

# LEVERAGING A LEGISLATIVE TARGET LIST

As you prepare for each new legislative session, one essential piece of work is building a new (or refreshing your previous) legislative target list for each chamber. A target list is a comprehensive list of legislators divided into categories based on their demonstrated support for your policy priorities. These lists are not typically for public use but rather to guide your policy education and advocacy efforts during each legislative session.

## Why Build a Target List?

Following an election, it can be overwhelming to look at Congress or a state legislature made up of potentially hundreds of individuals and decide where to start with your advocacy program. Target lists allow you to group legislators based on their level of support for your policy priorities and then prioritize where you want to focus based on your goals for the session.

## How to Build an Effective Target List

- **Step 1: Research.** The first step to building an effective target list that captures the position of each policymaker is doing the research. If you have a target list from the last session, your research should focus on new electeds to update the list for the next legislative session. It is important to approach this work with clear guidelines. While you can get a sense of where policymakers stand on children's rights broadly, a target list will be more effective with greater levels of specificity. For example, create one target list for Early Head Start and a separate one for paid leave because legislators may be more or less supportive depending on which of your issues is before them. [Please click here for more information on where to look and what to look for when researching legislators' policy positions.](#)
- **Step 2: Structure.** The structure of your target lists also impacts their effectiveness. It is important to be able to group legislators in a way that allows for nuance in their position. For instance, a two-column list – divided into *supports* and *opposes* – likely will not provide sufficient nuance to guide your advocacy, whereas a five-column list – ranking legislators on a scale from *very opposed*, *leans opposed*, *mixed/unknown*, *leans supportive*, *very supportive* – will provide better insight into who needs to hear from you before a vote on your issue.
- **Step 3: Placement.** The process of placing legislators into one of the five columns should be as objective as possible; however, recognizing this can't be entirely objective, you should try to apply consistent criteria for each column to mitigate subjectivity. Criteria could include votes, co-sponsorships, public statements, membership in a relevant caucus, etc. For example, your criteria for the *very supportive column* could be that they need to have voted in support of your issue or perhaps cosponsored a priority bill. This would mean that no seemingly supportive, newly elected legislators would be in the *very supportive* column. They would be placed in *leans supportive* until they have taken one of the actions needed to meet the criteria for *very supportive*. Because this document is for internal use, it is best to err on the side of caution rather than giving credit when a legislator has only made positive statements versus having taken a policy action.

- **Step 4:** Documentation and accuracy. To maximize the effectiveness of your target list, it is helpful to use a notes column that documents why a legislator is in a particular column, especially if it seems surprising. For example, noting that a supportive legislator is in the leans column because they haven't yet had the opportunity to meet the criteria for the 'very' column or when placing someone in the middle column, noting if they are unknown because you haven't found anything indicating their position yet or if they're mixed because they have made both supportive and opposing statements.



**TIP:** Ensure your target lists are as accurate as possible by updating them after significant actions occur, such as a vote or a new bill being introduced.

### How to Use a Target List

Target lists are best used to guide your time and focus based on your policy advocacy goals. For instance, to maximize the chances your bill moves through the Committee, prioritize meeting with legislators on that Committee and tailor your meeting based on which column the legislator is in. Before a vote, it can be best to reach out to legislators in the *unknown/mixed* and *leans supportive* columns. This doesn't mean that the very supportive or opposed legislators wouldn't benefit from outreach, but time and capacity are often tight, and it's good to start where your outreach is most needed. However, if your goal is building outspoken champions for your issue, you might focus on the *very supportive* column, or if your goal is more long-term, like trying to move legislators who are opposed toward being on the fence or even supportive, you might focus on the *leans opposed* column.

The bottom line is that legislative target lists are a valuable tool that busy advocates can use and update throughout the legislative session to maximize their time and impact

