

# ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING TIPS FOR COMMUNITIES AND BEYOND

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## Advocacy: What It Is, Why It Matters

A core principle of democracy is that elected officials and public agencies must be accountable to the people they represent. Correspondingly, the people strengthen democracy by demanding change when governmental systems are not meeting their needs. Voting is one way to demand change (see Voter Engagement Guide). Advocacy is another. People advocate by raising awareness about issues and building public and political support to drive change. Anyone can advocate, including tenants, community members, and nonprofit organizations. You do not need to be a policy expert to be an effective advocate. Successful advocacy often involves the sharing of lived experiences as a direct result of policies. This sharing provides valuable insight that decision makers need to improve policies and systems.

Advocacy can include a variety of activities, such as talking with elected officials, educating the public, using traditional or social media, convening people, and lobbying. Lobbying is a specific type of advocacy that involves taking a position on a particular piece of legislation. While all lobbying is advocacy, not all advocacy is lobbying. Most nonprofit organizations are allowed to lobby if such lobbying supports their mission and meets legal criteria (see Lobbying: Important Legal Considerations for Individuals and 501(c)(3) Organizations).

Building strong relationships is essential in advocacy. With elected officials and their staff, this can mean meeting regularly, inviting them to community events, sharing reports or stories, or touring affordable housing developments. In working with advocates, building relationships can look like one-on-one or

group meetings, sharing information and updates, asking for input on policies and advocacy activities, providing opportunities for action, and celebrating wins. More broadly, regular engagement on social media or through traditional media, attending or hosting community events, posting flyers, and word of mouth are powerful ways to raise awareness among the general public and draw more people into your advocacy work.

## Engaging the Community in Grassroots Advocacy

Grassroots advocacy is advocacy led by people directly affected by the policy or issue at hand. People and communities directly affected by policy can become involved in grassroots advocacy by attending community listening sessions, taking trainings in advocacy and organizing, and forming local advocacy strategy groups. See Organizing to Build Power to learn more. Engaging communities through creative avenues also is an option. Using art, spoken word, or film screenings can captivate diverse audiences and spark meaningful dialogue.

Make sure your advocacy is accessible to those you aim to reach. Accessibility considerations include, but are not limited to, an event venue's distance from public transit options, the need for language translation services, the provision of food, and more. Digital tools, like social media or online events, can expand your reach, mobilize supporters, and engage younger audiences.

## Advocacy Strategies and Tactics

Start by identifying your issue and your goals: What do you want to achieve and why? An issue in advocacy

is a specific, actionable problem (e.g., lack of rental assistance available and long waitlists) within a broader topic (e.g., affordable housing). The goal here may be to fund an expansion of the Housing Choice Voucher program to reach an additional 100,000 households in the next fiscal year. Work with your base, or your core trusted partners, to shape these goals. Once your goals are clear, identify your targets—the people who can make or influence decisions. For federal legislative actions, targets may include your members of Congress, their staff, or relevant committee members. Targets for executive or regulatory actions may include administration officials or those who have influence over them.

Next, plan your strategies and tactics. Decide what your message is and how you will communicate it. Remember, advocacy can take many forms. Meetings with officials or their staff are effective for building relationships and education about relevant issues. Community events like community conversations, film screenings, or rallies can engage supporters and make advocacy more interactive. Other strategies include emails, phone calls, and letters to elected officials and engaging the media to build awareness, support, and momentum.

Advocates can use a time called congressional recess—or in-district work period—to meet with members of Congress without needing to travel to DC. During a congressional recess, members of Congress leave DC to spend time in their home communities, creating a valuable opportunity for their constituents to connect with them directly. Advocates should use recess to invite their members of Congress to community events or host tours of affordable housing programs. Recess is also a good time to organize teach-ins, film screenings, rallies, or town halls to educate the public and show community support for your issues.

Remember, as political climates shift, organizing and advocacy strategies must adapt. Try new approaches or digital tools and always amplify voices from diverse communities as you respond to new challenges and opportunities. More on some of these strategies and tactics is below.

## STORYTELLING

Personal stories can make the case for housing solutions more effectively than facts alone when shared through collective values and vision. Effective storytelling as an advocacy tool connects personal experiences to a clear advocacy goal and combines stories with data points.

### Core Principles

Core principles for storytelling include agency, respect, and compensation. Directly impacted people should have full control over if, how, and when their personal stories are told. Stories should be told in holistic ways that focus on strengths and honor a person's full humanity, not focusing solely on their trauma or housing status. When funds allow, people asked to share their personal story in a professional or public setting should be offered fair compensation for their time and expertise.

### Elements of an Effective Story

Share your own experience with the issue at hand, such as your own journey with homelessness, the impact of stable housing on you or your community, or your work in the community. Help listeners connect to your story by naming the values that guide you. These values may include safety, dignity, opportunity, and family. End your story with what you want the listener to do with what you shared. If the listener is a lawmaker, do you want them to support a specific program? If the listener is a community member, do you want them to join your advocacy group?

Tips and Reminders:

- Keep it focused and simple.
- Be grounded in truth and your own experience.
- Explain the impact of policies on you and your community.
- Don't speak on behalf of a culture or community that is not your own.
- If you are sharing someone else's story, get permission and respect their voice.

### Prompts for People with Lived Experiences

- What does “home” mean to you?
- Describe your home and your living conditions. How did that affect your life?
- Has housing instability or have other housing challenges impacted you, your family, job, education, or health?
- Have you received housing assistance? What changed for you after that?
- What makes you proud to live in the place you call home?
- How would more affordable homes or better protections help your community?
- What are your hopes for the future and how does your home fit into that vision?

### Prompts for Housing or Service Providers

- What are the biggest housing challenges your clients or community face?
- How do you see federal affordable housing programs making a difference?
- What stories do you hear that highlight the need for stronger investments?
- What is one moment that made you proud of your work?
- How would more housing assistance improve your ability to serve the community?

## MEETINGS

Face-to-face virtual or in-person meetings with members of Congress or their staff are a core advocacy tactic. These meetings help start conversations, educate officials, and build relationships. Below are tips for an effective advocacy meeting. For additional information or support, please contact NLIHC’s field team at [outreach@nlihc.org](mailto:outreach@nlihc.org).

### Getting Started

- Schedule a meeting through your elected official’s office two to four weeks in advance and confirm details 24 hours before. Find your members’ of Congress contact info at <https://nlihc.quorum.us/officials/> or call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121. Identify yourself as a constituent, ask to speak with the scheduler, and indicate what you would like to meet about.
- Recruit other stakeholders to join you if possible.
- Schedule the meeting with staff if the official is unavailable. Staff often have more time for discussion and advise the official on decisions.
- Research the official’s interests, past votes, and committee assignments to connect your issue to them where possible. You can find out how a member of Congress has voted on affordable housing legislation at <https://tr.ee/eCu3nC>.
- Prepare talking points in advance and assign who will cover which topics if others are joining.
- Gather materials you may want to share with the office, also known as leave behind materials, such as NLIHC’s state-level data at <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state>.
- Look up required and restricted items (e.g., identification; large bags or food) for building security if the meeting is in person or be sure you have login info if the meeting is virtual.

### During the Meeting

- Arrive early for security and to find the meeting room if in person, or for tech setup if meeting virtually.
- Stick to a 20-30 minute agenda, including introductions, issue overview, key points, proposed solutions, and a clear ask of the official, such as “Will you support increased funding for Housing Choice Vouchers in this year’s budget?”
- Highlight stories, local impact, and data, connecting your message to the official’s interests whenever possible.

- Ask questions of the official or staff member to keep the conversation engaging and take notes.
- Say you will need to get back to them on questions they ask that you cannot answer—this is perfectly fine and an opportunity to keep the conversation going after the meeting.
- Present any leave behind materials.
- Ask to take a picture and thank them for their time.

### After the Meeting

- Send a thank-you email or letter and follow up on anything you promised in the meeting.
- Publicly thank the office on social media with the photo you took, if it makes sense for furthering your advocacy efforts.
- Share top takeaways with your network.
- Share about your meeting and any relevant feedback with NLIHC at <https://tr.ee/Dli5sp>.
- Continue engaging the official and their staff for ongoing relationship building and education.

### EMAILS

Email is the most common way to communicate with members of Congress and their staff. Keep messages concise, clearly present affordable housing concerns, and reference specific solutions or bills when possible. Email the dedicated housing staffer when possible. Contact NLIHC’s Field Team at [outreach@nlihc.org](mailto:outreach@nlihc.org) for help identifying the right contact. Email templates for key legislation are available on NLIHC’s Advocacy Hub at [www.nlihc.org/take-action](http://www.nlihc.org/take-action).

### PHONE CALLS

Phone calls are effective, especially when multiple constituents call on the same issue within a few days of each other. Coordinate with others if possible and consider using a script for consistent messaging. When you call, ask to speak to the staffer who handles housing issues, identify yourself as a constituent, and reference specific bills if relevant. Calling just before important votes or hearings is particularly impactful.

Contact your members of Congress directly through NLIHC’s Advocacy Hub at [www.nlihc.org/take-action](http://www.nlihc.org/take-action). On this page, find the legislation you want to act on and click the “contact your members of Congress” button. This takes you to a new page where you fill out your contact info, select email or call, and personalize your message before calling or sending an email. Note that not all legislation has these actions available. You also can locate phone numbers for your members of Congress at <https://nlihc.quorum.us/officials/>, or call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121 and an operator will connect you directly with the office you request. Additionally, members of Congress each have their own website that will list the direct phone numbers for each of their offices, including their local offices.

### LETTERS

Mailing written letters is a decreasingly effective tool for advocating with members of Congress and other decision makers because of the extensive security screening that delays delivery. However, they can still be used as an advocacy tool for less pressing matters, such as a hand-written thank you card for visiting your community center or other issues not having to do with immediate decisions. For members of Congress, address the letter to the housing staffer to ensure it ends up in the right hands. Use the following standard address blocks when sending letters to Congress:

#### Senate

The Honorable [full name of official]  
 ATTN: Housing Staffer  
 United States Senate  
 Washington, DC 20510

#### House of Representatives

The Honorable [full name of official]  
 ATTN: Housing Staffer  
 United States House of Representatives  
 Washington, DC 20515

## Additional Ways to Engage Elected Officials

Meetings, emails, calls, and letters are not the only effective ways to engage with officials about issues that concern you. Other ways to advocate include:

### INVITATIONS TO YOUR OWN IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL EVENT

- Invite an official to speak at your annual meeting or conference (in person or virtually).
- Organize a tour of your organization or affordable housing developments and feature people directly impacted sharing their stories and expertise.
- Hold a public event and invite an official to speak (in person or virtually).
- Host a community discussion and invite an official to participate (in person or virtually).

### SOCIAL MEDIA AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA

- Tag officials or comment on their social media posts.
- Get media coverage on your issues and forward the coverage to housing staffers of members of Congress. For example:
  - » Organize a tour for a local reporter or set up a press conference on your issue.
  - » Call in to radio talk shows.
  - » Write letters to the editor of your local paper or submit opinion pieces.
  - » Call local newspaper editorial page editors and set up a meeting to discuss the possibility of the papers' support for your issue.

### INFLUENTIAL SUPPORTERS

- Elicit the support of potential allies who are influential with officials, like your city council, mayor, local businesses, unions, or religious leaders. Ask them to speak out publicly about the issue and weigh in with your state's congressional delegation.

## For More Information

- For information about NLIHC's policy priorities and opportunities to take action, visit NLIHC's Advocacy Hub at <https://nlihc.org/take-action>.
- For state and local data and other resources, visit <https://tr.ee/E3LubB>.
- Contact NLIHC's Field Team at [outreach@nlihc.org](mailto:outreach@nlihc.org).

For information on members of Congress and offices of the administration, see Congressional Advocacy and Key Housing Committees and Federal Administrative Advocacy, and find your members of Congress at <https://tr.ee/yNdnZb>.