national collaborative for infants & toddlers

TOOLS FOR WINNING STATE APPROPRIATIONS CAMPAIGNS

Spring 2024

THE WHY OF APPROPRIATIONS ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

Long-term focused investments are needed for every expectant parent, infant, toddler, and caregiver to experience great health and well-being. Proper nutrition, quality health care, safe and stable homes, skilled early care and education, and financial security for families are all essential conditions for the health, development, and well-being of children aged prenatal to three (PN-3). These conditions can and should be supported by public systems funded by taxpayer dollars. The good news is that robust public investments in the PN-3 population are a win-win for families ***and*** taxpayers.

> "If it is true that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, isn't it also true a society is only as healthy as its sickest citizen and only as wealthy as its most deprived?"
>
> —Maya Angelou
> Even the Stars Look Lonesome

While many advocacy tools focus on making laws, few emphasize the power of the budget process to improve families' circumstances through strategic funding. This toolkit gives advocates a deeper understanding of the appropriations process and practical ways to make budgets work for babies!

Appropriations campaigns can be tough. Advocates are challenged to prove return on investment (ROI); competing against other issues; and, fluctuating state funds can mean fewer public dollars available when needs are the greatest. Deciphering a state budget requires patience, math, a policy analyst, and a good lobbyist. It is not unusual for state budgets to include policies that fail through normal legislative processes. When legislatures are working to pass a budget, these so-called 'poison pills' can make their way into state budgets, limiting or diverting the intended impact of the funding through earmarks or by including policy measures that preempt local authority. Even when advocates successfully secure the appropriation they need, the fight usually begins anew each budget cycle. This reality can wear down grassroots advocates and coalitions who must ask for the same thing year after year.

Even during the most politically polarizing times, people across ideologies agree that all children deserve a great start. The National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers, an organization dedicated to building an inclusive PN-3 advocacy movement, is ready to ensure that our shared values are reflected in state budgets from coast to coast. **DOING MORE FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS HELPS ALL OF US.** This toolkit will prepare advocates for the budget battles ahead with insights from lawmakers, staffers, lobbyists, and advocates, and tools for building political persuasion, pressure, and power for the PN-3 movement.

*NCIT is here to support your advocacy campaign in a variety of ways to help you plan and execute your campaign. We're eager to hear your feedback on this toolkit. What other resources would you like to see? Are there other resources you'd like to share with us? **Connect with us here through NCIT's TA portal** to begin a discussion about how we can best support your advocacy.*

national collaborative for infants & toddlers

INFLUENCING THE INSIDE GAME

DEMONSTRATING PEOPLE POWER

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

OVERVIEW OF STATE BUDGET PROCESS AND TIMELINE

To engage in appropriations advocacy, it is essential to understand the state budget process and timeline so your advocacy campaign can leverage key moments. See below for an overview of state budget processes and timelines and a list of resources with additional, state-specific information.

THE BUDGET PROCESS

1. State budget cycles begin with a revenue forecast. This process aims to estimate a projection of state revenue for the upcoming year. This forecast is essential for the Governor and state agencies to put together a proposed budget because, unlike the federal budget, the vast majority of states require a balanced budget.
   - While most states have balanced budget rules, the actual requirements vary: **44 states require the governor to propose a balanced budget; in 41 states, the legislature must pass a balanced budget; and in 40 states, the governor must sign a balanced budget**. In some states, like Vermont, the legislature is not required to pass a balanced budget, the governor is not required to sign one, and deficits may be carried over into the following year.
   - States vary in terms of how they **develop revenue forecasts**: 28 states use a consensus process, including the governor's office and legislature; in 12 states, the executive and legislature develop separate, competing forecasts; and, in 10 states, the executive solely develops the forecast.
   - States vary in terms of when and how often per year they release budget forecasts.
2. The state budget office shares budget guidance with state agencies. This includes the revenue forecast, spending targets, other relevant financial information, and guidance on the governor's policy priorities.
3. State agencies submit a budget request for the departments, programs, and services they oversee to the governor's office, where the state budget office reviews them.

TIP: This is a critical behind-the-scenes period for your appropriations advocacy campaign. Make your case to ***both*** the state agency and the governor's office for the funding you need because you're more likely to be successful if your request is in the governor's proposed budget. And long term it is best to have relationships with the state agencies that will be responsible for spending the dollars and administering the program once appropriated!

4. The governor finalizes and submits the budget to the legislature.
5. The state legislature takes up consideration of the governor's proposed budget. This typically includes both chambers holding legislative committee hearings, public hearings, and considering amendments to the budget. This results in each chamber passing its own version of the bill, followed by a conference committee to resolve differences between the two versions before final votes to approve.
   - In some states, the state legislature puts together its own budget bill that is considered concurrently with the governor's proposed budget.
6. The legislature sends the adopted budget back to the governor, where they typically have 3 options: approve the budget, veto it, or line-item veto specific parts.
   - Some states do not allow line-item vetos.

TIP: This period is where your appropriations advocacy campaign will be most active, engaging in lobbying, communications, and mobilization.

BUDGET TIMELINES

- State budget fiscal years run from July 1 to June 30 (AL, DC, MI, NY, and TX run on different schedules).
  - 30 states operate on annual budget cycles, while 20 states operate on biennial budget cycles.
- The general timeline for state budget and appropriations processes is as follows:
  - **JUL-AUG**: Budget guidelines are sent to state agencies
  - **SEPT-OCT**: Agency budget requests are submitted to the governor's office
  - **SEPT-NOV**: Agency requests are reviewed by the state budget office
  - **NOV-DEC**: Governor finalizes budget recommendations
  - **JAN**: Governor submits budget to the legislature
  - **FEB-JUN**: Legislature holds hearings, amends, and adopts the state budget

RESOURCES

- State Budget Basics, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
- Budget Processes in the States, National Association of State Budget Officers
- State Revenue Forecasts, National Association of State Budget Officers
- State Fiscal Briefs, Urban Institute
- Balanced Budget Requirements, Urban Institute
- Budget Processes in the States (page 11), National Association of State Budget Officers
- State and Local Budget Resources, Children's Funding Project

TIPS FOR REVIEWING A STATE BUDGET

Deciphering a state budget can feel overwhelming — it's absolutely a skill that comes with practice. While every state budget has its own state-specific quirks, some general tips and tricks can help guide your review of your state budget.

1. Before diving into the appropriations cycle, review the current fiscal year's budget.
   - The Urban Institute's State Fiscal Briefs resource provides links to every state's current budget.
2. Each state has its own way of organizing its budget, so you'll need to do some sleuthing to find the appropriations for the programs and services relevant to your issue. Some tips include:
   - Look for the federal programs and funds that all 50 states administer in the prenatal-three area, including SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), and CCDFBG (Child Care Development Fund Block Grant).
   - Funds are organized by department so you'll want to focus on the departments running programs you work on. While different states have different names for these departments and different state agencies oversee different programs, there are common themes. Below are some examples of where relevant funding is located in state budgets.
     - **HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES:** maternal and child health, prenatal health, sometimes SNAP and WIC, sometimes child care.
     - **EDUCATION:** early childhood education, sometimes child care.
     - **CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES:** sometimes SNAP and WIC, sometimes child care.
     - **AGRICULTURE:** sometimes SNAP and WIC.
     - **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:** sometimes child care.
   - Keep an eye out for non-budget language, which can sometimes be included in appropriations bills, such as: States vary in terms of when and how often per year they release budget forecasts.
     - **RIDERS:** Non-germane policy language in an appropriations bill that changes permanent law governing the program funded by the bill.
     - **PREEMPTION LANGUAGE:** Language in a state bill to limit or eliminate local authority from taking action on an issue. For more information, see this Preemption Toolkit
3. Budgets are complex documents, so it's always good to confirm your analysis with trusted expert partners in your state coalition.
   - Many states have in-state groups that are official partners of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonpartisan research and policy institute focused on federal and state budgets and policies.

TIPS FOR APPROPRIATIONS LOBBYING

While lobbying on appropriations is largely similar to lobbying on policy, there are key pieces of information and moments in the budget and appropriations process that should be effectively leveraged and a few pitfalls it's essential to avoid. In particular, data can be especially effective when making your case for funding.

MAKING YOUR CASE

- **Demonstrate need.** Campaigns advocating for funding for direct service programs can and should keep a finger on the pulse of participation and utilization rates of those programs. Waiting lists or a program running out of funds before the end of the year are effective data points to provide to legislators to demonstrate that your program needs additional funding. Also, keep an eye on low participation or utilization rates. Be ready to answer questions about what is happening and why additional funding is needed.
- **Demonstrate impact.** Appropriations lobbying is fundamentally about money, so it is important to be prepared to demonstrate the financial return on investment (ROI) of your program or services. For example, data shows employers see an ROI of more than $2.50 for every $1.00 invested in paid leave. On the flip side, can you quantify the cost of not taking action on your issue?
- **Provide motivation.** Research how much other similarly-situated states are investing in your issue (i.e., data on a neighboring state's funding of child care or SNAP). This data provides lawmakers with context that can motivate those who want your state to be the best in their region and/or to give them confidence or cover by realizing they are not alone in investing state funds in your issue.
- **Prepare for pushback.** Anticipate that your budget priority may come at the real or perceived cost to another state-funded program. Some lawmakers might ask advocates where the money should come from or even pose a choice for advocates between priorities (e.g., "We can increase funding for the early childhood education program, but to do so, we're going to have to take that money from the SNAP Incentives program"). Coalition members should plan not to answer questions like that and maintain their strategy if lawmakers create a false choice by pitting causes against one another.
- **Prepare for opposition.** When making your case, it is essential that you can answer tough questions and counter the arguments made by those who oppose funding your issue. Monitor what the opposition is saying publicly in the press. Try to learn what they're saying to legislators so you can best counter and inoculate against the opposition's talking points, especially with lawmakers who are on the fence about funding your issue.

TIP: Understand how the opposition thinks and speaks about this issue. Engage in respectful conversations with the legislative leaders most likely to oppose your funding request. Use that knowledge to reframe your arguments and better persuade lawmakers who are still on the fence.

USE EVERY PART OF THE PROCESS

1. **The executive.** Lobby both the agency and the governor's office directly as the governor's budget is being prepared. This is your best opportunity to ensure your ask is included in the governor's budget.
2. **The legislature.** If you didn't get your ask in the governor's budget (or you did, but your legislature writes its own budget in addition to the governor's proposal), lobbying key legislators is your opportunity to improve or reinforce your ask. You can advocate for your ask to be included as a member request from a supportive lawmaker or as an earmark (if they have earmarks in your state).
   - **NOTE:** Earmarks have a controversial history and are criticized because of the way they can and have been used. However, it can also be an effective way to get your program the funding it needs. The bottom line is that you should assess the situation in your state. Will the use of an earmark hurt any relationships with partners or legislators who are opposed? What are other potential downsides? Consider if it's worth it anyway if you can get the funding you need that way.
3. **In Committee.** If you weren't able to secure your funding request in the governor's or legislature's budget, you should try again as the budget goes through the Committee. Work with a supportive lawmaker on the budget committee to add or increase funding for your issue via an amendment. On the flip side, if you were able to secure funding, be on the lookout for amendments from the opposition to cut or eliminate your funding.
4. **On the floor.** If you weren't able to secure your funding request in Committee, you have another opportunity. When the budget bill is going to the chamber floor for a vote, work with a supportive lawmaker to try to add your funding via a floor amendment.

WHAT TO DO WHEN IT'S A LOSS?

- **When to call it.** While it's difficult when your campaign hits the point where you can see it won't be successful, appropriations in a long-term game. Know when to keep fighting and when to hold off until the next appropriations cycle. Advocating for your program's funding is vital, but so is maintaining the relationships in the legislature you need to get your program funded over the long term.
- **Handling accountability.** When you don't secure the funding needed for your program, organizations and coalitions need to decide how to handle accountability. Sometimes communicating disappointment privately is the way to go (especially with your champions). But sometimes, especially for political organizations that can target lawmakers who oppose your issue, expressing public disappointment is very effective. To maintain strong relationships with supportive lawmakers, it's crucial to give the lawmakers ***you have a close relationship with*** a courtesy heads-up when they may be expecting to receive critical press coverage for failing to support a priority — even if the criticism isn't directed at them.

WHEN AND HOW TO CHOOSE A CONTRACT LOBBYIST

HOW TO DETERMINE IF YOUR ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN WOULD BENEFIT FROM A CONTRACT LOBBYIST

1. Do you have the expertise internally to know when, where, and with whom you need to act to make the best case to secure appropriations for your issue?
2. Do you have the capacity internally to monitor the executive and legislative budget and appropriations processes?
3. Do you have relationships with the lawmakers and other key decision-makers who have the most influence over the state budget and appropriations bills that matter to your organization?

TIP: If you respond "no" to 2-3 of these questions, you should consider the pros and cons of hiring a contract lobbyist to support you in securing funding for your issue.

PROS OF HIRING A CONTRACT LOBBYIST FOR APPROPRIATIONS

- **Expertise.** Hiring a contract lobbyist who has extensive experience in the budget and appropriations process ensures that you will have the benefit of their knowledge of the timeline, essential players, process, levers of power, and influence.
- **Capacity.** Appropriations is a technical and wonky process that requires a substantial investment of time to track the movement of the governor's budget, appropriations bills and amendments, hearings, and other critical pieces of changing information.
- **Relationships.** Contract lobbyists spend significant time in the capitol building with lawmakers on behalf of their clients. As a result, they generally have both strong and long-standing relationships with lawmakers and their staff. They can guide your organization on which lawmakers need to hear from you and who influences the lawmakers with power in the appropriations process.

CONS OF HIRING A CONTRACT LOBBYIST

- **Expense.** Typically, the con of hiring a contract lobbyist is that it requires your organization to set aside funding to hire and staff time to manage a contract lobbyist.
- **Long-term relationships.** While a lobbyist's relationships are a clear value-add, relying on someone else's relationships to open doors and gather intel means you are not cultivating those relationships in-house over time.
- **Other priorities.** Contract lobbyists typically have multiple clients and discuss multiple issues when they meet with lawmakers. This dynamic may mean that your top priority for a lawmaker or a Committee isn't the lobbyist's top priority in their meeting - your issue could be the third or fourth thing on their list, which means the lawmaker might not feel the level of urgency you want communicated.

HOW TO CHOOSE A CONTRACT LOBBYIST

1. **Identify contract lobbyists.** You can check with your state's registry of lobbyists and ask partners, lawmakers, and their staff for recommendations.
2. **Research the lobbyist's other clients.** Depending on the situation in your state, you may want to consider:
   - **FAMILIARITY WITH YOUR ISSUE.** Do they have other clients that work on child care, SNAP, etc.?
   - **POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST.** Do they have clients whose interests directly oppose your goals or even who have the same goal but a different strategy? Are they values aligned or do they work with clients who oppose equity-centered policy?
   - **POLITICAL LEANING.** Do their clients lean heavily progressive, and/or do their clients lean heavily toward one party over the other? If you live in a state with a Republican trifecta, it could be helpful to have a lobbyist with relationships with Republican lawmakers. In high-stakes campaigns, it is advisable to have a lobbyist with deep connections on both sides of the aisle.
3. **Conduct interviews with more than one lobbyist**
   - Ask about their experience with your issue, their experience with the appropriations process, and especially their relationships with lawmakers, staff, and communities with jurisdiction over your issue.
   - Don't forget to ask about their work/communication style.
4. **Ask for references and do your own homework.**
   - Call the references provided by the lobbyist.
   - Ask partners and lawmakers or staff you have relationships with about the reputation and effectiveness of the lobbyist.

BEST PRACTICES FOR MEETING WITH AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

BEFORE THE MEETING

1. **Do the homework to identify the best lawmakers to meet with.** Your time will be best spent meeting with the lawmakers best positioned to influence funding on your issue (e.g., someone with political sway, like the Chair of the Budget Committee, or someone with a personal/professional connection to your issue).
   - The lawmaker who represents you or the district where your child care center, hospital, or organization is located.
   - Lawmakers on the legislative committee that handles budget and appropriations for your priority issue (the specific committee(s) will depend on your state).
2. **Request your meetings well in advance.** Lawmakers have busy schedules, especially during appropriations season. The email requesting the meeting should include the following relevant information:
   - Your name, organizational name, and if you and/or someone in the meeting is a constituent (often lawmakers prioritize meeting with their constituents).
   - What you want to talk about.
   - When you would like to have the meeting and why it is important to meet in a timely manner (i.e., you want to meet before a budget hearing on your issue).
3. **Prepare in advance.** It benefits your issue and organization to be well prepared for your meeting with a lawmaker. In advance, you should:
   - Prepare a 1-pager outlining the importance of your issue, your appropriations ask, and why it is necessary now. Include your contact information.
   - Identify who will be in the meeting (it runs most smoothly if the meeting isn't too large), assign roles and responsibilities (i.e. who will start the meeting, who will say why this issue is important, who will tell a personal story, who will make the ask, and who will close the meeting), and draft talking points that all participants are aligned on.

TIP: Lawmakers have limited time to review materials. Anything you prepare should be as succinct and digestible as possible and prioritize the most important information only; for example data localized for their district. Avoid overburdening lawmakers with dense research, lengthy documents, etc.

DURING THE MEETING

1. **Be on time.** Lawmakers' schedules are busy while legislatures are in session, so the meeting may be brief (potentially as little as 15-20 minutes).
2. **Be concise and follow the talking points.** Because meetings can be brief, you want to make sure that you have time to touch on the most important points: why the issue and funding are important, the personal story, and your appropriations ask.
3. **Listen to their response.** Once you have made your ask, listen closely to the lawmaker's response. Their response can indicate their level of support for your issue, whether they think the funding you're requesting is likely, or what information lawmakers need to grant your funding request (e.g., specific data, etc.).
4. **Answer their questions.** Answer the questions they may have for you as best you can in the meeting, but don't be afraid to say that you'll need to get back to them promptly if you don't know the answer. Make sure you get the contact information of the person you met with, so you can follow up on any questions.
5. **Leave a 1-pager.** At the close of the meeting, be sure to share the 1-pager that outlines your issue and makes your appropriations ask.

AFTER THE MEETING

1. **Send a thank you.** To maintain relationships with lawmakers and their staff, it is important to demonstrate your appreciation by thanking them for their time.
2. **Share materials via email.** Following the meeting, email a copy of your 1-pager and any additional materials that touch on issues that came up during the meeting.
3. **Follow up.** Be sure to keep in touch with the lawmakers and their staff. At appropriate intervals, send an email checking in about the status of your appropriations ask.

HOW TO BUILD AND POWERMAP YOUR TARGET LIST

In the context of appropriations advocacy, selecting key targets and knowing their levers of power and influence is essential to securing the funding your program needs. Below are steps to take when building a target list customized to your appropriations advocacy campaign.

1. **Identify your targets.**
   - Identify who in the governor's office has authority over your target budget items.
   - Identify legislative leadership with power in the appropriations process. (e.g., speaker of the House, leader of the Senate, relevant Committee chairs)
   - Identify which lawmakers are on the budget and legislative committees with jurisdiction over the appropriations bills that include the programs for which you're working to secure or expand funding.

TIP: Both chambers will vote on appropriations, so don't limit your targets to the Committee, although they do have a critical role.

2. **Research your targets.**
   - Research lawmakers' past votes on your issue and on related appropriations.
   - Research if any lawmakers or someone close to them have a personal connection to your issue (e.g., they have children/grandchildren in daycare, their spouse is an early child educator, etc.).
3. **Tier your targets.**
   - It is helpful to have a clear, visual way to look at where members of the Budget Committee (or members of the chamber) are on your issue so you know how many votes you need to win.
   - Create a 5-column spreadsheet that ranks lawmakers on a scale from very opposed, leans opposed, neutral/unknown, leans pro, very pro. Assess lawmakers based on your research and slot them into the column that best describes them. This will allow you to count your votes and identify persuadable lawmakers from whom you might be able to secure a vote.
4. **Power map connections with your targets.**
   - Power mapping is a valuable tool to assess how best to influence the targets you have identified that you need to secure your funding request.
   - For each key target, work with your coalition partners to identify who influences your target (e.g., other lawmakers, advocacy groups, the press, their constituents, donors, etc.) and assess if those influential players are for or against your issue and how powerful they are.
   - Identify any connections you or your partners have to those who influence your targets and develop advocacy strategies and tactics to create a surround sound effect around your target that pushes support for your issue and funding request.

HOW TO BUILD LONG-TERM APPROPRIATIONS CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

When developing an advocacy campaign focused on securing, protecting, and increasing funding for your issue, it is essential to think long-term. Appropriations are a regular process (annual or bi-annual), so they require a different approach than a big campaign to pass a bill – appropriations work is the definition of playing the long game. Thinking about your advocacy as part of a continuous lifecycle will ensure that your work to secure appropriations is constantly building toward the improvement of your programs and services. A solid campaign strategy is the backbone of long-term success.

1. **Coalition coordination.** Your coalition should meet regularly throughout the year to share intel and align on strategy for the appropriations advocacy campaign.
2. **The funding ask.** Each cycle, your organization and/or coalition should align on an evidence-based funding ask rooted in the current budget forecast.
3. **Align on targets**. Each cycle, assess and choose targets in the executive and legislature who have authority and/or power in the appropriations process, then do the research necessary to power map where, when, and how your organization/coalition can influence them.
4. **Build a campaign plan.** Once your targets are selected, design an appropriations advocacy campaign plan. With the explicit goal of your appropriations ask in mind, develop strategies to achieve it that leverage your organization and coalition strengths. This should include a lobbying strategy, a communications strategy, a strategy for mobilizing constituents, etc. Build a plan for tactics to execute these strategies that are customized to your targets.
5. **Engage state agencies.** State budgets originate in the executive branch so it is important to clearly communicate your ask and why it's needed now to the relevant state agencies and contacts in the governor's offices. State agency heads submit their budget requests to the governor's budget team well in advance and their prioritization can make or break your campaign. Build and maintain strong, trusting relationships with the "career" leaders in state agencies. Their roles transcend elections and they can provide intel about threatened cuts and advocate for your asks when aligned.
6. **Engage the legislature.** As the governor's budget moves to the legislature, turn your attention to your legislative targets – leadership, members of the House and Senate budget committees, etc. Clearly communicate your funding ask via private meetings, public hearings, and constituent engagement.

7. **Communications strategy.** Appropriations is a wonky subject, so it is even more important to tell a compelling story about the value of your program and services and the positive effect funding will have. This should include both data and storytelling via earned media and social media.
8. **Mobilizing constituents.** Elected officials are ultimately accountable to their constituents, so engaging them in support of your funding ask can be incredibly effective. This can include members of a group representing parents meeting with lawmakers about prenatal care, paid leave, and child care or hosting an event about Head Start and inviting providers, families, and lawmakers.
9. **Accountability.** The work isn't over once the appropriations bill passes; it's now time to ensure lawmakers who voted in favor of your funding ask know you appreciate it! Always remember to thank lawmakers for their support — regardless of whether you "won" or "lost" — to maintain your relationship with them since you'll be back again with another request during the next appropriations cycle.
10. **Monitoring and oversight.** After funding is secured, it is important to monitor disbursement of the funds. The state budget office is typically responsible for monitoring appropriated funds, and the legislative budget committee is responsible for oversight. Still, tracking funding implementation is always good to ensure that funds are reaching the families and children most in need in the state and to inform your ask next year.
11. **Collect the data.** The most important piece of appropriations advocacy is to show the positive impact of your program and services and what more it was able to do because of the funding it received. Collecting the data to show the impact is essential to making the case for what you would be able to do with even more funding next year.
12. **REPEAT!**

5 KEY ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN

While certain factors you can't control will impact your appropriations advocacy campaign (e.g., a state budget shortfall), understanding the factors within your control can set you up for success.

1. **Root your ask in reality.** Consider the state's budget realities when determining the amount of an appropriations request. Be prepared to demonstrate clearly both "why now" and the impact of the funding. Calibrating your ask to the context and making it clear that it resolves an urgent and timely need will keep you on lawmakers' radars.
    - In budget shortfall years, be prepared to defend current funding for your program against cuts – or, in a best-case scenario, request a reasonable increase backed up with data on the immediate need and impact. During a challenging year, an ambitious funding request will come across as unrealistic and laughable.
    - When there is an influx of funding or revenue causing a budget surplus, advocates shouldn't shy away from leveraging that to ask for the high-bar amount your program needs. But even when there is a budget surplus, be prepared to justify why you need the funding now and what the impact will be.
2. **Deploy a lobbyist.** Long-standing, trusted relationships with lawmakers who have influence over the budget and appropriations are crucial to a strong campaign. Whether you use an in-house or a contract lobbyist, these relationships provide access that can be difficult to achieve without connections. Lobbyists also bring knowledge and expertise to the processes.
3. **Tell a good story.** The story you tell and how you tell it matters. Successful campaigns rely on good stories, backed by data and anecdotes (ideally from constituents), told by compelling messengers. Successful campaigns also recognize the power of translating their messages into someone else's political language. Depending on the circumstances in your state, speaking more pragmatically than idealistically can help you reach and influence a broader audience of lawmakers. "Education justice" may be your end goal, but "workforce development" could help you get the bipartisan support you need to secure the funding.
4. **Maintain coalition alignment.** Coalitions build power to influence lawmakers by leveraging diverse perspectives, strengths, and experiences. A coordinated, collective ask from a coalition representing a larger constituency can be extremely impactful. Building and maintaining communication and transparency within your coalition is crucial to ensure alignment on your strategy and funding request. When different organizations in the same issue make misaligned requests, it undermines the coalition's power. It can even jeopardize the ability to secure the highest possible funding level.
5. **Make it local.** They say "all politics is local." The greatest and perhaps the only form of accountability lawmakers care about is their constituents' votes. Connecting your funding request to its benefit for their constituents, specifically, and leveraging constituents as messengers whenever possible will only benefit your effort.

BEST PRACTICES FOR JOINING, SETTING, OR GROWING A COALITION TABLE

WHY JOIN, SET UP, OR GROW A COALITION

- **Power in community.** There is power in the larger whole of a coalition, particularly in the appropriations advocacy process when resources are finite and lawmakers face myriad funding requests. Being able to say to a lawmaker that your coalition represents a significant portion of their constituents and community matters. It is critical to center in your coalition those communities intended to benefit from your budget ask. Working in partnership ensures the funding ask is grounded in their lived experience and needs. It is an equitable practice to offer compensation to these partners for their time.
- **Clarity and alignment.** Engaging in appropriations advocacy as a part of a coalition focused on your issues ensures alignment on your funding request among all or at least most groups working on your issue. A coordinated, collective ask from a coalition that represents a larger constituency can be extremely impactful for lawmakers.
- **Diversity of perspective and strengths.** Ideally, a coalition is made up of a diverse array of organizations, including those rooted in different types of communities, with membership and organizing ability, political power, communications skills and tools, policy and budget experts, and more. When faced with quick-moving appropriations bills and lawmakers influenced by different factors, a coalition is stronger when each organization brings unique expertise to the table to create a broad range of strengths.

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.

- **Shared resources.** Another benefit to joining a coalition is shared resources. One organization may not have the capacity or all the skill sets required for an appropriations advocacy campaign. When many organizations join together, resources can be combined and leveraged to build a comprehensive campaign plan.

SET CLEAR GOALS FOR THE COALITION

- Be clear about which issues the coalition will focus on. The goals directly impact the advocacy scope of target appropriations bills and line items, budget agencies and committees, etc.
- For appropriations advocacy, consider how broad or narrow you want the focus to be (e.g., children and families, prenatal to three, maternal health, child care, SNAP, etc.).

RECRUIT MEMBERSHIP

- The [coalition's goals](#) provide clarity about the scope of groups to recruit as members.
- Coalition membership should represent different types of people impacted by your issue (e.g., a child care coalition should include groups representing children, parents, providers, nontraditional groups focused on workforce development, etc.).
- Membership should take into account differing levels of expertise, interest, and capacity and offer different levels of commitment and engagement.

CO-CREATE AND ESTABLISH A STRUCTURE

- Establishing a structure for coalition leadership and decision-making is essential to achieve alignment on goals, funding requests, and strategies and tactics for advocacy. Co-create the coalition's operating guidelines and decision-making process to make expectations clear.
- Set up an executive committee to own strategy and action steps. This group shouldn't be too large. If many groups are interested in coalition leadership opportunities, consider establishing rotating roles, such as membership on the executive committee, meeting facilitation, and management of particular campaign tactics. Determine the executive committee's role and authority to act, speak, and make decisions on the coalition's behalf and under which conditions (e.g., rapid response moments, media opportunities, etc.).

ENSURE REGULAR COMMUNICATION AND MEETINGS

- Communication is essential to effective coalitions, so plan on **regular meetings** (e.g., weekly when legislatures are in session and monthly when they're out).
- Before the budget and appropriations cycle starts, align your coalition on appropriations goals for the year and strategies and tactics to advocate for them.

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.

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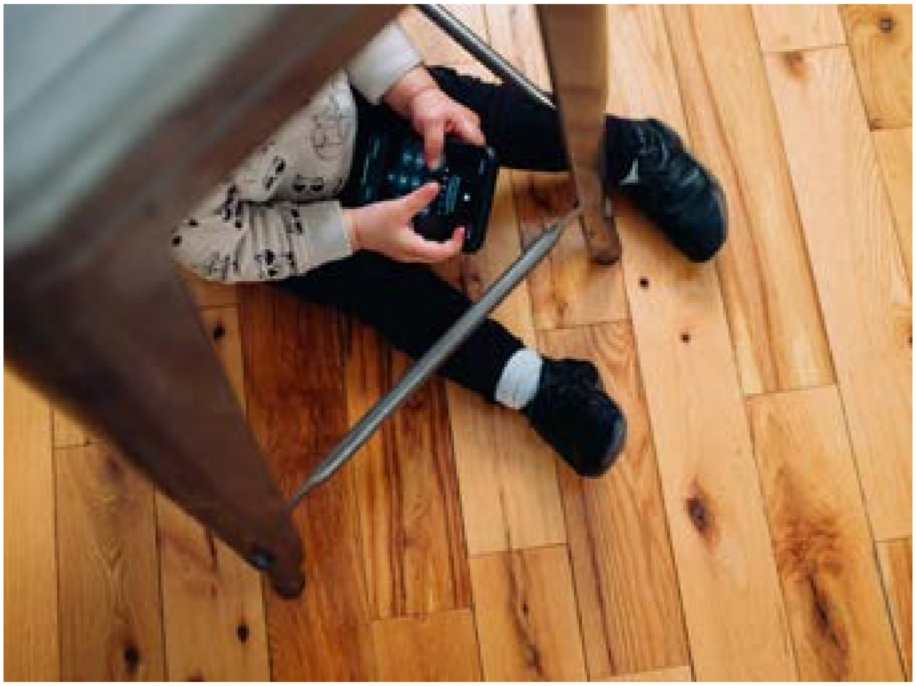
COMMUNICATIONS



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.

HOW TO WRITE AND LEVERAGE AN LTE, OP-ED, OR BLOG

A Letter to the Editor (LTE), opinion piece (op-ed), or blog post offers you significant control over how your message is delivered to your audience — you're the author! Because of that, it's important to select a tactic that is tailored to your audience. Here are some approaches you may want to consider when determining the most strategic tactic to employ.

- **Place your message where your audience will read it.** The best-placed product is the one your audience reads. A well-timed op-ed in your State Senator's local newspaper can be an effective way to grab their attention (even if that paper is "smaller" than other regional media outlets) because it's the one they're most likely to read. Alternatively, a blog post that's later shared on LinkedIn could reach peers in your field, and correcting the record on your issue via a timely LTE published and then shared on Instagram can push back against misinformation, creating roadblocks for your campaign.
- **Leverage the finished product.** Consider what you'll do with the LTE, op-ed, or blog post once it's gone live. Since you've carefully crafted your message to meet your campaign needs, you want to leverage the finished product fully. Often, that means strategically sharing the piece on social media, printing it out as an in-person handout for meetings, or linking to it in a pitch to journalists. This blog post offers some ideas for how social media, earned media, paid media, and more can be part of your strategy after publication.
  - **If you're going to share something on social media, keep in mind a couple of best practices.**
    - **Tagging elected officials.** If you tag an elected official, thoroughly proofread your message before posting it. Additionally, consider your organization's affiliation as a nonprofit or advocacy group — as a 501(c)(3) organization, you should ***only*** tag an elected official's official account, not their campaign account. 501(c)(4) organizations should strategically determine when to tag a campaign account versus an official account (i.e., their willingness to engage with you might shift during an election cycle).
    - **Including locations.** Lawmakers are most likely to listen to the people from their districts who vote them into and out of power. With that in mind, don't shy away from including locations in your social media posts. A location that tags their district can illustrate that your organization's work directly supports their constituents. Of course, it's crucial to consider your storytellers' and colleagues' safety when tagging a location in a public space online, so consider posting after an event has concluded and everyone has gone home safely.
  - **Make it even more powerful.** When your piece is published, add a layer of grassroots pressure by forwarding your published piece to grassroots advocates with an alert that walks them through how to send it to their own lawmakers alongside a message reinforcing the budget ask. The lawmaker you're targeting might have missed your blog post, op-ed, or LTE, but getting copies of it from a few of their voters might grab their attention.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (LTE)

WHAT IS AN LTE?

LTE is a letter submitted to a newspaper or online media outlet that responds to an article, editorial, or op-ed in that newspaper. Placing a letter, similar to an op-ed, is a great tactic to insert your message and can be effective in getting the attention of community members and lawmakers. However, LTEs tend to be easier to write and place than op-eds because they are shorter, and there are a greater number of strong opportunities to submit an LTE when compared to an op-ed.

WHAT KIND OF ARTICLES SHOULD I RESPOND TO?

- You should respond to articles that are (or aren't, but should be!) related to prenatal-to-three health and your state's budget.
- Generally, you will find two types of articles to respond to:
  - Articles that "get it right" but leave out something important that readers should know, such as data, the outsized impact of a state program on a specific community, or a unique personal story from a personally impacted constituent that explains how a program impacts them for better or worse.
  - A story that "gets it wrong" and compels you to correct the record for readers, pushing back on something misleading by offering fresh research, data, or perspective.

HOW DO I SUBMIT AN LTE?

- Every outlet has different submission guidelines, so you should check the guidelines for the news outlet that you are responding to verify length and submission requirements. This can usually be found on your media outlet's website under the Opinion section.
- Check to see if your outlet has designated "letters editors" to whom you can address your email.
- Some outlets will ask you to submit letters via email, while others will provide an online form you can fill out.

OTHER THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT AN LTE

- Most LTEs will be around 150-200 words.
- An editor may respond to your submission with edits if they are interested in publishing your letter, so be sure to check your inbox!
- Most LTE submissions will require you to include the writer's address and phone number. Addresses and phone numbers may be used for verification, but only your name and hometown will be published.
- We recommend that you submit an LTE in response to an article in a timely manner – within four days is ideal. We do not recommend waiting longer than one week to respond.

- You can see an example of an outlet's submission guidelines here and an online tool that will help you draft an LTE here.
- Asking grassroots advocates to author or sign their name to an LTE is a great way to move them up the ladder of engagement in your campaign. Having someone respond in their own words is compelling, particularly when they are coming from a strategically relevant legislative district. Be sure to allow the author's voice to shine through the messaging and resist the urge to make it perfect — authenticity is valuable here!

OP-EDS

An op-ed is a longer form of written content where someone is expressing their opinion on a relevant topic. It got its name from the way newspapers are organized. You can typically find the "opinion" section "opposite" of the editorial section, as in on the opposite side of the page. Hence, "op-ed." While the editorial section is where the paper takes its own stand on an issue (e.g., the *New York Times* Editorial Board often endorses presidential candidates, which can be seen as "the paper's" endorsement) the opinion, or op-ed, section is where readers' commentary on an issue will appear. Some news outlets will call their opinion section by other names, such as the commentary section or the guest essay section, but the purpose it serves is the same.

GUIDANCE AND TIPS

1. **Be sure that you have something to say.** Don't just write an op-ed to write one! Write because you have a clear and novel opinion on an issue and make it clear why that issue is important ***now*** and warrants action.
2. **Consider a co-signer.** It can often be enticing for editors to see different types of people, or people from different sides of the political spectrum, coming together to support an issue or argument. If you have a partner that fits the bill, consider having them co-sign the piece with you; just make sure to limit it to no more than two signers per piece. Otherwise, it can get unwieldy.

TIP: When seeking a co-signer, reach out to the NCIT network to see if there are any issue experts who can be quoted in an op-ed or local voices who could serve as co-authors.

3. **Check your word count.** Newspapers and online outlets have different word count requirements for op-eds, but generally, it is best to keep your piece between 650 and 700 words. Before you start writing, think of where you want the op-ed placed and check the outlet's website for word count requirements.
4. **Use personality and stories to keep your piece moving.** An op-ed is not a report, nor is it overflowing with data. It's a lawyer's closing arguments – a crucial chance to make a personal appeal.
5. **Know when to submit your op-ed.** If you're aiming to submit an op-ed timed to the Week of Action, plan to pitch at least one week in advance. Let the editor know when you'd like them to consider running the story. They will often be open to accommodating you, but since schedules fill up quickly, you'll have a better chance if you get the piece in early.

6. **Expect feedback from the editor.** The editor may offer edits or ask you to rewrite certain parts of the piece. Barring any significant ethical concerns, follow their guidance, and you'll likely end up with an even stronger final product.
7. **Follow-up after you submit.** If you have not heard back from the publication within 48 hours, it's usually a good idea to follow up via phone or email. If you receive a "no," then you should consider submitting to another local paper or online outlet.
8. **Only submit to one place at a time.** If you don't hear back from your first option and want to move on to another outlet, let the editor at the first publication know you're withdrawing your submission so there's no confusion.
9. **Repurpose any content that doesn't get accepted.** If your draft op-ed doesn't get accepted by an editor when you first submit it, consider repurposing that language as blog content or newsletter content, or trim it down and post it as a social media thread. And, if you think there will be another, stronger moment in the near future to re-submit the op-ed with some minor updates (e.g., once a key piece of legislation is passed), you can hold your draft for a future moment.

BLOG POSTS

A blog post should be tailored to your organization's voice, messaging, and audience. This may mean that you can repurpose an op-ed that a media outlet did not accept and use it as blog post content. If so, that's a fantastic option because it provides you with a link to leverage on social media, in pitches to journalists, and beyond. However, it's important to consider how the audience for your op-ed may differ from your website's audience.

Here are some questions to consider when crafting a blog post.

- Why are you writing this blog post?
- Is now the right time to share this message? If so, why? Make sure your audience knows the answer.
- Who are you speaking to?
- What do I want the reader to do with this blog post?
- Do I want my partners to share this blog post on their social media platforms once it's live? If so, is there an opportunity for collaboration by co-writing the piece or linking to another organization's research products to encourage their promotion? This can be a smart way to deepen an existing partnership.
- Is the blog post's tone, language, and length accessible to your audience?

TIP: Compared to an op-ed, a blog post is more likely to become too long. While op-ed editors require a limited word count, there's greater flexibility without an editor cutting words from your blog post. Consider that op-eds have a word count for a reason — the average reader's attention span may not last past about 750 words.

BREAKING THROUGH IN A CROWDED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Breaking through in a crowded media environment can be challenging. The good news is that it requires many of the best practices already referenced throughout this toolkit.

From an analysis of state news coverage on prenatal-to-three appropriations issues, a handful of clear themes rose to the top.

- **Make it human!** Storytelling is your key to solid media coverage. Stories are universal. They connect people to problems they've never personally experienced and have the ability to change hearts and minds. They also breathe life into news coverage, which is why journalists almost always offer insight into the "human impact" of a policy when describing it, either through a firsthand storyteller or another source who can speak to that impact. This means you must regularly identify, cultivate, and work with storytellers.

> **TIP:** Coverage on appropriations that breaks into standard news outlets (e.g., not wonky political blogs) almost always includes an anecdote from someone personally impacted alongside data. The equation to remember is "data + anecdotes = compelling story." **You can read more here** about crafting a media-worthy story.

- **Make it relevant.** The news environment a journalist is working in is crucial to understand in order to make a well-tailored, strategic request. Based on their existing coverage, what is significant to them right now? How can you frame your issue as relevant within that context? New information, such as an unlikely or surprising statistic, can capture journalists' attention.
- **Make it timely.** Journalists have dozens of competing priorities, so spelling out "why now" is crucial. What makes your issue timely among the other top issues of the day?
- **Audience is key:** Make sure you understand where you want to break through. Based on an analysis of previous appropriations efforts, a few trends hold true across states.
  - There will almost always be a story to the effect of "Here's what made it into this year's budget" in local newspapers, particularly on the online edition of your local radio and television stations.
  - Outlets such as POLITICO and Axios (which have select state arms), Roll Call, and the local newspaper for your state's capital (e.g., the Sacramento Bee if you're in California) will be likelier to have reporters who dig into the weeds on appropriations and follow the process from the beginning instead of merely reporting back on the outcome.
  - Local political newsletters and blogs will follow the politics surrounding appropriations (e.g., digging into "why" some things are moving while others aren't).

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- **Be mindful of the calendar.** The best time to start breaking through on appropriations is about 3 months before you need to secure press coverage. Dozens of organizations and coalitions are reaching out to reporters in the homestretch of the appropriations process, so you're putting yourself at a disadvantage if you're only beginning a week or two before the process is finalized. Ensure you understand the impact of media coverage on your inside game and time your press coverage to advance your overarching campaign goals.
- **Skip the jargon.** The word "appropriations" is one that instantly makes the average person lose focus — what does it mean? Why not use a simpler one? For example, you could say, "the funds that support child care and the care economy" or "investments in our children's future." While you may be an expert, keep in mind that the average reader isn't. Journalists who specialize in state budgets or policy have a higher tolerance for jargon but remember that it's essential to make your pitch interesting.
- **Back up your claims.** Whenever possible, share with journalists data that helps define the problem and identify your solution as the best path forward. Often, that requires demonstrating the scope of the problem (e.g., 1,275 babies died in Florida in 2021 — the first statistically significant increase in the U.S. infant mortality rate in over two decades).

HOW TO ENSURE MESSAGE DISCIPLINE

In a campaign, message discipline is the frequent repetition of a simple message.
It requires two basic prerequisites:

1. A simple set of talking points and/or a tagline (e.g., "good for farmers, good for families") that briefly defines the problem, solution, why it matters, and why it's urgent/why now.
2. Alignment internally and (as applicable) with coalition partners about the talking points and/or tagline. Make sure you have an understanding of whose buy-in you need both internally and externally. For example, some organizations will require sign-off from their editorial team while others require sign-off from their political or communications team (or all three!). Talking to the right people within your organization and your partners' organizations creates alignment on the value of sharing messages across platforms and makes it likelier to create the surround-sound messaging effect you're looking for.

TIP: Don't get too caught up in developing a catchy tagline — not all effective campaigns have one. It's better to have strong, simple messages.

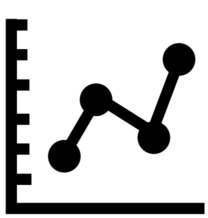
Once your messages have been developed and alignment is ensured among relevant internal and coalition stakeholders, here are a few ways to develop messaging discipline that makes your message stick.

- **Repeat again and again.** Studies show that people need to hear something at least seven times before it truly sinks in, but we've found lawmakers often need to hear something far more frequently than that. For someone to become an advocate for your cause and effectively repeat your message, the number is likely far above 14 times. The ability of your partners, peers, lawmakers, and/or everyday people to internalize your message and organically become a messenger for your cause is what makes a campaign sustainable in the long run.
- **Convey clarity and simplicity.** Your message needs to be clear, concise, and easily identifiable to your listener. Remember, your goal is for someone to be able to repeat your message confidently. The message that will resonate will be simple and clear.
- **Prioritize:** When in doubt, air on the side of saying less and choosing your words carefully. You only have a person's attention span for a limited amount of time, whether that's in a one-on-one meeting, on live television, or during a webinar,
so make sure the time you're investing is spent wisely.
- **Carefully select your messengers.** Given the value of repetition, cultivate a deep bench of messengers available and prepared to effectively deliver your campaign's message. A strong messenger to one audience may be a weak messenger to another. Think about what the person or people you're talking to will find compelling due to their professional or personal circumstances.

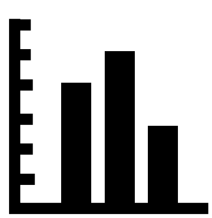
STORYTELLING WITH DATA: HOW TO MAKE THE CASE

You have research that you'd like to share, whether it's data that's your own or that you've compiled from various sources, but how do you bring the data to life in a way that'll resonate with your audience? Through storytelling!

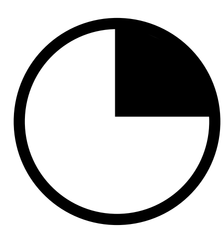
- **Know your audience.** Understand who you aim to reach, their context, what they care about, and the level of detail they need. If you're presenting the data to lawmakers, consider focusing on high-level insights and trends and be selective about the data points you include. Tailoring your story to your audience's needs and interests ensures that your message resonates and is more likely to be well-received.
- **Select your story format.** There are various ways to present your data story, from a traditional slide deck or memo to a more visually engaging infographic or blog post. Consider your audience's preferences and expectations when choosing a format, and if you plan to use multiple formats, make sure to optimize the story for each one.
- **Use storytelling techniques.** Incorporate elements of a story, such as a clear beginning, middle, and end. Stories also include settings, characters, and conflicts. Framing your data in the form of a story helps provide context and structure, making it easier for your audience to understand and remember the information.
- **Focus on the story.** Storytelling with data is not just about presenting numbers – it's about crafting a narrative that engages your audience. Think about the key message you want to convey and structure your data around it.
- **Mix and match the data**. Don't be afraid to blend different data sources. A quote from a relevant stakeholder might reinforce a data point from a survey. Pairing diverse data points can provide a more comprehensive and convincing narrative.
- **Incorporate visuals.** Including graphs, charts, tables, and infographics can make your data more accessible and engaging. Choose visuals that best represent your data, and avoid cluttering your visuals with unnecessary details.



Line graphs show data over many points in time



Bar graphs are ideal for comparing data points



Pie charts show parts in relation to a whole

- **Include a call to action.** What do you want your audience to do with the information you're presenting? Do you want them to make a decision, take action, or change their behavior? Make sure to include a clear call to action that encourages your audience to act on the insights you've provided.
- **Edit and iterate.** Continuously revise and refine your story until the narrative is compelling and clear. Consider sharing your story with someone to get feedback and ensure your key points are getting across effectively. A good story is always a work in progress!

PRACTICES TO AVOID

- **Avoid overloading.** Be careful not to overwhelm your audience with too much data. Be thoughtful and selective about the data points you include, and present them clearly and concisely.
- **Don't manipulate data to fit a particular narrative.** Present the data as accurately and honestly as possible. Avoid cherry-picking data to fit a preconceived narrative – let the data speak for itself.
- **Don't repeat or restate your opposition's argument.** Stick to yours! Repeating the opposition's messaging can inadvertently give their point legitimacy and spread mis or disinformation — and could simply give the message more air time than it deserves.

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BEST PRACTICES FOR IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH STORYTELLERS

WHY DOES STORYTELLING MATTER?

Storytelling, or intentionally sharing personal anecdotes that illustrate the problem at hand and/or potential solutions, is a crucial component of any strong campaign. To put it simply, storytelling is what makes connections that data alone can't. Your audience can find pieces of themselves or a loved one within a person's story. A strong story can spark action, driving those already embedded in your campaign to recommit to the fight and even persuade those who haven't yet been convinced to support your cause.

Data paired with anecdotes make a compelling story, regardless of your audience. That's the beauty of storytelling — it's universal. While some stories will resonate more with one audience than another, stories change hearts and minds because they help us bridge divides and recognize commonalities in the human experience. We can put ourselves in another person's shoes and recognize the need for change.

HOW DO I IDENTIFY STORYTELLERS?

The best way to identify storytellers is to consider the people you serve and work with. Often, the people who volunteer for your organization or even work within your organization are driven to do so due to their personal experiences. That said, not everyone is comfortable being a storyteller for all audiences. It's important to get an understanding of who is open to being a storyteller and under what circumstances. Often, this is accomplished by inviting people to complete a survey or participate in an interview.

Some questions to consider when compiling a survey or interview questions include:

- What brought you to this issue or program?
- Are you interested in sharing your story publicly? If so, why? What do you want people to know? What do you hope to see as a result?
- Who, if anyone, do you want to hear your story?
- What are you comfortable sharing publicly about your story?
- What about yourself are you comfortable sharing publicly?
- Do you prefer to communicate via phone, Zoom, writing, or in person? Is there a form of communication you're uncomfortable with?
- What are your preferred methods of contact?

TIP: Anonymity is always an option. While it's compelling to have someone share their story personally, it's most important that the story is shared. That means that someone else can share a story, with the storyteller's approval, to ensure anonymity. Additionally, media interviews can be conducted on the condition of anonymity or under the requirement of a pseudonym. If that is of interest, anonymity conditions must be agreed upon, ideally in writing, ***ahead of the interview***. We also recommend working with a trusted journalist and ensuring that you or an advocate for the storyteller joins the interview to serve as an additional layer of security — pushing back against unfair questions or stepping in to prevent retraumatization for the storyteller.

HOW DO I WORK WITH STORYTELLERS?

When working with storytellers, it's crucial to recognize that their story is deeply personal and perhaps challenging for them to share with you and others — even if they're eager to do so. Because their story is so personal, the goal is always for the storyteller to speak on their own behalf if they're comfortable doing so. We recommend creating a bank (e.g., a simple spreadsheet, a chart, a list, etc.) of storytellers you can go back to regularly throughout the campaign. This "storyteller bank" would include information from the intake survey or interview, such as the topics they're eager to speak about, their anonymity needs, the representatives for their district, and their preferred methods of contact and communication.

Importantly, agreeing once to a story does not mean the storyteller will always be comfortable sharing their story with any given audience at any given time. Before engaging a storyteller or their story, always check in with them to ensure they're comfortable with how their story is being shared, the tone, the audience, the circumstances, and the timing. Avoid being extractive of someone else's story and give the storyteller the microphone whenever possible.

WAYS TO USE A STORY BANK

- **Legislative meetings.** Bringing storytellers to meetings with lawmakers, especially if they are the lawmakers' constituents, can be particularly compelling.
- **Press coverage and statements.** Having a storyteller sign an op-ed, LTE, or a statement within a press release has a powerful impact. Press interviews for written, radio, or television coverage always benefit from a compelling story shared by someone with lived experience — and is often a perspective journalists are eager to hear.
- **Social media.** You can consider creating brief social media videos of a storyteller sharing their story, quote graphics and/or pictures, brief statements, or even social media "takeovers" (where the storyteller posts from your organization's social media page for a given day).
- **Email.** Newsletters and other email communication can be made more interesting when a real story is shared. You can embed videos in an email, share pictures, or have the storyteller sign a brief statement within the email.
- **In-person events.** At rallies, convenings, press events, or community gatherings (e.g., with a local faith community) having a storyteller share their experiences grounds the conversation in what truly matters. It can be energizing, inspiring, and compelling to audience members and journalists who capture the moment.
- **Storyteller's choice!** If there is a creative approach to storytelling the storyteller is particularly interested in, lean into that. It's important that they feel safe and empowered when sharing their stories. For example, if a storyteller is an artist and feels most comfortable sharing their story through a mural or a series of sidewalk chalk drawings, help them take the required steps to make that happen in a strategic place. Consider how to work that into your social media, press outreach, or even in-person meetings with lawmakers as a way to share someone's story in the way that makes them feel most comfortable.

WHEN, HOW, AND WHY TO USE PUBLIC OPINION POLLING

As you develop your appropriations advocacy campaign, consider whether polling on your issue will help move policymakers to support your funding request. Polling the public for their opinions on issues is an effective way to show how much people care about an issue and what they're willing to do about it. Polling data can help make the case for why your program needs additional funding; specifically that your issue has broad support from constituents in your state. If your organization is a 501(c)(4) that does political work, a poll showing voters are more likely to support a candidate who supports funding for child care and/or other prenatal-to-three issues could really move the needle on your vote count.

If you're a 501(c)(3), you can conduct polls! Just be sure to keep the following in mind:

- Avoid linking issues with candidates. If your survey covers both, consult with legal counsel to ensure federal tax and election laws compliance.
- Don't explicitly or implicitly favor, endorse, or oppose a candidate.
- Critique policies, not sitting legislators or officials, and avoid personal attacks.
- You can discuss the implications of proposed legislation or ballot initiatives, but don't urge participants to contact legislators or vote in a particular way.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN HIRING A POLLSTER

If you don't have the capacity or expertise to do polling internally, consider contracting with an individual pollster or polling firm.

- **Who are you polling?** It is important that the pollster you work with has experience polling the communities you want to hear from. For example, if you want to demonstrate support for increased access to child care among the Asian-American community in your state, your pollster needs to be confident they can over-sample in that community to produce meaningful results.
- **How do the pollster's relationships and reputation impact you?** Each pollster has a distinct reputation based on who they tend to work for. Some pollsters are known to be left-leaning, which gives them significant credibility within the progressive movement but may minimize their credibility among conservatives. Some pollsters hold close relationships with lawmakers for whom they regularly work, so choosing a pollster you know the Budget chair trusts could increase the credibility of the results in their eyes. Assess your goals and do your research before hiring a pollster to ensure that their reputation and relationships are a value-add for your campaign (i.e., their reputation and relationships often should be strongest among the lawmakers you're seeking to persuade).

- **Does the pollster regularly work in your issue space?** Familiarity with your issue space can impact a pollster's reputation (i.e., people know them as an expert in this space), and it can benefit you when it comes to developing the survey questions. An expert in your issue area has the ability to capture the nuances of your issue and deliver hyper-focused questions that can build a clear and specific case for your campaign.
- **What support, beyond polling, are you looking for?** Some pollsters are open to offering support in disseminating the survey results to your target audiences, whether that audience is lawmakers, coalition partners, or media. Do you need a pollster to walk through the polling results with lawmakers, either with you present or individually? If so, choose a pollster whose relationships will open doors to those lawmakers. Do you need a pollster to present messaging guidance to your coalition partners based on their results? Consider someone who is a clear, compelling presenter. If you're seeking support sharing the survey results with journalists, perhaps via a press conference or webinar, choose someone who has name recognition among the journalists you want to reach.

TIP: To determine a pollster's reputation among lawmakers and journalists, search for their name and/or firm in Google News. You'll be able to pick up on which outlets and journalists share that pollster's surveys in their coverage and you'll quickly get a sense for the general reputation of that pollster (i.e., if they're regularly polling for conservative candidates or appearing in conservative outlets, that's an indication that they may be right-leaning). Additionally, don't hesitate to ask your peers and partners for insight into a pollster's reputation, and be honest with pollsters about what you're looking for from them.

WHEN AND HOW TO MOBILIZE CONSTITUENTS/VOTERS

While there are many ways to influence lawmakers, one of the most effective can be mobilizing their constituents, those who will ultimately hold them accountable at the ballot box. However, additional factors must be considered when activating constituents in the context of an appropriations advocacy campaign.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN ENGAGING WITH CONSTITUENTS

- Messaging is an important consideration when working to organize and mobilize constituents on appropriations because it is a wonky topic that generally requires more explanation than a piece of legislation.
- Will public or private pressure from constituents move a lawmaker toward support?
- What should be the tone of messages from constituents?
  - Appreciative of past support while asking for additional funding?
  - Focus on personal storytelling and the impact of the funding?

PREPARING CONSTITUENTS TO ENGAGE WITH LAWMAKERS

- **Grassroots:** Grassroots advocacy focuses on engaging those most affected by an issue to reach out to their lawmaker to call for change. Constituents don't need to be experts on the intricacies of the budget process — but they do need a baseline understanding and familiarity with key moments. As an advocate, that's where you come in. When you mobilize constituents to engage in appropriations advocacy, it is essential to conduct training on how the budget process works to build their power and knowledge. By cultivating a well-informed and engaged grassroots network, you amplify your campaign's impact and foster a stronger collective voice for your cause.
- **Grasstops:** Grasstops advocacy engages those who have strong connections to lawmakers, such as thought leaders and key donors. This approach can be a valuable complement to grassroots advocacy. One way you might approach grasstops advocacy is to look at a lawmaker's donor file and identify any overlap with your or your partners' donor files (e.g., a donor supporting a candidate and a fellow NCIT member). If so, you can engage and prepare that donor (or volunteer) for a meeting with key lawmakers on behalf of your campaign.

ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZING

OPTIONS FOR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ENGAGEMENT

Private

- Facilitate constituents requesting meetings with lawmakers or their staff to make a funding request.
- Direct emails and calls to lawmakers' offices urging them to support the funding request your organization/coalition is making.
- Invite lawmakers to do site visits to learn firsthand about the importance of your issue and the impact funding would have (e.g., a child care center, a Head Start classroom, etc.).

Public

- Provide support and talking points to constituents willing to ask a lawmaker a question about your issue at a town hall or roundtable with the lawmaker and make the ask that they support your funding request
- Set up an event at the state legislature to raise the profile of your issue (e.g., a farmers market in support of SNAP incentives).

HOW TO HOST A SITE VISIT WITH AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

The goal of a site visit is to find ways to show, rather than "tell," a lawmaker the value your program brings to the community. This might mean creating opportunities to have lawmakers connect with the people you serve, "sample" your services, or visit an existing event you have planned.

Overall, the goal is to educate leaders on the importance of funding your work. We know lawmakers are more likely to support funding a cause when they understand exactly how the money will be spent — this is your opportunity to do just that. Further, this is an opportunity for you to deepen a relationship with a lawmaker and offer them a chance to connect with constituents in their district.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF TO PLAN AN EFFECTIVE SITE VISIT

- What are your specific and realistic goals for this site visit, keeping in mind that these visits are often brief and you may only have 15 to 20 minutes with them?
- Which electeds will be in attendance?
  - How can you ensure they see the value investing in your program would bring to their constituents specifically?
  - Can you frame the site visit as an opportunity for them to connect with their constituents?
- What questions do you plan to ask the elected?
  - When thinking of messengers, who is best positioned to ask those questions?
- What questions do you anticipate the elected asking you?
  - Are you prepared for challenging questions?
- How can this be an opportunity for relationship-building between your organization and the elected?
- Do you plan to create leave-behind materials for the elected? (e.g., a one-pager of recent research into your issue area, an op-ed written by someone with lived experience in their district, etc.)
- What communications materials can you develop from the visit?
  - Is the elected open to taking a photo or video with members of your organization or the people you serve?
  - Are they open to you posting on social media?
  - Is the elected interested in giving a press statement in the form of a brief press conference following the site visit? Alternatively, are they open to a trusted journalist shadowing the site visit in real-time?

TIP: Press attention is often most desired by your champions, who can leverage media coverage as an opportunity to show their longstanding or newly refreshed commitment to the issue, rather than lawmakers you're still persuading, who can see it as an imposition. Further, certain advocacy conversations can be more effective without a journalist in the room — a lawmaker can be more candid without a recorder present.

MENU OF TACTICS

Strong campaigns are nimble in their approach based on what will secure the results they're seeking. With that in mind, here is a brief overview of campaign tactics to keep in your toolbox.

- **Paid ads.** Paid advertising is a great way to convey a specific message to a particular audience on your timeline. You can leverage paid ads across a variety of mediums: online, print, and radio. You can also pinpoint the geography you seek to target with ads, such as your capitol building or a relevant government agency.
- **Digital billboards.** While it's effective to place a billboard on a highway or interstate to capture lawmakers' attention (perhaps when driving to the airport while traveling between the state capital and their home district), there are ways to get more creative about billboard placement. Trucks and cars can drive throughout strategically selected parts of town, carrying a mobile billboard that shares your message, images, and data.
- **Press conferences and in-person stunts.** In-person stunts, activations, rallies, marches, sit-ins, or other events are great moments to reach out to your partners, activate your coalition members, and encourage any grassroots partners to connect with their support base. Having in-person events that are eye-catching, memorable, and talked about in the press after the fact is a great way to demonstrate your movement's power to lawmakers.
- **Lobby days.** Lawmakers are likeliest to respond when they hear directly from their own constituents about how issues impact their everyday lives. Ahead of big moments, make sure lawmakers hear from your movement by bringing storytellers, experts, and spokespeople to the Capitol building to connect one-on-one.
- **Social media.** Social media helps make the world smaller by connecting people and creating platforms for movements that might not otherwise be possible given geography. If you have an in-house social media expert, that is a skill you can share with your coalition by creating social media toolkits or offering guidance on how to engage with key stakeholders online. If you don't have that expertise, perhaps one of your partners does!
- **Earned media.** Don't forget to keep journalists up-to-date on key campaign moments within your movement. That may mean inviting journalists to press conferences, sharing pictures of your mobile billboard, or even connecting with your members of the editorial board to ensure they understand the appropriations timeline and the stakes for this issue so they can urge lawmakers to lend their support at a time strategic for your campaign.

TIP: Get creative! Consider how leave-behind materials can continue to amplify your campaign after an event concludes. Get a local company to sponsor the cost of a baby bottle, bib, or other prop you might use as a leave-behind. Look at the state house cafeteria and create a weekly menu of what SNAP recipients would be able to purchase using their benefits.

THE POWER OF EFFECTIVE MESSAGING

ELIZABETH GAINES

Children's Funding Project

Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney took a brilliant approach to the Sugary Drink Tax in 2016, which I discussed with him in an interview. Instead of focusing on the public health benefits of the tax, Mayor Kenney approached the tax as simply a way to generate new revenue for something the city desperately needed. He emphasized the benefits of the cash injection for the city, which had limited funds that year, to enable investment in public programs such as universal pre-kindergarten and community schools. In a 2016 interview with Reuters, Kenney said, "If you want to tax something and people know where the money's going to go, then it's easier for them to get behind it." He noted that focusing on revenue rather than health, was largely responsible for the measure's passage. The brilliance of this approach was lost on many, but is something advocates should keep in mind. Sometimes, to make positive changes, you might benefit from not taking the most straightforward path from point A to point B. In this case: a different approach to messaging by describing the elements of the proposal that are most resonant with your audience is important.

CAMPAIGN CONSIDERATIONS AND COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID

CHRIS BERNARD

Hunger-Free OK

The campaigns that are least likely to be successful are those that aren't able to pivot based on context. You need to have a clear understanding of the fiscal environment in which you're making your ask — your ask should look different if there's a surplus versus a deficit. And, you should make your ask intentionally, as too big of an ask may not be taken seriously, while too small of an ask means you're unlikely to get what you need for a successful program. Advocates also need to consider their messaging. Talk about your issue in a way that resonates across the political spectrum, taking note of whether a pragmatic or ideological approach is smartest for the environment you're working in. This extends to the outside game, too. If an ideological approach doesn't resonate with decision-makers, your organizers need to pivot accordingly. This also means advocates need to be careful about if and when they turn to negative messaging. Often, going negative too early (or even at all) can kill a campaign before it gets off the ground. Finally, advocates need to consider relationships. This could mean the relationships your lobbyist holds or the relationships you and your partners hold. Your lobbyist should have relationships with the people who will be decision-makers on your issue. You also want to ensure coalition clarity and alignment on its strategy and lines in the sand to balance the coalition's ideal ask with the need to be pragmatic given the circumstances in the legislature. This means that you need to trust your partners to be stewards of your relationships with your champions — legislators who vocally support your issues and should always be the people you turn to first before consulting other legislators. You need a clear understanding of what the relationship with your champion looks like and what they expect from you. Ultimately, selecting the right partners who you trust completely is crucial to a successful campaign.

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CASE STUDIES

THE POWER OF A COALITION

LIBBIE SONNIER

Louisiana Policy Institute for Children

A strong coalition is the most potent asset advocates can have when implementing an appropriations campaign. In a strong coalition, each organization brings something unique to the table to collectively power the movement. For example, we provide our Ready Louisiana coalition with research and communications support (writing, predominantly). This helps us develop message discipline. We're not just "singing from the same songbook," we're collectively singing from the same page and same line of that songbook. We're able to stay focused on doing what it takes to secure victories for children and our families. Sometimes, that means repeating the same talking point relentlessly so that eventually, it comes so naturally to lawmakers that they think it was their idea in the first place. That's a victory because it gets us one step closer to our goals. While we provide research and communications guidance, other coalition partners are grassroots organizations with memberships that can be activated by a single text — something we saw in real-time when dozens of advocates raced to the capitol building to push back against a $52 million dollar funding cut. We all have a shared understanding of what's important and how we need to act in unison to support children and families in this state. Successful campaigns require the ability to act nimbly by sending journalists a last-minute media alert, taking out a full-page ad in the paper, or moving in lockstep with your trusted partners when they call for an activation. At this point, our coalition is powerful enough that we can and do leverage significant pressure. You can't mess with young children in this state without expecting some serious pushback.

DEFINITIONS

There is a lot of wonky jargon associated with state appropriations processes. Ballotpedia has an excellent resource outlining basic definitions for key terms to know. On the right-hand side of the same page, make sure to take a look at your state's budget and finance information to gain additional context.

ADDITIONAL TERMS TO KNOW INCLUDE:

- **Appropriation:** The amount of spending for a program legally authorized by the legislature.
- **Rider:** A rider is an amendment to a law or new law that is attached to a bill but is not directly related to that bill.
- **Fiscal note:** A fiscal note is a written estimate of the costs, savings, revenue gain, or revenue loss that may result from the implementation of a bill or joint resolution. It serves as a tool to help lawmakers better understand how a bill might impact the state budget, individual agencies, and, in some instances, local governments.
- **Line-item veto:** Also known as an item veto (see Ballotpedia above), partial veto, or an amendatory veto, this is a type of veto power that allows the governor to cancel specific parts of a bill (usually spending provisions) while signing into law the rest of the bill.
- **Earmark:** Earmarking is the practice of setting particular money aside for a specific purpose.

For state-specific information, visit your legislature's website. Many state legislatures or state agencies have glossaries available to the general public. A few examples include Alabama, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Washington.

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APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL BUDGET RESOURCES

- State Budget Basics, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
- State Budget Partners, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
- Budget Processes in the States, National Association of State Budget Officers
- State Revenue Forecasts, National Association of State Budget Officers
- State Practices on Revenue and Spending Forecasts, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
- Better State Budget Planning Can Help Build Healthier Economies, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
- Preemption Toolkit, Voices for Healthy Kids
- Glossary of State Budget Terms, Ballotpedia
- State Fiscal Briefs, Urban Institute
- Balanced Budget Requirements, Urban Institute
- State and Local Backgrounders, Urban Institute
- Budget Processes in the States (page 11), National Association of State Budget Officers
- State and Local Budget Resources, Children's Funding Project

ADDITIONAL LOBBYING RESOURCES

- How States Define Lobbying and Lobbyist, National Conference of State Legislatures
- Comparison of 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) Permissible Activities, Bolder Advocacy, Alliance for Justice
- Early Childhood Education (ECE) Policy Dashboard, Child Care Aware of America

ADDITIONAL COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCES

- Messaging Briefs: High quality, affordable child care; maternal and child health; Early Head Start; Paid Family and Medical Leave; Economic Security, NCIT
- How to Leverage Media Hits, M+R
- Fast LTE Tool, M+R
- SNAP Toolkit, Voices for Healthy Kids
- Head Start, Voices for Healthy Kids
- Paid Family and Medical Leave, Voices for Healthy Kids
- Preemption Toolkit, Voices for Healthy Kids
- Storytelling and the Power of Making Headlines, M+R

ADDITIONAL ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZING RESOURCES

- Coalition Campaign Asset Inventory, Power Prism and Voices for Healthy Kids
- Key Considerations for Coalition Operating Guidelines, Power Prism and Voices for Healthy Kids
- Coalition Mapping Worksheet, Power Prism and Voices for Healthy Kids
- Template Campaign Plan, Power Prism and Voices for Healthy Kids
- Power Mapping (Pathways of Influence) Worksheet), Power Prism and Voices for Healthy Kids
- Campaign Planning Tools, Voices for Healthy Kids
- Finding Commonalities and Solutions With Decision-Makers, Voices for Healthy Kids

NCIT is here to support your advocacy campaign. Use our TA portal to connect with us.