

May
2022

Partnership Policy Spotlight

Community Action Recognizes Advocacy as Part of Community Action Month



ADVOCACY IS ESSENTIAL TO COMMUNITY ACTION

A primary goal of the original Community Action Program was to empower all residents of a community to create opportunity-rich environments where they could thrive – “to help people help themselves and each other.” The architects of the program recognized that effectively fighting poverty required not just coordinating services, but also the “maximum feasible participation” of groups receiving those services. They understood that poverty and political exclusion are inherently intertwined and that addressing that powerlessness meant that programs needed to instill a sense of political empowerment in their customers. In the words of Robert Kennedy, “maximum feasible participation means giving the poor a real voice in their institutions.”

Community Action Month

reminds us that our touchstone of participatory justice continues today and is an opportunity to empower customers by reaching out to elected officials, partners,



and community leaders, telling them about your organization’s work, and inviting them to engage at an event or site visit. The National Community Action Partnership celebrates all forms of advocacy that lift up the people we serve.

THE ADVOCACY CONTINUUM

Some may find the idea of advocacy initiatives daunting, but Community Action advocacy is a broad continuum of actions – it encompasses sharing customer stories, directly lobbying policymakers, and everything in between. Every point on the continuum presents opportunities

for resident empowerment, participation, and self-advocacy.

Advocating for communities can be as simple as educating policymakers and community partners about customer needs, the services that agencies provide, and problems facing groups accessing services. Examples include inviting local officials, state policymakers, and other community organizations to visit an agency and engage with customers, or drafting press releases that announce new or expanding services, or share first-person customer success stories with the community. Social media campaigns are also an effective way to lift up customer voices and shape the

local and national narrative around economic equity.

On the direct lobbying side, CAAs are perfectly situated to identify more structured opportunities for policy change through needs assessments. Services are molded to community needs and the same principle applies to policy change. As trusted local hubs, CAAs can collect data across customer and stakeholder groups, flagging policy problems and empowering customers in the process. To identify potential policy changes, ask: “What problems are facing different groups in our community? What policy changes could mitigate or solve these problems? What types of advocacy could achieve that policy change?”

To help guide the policy work of CAAs, NCAP has established a [Policy Platform](#) outlining broad positions on topics relevant to the Network that can serve as a starting point for identifying issues. Once you’ve identified a policy change to work toward, ask: “Which policymakers control this policy? Which of our priorities and values do they share? What is the process for the policy change we support?” Examples of direct lobbying include voicing support for or opposition to specific legislative or

administrative proposals by engaging with policymakers through meetings, letters, and phone calls, or letters to the editor persuasively outlining the reasons for your policy position.

INCORPORATING ADVOCACY

Advocacy should not be a discrete initiative, but rather folded into the everyday work of an organization. Multiple programs often run by CAAs lend themselves to effective engagement with elected officials and community leaders, for

example: invite them to visit a home in the process of being weatherized; have them help distribute food boxes and talk with customers; or invite them to participate in a Head Start Graduation ceremony. Not only do these strategies avoid triggering lobbying rules, they help elected officials fulfill their responsibility to engage with and represent the communities they serve.

COALITION BUILDING

It’s also important to identify allies and participate in coalitions

Advocacy Resources

- NCAP has multiple policy and advocacy resources available including our [Policy Platform](#), [policy and advocacy landing page](#), [outreach and engagement initiatives](#), and a webinar/slide deck on strategies for effective advocacy in your community. You can also contact [Ryan Gelman](#), our Public Policy and Advocacy Project Director, with any policy or advocacy questions.
- [CAPLAW](#) is a valuable resource for [understanding the difference between advocacy and lobbying and what rules apply in which context](#). You can also [contact CAPLAW attorneys directly](#) if you have a specific question about an advocacy/lobbying issue.
- [Bolder Advocacy](#) is a program created by Alliance for Justice to assist nonprofits with advocacy rules and strategies, and publishes many useful resources including [tools for effective advocacy](#) and an [Ask an Expert option](#) for specific questions.



Issues We're Tracking

that share your values and policy priorities. Coalitions are extremely effective advocacy tools because they expand an organization's network and support base, amplify resources, diversify perspectives, and provide motivation and momentum. Before forming or joining a coalition, it's important to have candid discussions about goals, division of labor and other resources, organizational structure (committees/subcommittees), and potential concessions and deal breakers.

FORWARD!

For almost 60 years, participatory justice has been a fundamental and unique characteristic of Community Action. These days, policy discussions feel increasingly national, but even though a federal focus is relevant, especially for the funding and administration of various programs, much of the advocacy work necessary to advance economic justice is happening at the local level by strengthening communities. Community Action has the power to amplify advocacy efforts that expand civic participation and stimulate a community's social and economic institutions in a way that increases opportunities for both individual residents and the entire community.

- Engaging on the [CSBG Modernization Act](#) is a great starting point for Community Action advocacy. On civic participation specifically, the bill includes language drawing clear lines about eligible entity on-site voter registration activities. Check-out the [NCAP](#) and [NCAF](#) landing pages for the CSBG bill!
- [NCAP, NCAF, and multiple state associations and CAAs have endorsed](#) the recently-introduced [Nonprofit Sector Strength and Partnership Act of 2022](#), which creates structured forums for government-nonprofit engagement (including a White House Office on Nonprofit Sector Partnership) and expands and diversifies data collection on the nonprofit workforce. [Check out Independent Sector's landing page to learn more!](#) [Click here to add your organization's support!](#)
- The [National Council of Nonprofits](#) has [identified issues affecting nonprofit advocacy activities in their Public Policy Agenda](#) ("Section V – Advocacy Rights: Promoting Civic Engagement"), which can serve as guideposts for organizations engaging on rules affecting nonprofit advocacy activities.

