

HOW TO ORGANIZE A LEGISLATIVE NETWORK

“Effective advocacy requires a clear analysis of the political environment, an understanding of the concrete problem and a coherent proposal for its solution. Strategies can include use of communications media to form public opinion, educating decision makers, organizing public events, research, creation of a coalition and other activities.” — CRS Advocacy Criteria and Guidelines, Overseas Operations, January 2002

It can be difficult to get people involved in advocating for international issues. Often, you will hear:

- “Why should I call my senators about a war in far-off Liberia? What do I have to do with that?”
- “We have a lot of problems here at home that I need to worry about. We should take care of our own people first!”
- “International issues are too complicated.”

The following are excerpts from *Global Solidarity in Action: A Guide for International Issue Advocacy in the United States* by CRS.

But, as faithful citizens, we are called to be concerned about the wellbeing of all of God’s people, near and far. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers—not only here at home, but around the world.

At the same time, international issues can be very complex. Foreign assistance, for example, is difficult to grasp. It often involves mind-boggling figures—\$3 billion for HIV and AIDS programs, for example—and sets policy priorities in legalistic terms a layperson may find hard to understand. It is important, however, to remind ourselves that global solidarity and international peace and justice are important to us because our faith calls us to care for and support all of our brothers and sisters worldwide and because many times, these issues do affect us directly.

Our government’s policy prescriptions represent our society’s values. We vote for the people who make our policies, so ultimately, we the people are responsible for what our government does. When it comes to international policy making, a decision about what to do with our tax money can be a matter of life and death for the poor in Africa and other areas in the world.

The following can assist you in developing your action plan for advocacy:



1. Identify an international issue to work on.

Often, it helps to focus in on a particular issue that your community may be very interested in, which will galvanize the maximum number of people to become involved in advocacy on international issues.

- Find out what people in your community care about; for example, the growing community of “new” Americans might foster interest in immigration and refugee issues. Causes of poor health in your community may lead to interest in addressing maternal and child health initiatives.
- Talk to leading community advocates about what they care about, and connect their concerns to an international issue that could interest and excite people.
- Have a vision for what you would like to accomplish and how to attract other people to your cause.
- Be positive! Advocacy around international issues can be very challenging. Stay focused on your vision of how your efforts will support global justice and solidarity.

2. Clarify your goals by:

- Defining the issue you are working on and imagining the outcome once the issue has been resolved.
- Outlining short- and long-term goals for your advocacy work.

3. Building Grassroots Advocacy Capacity

Before you can effectively advocate on an international issue, you must create the power base for it. Power in politics is often associated with big money, fancy Washington, D.C., events and lobbyists. However, power also comes in numbers. The more people you can involve in your cause, the greater the impact that your message and activities will have. Politicians take notice when large numbers of people are delivering the same message to them about international issues. To build a power base with like-minded advocates, find out:

- What advocacy capacity does your diocese/parish/college or university or community group have?
- Is there an established legislative network in your diocese or other organization that you could recruit for your efforts?
- Are there groups in your area that share common values and concerns?
- Would working together increase effectiveness?

4. Establishing a Legislative Network

A legislative network is a group of people that can be called upon to contact their elected officials about a particular piece of legislation or policy initiative. With the immediacy of the internet, such networks are often linked by email. But some networks still spread the word by telephone tree, which can be just as effective. Networks can be made up of tens, thousands or even millions of people.

If your diocese, parish or other group does not already have a legislative network, but you find that there is enough support, staff capacity and funding to establish one, here are some tips to get you started. For more information about legislative network matters, please contact the [CRS Regional office](#) for your state.

▪ **Organize the Network**

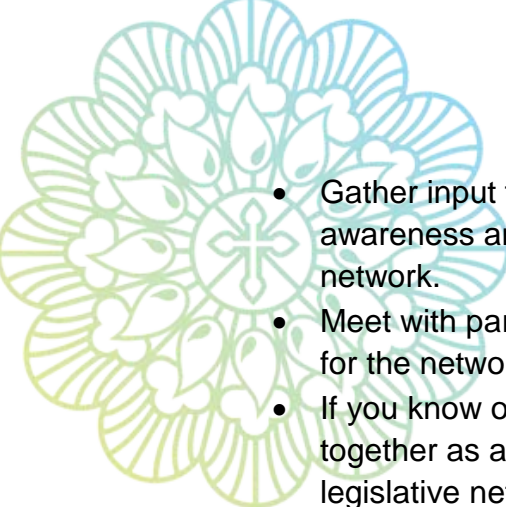
- Identify people who have the interest, time and talent to organize the network. Consider establishing a committee of people who can coordinate the network.
- Identify and fill needs to administer the network, including computer software programs, registration forms, filing systems and categorizing of people and their interests (HIV and AIDS, global poverty, global hunger, etc.).
- Explore how other dioceses, parishes and groups have organized their legislative networks. Take note of best practices and tips.
- Develop goals and action steps for implementation, including:
 - Recruitment of leaders and members;
 - How the network will operate;
 - How communication will happen;
 - Network member training and support;
 - Focus of advocacy work—city, state or federal issues? Domestic and/or international issues?
 - Determine sources of advocacy materials: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: Social Development and World Peace/Domestic and International, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Campaign for Human Development, State Catholic Conferences or other national organizations, such as Franciscan Bread for the World, Pax Christi, NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice or city/county/local community organizations.

▪ **Establish the Reasons for Creating a Legislative Network**

- **Create a mission statement.** A mission statement will provide focus for why the establishment of a legislative network is important in your diocese, parish, university/college or other community group. And remember, the value of a network goes beyond just passing a bill: a network provides a way for people to put their faith into action.

▪ **Network and Coalition Build to Strengthen the Network**

- Take inventory: what group in your city or state already has a network? How is it organized?
- Identify possible groups that you could contact. Find out how your diocese, parish or other group can maximize its voice by working with others such as ecumenical and interfaith groups, community and other grassroots organizations.
- Ensure support from supervisors, colleagues, your bishop, pastors or parish leaders.

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- Gather input from different people who may be critical partners to raise awareness and ensure that a broad group is invested in the success of the network.
 - Meet with parish and/or appropriate leaders to scout out potential new leaders for the network.
 - If you know of others who are interested in international issues, bring them together as a group and encourage them to work together to build a legislative network.

5. Promote the Legislative Network

- Prioritize issues via a regular annual event, diocesan committee meeting or survey.
- Include information about your network in all your materials and incorporate it into your talks and visits. Always have a sign-up sheet for the legislative network with you.
- Develop training with already available materials, including Catholic social teaching and bishops' statements, and work with the diocese/parish to gather ideas and develop handouts.
- Include information about political consciousness, the political system and the place of faith/Catholic social teaching in the public square in your presentations and materials.
- Provide ongoing support via background materials/information, action alerts and other resources.
- Organize events with speakers, create review time for issues, organize delegations to district offices, and initiate other activities that help people grow in their understanding of political realities.
- Hold regular events like annual conferences/workshops and lobby days (state and/or federal), or publish articles and op-ed pieces through your diocesan newspaper and other local newspapers.
- Set up opportunities for you and other committee members to speak at conferences and events that include the issues your network is promoting.
- Invite CRS to give an advocacy skill-building workshop or participate in your conference.

6. Rewards and Recognition

- Always inform your legislative network membership of the outcome of legislation or policy change.
- Remind people to thank their elected officials for a job well done.
- Bring people together to evaluate and celebrate.
- Present awards.



- If appropriate, ask the bishop or other leaders to convene advocacy leaders to thank them for their work.

7. Evaluation

Evaluating the effectiveness of advocacy is very difficult, and requires additional work from volunteers. However, effectiveness is the key to growing your legislative network.

- Always ask advocates to report back on actions taken. This is a very important step because it will provide ways for you to analyze the effectiveness of your advocacy efforts.
- Create resources to assist network members to understand the importance of evaluating the impact of their action.
- Evaluate your system as a whole: does it work? What could be better? How helpful were the communications? What lessons were learned from a particular legislative session, and how do they impact the next session?

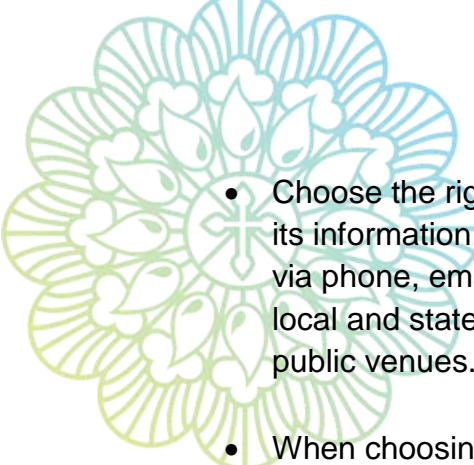
1. Researching and Developing your Message

It is important that you and your allies know the advocacy issue you are supporting well, and understand the process by which policies are changed. To become experts on both the issue and process, consider the following:

- What are organizations like CRS saying about your particular advocacy issue? Collect data from the web, printed materials, the media and other credible sources.
- Find the “human face” of the advocacy issue. This is critical to not only recruit new advocates, but also to connect with your lawmakers. Data and numbers can be very persuasive, but a story about a real person affected by policies is even more effective. CRS has many different stories from all over the world that can help you to personalize your advocacy efforts. Visit the CRS Media Center at <http://www.crs.org/media-center> for more information.
- Summarize the information you have gathered into a short format that is easy to understand. Make sure you include the following elements:
 - a. Keep it simple.
 - b. Present the issue from a “personal” view.
 - c. Know your audience and tailor your message accordingly .
 - d. Offer a solution.

2. Delivering Your Message

It is important to know what systems are available for you to deliver your message, and who the messenger will be. Think of the following:

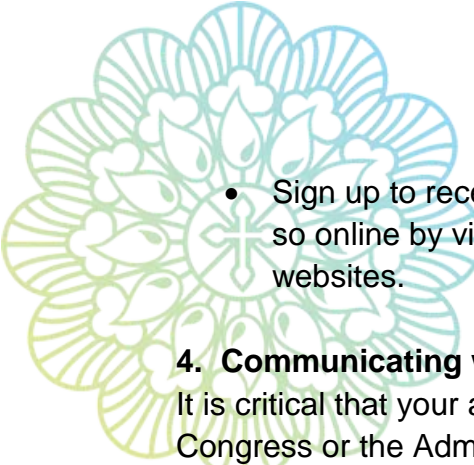
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- Choose the right message delivery system according to how your audience gets its information. If you are targeting Congress, consider delivering your message via phone, email, letters, faxes and personal meetings. Other options include local and state-level media, websites, church bulletins, billboards and other public venues.
 - When choosing a messenger, think of who is most capable of delivering a coherent, persuasive message. For international issues, it is often very effective to recruit someone who has traveled to or worked in developing countries overseas. Additionally, immigrants and refugees in your community may be willing to share their experiences of the global issue you are advocating for. Remember, the human face of the advocacy message is critical.

3. Getting to Know Your Audience

Most advocacy around international issues is done on the federal level, with Congress and the administration. To be effective, it is important to know your audience—your senators, your representative, the president and key members of his administration

Consider the following questions:

- *What makes the elected official you are “targeting” tick? What arguments persuade him/her?* You can learn a lot about your elected officials from your local newspaper, or by following the news on television or on the web. Find out what issues they really care about. For example, is there a specific issue your representative or senator seems to bring up more often than other issues? Has she/he championed specific issues in Congress? The next step is to find a way to approach your advocacy with your elected official using the arguments that will most likely persuade her/him based on your research.
- *What issues have the elected officials supported that you are most concerned about?* Did your senators and representative support the Global AIDS Bill? Do they support immigration reform or more food aid? You can contact the CRS Community Engagement Department to find out how your congressional delegation voted on an issue that you care about.
- *Who are your elected official’s allies? Is there a way to persuade his or her allies to support your cause so that they can help influence the elected official?* Maybe your congressional representatives have a close relationship to business in your area or labor groups. If so, think about whether you may have ties to those groups, and whether you could work with them to forge relationships with members of Congress based on an international issue you are working on.

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- Sign up to receive your congressional representatives' newsletters. You can do so online by visiting the Senate (www.senate.gov) and House (www.house.gov) websites.

4. Communicating with Your Elected Officials

It is critical that your advocacy efforts include constant interaction with your members of Congress or the Administration that you are trying to persuade on specific international issues. Consider checking out the Catholic Confront Global Poverty toolkit page for assistance on using the following tools for effective communication with your elected officials:

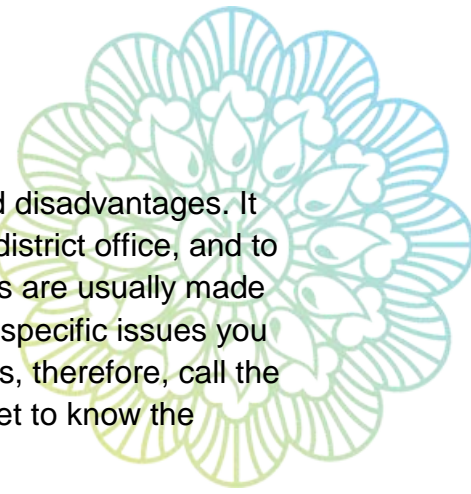
Letter writing and phone calls to elected officials are two of the most important ways you can influence their decision making on important foreign policy questions. Thanks to the internet, letter writing now encompasses both email, as well as the traditional postal service, to get your point across. There are both pros and cons to using traditional mail or electronic mail when communicating with elected officials.

Writing an actual paper letter often demonstrates a real commitment to your cause. Elected officials always take note if their constituents actually took the time out of their busy days to write a letter, put it into an envelope, stick a stamp on it and drop it into a mailbox. That takes a lot of time and effort! Letters are also visual proof of how much people care about a particular issue. A stack of letters or a bin filled with postcards can leave a lasting impression on a member of Congress as he/she contemplates his/her position on a bill or policy initiative.

At the same time, however, given tightened mail security, “snail mail” usually takes a long time—often weeks—to reach congressional offices. When important issues are moving through Congress quickly, traditional letters may not reach the intended audience in time. In that situation, emails or phone calls are the best means of communication.

Email can also be very effective when considering that congressional offices usually “tally” the numbers of incoming messages on a particular issue. Remember what we said about power in numbers? The more emails hit that a member’s inbox, the more attention he/she will pay to the message.

Phone calls to the Washington, D.C., offices of your elected officials are also very valuable. Often, connecting with the right staff person who is responsible for advising the member of Congress on a particular issue be it foreign aid, trade or migration, can be very rewarding and can set the tone for a lasting relationship with that office.



Contacting members' district offices back home has advantages and disadvantages. It is important to build a strong relationship with the senior staff in the district office, and to ensure that they know your priority issues. However, policy decisions are usually made in Washington, D.C., and office staff there will know more about the specific issues you are advocating for than the district staff. For pressing policy concerns, therefore, call the Washington, D.C., office. For relationship building, make sure you get to know the members' staffs in their district offices.

The overarching lesson to be learned is that it is important to use ALL the communication vehicles at your disposal to be an effective advocate. Utilizing one method alone will not always accomplish your goal, especially if the goal is difficult to achieve like convincing an elected official to switch his or her position on providing more funding for humanitarian assistance.

Tips for communicating with your elected officials include:

- Keep your message concise and focused on a single issue. Multiple messages or requests can be overwhelming and weaken what you are trying to communicate.
- Be respectful and avoid critical comments on issues of disagreement. Instead, express your disappointment about your member's position, and explain why your view offers a better alternative.
- Communicate your convictions and beliefs, but avoid using a moralizing or preachy tone.
- Convey why the issue matters to you, and if possible, relate the issue back to your congressional district or state and to prior statements made by the elected official.
- Avoid references to political parties or party positions.

Personal Meetings

Setting up personal meetings with your elected officials or their staff is another great way to communicate your message. Personal interaction allows for debate on issues, and provides you with an opportunity to share your concerns and ask for specific commitments from your elected officials. Individual meetings also open the door for future communications; this is a good way to establish a personal relationship with the office.

Tips for how to communicate with your elected officials or their staff in person:

- **Be prepared.** Know the issue you will be bringing to their attention, have a set of convincing arguments in support of your position ready, and know what you want from your communication. CRS is happy to support you in your preparation. We can give you the most up-to-date information about legislation, provide talking points, and make sure you have the best arguments to "win your case."

- **Know what you want and expect.** Setting expectations for a meeting can lay the framework for evaluating the meeting afterward.
- **Assign roles.** Make sure you and members of your group know what each of you will be talking about so that the message stays clear and concise.
- **Be on time, courteous and positive.** Remember that most people will not be won over by overly aggressive language or a negative attitude.
- **Make clear whom you and your team are representing.** It is important for your elected official and/or staff to know what interest you are representing and what kind of “power” is behind the message.
- **Take notes.** This is particularly important for follow-up with the office, especially if they have questions about your issue that cannot be answered during the meeting.
- **Ask for a commitment.** This commitment may be to just “continue the discussion.” Don’t expect to have a positive outcome right away.

After your meeting, make sure to:

- Debrief with your team, and identify next steps.
- Share information with your partners and fellow advocates.
- Call or email the CRS Community Engagement Department to let us know the outcome of your meeting, and if there is anything we can do to support your follow-up.
- Send a thank-you note to the people you met, and provide any information they may have asked for in your meeting. Take this opportunity to reiterate your message.
- Remind the staff about your meeting every time you call or write a letter to the office to refresh their memories about your efforts and to build a lasting relationship with them.

Petitions and Sign-on Letters

Oftentimes petitions and sign-on letters can be used to demonstrate the strength of your advocacy message. Sign-on letters usually highlight a specific policy issue, for example, requesting a certain amount of funding for the foreign aid appropriations bill. They outline the reasons why the undersigned support the specific issue, and why the elected officials receiving the letter should support the request. Such a letter is followed by a list of signatures from individuals or from leaders representing larger groups and organizations. To be effective, petitions and sign-on letters must include a broad range of interest groups and individuals, speaking in one voice on a particular issue.





Acknowledgement and Thanks

It is very important to make sure you acknowledge the work of your elected officials, especially when they “do something right.” Make sure to communicate your approval and appreciation for their support of your advocacy issues with phone calls, emails and letters. Thank-you notes are always welcome and very effective in building a good relationship with an elected official's office.

How to Work with the Media for Advocacy

The media—newspapers, radio, television, internet—is a very effective tool for advocacy, because it reaches a broad audience and has the attention of elected officials. Some guidelines to think about as you consider engaging the media in your advocacy efforts include:

- **Establish your reasons for reaching out to the media.** General awareness raising? Recruitment of more grassroots advocates? Sending a message to your congressional delegation or the White House?
- **Consider available media outlets.** For example, diocesan newspaper, radio or TV station, school newsletter or university newspaper.
- **Identify the appropriate media outlet.** For example, if your budget is limited, a television ad is not realistic, but “free” media as part of a diocesan newspaper article might be effective in reaching new advocates.
- **“Target” your message to the right audience.** If you are trying to get an article about your advocacy issue published, consider what kinds of media outlets are available. For example, what kinds of stories does your diocesan newspaper prefer and in what format?
- **Identify a “hook” for your story.** If you are working on HIV/AIDS, consider approaching the media around World AIDS Day (December 1) to feature a story about local efforts to fight the global AIDS pandemic.
- **Keep it short and simple.**

Your [CRS Regional Office](#) is also available to support your work by providing information, advice and training, or you may call the U.S. Operations Call Center at 1-866-608-5978. For current policy issues of concern to CRS, the [Catholics Confront Global Poverty site](#) and the [CRS Media site](#) have available press releases, stories, pictures and opinion editorials you may use for wider distribution. Contact your CRS Regional Office, or call the U.S. Operations Call Center for more information.