



Nonprofit Voices: Tapping the Power of the Board

Are you drawing on the tremendous resource your board can be in advocating for your organization?

By Marcia Avner

Board members have critical roles to play in nonprofit advocacy and lobbying. As community leaders – and they’re all community leaders by virtue of serving on a nonprofit board – they’re powerful players in implementing nonprofit advocacy strategies.

Board members need to understand the value of advocacy.

Advocacy is important to all nonprofits’ work. Public policy decisions will be made with or without nonprofits’ voices. Nonprofits have information and experience that are needed to inform the public dialogue.

Most board members know that policy shaping is vital to meeting their nonprofit’s mission. What they need to understand is that advocacy and lobbying are legal and that, as organization leaders, they have a unique role to play in the advocacy process. Here are some effective ways to engage board members in nonprofit advocacy and lobbying:

- **Recruit board members** who understand the political landscape and are eager to advocate on behalf of your nonprofit.
- **Provide training** for all your organization’s stakeholders so they understand the laws that govern nonprofit advocacy and lobbying. Most nonprofit leaders and volunteers don’t know how much advocacy and lobbying nonprofits can and should do!



Board members have critical roles to play in nonprofit advocacy and lobbying.

- **Engage board members in planning** when you first develop your advocacy and strategic plans. Tap and build their expertise throughout the planning process.
- **Respect and underscore** their importance as decision makers. The board not only plans but must be involved in major decisions as the policy shaping process evolves.
- **Ask board members to lead** a Public Policy Committee to advance your policy plans.
- **Decide with board members which specific tasks** each is prepared to do as part of your advocacy work. Board members appreciate clear role definition.
- **Support board members with materials, logistics, and the company of colleagues** who will make these tasks manageable, interesting, and exciting for them.
- **For board members new to policy, demystify the process** with basic training in advocacy and lobbying; a working tour of your state capitol, city hall, or other arenas of influence; and conversations with

the elected and appointed officials who are your champions.

- **Keep board members engaged in critical analysis, evaluation, and celebration** of your advocacy work, shaping course directions as your work advances.

Board members want to know their roles.

Let board members know the important roles they can play in your organization’s advocacy efforts. For example:

- They are **decision makers**. Key board members should serve on your nonprofit’s “Rapid Response Team” when immediate decisions must be made in the course of advocacy and lobbying efforts.
- Board members are **community connectors** and can expand your organization’s reach to stakeholders who will support your cause.
- Board members are often a nonprofit organization’s most compelling **messengers**. Because they’ve given their time and money to an organization whose mission they support, they have respected standing in policy arenas. Their community leadership may already be recognized by policy makers, and that adds to their power. ■

Marcia Avner is public policy director at the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, teaches in the Master of Arts in Advocacy and Political Leadership at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, and is author of The Nonprofit Board Member’s Guide to Lobbying and Advocacy and The Lobbying and Advocacy Handbook for Nonprofit Organizations (www.fieldstonealliance.org).