



How to Be a Better Advocate for Older Adults, People with Disabilities and Their Caregivers

Explore the crucial role of advocating for older adults, people with disabilities, and their caregivers with state and federal legislators. Dignity Alliance Massachusetts offers actionable advice and strategies for individuals to effectively engage with policymakers and drive positive changes.

Effecting real change at the state and federal levels often means contacting state legislators and occasionally members of Congress to raise awareness about the needs and concerns of older adults, people with disabilities and their caregivers.

Lobbying elected officials may seem intimidating, but keep in mind that you are an advocate for other people who need help and who are among the most vulnerable in our population – a population that is a growing part of their constituency. When you understand the legislative ecosystem and how legislation is created, you can better communicate your needs to legislators and communities.

HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR OLDER ADULTS, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, AND CAREGIVERS

Here are six quick tips that make advocating to help others a little easier.

Get to know your elected officials

One of the best times to talk to elected officials is before they are elected. Candidates for office are often more willing to talk about local issues. Once they are elected, make sure that you contact them and get to know them when the legislative body is not doing business such as attending community events or visiting them in district office hours.

Invite your legislator to events in your area so that when you call, they can put a face to the name. Events that focus on the issues concerning older adults or those with disabilities are especially productive. This also gives you more time to interact

informally. And while you get to know your legislators, take time to also know their staff, as they are often the ones who deliver messages and set up meetings.

Always thank your elected officials

To start your meetings out on a good note, thank your elected officials for their service. If you know of a particular piece of legislation they shepherded or something else they have done that positively impacted you or your organization, thank them for that. If you do not, simply thank them for their time and service. When you thank the legislator, be sure to thank any staff members with whom you interact as well. Sending a thank you note after your meeting also gives you a chance to reiterate your point while practicing courtesy.

Find common ground

If you have a specific ask, get to that point because your legislator may not have much time to give you. Be prepared and get right to your question, then listen to the legislator. They are much more likely to speak to someone that will give and take than someone who cannot compromise and will not listen to their point of view.

For example, if you are both concerned about the use of federal funding, listen to what the legislator has to say in addition to sharing your viewpoint, then find the common ground between your views. Maybe the solution is using some funding for your project, and you support some funding for their project back in your area. And remember, always be civil.

Tell your story

Rather than just sharing numbers and statistics, try to speak to impact. This will make your request more memorable. Tell the legislator about a program that will be cut if you don't get funding — and make the consequences clear. Explain how many people this will impact and how it will impact them specifically.

Let them know why this is so important to you. Chances are the legislator has already been provided with statistics, but if you tell them the story of Maria and how much she needs the increase in her personal needs allowance or how much she wants to go home if there's sufficient funding for home care and rental assistance. Invite that legislator to visit a nursing home or home care recipient.

It's always better to share a concrete problem than a generic request for more funding. Include links to Dignity Alliance or ask if they receive *the Dignity Digest* so that the official can learn more about your agenda. If they don't receive it, offer to submit their email to Dignity Alliance.

Use the time out of session

Advocacy is a year-round project. When the state legislature or Congress is in recess is a

good time to familiarize yourself with the legislative process, and what bills may be coming from a state or national level. We tend to focus on legislators during the legislative session. However, during this time it may be more difficult to get their time and attention. Setting up a meeting is easier out of session.

If you do get a meeting, leave your legislator with a letterhead page of Dignity Alliance's priority concerns and what you would like to see happen during the session. This is also the best time to invite them to functions and events in your area, so they can see the outcome of legislative action. Take them to the local café or senior center and introduce them to key community members. Help them develop a fondness for your neighborhood and community like you have.

When an important issue comes up, communicate

While all the tips shared here are important, knowing and tracking important legislative bills is key to advocacy. This is true whether you support a bill or are opposed to it. A legislator only knows what is important to you if you tell them. When you contact your legislator, identify your name and make clear that you are a constituent.

Spread the word and get others in your district, community or field to weigh in. Use the specific bill number and let them know where you stand on it.

SAVE TIME AND MAXIMIZE IMPACT

Legislators have their plates full, and we know you do too. To save time and maximize your impact, use the Dignity Alliance advocacy platform when you received a Dignity Action Alert. It can help you contact legislators quickly when alerts are needed to act on a bill or budget.

IT ONLY TAKES A MINUTE! GO TO: www.dignityma.org , click on ADVOCACY, then click on TAKE ACTION, when the action alert appears, type in your address at the bottom, then click GO. Fill in your name and contact information, and hit SUBMIT. Your email will go to your state legislator or member of Congress depending on whether it is a state or federal issue. THAT'S ALL!

Once you've sent your message, you can expand your impact by asking relatives and friends to do the same, using the same system. They don't have to be participants in Dignity Alliance to add their voice to the cause. At the bottom of the cover message from Dignity Alliance there's a link to forward the message to a friend and the system allows sending the message to five others. Your active support will help to deliver transformational change to the lives of many others. Thank you!