

BEST PRACTICES FOR TALKING ABOUT BUDGETS AND APPROPRIATIONS

- **Who are you talking to?** It's crucial to know your audience and tailor your message accordingly.
 - ▶ **THE AUDIENCE IS LAWMAKERS.** You should have an understanding of who on the relevant committees holds power and understand how you can make your issue compelling to them professionally and personally (based on the relationship you or your lobbyist has with them and/or what they've shared publicly during media interviews and on social media). You should also understand the political climate you're working in and navigate accordingly based on shifting power dynamics and leadership roles.
 - ▶ **THE AUDIENCE IS THE MEDIA.** Remember that the appropriations process is wonky! Words like "appropriations" can be intimidating to the average consumer of news. When considering your vocabulary, try to stick to an eighth-grade reading level with minimal jargon and no acronyms. You want to tell a compelling story by pairing data with anecdotes to define the problem, illustrate how you plan to solve it, and who has the power to help you get there.
- **Where is the money going?** Lawmakers want to understand what they're investing in, not simply why they're investing in it. Whenever possible, try to break down state appropriations by legislative district. Lawmakers love to see how much is coming back to their constituents. Specifically, make a plausible case for the return on investment – relative to the cost of doing nothing, where applicable.
- **Why does this investment matter?** This is where data and storytelling come into play. Describe the problem, relying on local people with lived experience in your community (e.g., the people you serve) to describe firsthand the issues they're facing and what needs to change. Be sure to back up any anecdotes with data illustrating the gravity of the problem at hand and your program's capacity to spark the change the community needs.
- **Who will this investment help?** Lawmakers listen to their constituents more than anyone else. Keep that in mind when demonstrating what your program will do (and for whom) and why it matters. Make it personal by getting permission to share stories from real people who will benefit from the investment. As soon as you know who the key budget decision-makers will be in your state, begin identifying personal stories and localized data from their district.
- **Why now?** During budget season, lawmakers are weighing many competing priorities. Given limited resources, lawmakers need to understand what makes your issue important to invest in right now.



TIP: Idealistic language may work better with Democrats, and practical language may work better with Republicans. This isn't because Democrats aren't practical or Republicans aren't idealistic! But it does mean you may need to translate your message into another party's language to get the result you're looking for — without sacrificing your ideals or goals.

- **What tough questions can you anticipate?** Before you begin any conversation with a reporter or a lawmaker, you need to be prepared for the potential responses and reactions you'll receive. We highly recommend creating a document of tough questions and answers to push yourself and your partners to think through how to pivot back to your message in any circumstance. You need to be prepared to handle the worst-case scenario with composure!
- **Be ready to counter the opposition's message — but don't repeat it.** Monitor what the opposition says in public forums like the press, social media, and to lawmakers and prepare counterpoints. While you don't want to *repeat* the opposition's message (doing so may inadvertently legitimize or publicize it), you do want to be able to use your proactive message to effectively inoculate against it. Don't forget to consider historical context. How have similar debates played out in other states? What messages were beneficial versus harmful to their campaign?
- **Remember, you're the expert here!** Be sure to continue returning to your organization's talking points on the issue. And, take note of which talking points have been effective among various audiences in the past — either by assessing positive social media engagement, earned media pickup, or real-time reactions from lawmakers during meetings and town halls.



TIP: Before starting a coalition focused on your issue, do a scan of organizations working in this space to assess if one already exists, and if so, find out more information about their goals, membership, appropriations engagement, and how to join.