

Libraries of Washington State

Advocacy 101: Basic Tools for Outreach

Reaching out and telling your library's story is one of the most powerful tools available to organizations for helping elected officials understand the importance of issues facing libraries in their local communities and the impact of choices on the constituencies they represent. In sum, outreach simply mean getting the people directly impacted by policy and their advocates to talk directly with legislators, staff and other elected and appointed officials about a specific issue, policy or piece of legislation. The tools used in this kind of outreach commonly include:

Grassroots Tools (those that typically involve bigger groups than just yourself such as Friends groups and other allied organizations)

- Action alerts
- Phone campaigns
- Letter campaigns
- Hearings
- Lobby days

Direct Outreach Tools (those that typically involve individuals or small groups)

- Coffees and Brown Bags
- District meetings/Town Halls

What follows is a brief description of these tools and how they are used.

Action alerts: Typically these are short, effectively messaged alerts sent by fax or email to a membership base or other previously identified group asking them to reach out to their elected about a specific issue. Action alerts typically contain a specific message, are time sensitive and require immediate follow up. Action alerts are most effective when the people taking the action loop back in with their organization to let them know what they did and what the impact of their outreach was. The call to action is usually a letter, phone call or personal visit with an elected, a letter to the editor or outreach to some other specific body or individual.

Phone Campaigns: A phone campaign can be done either by asking a group of individuals via an action alert to contact their elected by phone and/or by organizing a phone bank at one or more central locations and having individuals call through a list of predetermined people to deliver a specific advocacy message.

Letter campaigns: There are two common types of letter campaigns: those that are directed to the elected and those that are directed to the media and an influencer on the elected. In both cases, the letter campaign is typically initiated via an action alert or other outreach from the organizing group (e.g. Friends of the Library) and can be directed toward specific legislators and/or newspapers in key districts. If the target of a letter campaign is specific legislators (e.g. a relevant committee) it is used to advocate for a specific piece of legislation/issue. If the letter campaign is targeted toward newspapers they are usually letters to the editor of papers in elected officials districts and designed to raise community awareness of an issue and encourage other community members to contact their elected. Often both approaches are used together.

Hearings: Public hearings are held by committees at which time they receive testimony from parties concerned about a specific topic. Often it is helpful for organizations to have representation from committee member's districts at the hearings to give testimony to the committee itself. This testimony becomes a part of the public record, unlike individual legislative visits. Other members of the legislator and the public can review the record from these meetings.

Lobby Days: A lobby day is generally organized by a group or a coalition of groups with similar interests. The purpose of this day is to gather a large number of constituents in the capitol or city hall/county seat on a given date and time to do personal meetings with electeds about a key issue or upcoming vote on specific legislation or policy. Often lobby days are organized in conjunction with a key committee hearing so that a large number of people can attend a hearing on specific topic and also meet with individual legislators.

Coffees and Brown Bags: An individual may invite a candidate or elected to come speak with a group in their district to discuss key issues and update the group on critical issues happening in the upcoming legislative session. These are typically organized by local community members and are scheduled well in advance. Brown bag lunches are another form of this type of outreach. This is an informal way to learn more about your electeds position on key issues, concerns they have and to share information you have and ask questions. It is also an excellent way to educate potential electeds about the importance of your library system in the community and to position the library as a resource.

District Meetings/Town Halls: Most electeds hold regular meetings in their individual districts to share information and learn about constituency concerns. These meetings are different from a candidate coffee or brown bag because they are organized by the elected's staff and the agenda is usually very broad covering the full range of issues the candidate is working on. They are valuable to attend because they allow constituents to learn more about what their elected is doing, what they see as critical issues and what other constituents are thinking about. They provide a great forum for asking questions and raising awareness with other constituents of critical issues you are concerned about. Having more than one voice (conveying common themes) at these sessions is valuable.