

Health Care Advocacy 101

What is advocacy?

There are many ways to help children, but one of the most effective ways to make our society better is legislative advocacy in behalf of children. Advocacy means supporting laws and policies that are good for children and opposing those that aren't. It means to speak up, to plead the case of another or to champion a cause.

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin is committed to improving the health and well-being of children by advocating for them at the local, state and federal levels. We often ask for help from our grassroots advocates, a group of people ranging from patient families and physicians to community members who want to be informed about the legislative issues that affect children. With our support, grassroots advocates write letters to their legislators and newspapers, make phone calls, attend events and visit legislators personally to tell them about the issues important to them.

Tips for effective lobbying

Legislators want to hear from their constituents, and it is your right to talk with your legislators to share your opinion. Here are some tips to help you lobby effectively.

- **Be friendly.** Legislators are people. Talk to them as people; be friendly, sincere and honest.
- **Be prepared.** Legislators are generalists. Due to the nature of their jobs, they know a little about a lot of issues but may not know details about your profession, your issues or your area of expertise. Don't expect them to be versed in the topic you are bringing to them. This is your opportunity to educate.
 - Begin with an explanation of the general topic. Be as brief as possible.
 - Provide good information, giving only facts. Legislators are influenced by facts. If the facts are on your side you will be in a much better position.
- **Be respectful.** Recognize that there probably is a sound logical argument in opposition to your view. There are others who may believe that what you want to do is not good for consumers, is more costly or unfavorable in other ways. Some legislators will disagree with your position. Treat them respectfully. They may be allies on other issues.
- **Be direct.** Answer all questions directly. Tell the whole story.
- **Ask for a response.** Ask specifically for your legislator's support. Listening and nodding does not indicate agreement. Find out if you have convinced him or her on your position.
- **Establish a relationship.** Distinguish yourself from others by calling or writing to your legislators. Let them know when they have done something right. Don't approach them only when you want something. Legislators respond best to people from their own districts. Try to go with someone from his or her district when you talk with a legislator.
- **Say thanks.** Thank your legislator for meeting with you or for reading about your position on an issue.

How to contact your federal representatives

Many federal laws affect children and families, including laws involving health care, safety and education. Wisconsin is represented in the United States Congress by two senators and eight representatives.

[Find out who your congressmen are](#) and how to contact them by letter, phone or email. Most legislators maintain their own Websites. Many also send newsletters to their constituents periodically to let them know about pending issues.

Both the [U.S. House of Representatives Website](#) and the [U.S. Senate Website](#) provide detailed information about the legislative process.

How to contact your state legislators

The actions of state government should be based on the wishes and concerns of its citizens. Wisconsin's Legislature is made up of two elected bodies, or houses – the Assembly and Senate. Your state representative and senator need to hear from you. It is important that he or she understands your concerns, knows your position on a bill and answers your questions about legislative proposals before the Wisconsin Assembly or Senate.

The [Wisconsin State Legislature Website](#) includes an easy form for you to use to identify your legislators by entering your address. Or you can look at a state map online.

You can call, write letters, send emails or arrange face-to-face meetings with your legislator to discuss your views on issues that affect you, your family and your community. You also may leave a message for your legislator's Capitol office or indicate your position on legislation through the toll-free Legislative Hotline at 800-362-9472.

[Learn more about the state legislative process](#) and how you can provide input.

Things to remember when contacting legislators

Because lawmakers often rely on letters from constituents to gauge public opinion in their districts, here are some things to remember:

- **Contact your own legislator as well as the chairperson and members of the appropriate committee.** It is important that committee members receive your opinion while they are holding hearings on legislation in which you are interested.
- **Put your return address on the letter.** The envelope sometimes gets thrown away before the letter is answered. If you are emailing a message, include your full name and address.
- **Identify your subject clearly.** If you are writing about a specific piece of legislation, provide the name or number of the bill, if possible.
- **State your reasons clearly.** Your own personal experience is the best supporting evidence. Explain how the issue affects you, your family or your community. Be specific and brief (one page is best). Clearly state whether you are for or against the bill or resolution. Support your position with reliable facts and figures.
- **Write your letter in your own words.** Avoid form letters that identify your message as part of an organized pressure campaign. A sincere, heartfelt letter expressing your concerns is much more influential.
- **Be reasonable.** Don't ask for the impossible or engage in threats. Courtesy always is appropriate. If you disagree, do so without being argumentative.
- **Time the arrival of your contact.** Your phone call, letter or email should reach your legislator before legislation is acted upon in a committee. Usually it is best to offer comments on legislation while it is still in committee.
- **Ask your legislator for his or her position in a response.** As a constituent, you are entitled to know.
- **Thank your legislator if he or she has done something you think is right on a particular issue.** Everyone likes a pat on the back, and it will be remembered.