



# Building a Successful Local Advocacy Program

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# Chapter 1: Government Affairs 101

Advocacy is a broad programmatic “tool” used by citizens to influence public policy at all levels of government. One of the largest components, and arguably the most important aspect, of an advocacy program is government affairs, the act of being engaged in both legislative and regulatory governmental action.

- **Legislative affairs** refers to matters that come before legislative bodies such as a city council, state legislature or the U.S. Congress.
- **Regulatory affairs** refers to issues that go before rulemaking bodies, such as the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a city building department or a state environmental agency.

## How is Public Policy Formulated?

The early stages of idea generation and potential legislation are often masked by seemingly harmless governmental action. For example, a mayor may appoint a task force to resolve a local issue like water quality or smart growth. A governor may appoint individuals to a working group to tackle an issue like traffic or transportation. A state legislature may call for testimony on an issue during an interim legislative period, or a city council person may mobilize a group of citizens to vocalize and act on a particular initiative.

Typically, these task forces or working groups are populated by individuals or organizations known as stakeholders: lobbyists or special interest groups. Everyone with a special interest has the right to petition or lobby as established in the First Amendment of the Constitution.

It is our job as effective advocates to make the home building industry a recognized stakeholder on important state and local issues – no matter the level of relevance to home building. As often happens, an issue may begin concentrating on something like “homelessness,” only to turn into something like “affordable housing.” While homelessness may not seem to be at the forefront of issues for HBA members, an issue like affordable housing is indeed.

Upon completion of their assigned task or mission, task forces and working groups often produce final reports or work products.

## Advocacy Basics for All Scenarios

**Learn the System First.** Too many advocates don't take the time to learn the history and culture of the system they want to influence. All too often, a group of advocates works for a couple of years to get a bill passed, only to find that it doesn't get implemented because there was no money for it in the budget. So they work for another few years to get it funded, but it still isn't implemented because no one talked to the agency that was supposed to do it.

**They Don't Have to 'Get Religion,' They Just Have to Vote Yes.** We all care deeply about our causes, but that doesn't mean that everyone else will. Just let it be - they don't have to become a "convert," they just have to vote yes.

**Don't Leave Without Closing the Deal.** Often times, an advocate makes a case with a policymaker who says he/she agrees completely, but in the end, this can turn out to be a serious problem. Having made her point, the advocate leaves feeling great, only to later learn that even though the policymaker "agrees," he did not *support* the proposal. It's human nature to hear what you want to hear, but advocates need to listen carefully. If you want them to vote yes, ask for their vote specifically. If you want them to fund a program, ask for it specifically. Be polite, but endure the silence as you wait for their answer. Make no assumptions.

**Follow Through.** Programs are not done even when they are implemented. They have to be evaluated and adjusted accordingly to be sure they are solving the original problem. It is critical to keep up the pressure through the entire process. This is especially true if you fear a "slippery slope" of legislation; don't let up because your opposition is still lurking.

**Don't Take it Personally.** Policymakers have to balance a lot of very worthy and competing interests. You won't win every time. Be gracious and don't burn bridges. Wait for the next opportunity. Also note that a great deal of pressure builds at the end of legislative sessions and near committee deadlines, so tempers run high. Things are said and feelings can get hurt: Don't take it personally.

**Be Patient.** Nothing happens overnight. Put your idea out there and tend to it. Monitor and wait for opportunities.

**Advocates Must be Flexible.** If, for whatever reason, your proposal won't work, find another one that does the same thing. Reasons can be political, financial or just personal. Find a way around it. Get creative: Repackage it, route it through a different agency, whatever will work.

## Effective Means of Communication

- **Email:** Excellent at any time and very convenient. Make sure to include your home address for constituent verification.
- **Letter writing:** Very effective, as it shows that time was spent by the advocate. You can include background materials in a package or send bundles of 'postcards' from voters showing wide support for an issue. Timing is crucial, as letters can take up to a week to arrive.
- **Phone calls:** Good when time is short. They allow for all concerned citizens to participate at a low cost. Be sure to keep your script simple.
- **Meetings:** Most effective and most resource intense. Advocates must spend time setting up the meeting, preparing and following up. This is the best way to establish and maintain a true relationship.

# Chapter 2: Legislative Affairs vs. Politics – What’s the Difference?

Think of advocacy as a process. Step one is to elect the right people and step two is to educate or lobby them. Politics is a part of advocacy and should not be avoided; it is much easier to lobby an official you helped elect than to deal with the ones that others elect. However, it is important to remember that you can’t discuss politics when you are discussing legislative issues. Keep the two separate to maintain a professional reputation.

## **Step One: Finding and Electing Candidates**

Keep one thing in mind when choosing and electing candidates: They won’t vote with you all the time, but if you are a major influence in electing them, they will listen to you all the time.

An elected official has one main goal: to remain an elected official. Any actions you take to help or hurt that cause will be useful in furthering your cause or legislation.

## **Create an Opinion Leader and Candidate Recruitment File**

An opinion leader file is simply a list of individuals who are involved in local activities or organizations that could potentially embrace your message(s). Building the file is an exercise in gathering lists of standard participants, such as chamber members, business leaders, farmers, political and charitable contributors, etc., along with the people and organizations that will aid in the influencing of legislation and elections.

It is important to note that the leader file is a valuable asset and can be reused by the HBA in future endeavors.

Aside from HBA members and the employees of members, there are several other sources one can reach out to build an opinion leader file. Some ideas include:

- General business and labor groups
- Community service organizations
- Educational institutions
- Government bodies
- Media groups
- Political/activist groups

## **Conduct a Public Opinion Survey**

It is important to acquire a baseline understanding of the attitudes and awareness of the general public and your opinion leader file on growth issues. Conducting a survey of the general public using the voter file, as well as a survey of your opinion leaders, will show what arguments work with which segment and where work needs to be done.

- Where do voters live and where do they work?
- Are they pro-growth or anti-growth?
- Are they aware of the positive economic impact of the housing industry?
- What are the specific problems associated with growth that they are most concerned with?
- What solutions will they support?
- Whose job is it to fix growth-related problems?

The survey should enable you to understand how voters feel about the city, current elected officials, current hot topics and projects. It will also describe potential candidates to see if solutions that the HBA favors are supported by the voting public.

Additionally, testing the vulnerability of both the current elected officials and candidates could be added to the survey. This will give the HBA knowledge of how the public feels about these leaders' records on a number of issues and can later be used when the HBA works to get certain candidates elected or voted out of office.

## **Step Two: Educating Candidates and Elected Officials**

Education and outreach are keys to keeping your HBA brand strong and positive. If your HBA already does a good job of this, the actions and ideas below can serve to boost efforts and success:

- Giving speeches to community service groups about the positive impact of industry and charitable activities;
- Sponsoring a candidate or issue forum before an election;
- Presenting awards to elected officials and local government staff members;
- Reaching out to local media outlets on a regular basis; and
- Consistently communicating with members and the public through mailings or newspaper ads about positive local legislative activities.

## **Media Outreach**

Keeping in touch with reporters and leaders from print, radio and TV news will make it easier to get all

sides of a story told. Treat reporters like elected officials; it is important to be in touch even when you have no issues. Reporters are more likely to see your side of a story or seek your opinion if they know you and you provide them with honest facts (with sources) and story ideas. Use your list of contacts to see if a community leader is a friend and can go to the media with you.

For example, if you have a group of members who have done a charitable act or are working on a unique project, notify a reporter and ask them to do a short “feel-good” piece.

To increase a reporter’s knowledge of the industry, have them do a “day in the life” story and follow a builder, planner, developer, remodeler, etc., for a day.

### **Embrace New Tactics**

One of the arguments used to discourage industry involvement in local elections has always been that direct industry support for candidates tends to hurt instead of help. This does not have to be the case. New political tactics allow groups to have significant impact on electoral outcomes without having their support become an issue in the campaign. In-kind contributions like polling, candidate education, list building, turnout modeling and basic political consulting can have a tremendous impact on electoral outcomes without drawing the kind of public scrutiny that you and the candidates you support are seeking to avoid.

# Chapter 3: Government Affairs and Your HBA – The Must-Haves

## **Government Affairs Committee**

The basic mission of any government affairs committee (GAC) is to recommend policy to the association on legislative, regulatory and legal issues. Here is a brief overview of the structure of the committee.

### **Committee Chair**

A strong, disciplined chair is essential for an effective GAC. The chair is responsible for planning, conducting meetings, maintaining records and information, getting action and evaluating results.

### **Committee Members**

As with a committee chair, there are also a number of desirable qualities you'll want to seek in committee members. According the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), committee members should:

- Be knowledgeable about or interested in the committee's area of activity;
- Know the committee chairman;
- Be familiar with the specific responsibilities of the committee;
- Know the association's practices, policies, and procedures;
- Be aware of the responsibilities of the association staff to the committee;
- Know the past performance of the committee;
- Be knowledgeable about the reporting procedure to the board of directors;
- Establish only realistic, attainable goals;
- Give recognition to the chairman and other members of the committee; and
- Get involved and participate.

### **Government Affairs Staff Director**

ASAE and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce use the same description for the role of staff:

Staff should render all possible assistance, but should not assume the committee's prerogative. During a committee meeting, the staff representative should be available to answer questions, offer suggestions, or raise questions when appropriate. To this end, staff must be thoroughly familiar with association policy, the committee's scope, and the subject under discussion.

# Chapter 4: Defining Your HBA

One of the most important components of any HBA is branding. As a state or local HBA, you are a force within your community. If you are not already, you should be considered the foremost expert in the field of home building. The community, as well as the local government, should be looking to you for facts and figures on home building, land use and infrastructure issues. This chapter is dedicated to building and maintaining a brand for your HBA, as well as establishing yourself as spokesperson for the industry.

## **Building a Brand and Becoming a Spokesperson**

To build your brand, you and your HBA need to become very visible within your community. The HBA needs to establish a reputation of community activism, as well as being a clearinghouse for information on all aspects of the home building industry.

To maintain this brand and be recognized as a spokesperson for your industry, you need to remain accessible and have your views constantly known by the media, local and state officials and other organizations within your sphere of influence. The one pitfall to avoid when trying to build your brand and become a spokesperson is having multiple voices speaking for your organization. There needs to be one constant person available, whether that be the executive officer or government affairs director, who consistently provides legislators and the media with the information, opinions and answers they need.

If an EO is overwhelmed with membership, a parade of homes and other HBA tasks, he or she might want to consider hiring a government affairs director or manager. This person monitors legislation going through local municipalities, state houses and other governmental mechanisms. There is nothing more hurtful to an HBA than laws and regulations getting passed that the HBA didn't know about and wasn't at the table to help craft. A government relations staff person will help to make sure nothing slips by.

# Chapter 5: Tracking Legislation and Regulatory Rulemakings

## **Know the Timelines, Obtain Agendas**

The most important piece of information to determine is when your targeted decision-making bodies meet. You also need to know deadlines. Many state legislatures set deadlines for bills to keep the process moving. Take note of this information (which can be obtained directly from your state legislature) when tracking.

The next thing to do is keep an eye on the agenda of your targeted legislative or regulatory entity so you know when items relevant to your business will be discussed. Most committees and agencies post agendas on their websites or you can call the office.

## **Identify and Budget For Tracking Services**

Staying on top of all relevant legislation can be tricky and time-consuming, so if you have the resources, a tracking service is a nice option. Vendors include options that provide basic legal research and simply track (Lexis-Nexis or Westlaw). If you have the funds, there are also full service options (CapWiz, DDC) which track and allow you to publish on your own website so your members can take action. Make your decision based on your budget, your association's needs and ease of use.

## **Use ‘Troops on the Ground’**

As previously noted, it is also important to establish connections with legislators and staff. If you are known among your elected officials, they may contact you when legislation related to housing comes up.

## **Above All, Stay Involved**

Establishing yourself as an expert on the building industry is one of the most proactive steps you can take to beat burdensome laws and regulations. Even if you are not currently facing a legislative challenge, it is wise to set up an appointment to discuss the general “state of the industry” or your legislative “wish list.” Make sure you always bring facts and resources to the table. If asked a question, follow up promptly. If legislators and staff know you, they will be more likely to contact you about legislation before it becomes a problem.

# Chapter 6: How to Testify Before Decision Makers

## Before the Hearing

- **Hold Preparation Meetings:** When appropriate, hold meetings with key staff and elected officials who support and oppose your position before the hearing. This will allow you the opportunity to fine-tune your message and solidify relationships. Be aware and informed of procedural rules regarding elected officials' meetings outside of the regularly scheduled meetings (i.e. Brown Act violations) that could negatively impact the outcome of the issues.
- **Prepare Your Remarks:** Time is usually limited, so be brief and direct. Written testimony should not be read at committee hearings. Organize your comments in outline form to provide a summary when called upon to speak. Committee staff will distribute copies of written testimony to members of the committee if you bring a copy for each member.
- **Avoid Duplication:** If other people will be offering similar testimony, try to coordinate your testimony and avoid duplication. Well-organized testimony is the most effective.

## At the Hearing

- Be punctual: Locate the sign-up sheet near the entrance of the hearing room and write your name, address and whether you favor or oppose the bill.
- Check to see if copies of proposed amendments or substitute bills are available.
- Take your written materials to the committee staff for distribution.
- If you are going to be using the presentation equipment, talk to the committee staff to coordinate.

## How the Meeting Is Conducted

Be present at the beginning of the hearing. The committee chair will open the hearing on a particular bill. Frequently, opening comments will be made by the bill's sponsor or by committee staff. Sometimes, however, the chair will ask for testimony from proponents and opponents immediately. Note that it may be necessary to restrict testimony so that everyone is given an opportunity to express his or her opinions. You may be called to testify with others in order to save time.

## **Making Your Remarks**

Begin by introducing yourself to the chair and committee members, and by stating your purpose. For example, "Mr. or Madam Chair and members of the committee, I am John Doe from Spokane. I am here representing ... I support this bill because ..."

In your opening remarks, make it clear whether you are representing other citizens or just the HBA.

Be brief and make sure your remarks are clear. Avoid being too technical and do not repeat previously made remarks.

Be prepared for questions and comments from committee members, as these are designed to gain additional information. Do not respond if you are not sure of an answer. Tell the members you will send a written answer to the committee and then follow through.

Restrict yourself to your testimony. Abstain from other overt demonstrations such as clapping, cheering, booing, etc.

## **Follow Up**

Mail a hand-written thank you note to each member of the committee and any key staff members. Send any written responses to questions you did not have an immediate answer to within three days.

# Chapter 7: Know Your Opposition and Stay Close to Your Friends

## **Research Your Opponents**

The role of media in promoting an agenda has been widely documented. In addition to crafting your own message for public consumption, it is essential to keep abreast of the news about your organization, your competition and the industry as a whole in order to understand the impact of evolving legislation on your community.

## **Maintain an Open Dialogue**

Be willing to coalition build and pair up with non-traditional partners (environmental groups, labor unions, activists, agricultural interests, etc.). Remember: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Recognizing your opposition means not only knowing how to best defeat them on certain issues, it also means not accusing them of things that they don't believe in. Such a statement of respect prevents dialogue from being shut down because it shows that you understand a particular group to be who they are, even though you disagree.

A coalition is a temporary alliance or partnering of groups to achieve a common purpose or to engage in joint activity. Coalition building is the process by which parties (individuals or organizations) come together with other groups of similar values, interests and goals so members can combine their resources and become more powerful than when they each acted alone.

## **Coalitions and Advocacy**

Coalitions may be built around any issue and at any scale, from neighborhood issues to national conflicts. However, coalitions can be especially beneficial in an advocacy role. Through combining common organizational interests, a coalition can bring greater power and strength to an issue. Generally, low-power groups are much more successful in defending their interests against the dominant group if they work together as a coalition. However, there are many benefits to having a dominant group in a coalition as well.

# Chapter 8: Political Leverage

If a candidate is worthy enough of the HBA's support, help out by making a contribution to his or her campaign and solicit the membership for personal contributions. This is a great way to show a candidate you have political clout and are not afraid to use it.

## Contributions

Political contributions are the most direct way to get your voice heard in the political arena. Creating a political action committee (PAC) to raise money to support candidates is discussed in Chapter 9: Political Giving. However, there are other ways to demonstrate your support for a candidate and gain leverage.

## Volunteering

The most personal way to help a candidate is through political volunteering. Whether it is holding a gathering at a member's house or walking door-to-door with a candidate distributing campaign literature, this is the most visible support you can give to a candidate. Mobilize the HBA membership for a candidate that really speaks to the issues of the industry. A gesture like that will never be forgotten by the candidate and will be repaid through an open door policy.

## Communications

Political communication allows an HBA to get information out to its membership regarding which candidates speak to the industry's needs. It is as easy as an announcement at a board meeting or as intricate as hosting a local slate of candidates. Other methods to consider:

- Political endorsements can help members decide which candidate to support.
- Opinion articles about candidates, written by HBA staff and or a member, appearing in local papers can also help spread the word.

Word of mouth is what wins elections, and communication within an HBA goes a long way to electing the right candidate.

## Call On One of Your Own

If many of your members are already politically active, try to get them to take it a step further by getting them to run for state or local government. There is nothing better than to have state and local officials that understand your issues and can sympathize with them.

# Chapter 9: Political Giving

## **Political Action Committees**

A political action committee (PAC) raises money from individuals with a common interest or who belong to a specific organization such as an HBA. The purpose of a PAC is to give organizations, companies and other groups the ability to financially support political candidates when they are otherwise prohibited by law from doing so. There are very specific rules and laws that a PAC must follow regarding contributions and expenses. These rules vary among jurisdictions, but most adhere to a common set of operational principles.

## **Local Political Action Committees**

All PACs must be registered with the appropriate governmental office and they must also report both funds raised and contributions to candidates or initiatives. If your PAC intends on contributing to candidates running for local elected office (town, city council, mayor, school board, county commissioner, etc.) then your fund must typically be registered with the local board of elections.

By registering, you will be bound by the requirements and restrictions as established by the local board of elections for the local political subdivision in which you reside. Some local governments may by default refer to the state requirements for registering and reporting, but the first step in establishing a local PAC is to contact your local board of elections office.

## **State Political Action Committees**

State PACs, on the other hand, contribute to state level political candidates and causes. It is vitally important to know and understand the state laws regarding the establishment and reporting requirements for state political action committees. Each state has different laws. Contact your state's campaign finance office to get started.

## **PAC Governance**

PACs are traditionally separate entities from your HBA. They have their own governance, their own checking account and often their own staff. Upon registering your PAC, you and your members (with the guidance/assistance of a lawyer) must craft bylaws to set the general framework for the activities of the PAC, and designate a board of directors/trustees to oversee operations.

The PAC is required by law to have a chairman and treasurer upon registering and soliciting funds. Bylaws help to outline the role of all of the parties involved within the PAC and should clearly explain the process for determining a PAC contribution. PAC bylaws allow HBA members to see exactly how the PAC will function, which should make them more willing to contribute.

## **Raising Funds**

There are several approaches to raising funds. Your HBA can use enrollment cards or dues, develop online and email options, plan and coordinate fundraising events, create incentive clubs with suggested levels of giving, create a reward system for contributors, or establish a training curriculum for peer-to-peer solicitation.

## **Hard Money**

Hard money can be defined as voluntary, personal contributions. Your PAC fund is usually restricted to soliciting those people who have the common interest, such as members of your local HBA. The contributions can be from the member and the members' family and it is the responsibility of the PAC to determine the appropriateness of the contribution.

## **Soft Money**

For our purposes, soft money can be defined as membership dues or corporate donations. Soft money **can** be used for direct communications to HBA members by way of mailings, phone calls, etc. and can also be used to provide the gifts that are sometimes provided for a contribution to the PAC fund. However, soft money may **never** be used for direct contributions to a candidate.

## **Surveys**

Part of the process of choosing the right candidate to support is having multiple candidates fill out surveys. These surveys should be sent to all candidates who have filed for office, and those that choose to return the surveys should be granted an interview with the PAC or endorsement board. Don't turn away a candidate without hearing them out. A person who on the surface appears to be an enemy could very well become a proponent with some simple education.

## **Scorecards**

Upon election, it is equally important to make sure that officials keep their promises and work toward your goals. Voting records are a public and accurate measure of how a politician is stacking up to your needs. What a politician says may be favorable, but if they don't cast votes supporting that position, it

has no power. Working behind the scenes is important and you should work on a means to track what key local legislators do for you when not casting ballots. For example, do they meet with you regularly, promote your efforts in public, attend meetings, work to lobby their peers on your behalf, etc.?

### **Independent Expenditures**

We recommend setting aside money to provide you with the option of doing independent expenditures, which expressly advocate the election or defeat of a particular candidate and are done without any consultation or coordination with the political campaign that is the focus of the expenditure. In a close election, targeted independent expenditures can make the difference between winning and losing.

Independent expenditures are a very useful political tool in elections where only small amounts of money can be given to candidates. By deciding not to contribute to or communicate directly with a candidate and instead spend money to influence voters on their behalf, you can have a larger impact. The HBA PAC will benefit by having influence on the election and building a reputation as a serious organization, which will help you deal with election winners and recruit candidates.

### **Non-Monetary Ways to Show Your Influence**

#### **Legislative Awards**

A very simple and meaningful way to keep in contact with and provide a political boost to an elected official is to name him/her legislator of the year. Presenting the award provides opportunities for you to interact with and lobby the legislator, allow your members to meet the legislator, receive positive media coverage and use the accolade in future voter contact.

#### **Get Out the Vote**

Cities and towns hold elections to decide if incumbent mayors and council members should remain in office or be replaced by new representatives. Local elected officials have a great impact on home builders, suppliers and employees. Impact fees, zoning decisions, millage rates, and other regulations are decided by local elected officials, and the home builder network can affect these elections.

For example, in a city of 50,000 residents, there will be approximately 22,000 registered voters and about 6,000 of them will vote in a non-presidential election. Most local races have a winning margin of 5% to 10%, or 300 to 600 votes.

An HBA with 200 members that makes a real effort to increase voter turnout can account for those 300

or so votes needed to win. Here's how:

- 200 members
- 150 spouses of those members
- 300 employees of those members
- 300 employees of sub-contractors and supplier companies
- 50 lawyers, accountants, bankers, etc.

This list adds up to 1,000 possible voters that your HBA can reach. If 30% of them vote for the same candidate because of his or her stance on issues important to the building industry, there is a strong chance that the candidate will win. Here are a few actions that can be taken to help increase voter turnout among members and their contacts:

- The first week of October (or 4 to 6 weeks before an election), send an email or letter from the HBA president to each member and associate member reminding them of the upcoming election. Include an absentee ballot request form, found online at the Secretary of State's website.
- Make sure the candidates that the HBA (and/or HBA PAC) supports have a chance to speak to the membership.
- In the third week of October, send an email or letter from the HBA president to each member and associate member reminding them to send in their absentee ballot or to go to an early voting booth before the deadline (varies by state). Also encourage employers to allow employees to fill out ballots or to go to an early voting booth during an extended lunch break.
- The Sunday and Monday prior to Election Tuesday, HBA leadership and sponsorship companies should make phone calls and send personal emails to members and sub-contractors to make sure they have voted early or will vote on Election Tuesday.
- A similar timeline of advance emails, letters, contact calls should be scheduled for spring or summer election cycles.

Increased voter turnout increases the chance of your candidate winning.

### **Members Equal Voters and Voters Equal Power**

You can register members to vote by including a voter registration form in your monthly newsletter,

providing an internet link to the secretary of state website in a membership email, passing out forms at general membership and committee meetings, or having your board members take forms to job sites and associates stores to ensure registration. Already have your members registered? Have members and their employees or sub-contractors registered and voting by absentee, and then you are talking real voting power!

Make sure your members and their contacts know who to vote for in each particular election cycle. Take time to create a candidate survey and meet with the candidates. Ask them what they know about issues important to your association; if they are not familiar with impact fees, zoning, or septic system requirements, then take time to educate them. You have a good chance of winning the confidence and trust of a person you teach. Once the HBA has decided on a slate of candidates to endorse, use every means available to disseminate that information. Members must know who to tell friends, employees, co-workers, bankers, lawyers, etc. who to vote for and why.

# Chapter 10: Hosting a Legislative Event

Inviting legislators to meet in a less formal setting is an excellent way to build and grow a relationship, impress upon them the fine work you are doing on behalf of their constituents, and become a trusted resource they and their staff turn to when they need information.

## **Breakfast Meetings Are a Good Place to Start**

Breakfasts are a common way to host legislators: busy people tend to have early mornings free, breakfast is usually less expensive than other meals, the function may be easier to offer at your building, and the timing allows legislators to come in and leave as it is convenient for them. They should leave with just enough written information to be useful, and your contact information is the most important part of that written information.

You can also consider hosting the event at a jobsite. This allows you to take the legislators on a brief tour of a project under construction, pointing out the green features, new technology, affordability or any other benefit you want to highlight.

Legislative breakfasts generally start at 7:30 a.m. and end by 9:00 a.m. Simply serving coffee and muffins or fruit is fine; getting too fancy can take away from your message.

## **Getting Started**

- Choose your site, reserve a few available dates a couple of weeks away and create a guest list (see Who to Invite below).
- Call the aides of the legislators you really want to be sure attend – put the event on their calendars, make it clear that you are scheduling the event around them and ask them about any competing events the legislators have been invited to.
- Pick a date.
- Print and mail invitations to both home and work addresses.
- Call invitees a week after the mailing goes out to be sure the invite was received. It's a good idea to call both home and work phone numbers.
- Be persistent – keep calling every few days until you get an answer one way or another; even an "I'll try to make it" is fine.
- If your organization is registered for lobbying, check about reporting limits, how much is spent on each attendee, and, if necessary, how to report the breakfast

## **Who to Invite**

Be expansive in your guest list. Invite your local legislators, members of committees that oversee your program area, leadership, anyone who has paid special attention to your program, and people who have personal relationships with individuals in your organization.

Some associations invite all local legislators to be on the safe side. Make it clear to their offices that it is acceptable to send an aide. Invite executive branch policymakers – those that oversee your contracts, regulate your organization, etc.

Invite your sponsors, community leaders and local municipal elected officials. Be sure to include your lobbyist if you have one. If you are part of a coalition, invite your partners. Also consider inviting clients, volunteers, your board of directors and staff from across program areas. Your goal is to have a lot of people in the room to greet the legislators.

## **Invitations**

Sending postcards is fine, as are letters on your letterhead. Make it simple:

*Join us for a legislative breakfast*

*Organization name*

*Date, time*

*Address*

*Phone number, email address for questions and RSVP*

Include directions and parking information with the invitation – don't direct people to a website. You can include an organizational brochure, but don't include any additional information about your HBA.

## **Day of the Event**

Be prepared to greet legislators at exactly the time the invitation says you are starting. Don't assume attendees will be late. On the other hand, allow for some individuals to come later or choose to stay longer. If a legislator wants to stay and talk, give him or her your time.

Set up the room to facilitate discussion, not lecture-style pointing at a podium. Have a few chairs in small groups or against the walls. Remove any big tables or push them to the wall. Put the coffee at the other end of the room from the entrance so people have to walk by several attendees to get their beverages.

Have nametags for every client and staff person. The nametags should be available for legislators at the front door, but don't insist they be worn.

Make sure that plenty of HBA information packets are available. The most important piece of the packet is your contact information; it should be in several places throughout the packet (e.g. include business cards and print addresses on each piece of paper, as the packet may not stay together once it gets to the office). Include every piece of information: name, title, organization, address, phone numbers, fax, email and website. Make sure that the numbers provided will get people a quick response.

Take pictures of legislators with your members and staff if you can. Try to include everyone. Take crowd shots to be sent along with thank-you notes and used in your newsletters and communications, or on your website.

Introduce yourself to each legislator. Don't assume they will remember you; they meet thousands of people. A nice way to start off is, "It's so good to see you again, Senator." If legislators start to huddle in a corner and talk shop, accept it for a while. If it goes on, gently join the group and interrupt. Be polite, but engage one or several individuals in a separate conversation that brings them back to your services. For example, walk up with a member and say, "Senator Jones, I want to make sure you meet Ms. Smith." Never argue with a legislator.

Legislators may send an aide in their place. This is not a bad thing; in fact, it can be an excellent opportunity. Treat an aide just as you would a legislator. Unlike legislators, aides are full time at the capitol and are often intimately involved in policy decisions. Get their names and send thank-you notes to both them and their legislator afterward.

## **The Agenda**

Again, this is mainly an informal gathering. Many legislators will not stay for the remarks, and they should come away with the intended messages without having to stay. Keep remarks brief – 15 minutes maximum. The executive officer or president can begin by thanking the legislators for coming, and then turn it over to a home builder to talk about how important home building is to the community or economy, and mention any legislation that is particularly important to your members.

Thank them again at the end, not only for coming, but also for their support. Emphasize that you want to create a relationship and that they should call you any time they need information. In describing relevant legislative issues, start positive and do not limit yourself to home building – talk about other topics of importance to your community. Remind everyone to get an information packet before leaving.

# Chapter 11: Building a Grassroots Network

Grassroots advocacy is an integral component of any well-rounded government affairs program and adds legitimacy and support to the professional lobbying efforts conducted by an association.

Grassroots as referred to in the political spectrum is a group of like-minded people coming together for a cause that they believe in.

In essence, NAHB is a grassroots organization comprised of more than 700 hundred state and local builder associations representing more than 140,000 members with the common agenda of protecting and promoting the interests of the home building industry.

While association members are a seemingly ready-made pool of potential grassroots advocates who are available to fight for industry-friendly policies, a successful grassroots program requires more than just available people. It requires the ability to motivate those people to take action at the same time and in the same way to make an impact that will resonate with elected officials.

The following 10 steps will help you build and implement a grassroots program that gets your organization noticed by your elected leaders.

## **Step One: Assess Your Grassroots Needs**

Whether you have an existing grassroots program that is in need of a revamp or you are building your program from scratch, the first step is to develop a clear understanding of where you are headed with your program and how you are going to get there.

By assessing your current state of affairs, you will have a clear understanding of your organization's political and organizational resources before you begin. Equally important, you must have the input and buy-in from your organization's key stakeholders before you move forward. Consider conducting one-on-one interviews, surveys and focus groups with your leadership to gather information. This exercise not only adds value and creates a sense of ownership amongst your stakeholders, but will greatly assist with the implementation of the program as you move forward.

## **Step Two: Develop a Framework**

Following your assessment, you should have gathered a lot of information to sift through. You will need to prioritize the recommendations, ideas, and concerns and begin to assemble a structure for your program. The first step is to decide how sophisticated you want your program to be.

Do you want a large pool of advocates who will send emails, make phone calls or write letters to their elected officials a few times a year? Or do you want something more complex that supports a smaller group of savvy advocates that will represent the industry in face-to-face meetings, conduct events with elected officials, write letters to the editor and speak at public hearings? Perhaps you want a combination of both.

Having a good sense of your association's needs and resources along with realistic expectations of your advocates and their capabilities will help you determine the framework for the program.

### **Step Three: Define Roles and Responsibilities**

Once you have established a framework for your program, you will need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities your advocates will be expected to take. This becomes invaluable during the recruitment process as you and your potential recruit try to identify the role that best suits their abilities and matches the level of commitment they are willing to make.

### **Step Four: Write a Strategic Plan**

Now that you have the structure of your program in place, it is time to decide what you want to do with it. Some of the many questions you will need to ask yourself include:

- How are you going to recruit and expand participation?
- How are you going to communicate with your advocates?
- How many times a year are you going to mobilize them into action?
- How are you going to decide what issues your grassroots program will support or oppose?

A strategic plan should reflect your goals for the program and operational methods that you are going to use to activate your grassroots. The strategic plan should be at least a three-year roadmap that helps keep your program on track.

### **Step Five: Marketing**

Consider giving your program a name and perhaps even a look that is reflective of the program you have designed and the organization you represent. HBA members are in no short supply of communications from their state and local chapters and the National office. When contacting your advocates, you will want your communication to come from an immediately recognizable source that triggers an

understanding of the type of information being received.

Response to a grassroots mobilization effort are frequently time sensitive. Properly marketing your program helps your advocates prioritize the many communications they receive and take action when legislative issues requiring their attention arise.

### **Step Six: Stakeholder Approval**

You have designed your program and written a strategy and now you are ready to implement what you have created. Before you move forward, you will want to revisit with your stakeholders for final approval of your plan. This step allows your stakeholders to give one last round of comments and allows you to make any adjustments before you unveil your program.

Your new program will run into roadblocks and tweaks will need to be made as you go along. It is worthwhile to assemble a group of stakeholders as permanent advisors to help tackle programmatic issues as they arise. A small group of staff and member advisors will help you maintain the integrity of your program and provide you with the cover you need to make tough decisions. As mentioned previously, this provides a sense of ownership in the program and also helps you hold those underperforming accountable.

### **Step Seven: Recruitment**

Recruitment is on-going process that will last the lifetime of your grassroots program. Your advocates will come and go as will the elected officials who are voted into and out of office. Below are some tips to get your recruitment program underway.

- **Target Elected Officials:** Whether working with legislative bodies at the local, state or national level, it is ideal to have advocates who can serve as grassroots contacts for each elected official. However, as a starting point, it is best to focus on the leadership and elected officials with decision-making authority over the priority issues that you care about.

You will want to identify individuals who either have an existing relationship with an elected official or are willing to develop one. Their job is to help keep the agenda of the housing industry at the forefront of the legislative agenda through contact at key times during a legislative session. While individuals with existing relationships with elected officials are oftentimes an asset, be aware that this can also be a hindrance. The personal relationship may make it difficult for them to discuss industry matters. Be sure they are comfortable with their role as an advocate before they commit to the job.

- **Grassroots Teams:** Grassroots mobilization asks advocates to take individual action that collectively, with the actions of other likeminded advocates, sends a united message to elected officials. The individual nature of grassroots can leave some advocates with the feeling that they are working in isolation. Is there anyone else out there that is taking the action that I am?

Be sure to tell your advocates who their peers are in the program and allow for them to communicate with each other. You may also want to consider putting together small teams of people to focus on one elected official. They can work together to carry out the grassroots activities you design.

- **Opt-in vs. Opt-out:** When working to build a large base of advocates aimed at generating mass quantities of communications to elected officials, you will want to consider automatically enrolling members in the program then providing them with the opportunity to opt-out if desired. This is particularly appropriate approach for the member leaders and key stakeholders within your association.

The program manager of a grassroots program often painstakingly recruits one person at a time when a natural base of advocates already exists. This group then can be expanded upon and assist you with bringing other advocates into the program.

## **Step Eight: Issue Selection**

HBA members have diverse skills with competing ideas about which issues should take center stage. Multiple issues may be championed as priorities for the organization as a whole, when in actuality these issues only impact a particular group of members. Niche issues should never be dismissed; however it may be that a resolution to these issues can be accomplished without full grassroots involvement.

Your organization should commit to limiting grassroots campaigns to support only around three priority issues per year. This helps manage expectations among members and staff that are eager to activate the grassroots network every time an issue impacting the industry arises. Limiting the number of issues will also help avoid excessive communications to your grassroots members about topics they have limited knowledge about and are ill-prepared address with their elected officials.

Ideally, the issues selected should have implications that impact a wide breadth of membership and stand a chance of being address by the legislature. Hot-button issues will help keep your grassroots advocates engaged throughout the twists and turns the issues are likely to take while being considered.

## **Step Nine: Training and Activation**

Before you pull the trigger on your grassroots network, it is imperative that your advocates are educated about the priority issues selected by your organization. This often means taking complex issues and translating the essential elements into layman's terms that can be delivered in short sound bites and bullet points.

The goal is to give your advocates a fundamental understanding of the issue by providing information on where the issue has been, where it stands at the moment and how they can help move it in a favorable direction. There are many ways this information can be delivered to your advocates, including emails, newsletters, online trainings and of course, in-person. You should determine the best communication method based upon your resources and the preference of your members.

Undoubtedly, some of your members will want more in-depth information about the issues. This is a positive sign and you want to cultivate this interest. Be prepared to provide additional information and find experts that can help you accurately respond to complex questions that may require their assistance.

When it is time to pull the trigger on your grassroots network, you want your advocates to deliver the same message at the same time and in the same way, whether you ask them to make a phone call, send an email or meet with a legislator. This coordination is imperative in order to generate the grassroots "buzz" that is needed to make elected officials and their staff take notice.

## **Step Ten: Recognition**

It is important to show appreciation toward your advocates by highlighting their grassroots accomplishments to their peers. Take advantage of opportunities to share their success stories in newsletters and other member communications, and at meetings and receptions, etc. You may also consider establishing prestigious annual awards that honor top advocates. This not only provides them with a sense of accomplishment and helps keep them engaged, but it creates a healthy competition among their peers also seeking the same recognition.

# Chapter 12: NAHB Intergovernmental Affairs Team

The NAHB Intergovernmental Affairs team stands ready to help your HBA create an effective local advocacy program. Please reach out with any questions or assistance you may need.

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