

Grassroots Lobbying Manual



Advancing fairness, safety and opportunity for Georgia's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and allied communities

Visit us online at:

www.GeorgiaEquality.org

or call us at:

(404) 523-3070

ARE YOU READY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Whether you're new to grassroots advocacy, or are interested in strengthening your skills, this manual is for you. It's full of tips and useful knowledge designed to help you ensure that policy makers in City Hall, Atlanta and Washington, D.C. are responsive to the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender individuals and our allies.

CAMPAIGN FOR A FAIR MAJORITY – A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR LGBT EQUALITY IN GEORGIA

*"Surely we can agree that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters deserve to visit the person they love in the hospital and to live lives free of discrimination."
- President Barack Obama*

INTRODUCTION

Georgia's political landscape has changed dramatically in the ten years since Georgia Equality was founded; however, the potential for our community to advance LGBT policy issues has only strengthened with greater social awareness and acceptance. Georgia Equality has developed a bold, new strategic plan for grassroots political advocacy – Campaign for a Fair Majority – that is based on current political reality and enables us to build a bi-partisan fair majority in Georgia.

STRATEGIC PLAN SUMMARY

Georgia Equality is working to build a fair majority in Georgia through electoral and legislative action at the state and local level. Carving out a bi-partisan fair majority in the state legislature and on local councils and commissions requires targeting unfair elected officials for defeat in primary and general elections, and intense lobbying to fight back anti-LGBT proposals and work for the passage of pro-LGBT legislation and local ordinances.

INTENSIVE LOBBYING

Georgia's legislature officially convenes the first quarter of the year; however, during the other months of the year committees are meeting, legislators are meeting constituents and participating on committees, attorneys are drafting legislation, and deals are being made. Successful lobbying requires a year-round operation based on extensive research – legislative interviews, voting records, personal and professional backgrounds, counting votes on any given issue going into session, developing strategies to move individual legislators, and ensuring accountability in relation to election activities.

STRATEGIC ELECTIONEERING

With a year-round lobbying operation, we can hold our elected officials accountable for their actions. Few general election races – outside of “open” seats – are competitive as a result of legislative redistricting; however, primary races are very competitive. A strategic election operation allows us to focus on state legislative and local races that are happening throughout the year.

ONE VOICE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE

HOW YOU CAN CREATE CHANGE

You don't need to be a professional lobbyist to influence how policy and legislation is created. All you need is personal experience, factual information to back up your personal expertise, and knowledge of who the key decision-makers are and what is most likely to influence them.

There are numerous opportunities for advocates to engage policy makers as they work to pass legislation and make funding decisions. To be effective in your advocacy efforts, it is important to understand how lawmakers work. For example, the legislative rules and budgetary process that Congress follows are different from those followed by the State Legislature. While local, state and federal legislative and budgetary rules vary, each level of government uses formal structures and processes with agreed upon timetables and deadlines. Understanding the rules of the legislative game is a valuable part of successful grassroots advocacy.

If you, or someone close to you is living with HIV/AIDS, or you work in a community-based agency that provides services to the LGBT community, such as HIV services, you have valuable information that elected officials and policy makers need to do their jobs. Your first-hand experience is important feedback for officials who rarely get the chance to visit programs themselves. For this reason, communicating with your elected officials about what you think is important benefits them and you.

REGISTER AND VOTE FOR EQUALITY!

One of the most important actions you can take to advance fairness and equality for LGBT individuals and communities is to learn about the issues and vote. Contact your local county registrar who can help you register to vote or if you have access to the Internet, the Georgia Secretary of State's website provides online voter registration information at http://sos.georgia.gov/elections/voter_registration/voter_reg_app.htm

Voter Registration information is also available on the Georgia Equality website.

Because so many qualified people are not registered to vote, it's important to promote voter registration at community events such as socials, workshops and at service organizations. Call our office and we can send you a stack of voter registration forms for your next event.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

At first, everyone is nervous about contacting his or her elected officials. But experienced advocates will tell you that it gets easier with practice. Fortunately, there are many different ways you can communicate with your representatives. Choose the one you feel most comfortable with, knowing that even the shortest letter or the briefest email -- when it comes from a constituent -- speaks volumes to an elected official.

In fact, most elected officials keep careful track of how many letters, emails or calls they receive on an issue as a way of gauging constituents' opinions. The fact that most constituents don't take the time to communicate with them means that when you do, it's that much more powerful.

Your letter may actually represent dozens, hundreds or even thousands of constituents who didn't bother to write. Though you may think of yourself as a single voice, when you take action, you amplify your voice, and in the process, create change.

WRITING A LETTER

WHO REPRESENTS YOU?

Knowing who represents you at different levels of government is the first step in effective advocacy.

One source of this information is Project Vote Smart. By entering your zip code on their website, you can find out who your state and federal elected officials are. There is also a section on the website for listings of city and county elected officials.

www.VoteSmart.org

A personal letter from a constituent is a very powerful advocacy tool. In general, an effective letter is limited to one or two pages at the most. Start and end your letter by stating why you are writing and what it is you would like your representative to do. This is often referred to as .the ask.

TWO SIMPLE RULES FOR INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY

1) Elected and appointed officials make different decisions when watched by the affected constituency

2) Get the right information to the right person at the right time

- Judy Meridith and Cathy Dunham

Real Clout: A How-to Manual for Community Activists

The tone of your letter should always be professional and courteous, even when you disagree with a member's position, or are expressing disappointment about an action they took. Always address your legislator correctly, for example: Assembly Member Gomez or Representative Satcher. Envelopes should be addressed to: *.The Honorable* Gail Williams, U.S. House of Representatives.

FIVE KEY ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- Identify the issue.
- Cite a personal connection or describe its local impact.
- Use key facts to support your case.
- Make a specific "ask."
- Say thank you and request an opportunity to follow-up

SENDING AN EMAIL

Email is a quick, inexpensive way of communicating with legislators, but it is often not considered as effective as personal letters. Virtually all elected officials now have email addresses for use by constituents.

CALLING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Calling your legislators is very effective, particularly in the days just before they are scheduled to take action or vote on your issue. To prepare for the conversation, jot down a few notes containing the key points you want to make, and refer to the notes during your call. Although it is generally most effective for you to call a member in their capitol office, which is where most of their staff is located, you may also call their district office to avoid long distance charges.

Unless you know the elected official, you will almost always speak with a staff person and not the member directly. Do not feel as though you have been put off. In fact, when calling members of Congress it is helpful to ask to speak to the legislative aide who handles the issues most closely associated with your concern such as civil rights, health or HIV/AIDS issues. This person serves as the eyes and ears of the member and is the person the member relies upon to learn how an issue affects their district. Over time, as you develop relationships with key staff members, you will come to be seen as an authoritative and valuable information resource. Hopefully, the next time an important LGBT-related issue is being considered, that staff person will turn to you for your opinion, and will convey your views to the member directly.

It is also important to note that staffing for Georgia's legislature often varies from Congressional and local staff. Most legislators do not have private staff, rather multiple elected officials will share a secretary. While they are still the person you will most likely speak with, it is often best

MAKING YOUR E-MAILS AND CALLS EASIER

Georgia Equality's e-mail system allows us to imbed links in our e-mail alerts so that you know exactly who your elected official is and can e-mail them directly through our action alert.

HOWEVER, for our system to be able to do this, we must have your home address.

Only about a third of our current members have given us their street addresses along with their e-mail. Check your Georgia Equality account to make sure we have your correct

to ask them to have the legislator call you back at his/her convenience. You can also leave a brief message regarding the specific topic you are calling about.

PROVIDING PUBLIC TESTIMONY

At some point during the process of considering a bill -- including the annual state budget or Federal appropriations bills -- the Legislature or Congress gives members of the public an opportunity to comment on what is being proposed. This usually takes place during a committee meeting or hearing, and is referred to as public comment or public testimony.

If you decide that you would like to provide public testimony on an issue, you should first find out the specific protocol followed by the legislative body. Sometimes, members of the public can simply come to a committee hearing or meeting, sign up at the door, and testify when their name is called. Usually, however, you must make arrangements to testify in advance with the committee staff.

SOME DO'S AND DON'TS IN PROVIDING PUBLIC TESTIMONY

DO:

- ☺ Contact a sympathetic member of the committee or their staff ahead of time to make sure you are on the agenda or to confirm how to sign up to speak and that your comments are appropriate for the hearing.
- ☺ Know how long you will have to speak. Often public testimony is limited to 5 minutes or less.
- ☺ Dress professionally so that your remarks are not overshadowed by your appearance.
- ☺ Prepare our remarks ahead of time, and if possible, bring copies for distribution.
- ☺ Start by introducing yourself, where you are from and the reason you are speaking (what you are asking the members to do). Speak slowly and clearly.
- ☺ Use your personal story and expertise to make your case.
- ☺ Be brief and stick to the time limit.
- ☺ End your remarks by saying thank you.

DON'T:

- ☹ Behave rudely or unprofessionally. It will reflect poorly on you and your issue.
- ☹ Repeat arguments that have already been made. Simply say that you agree with others that have testified before, then focus your time on new arguments or your personal story.
- ☹ Make personal remarks about those testifying on the opposing side of your issue.
- ☹ Insist on finishing your testimony if you have run out of time. Distribute copies instead.

MEETING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS AND THEIR STAFF

Having a personal meeting with legislators and their staff -- either by yourself or as part of a small group -- is one of the most effective advocacy tools, because it allows you to put a face to your issue. Arranging an appointment is usually as simple as calling, though you may be asked to

DISTRICT MEETINGS

Traveling to Atlanta or Washington, DC is difficult for most people, but you can follow the same procedure to set up a meeting with your representative or senator when she or he is home in the district.

State lawmakers are home most weekends that the legislature is in session and members of Congress have several scheduled recesses throughout the year.

make your request in writing and you may need to wait a few weeks. While the legislature is in session in Atlanta or if you plan to be in Washington, D.C., call ahead and schedule an appointment to meet with our elected officials. Your representatives' offices will usually try to accommodate your schedule and are generally eager to meet with you. It is often easier to secure a meeting with a legislator if you have multiple participants as this minimizes the number of meetings the legislator has to hold on an issue.

Before your meeting begins, take a few minutes to prepare what you want to say. If you are meeting as part of a group, make sure to identify a leader to begin the meeting. Always start by introducing yourself and thanking the person for their time (provide a business card, if available). Then, explain why you are there and what it is you want them to do (e.g. sponsor a bill, send a letter, vote for more funding).

Remember that you've requested the meeting, so it's up to you to keep to the agenda, despite distractions. In order to make sure that all of your key points are made during the limited time you have, *it is extremely important that all meeting participants stay on message!* For example, if the meeting is about funding for AIDS housing, make sure your comments relate to that issue, and not about funding for case management, or about a problem your agency may be having that is unrelated to housing.

Legislative staffs serve as the eyes and ears of the members and are the ones elected officials rely upon to learn how an issue affects their district.

Always try to bring written information to your meeting to leave with the member or staff.

If a fact sheet is not available, bring copies of favorable news stories or letters of support. The importance of bringing paper to your meeting is twofold: you've left something that the staff member can refer to when you are gone, and you yourself have something to refer to in your meeting.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD FACT SHEET

- Describes the problem or issue you are trying to address using facts or data to support your claim
- Describes your proposed solution and the top three or four arguments in favor of your position
- Responds directly or indirectly to the main arguments against your proposed action
- Lists key supporters or coalition partners, including information about who to contact for additional information

Before ending your meeting be sure to make your request. Ask the member to commit to voting for or against a bill, to introduce legislation, or to in some other way take a leadership role on your issue. Whether or not you receive a commitment, remember to follow-up by phone or in a letter as the issue or legislation continues to make its way through the process. Always end the meeting with a thank you- if not for their support, for taking the time to meet with you and hear your views.

BE CAREFUL:

If a legislator or staff member asks you a question you don't know the answer to, be honest and tell them you don't know.

Tell them you will get the information and contact them within the next few days. Your credibility is essential to your success as an advocate.

HINTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL MEETING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

BEFORE THE MEETING

Meet with your group before hand to plan your strategy. Make sure you have a facilitator and timekeeper, review the materials you will be providing, decide on the key talking points and “asks” and decide who will cover which issues during the meeting.

Don’t be offended if you meet with a legislative aide--they are often the eyes and ears of the legislator. Staff aides can be very influential with the elected official.

Be on time for your appointment. Members’ schedules are very tight and many meetings will be quite short so it is critical to be on time.

Dress appropriately. Generally, it is ideal to dress professionally for meetings in legislator’s offices.

DURING THE MEETING

Begin with introductions. Mention if you are a resident or work in their district. Legislators are more likely to give credence to constituents than to non-constituent advocates.

Be courteous. You want to develop a relationship with this Legislator. Don’t burn bridges.

Be focused in your discussion. Stick to your agreed upon agenda; don’t let the Legislator throw you off track. Bring the discussion back to the topic at hand if necessary; keep focused.

Get verbal commitments from your Legislator. Ask them to commit on the issues you discuss. Ask them for their vote on specific budget items, bills and/or policies. Don’t leave without making a specific request and asking for a commitment.

Remember that your personal story is the most compelling advocacy tool that you have.

You are the expert! Speak with confidence, but don’t be patronizing. You have firsthand experience with these issues, so let them know.

If you are asked a question you don’t know the answer to, be honest and tell them you don’t know. Tell them you will get the information and contact them within the next few days. Your credibility is essential to your success as an advocate.

Keep a list of what the office wants and questions that are raised during the meeting.

Work as a team. Designate a timekeeper so you can discuss all the issues on the agenda. Make sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity.

Be sure to provide your Legislator or staff member with a fact sheet or packet of materials. Make sure you have one simple fact sheet that contains your basic information and the request that you are making of the legislator.

Leave business cards or, if you have them, personal cards.

Thank them for the meeting.

AFTER THE MEETING

Select someone to write a thank you letter from the group. Send this letter to the Legislator within one week of the meeting.

Immediately after the meeting, meet as a group to debrief. Review notes, comments, and necessary follow-up information. If the Legislator requested extra information make certain a representative from your group follows up!

Make sure someone in your group reports back on the meeting. Please let the staff who helped organize these visits know how the meeting went. Let us know if anything came up that we should be aware of when meeting with this legislator's office in the future.

**MANY VOICES CREATE A MOVEMENT
MOBILIZING FOR CHANGE
BUILDING AND MOBILIZING NETWORKS AND COALITIONS**

If one voice can make a difference, many voices together can create lasting and meaningful change. The need to work in coalition is essential on an issue such as LGBT rights or HIV, which affects many different communities, constituencies and organizations. By working together to change policies or influence how money is spent, advocates can achieve goals that would be much more difficult to attain independently, and can counter powerful opponents and entrenched interests in the process.

By mobilizing grassroots advocates around key issues and goals, coalitions (also called alliances or networks) can significantly increase the visibility of an issue. Successful coalitions are those that harness the diversity of their membership -- including their members' political and personal backgrounds, level of advocacy experience, skills and geographic location. A major benefit of working in coalition is the ability to share responsibilities and maximize the use of limited resources.

It is important to keep in mind that coalitions cannot address all issues and should be used as part of a larger strategic advocacy effort. At times, coalitions can be time-intensive, difficult to manage and hard to nurture. But when effective, they can play a pivotal role in advancing a community agenda.

TIPS FOR BUILDING A STRONG AND SUCCESSFUL COALITION

Before investing time and energy working to build a new coalition, do your research to see if one already exists. Starting a new coalition where one currently exists can be viewed as an attempt to preempt or replace existing efforts. Talking with fellow advocates and interested organizations can save time and aggravation. What you learn from these conversations will help you decide if starting a new coalition will advance your issue, or if it would inadvertently set it back. If none exists, contact key members of your community to gauge their interest in helping start and sustain a coalition effort and then expand membership from there.

GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT YOUR COALITION EFFORTS

Community meetings, street outreach and one-on-one meetings are all important opportunities to educate others and build your coalition's membership. Distribute information via email list serves, mailings, newsletters and by posting flyers. Don't forget to notify your community paper about your coalition's meeting times.

DEVELOP A SOLID ACTION/WORK PLAN

Set clear goals and objectives, and assign responsibility for completing key tasks from the start. Revise your work plan, as necessary, to advance the strategic interests and goals of the coalition. Potential members must understand **exactly** what the coalition will work to achieve and should have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities as members.

BUILD ON COMMUNITY EFFORTS

Any effort to mobilize action should build upon work currently being done in the community. Partner with other advocates and community leaders who have a shared interest and demonstrated commitment to your issue.

CREATE A STRUCTURE THAT WORKS

Coalitions' organizational structures and operating principles are as diverse as the issues they are created to address. They can be structured loosely or formally. They can be local, regional, statewide, national or international in scope, and can operate on a regular basis or only when needed. Coalitions are living entities that evolve and change over time.

ENLIST TRUSTED LEADERSHIP

Leaders of coalitions serve to help facilitate decision-making by the group, mobilize participation and oversee group dynamics. Using leaders from within a community who are viewed as credible is essential.

BUILD STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The membership of your coalition communicates important messages to other advocates and policy makers. Most coalition members represent organizations; however, some also may include individuals. Enlisting the support of well-respected community leaders, elected officials and candidates for public office can add credibility and visibility to coalition efforts, as can untraditional allies such as business and industry leaders.

SELL YOUR ISSUE

Position papers, talking points, and fact sheets are all important tools that sell your issue. They also serve to keep coalition members focused on a common message when dealing with the media, policy makers and other third parties. Use facts and personal stories that reinforce your strategic message.

MANAGE CONFLICT SUCCESSFULLY

Within any group, conflicts will arise. The success of coalitions depends in large part on the ability of coalition members to commit time and resources towards a shared goal and to put personal or competing agendas aside. Developing operating principles that establish how a group will make decisions and how it will handle conflict is best done before a conflict actually arises.

RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF DIFFERENT RESOURCE CONTRIBUTIONS

The work of coalitions requires resources, and it is important to remember that individuals and groups bring different resources to a coalition effort. It for all contributions and work done well.

AGREE ABOUT WHO WILL BE THE SPOKESPEOPLE FOR THE COALITION

Selecting the right person to represent your issue and assuring that they are trained helps to avoid multiple messages and confusion about who speaks for the group.