

ADVOCACY IN PREVENTION: WHAT WE CAN AND CANNOT DO

Advocacy is the process of stakeholders' making their voices heard on issues that affect their lives and the lives of others at the local, state, and national level. It also means helping policymakers find specific solutions to persistent problems. Most nonprofits can and do engage in as much advocacy as possible to achieve their goals. Prevention professionals advocate to support an idea or cause that affects behavioral health and health care. When done effectively, advocacy influences public policy by providing a channel for individuals and organizations to voice an opinion. These efforts can, in turn, sway public opinion, garner press coverage, and ultimately provide policymakers an opportunity to respond to constituents' needs.

Lobbying is a type of advocacy that attempts to **influence specific legislation**. State and federal funders in general forbid providers to lobby specifically when working under the aegis of federal funds. Limitations on lobbying are policy positions set by a funder.

Educating the public and/or legislators **on a specific issue** is not considered lobbying.

Examples of Advocacy Prevention professionals can and should advocate for proactive legislation that supports behavioral health. Examples include:

- ✓ Describe at a legislative hearing the outcomes of similar legislation in other states.
- ✓ Encourage coalition members from organizations that do not receive federal or state funds to express their position on pending legislation related to the coalition's mission without suggesting a course of action.
- ✓ Testify during work time that is clearly documented to be from non-state or federal funds.
- ✓ Distribute information packets that indicate why the content of a piece of legislation might be harmful to youth.
- ✓ Organize a legislative forum to share information related to substance misuse and its impact.
- ✓ Discuss a prevention issue in public.
- ✓ Provide information to groups, constituents or legislators on a prevention issue.
- ✓ Respond to a legislative committee's written request for information or testimony.
- ✓ Explain prevention-related laws or policies to any group or person.
- ✓ Create and distribute prevention-related fact sheets or "white papers."
- ✓ Tell a member of Congress or the state legislature how a grant your organization received has helped your constituents.
- ✓ Educate a member of Congress or your state legislature about the effects of an existing policy or legislation on your constituency
- ✓ Invite a member of Congress to visit your organization so that he/she may see firsthand how federal funding or a policy affects day-to-day operations and the difference it makes.
- ✓ Contact a legislator *as a citizen of their district* or ward to support for passage of a particular bill or ordinance.

Examples of Lobbying On the other hand, it would be considered lobbying to:

- ✓ Post support for an upcoming bill on social media listing one's credentials and employment at a prevention program.
- ✓ Take a position on an existing piece of legislation at a hearing or other public event sponsored by one's organization.
- ✓ Recommend that coalition members or other citizens vote for or against pending legislation while acting in one's professional role.
- ✓ Circular a petition to support or veto a piece of legislation or policy.
- ✓ Assist in the writing of potential legislation or legislative amendments.

