

## **Top Ten Tips For Disability Policy Change Agents or How to Influence Policymakers and the Policymaking Process**

1. Understand Historical and Policy Context
  - Research the treatment of persons with disabilities (such as exclusion, segregation, and automatic referral by generic system to disability system).
  - Become knowledgeable about current policy framework and its strengths and inadequacies.
  - Use your understanding of historical and policy context to explain why change is necessary and the nature and scope of needed changes to current policy.
  - Recognize the intensity of feelings by persons with disabilities regarding why it is critical to develop new or modify existing policy based on historical treatment.
  
2. Articulate Values, Principles, and Goals of Disability Policy
  - Recognize the difference between the old v. new paradigm of disability policy (old paradigm = need to “fix” “defective” person with a disability v. new paradigm = recognize that disability is a natural part of the human experience and the responsibility of society to build social and political environment by providing necessary supports, services and accommodations (civil rights model).
  - Recognize the goals of disability policy.
    - Equality of opportunity (individualization, inclusion, meaningful opportunity).
    - Full participation (empowerment, self-determination, informed choice and individual and systems level).
    - Independent living (skills, services, and supports).
    - Economic self-sufficiency (training, education, assistance and supports).
  
3. Understand That Policy is Made in a Political Context.
  - Public policy is proposed, debated, modified and adopted in a political environment.
  - “Tools of the trade” include use of:
    - Politics
    - Power
    - Self-interest (what motivates an individual to do something)
    - Compromise of Positions, Not Principles
  
4. Understand the Needs of Policymakers—who make decisions, set policy, sponsor and pass legislation, etc.
  - Understand their self-interest—what motivates them (re-election, power, status among peers and interest groups).
  - Balancing priorities (time pressures).

- Political implications of what they say and do.
- Understand that they are often dependent on others for advice—particularly on specialized interests.

#### 5. Understand the Needs of Staff of Policymakers

- To promote and protect their boss.
- To have help in sorting through avalanche of input to determine what is “real” and what is “posturing”.
- Help them develop assumptions and present fiscal funding and program estimates
- Help identify key players
- Help in developing viable policy options, drafting bills/report language, floor statements (statements to be made on the “floor” of the legislature, Senate, House, Committee, etc.), speeches.
- Help in developing political strategy.

#### 6. Understand the Need for and Role of An Organized Coalition in Exercising Power over the Policymaking Process

- Need for a coalition as an effective way to come together around common interests (policymakers demand it, source of power, and helps provide support/assistance to policymakers and their staff).
- Be aware of the composition of the coalition (cross-disability consumers and providers and nontraditional groups—representing unique perspectives on common issues).
- Cohesion (keep the disability community together).
- Synergy (A combined or cooperative force that comes together to have a greater total effect than the sum of each of the parts.)
- Skilled individuals performing varied tasks working together.
- Leadership (“policy entrepreneur”)—existing and as a mechanism to nurture new leaders.
- Responsibility to help get the work done (carrying out agreed on tasks).

#### 7. Understand the Need for a Strategic Plan

- “Planned spontaneity” (need to think strategically and act on basis of a plan: understand the importance of pre-meetings to lay the groundwork for what needs to be done).
- Use planning as a “reality check” (to identify and understand macro issues, past advocacy efforts and why change is now possible, constraints on achieving success, capacities of coalition, and degree of opposition).
- Identify the prize—the goal you want to/must achieve (focus on principles and major concerns, not positions).
- Decide on an overall strategy:
  - Determine the nature and degree of controversy/opposition there is surrounding your issue.
  - Decide on an appropriate vehicle such as modifying a statute, regulation, or guideline.

- Identify key policymakers who will assume leadership roles in implementing the strategy.
  - Frame the issue and decide on the message—how you will talk about your issue.
  - Control the dynamics of the debate to create an “aura of inevitability”—“This is going to happen, so let’s shape the outcome”.
  - Determine how a particular tactic (such as direct action or a meeting with a policymaker) fits in.
  - Develop favorable program and fiscal (funding) estimates—make it doable.
  - Present viable policy options based on research and program and fiscal estimates.
  - Continually assess the effectiveness of strategies.
8. Understand the Power of Personal Stories Tied to Policy Objectives
- Telling personal stories in isolation doesn’t work—it must apply to what you need to accomplish.
  - You’ll need to decide on a policy objective and how you’ll frame the issue and then tie a personal story to policy objectives and policy options.
  - The best personal stories demonstrate positive impact of proposed intervention/change in policy (describe circumstances before and after intervention).
9. Understand the Importance of Long-Term Relationships and That Who Delivers the Message is Often More Important Than the Message
- Develop long-term trust relationships to maximize influence and do this before you need something from them.
  - Strategically select the spokespersons who will have maximum influence over policymakers.
  - Ensure that the message is presented in a manner that recognizes the needs of particular policymakers/staff.
10. Recognize Your Strengths and Limitations
- Keep your eye on the prize—put ego aside.
  - Don’t agree to a policy option when not fully knowledgeable.
  - Don’t agree to a policy option on behalf of other whom you don’t represent.

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