



Legislative Breakfasts: Building Relationships with State Legislators

Here's how one organization is making its voice heard – and how you can duplicate its success. It's as simple as picking up the phone.



Reaching the legislature and its leadership is critical to the mission of the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers (MCHSP). Through the early 1990s, MCHSP organized rallies at the State House followed by visits to senators and representatives. As other groups began to use this strategy, MCHSP sought new ways to distinguish itself and its message.

In 2004, MCHSP created a “Legislative Awareness Campaign” to promote its *Five Point Agenda for Human Service Reform*. The Campaign’s central goals included engaging elected officials at the local level and informing them of the importance of nonprofit organizations and community-based programs. The focus on engagement at the local level was based on the belief that legislators who see programs and people served firsthand are more likely to make decisions that are responsive to the community. The *Five Point Agenda* grew out of a need to ensure that local organizations (MCHSP’s members) were speaking with a unified voice about critical issues. Local service providers were encouraged to use this agenda in advocacy efforts to present a consistent message to legislators.

Finding an Effective Strategy

Of the many new advocacy strategies MCHSP and its 300 members tried in 2004, one of the most successful was holding legislative breakfasts. MCHSP encouraged local service providers to host these breakfasts, often in partnership with each other. To promote the breakfasts, MCHSP staff and board members attended as many as possible and announced them in MCHSP’s statewide newsletter.

The breakfasts proved more effective than fighting for legislators’ attention at the State House. Such breakfasts also accomplish the following:

- **Strengthen relationships** between legislators and nonprofits at the local level.
- **Generate positive press** coverage.
- **Increase legislators’ knowledge** of issues important to local nonprofits.

- **Develop** nonprofits' advocacy skills.

Cost of the breakfasts? An average of \$8 per person, plus rental space. Educating lawmakers about nonprofits' work? Priceless.

Pinpointing Key Success Factors

At the breakfasts, local organizations brought their clients together with elected officials and highlighted important local issues. The events gave legislators a chance to hear the stories of those served by nonprofits, in their own words.

"People and their families who are served by nonprofits are more effective than professionals at providing testimony," says Mike Ripple, Director of Operations at MCHSP. "A good event will always allow clients to tell their own stories."

Another factor that led to success was including more than one organization at each breakfast. "If legislators see five to ten provider organizations at a single breakfast, with the people they serve, it makes a point and gives us greater strength as a sector," Ripple says.

Hosting a Breakfast for Your Legislators

Here are steps any organization can follow to replicate MCHSP's legislative breakfasts and forge ties with lawmakers:

- **Call** your local legislators' schedulers, and invite the legislators to attend a breakfast. After agreeing on a date with the schedulers, begin to organize the event. (The date should be between January when the governor's budget is released and March when the House announces its budget.)
- **Choose** several board members and clients, and ask them to provide testimony at the breakfast about how your organization changes lives.
- **Invite** other local service providers to the breakfast.
- **Compile** information on the money your organization raises to complement state funds and the ways in which decreased funding has affected service delivery. Prepare a press packet with this material

along with information about your organization.

- **Arrange** for a caterer to furnish the breakfast.
- **Ask** the local media to attend your breakfast, and give each of them a press packet. Use this event as an opportunity to build your relationship with local reporters so they'll contact you when there's breaking news related to human services. If representatives from the press don't attend the breakfast, take pictures and send them to local media with a press release.



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- **At the breakfast, recognize** all legislators. If possible, give each lawmaker a few minutes to speak. Then have board members and clients talk about your nonprofit's impact on the community.
- **Provide** facts and figures in writing to lawmakers and their staff.
- **Get feedback** from elected officials to ascertain their position on critical issues.
- **Thank** your legislators and their staff for coming, and continue to maintain contact with them. Send them a special thank-you whenever they do anything that helps advance your mission.

Measuring Results

MCHSP measured its success by the number of meetings held, the

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number of people who attended, and the impact of the events. For example, in 2004, 15 breakfasts were held; some had as many as 400 attendees. The impact is difficult to measure decisively, but MCHSP believes the breakfasts helped ensure that the voice of the nonprofit community was heard in the State House, especially with regard to direct-care workers' salary reserve. This salary reserve was a major issue for nonprofits in 2004. The governor reduced the direct-care workers' salary reserve, and the Massachusetts legislature voted to override the reduction. Workforce development was one of the *Five Points* that organizations discussed with a unified voice during legislative breakfasts. And legislators appreciate the chance to meet their constituents in such an effective way.

Meeting an Ongoing Challenge

One of the challenges MCHSP faces is getting nonprofits more politically involved. MCHSP believes legislators need to be reminded that nonprofits are providing services to people identified by the state through legislative mandates. Building relationships with legislators is as easy as picking up a telephone and inviting a legislator to a breakfast. However, it's something people resist doing. "Constantly telling people to participate in policy isn't enough," says Mike Ripple. "One of the benefits of this project was showing service providers just how easy advocating for their cause can be. As one of our board members constantly reminds us: The world is run by the people who show up." ■

The Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers, Inc. (MCHSP, www.providers.org), a leading voice for change in the human service sector, is the largest statewide membership association for community-based organizations providing social, rehabilitation, education, and health care services.