to solve the problem depends on its severity and the influence of those advocating for change.

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Meeting with Administrators

When you start to develop your group's strategy, you will soon identify decision makers with whom you will want to meet, share your information and goals, and solicit help to achieve your goals. Your first step will be to set up a meeting. Once an administrator agrees to meet with you, confirm the appointment in writing, state the purpose of the meeting, and include a list of individuals from your group who will attend.

Prior to the appointment, develop an agenda to guide you through the meeting and help you stay focused. Include a clear statement of the problem, and your proposed solution. Also identify the role each person from your group will assume at the meeting, such as one person acting as the primary spokesperson and managing the agenda, another person acting as a data person (providing either personnel, statistical, or professional background information), and a third member taking notes during the discussion.

Share your agenda with the officials when you arrive at the meeting. They may also come with their own agenda. When possible, try to keep your discussion on topic, but listen carefully to what others say to learn their perspective and how you might influence them. Advise the officials from the beginning that the results of this meeting will be shared with others. In fact, put everything you do in writing.

Before ending the meeting, ask when you will hear a formal response. Remind administrators that you want to work with them on your issue, but make it clear that you are determined to move forward on your issue and you will pursue other options (such as going to your legislator or the press) if you can't find a way to work together.

Be aware of tactics to avoid action, such as inviting advocates to sit on a committee (commission, task force, blue ribbon panel, etc.). Unless you are trying to build relationships or gather background information, do not accept an appointment to a committee that will not deal with your problem in a short time (less than three months) and that the results of the committee will be seriously considered. You cannot afford to have your energy drained by unnecessary or additional meetings.

Advocacy and Lobbying

Many nonprofit parent groups in the U.S. shy away from advocacy efforts because they believe that the IRS prevents organizations with 501(c)(3) status from lobbying. While the IRS does limit the amount of money a nonprofit can spend on lobbying, nonprofits are certainly allowed to lobby. The IRS simply states that an organization with 501(c)(3) status “may not attempt to influence legislation as a *substantial part* of its activities and it may not participate at all in campaign activity for or against political candidates.” [emphasis added] There are no limits on volunteer efforts and other cost-free activities.

Of course, not all advocacy is lobbying. In general, at the federal level, lobbying is defined as communication intended to influence specific legislation. It does not include activities to raise policy makers’ awareness about adoption or children’s special needs, efforts to influence administrative rules, examinations of broad social problems, responses to written requests for assistance from committees or other legislative bodies, or actions to improve school practices, for example. Nonprofits should not be afraid of advo-

cating or lobbying, but should track expenditures related to lobbying. If a group is concerned about the vagueness of the “substantial part” limitation, it can choose to come under the provisions of the 1976 lobby law and file IRS form 5768 to apply for 501(h) status. This status provides specific dollar limits, based on the organization’s expenditures, for lobbying. Groups who choose the 501(h) election remain 501(c)(3) organizations with tax-deductibility of contributions, and simply have to complete an additional financial report on their lobbying activity with their annual IRS 990.

For more information about applying for 501(h) status and how it will affect your organization, contact the Alliance for Justice in Washington, D.C. for a copy of *Worry-Free Lobbying for Nonprofits—How To Use The 501(h) Election to Maximize Effectiveness*, 202-822-6070, www.afj.org.

For more information on lobbying guidelines in Canada, contact the Adoption Council of Canada at 888-54ADOPT or NACAC at info@nacac.org

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The next step is to plot out a strategy timeline. Sometimes working backward from your deadline can help you think through the steps you will need to map out your strategy.

For example, a parent group that wants to initiate training in its local school may find out in October that the training schedule is determined each spring before school lets out. In this case, they will not get to implement training this year but will want to take time now to identify the decision-making body for next year’s training, prepare quality materials, and present their training ideas to the decision makers in the winter. They could also use this year to work with individual teachers to try out some of their materials and determine which ones are most helpful.

A parent group that seeks mental health services for children may hear in April that legislators are considering cutting mental health services in next year’s budget. This group will want to act fast. If the vote takes place in June, parents will have a short time to compose a clear, concise message and get it to foster and adoptive

parents statewide. Next, they might organize a phone tree or listserv and recruit constituents to call, write letters, e-mail, or visit their legislators to express their position, giving clear details of exactly how the budget cuts will affect families.

Evaluate Your Plan and Efforts

You will need to keep track of the results of your efforts. Advocacy efforts often take numerous attempts. You may have to try a number of strategies before you reach an acceptable resolution of the problem you set out to solve. Sometimes you have to rethink what you did and change a tactic or the overall game plan.

Once you have achieved your objective, celebrate your success. Make sure, however, you continue to monitor the implementation of your recommendations to ensure that there is follow through and the problem you set out to address is actually solved. ♦