

## Handout #10 » Public Policy Advocacy

*Speak out for those who cannot speak . . . defend the rights of the poor and needy. – Proverbs 31:8-9*

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### What is public policy advocacy?

*Public Policy* is the way we govern our communities through laws and administrative rules. *Public Policy Advocacy* is a way of loving our neighbors as ourselves by helping shape public policy in ways that will affect their lives for the better.

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### What is an advocate?

An *Advocate* is anyone who cares enough about the good of his or her community and its members to speak up on their behalf. An advocate does not have to be an “expert” or a “political activist,” only someone who takes seriously the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. An advocate learns about issues affecting the community and expresses his or her views and concerns to the appropriate policy makers, building relationships with them through regular contact.

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### Why should I be an advocate?

Being an advocate means being:

- » A **good steward** of the gift of citizenship in a democracy;
- » A **faithful witness** to God’s will for a just, peaceful, and healthy world;
- » A **loving neighbor** to those whose lives are impacted by public policies – especially the most vulnerable among us.

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### How can I be an advocate?

Most public policy advocacy involves telling elected officials about your support for, or opposition to, a specific piece of legislation. This can be done by letter or e-mail, or at an office visit or a public hearing.

#### **Find out who your legislators are and how to contact them:**

To find the name and contact information for your representatives in the Wisconsin Legislature and the U.S. Congress, go to [www.legis.state.wi.us/waml](http://www.legis.state.wi.us/waml) and enter your address, or call the legislative hotline, 1-800-362-9472. Most legislators have little interest in the views of non-constituents.

#### **Write a letter to your state or federal legislator:**

- » *Be Personal* – a handwritten letter receives much more attention than a form letter or card.
- » *Be Concise* – Limit your letter to one or two paragraphs.
- » *Be Specific* – State clearly what you want your legislator to do on a single topic or bill.
- » *Be Polite* – Be respectful, even when you strongly disagree.
- » *Give a Reason* – Say what motivates you to write, and/or support your position with a fact.

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- » *Identify Yourself* – Include your name and address on both the envelope and in your letter.
- » *Follow up* – for example, express thanks or disappointment for the way your legislator voted.

### **Send an e-mail to your legislator:**

- » Your legislator's website may include a form you can fill out to send an e-mail.
- » Follow the same guidelines as for letters, and include your name and mailing address.

### **Visit with your legislator or a staff member:**

A visit with the appropriate member of your legislator's staff is usually easier to arrange. You can meet them at their office in the U.S. or State Capitol, or in their home district.

- » Plan ahead – Familiarize yourself with the issue and the legislator's views.
- » Make an appointment – Tell them the purpose of the meeting and who will be attending.
- » Be prompt, patient, and flexible – legislators have busy schedules.
- » Be prepared – Bring supporting information, and a concise fact sheet to leave behind.
- » Don't forget the "Ask" – Make a specific request to the legislator and note the response.
- » Keep in mind that every visit is a step in developing a long-term relationship.
- » Make notes to help you or others to prepare for future contacts.
- » Send a thank-you letter reviewing the meeting, and any additional information requested.

### **Offer Testimony at a Public Hearing:**

The Wisconsin Legislature holds public hearings at which citizens may respond to pending legislation. You can register to testify for or against the bill or to provide information without taking a position. You can also register for or against the bill without testifying. If you want to testify:

- » Be prepared – identify your key points and anticipate counterarguments from the other side.
- » Do your homework on the backgrounds and views of the committee members.
- » Bring about 25 copies of your testimony to give to the committee staff and reporters.
- » Limit yourself to 5 to 10 minutes. Use vivid examples, stories, or exhibits.
- » Be polite, but don't let yourself be intimidated or diverted. Thank the committee.

**For a longer version of this guide and other Public Policy Advocacy resources, visit [www.wichurches.org](http://www.wichurches.org).**

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Sources:

Bread for the World, Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations, Lutheran Partners in Advocacy