

# Grassroots Essentials in Health Care Advocacy

## *A Citizen Tool Kit*

**“A healthier community is not just some random outcome. It is instead the result of caring, committed individuals joining together in an ambitious effort.”**

*\* Message to America from the Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities*

### **Who Should Advocate?**

- Anyone and everyone
- You!
- General public
- Religious organizations
- Non-profits: yes, you too can and should lobby but follow guidelines

### **Advocacy is About Speaking Up**

- Reach out to or join existing networks, coalitions or committees.
- Write letters to the editor and to your elected officials.
- Seek out community allies.
- Make a visit to the State Capitol while the Legislature is in session.
- Meet in person with your elected officials, call them or email them.
- Convene a meeting of interested stakeholders.
- Start an email tree or phone network.
- Join the Colorado Consumer Health Initiative ([www.cohealthinitiative.org](http://www.cohealthinitiative.org))
- Introduce yourself to members of Congress or to Colorado Legislators –express your concerns about health care issues and access, and solutions.
- Plan or attend community, state or national events about health care.
- Go on-line and get on email list serves.
- Schedule a breakfast with a local reporter around an issue you care about.
- Join the League of Women Voters, AARP or other groups.
- Start doing research on health care issues, solutions, and proposed legislation and policies. Learn more.
- Speak up, speak out – get involved, start somewhere...

### **Types of Advocacy**

- Contacting legislators (call, write, e-mail, fax, meet)
- Testify at public hearings
- Rally
- Media (letters to editor, meeting with editorial board)

### **Types of Lobbying**

- Direct lobbying
  - You call your legislator and ask them to vote a specific way on a specific bill -- go to [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org) to find out who your legislators are..
- Grass-roots lobbying
  - You tell your friends to contact their legislators
- There are specific rules for non-profits around lobbying.

### **Who Should You Educate and Lobby?**

- City Council members
- County officials such as County Commissioners
- State legislators
- Federal legislators
- People who work in governmental agencies at all levels

### **10 Rules**

1. You are the expert.
2. Tell the truth.
3. Know who else is on your side.
4. Know the opposition.
5. Don't be afraid to say I don't know.
6. Talk about any personal connection you may have.
7. Be specific.
8. Follow up.
9. Don't "Burn Bridges"
10. Remember- You are the boss!

### **What NOT to Do**

- Don't threaten legislators
- Don't tell them they work for you (even though they do)
- Don't get into a debate (you'll lose)

### **When Should You Lobby?**

- You can schedule meetings with legislators all year.
- Colorado's Legislative session is from January-May.
- Off-season is a good time to build relationships with legislators.
- During the session, contacts should be more focused on specific pieces of legislation.

### **Writing to Your Elected Officials**

- Identify yourself (constituent, concerned citizen)
- Keep it brief
- Get to the point
- Be Specific
- Be Factual
- Personalize your message (more)
- Thank your legislator
- Ask for a reply
- *How to address your letter:*
  - "The Honorable (first name) (last name)
  - Salutation: Dear (elected position) (last name)

Remember, it's all about 51%! Elected officials need 51% to stay in office or get a bill passed. Health care advocates need to show elected officials that 51% of the voters support a bill or policy.

**Tips!**

- Email is good but hand written or typed letters are more personal.
- Introduce yourself and explain which bill or policy you are writing about, and if you belong to a coalition or health care advocacy group.
- State your position clearly, be specific, explain what the bill would do (or not do), and outline any group whom you know supports or opposes the legislation or policy.
- Near the end of the letter, repeat what action you want them to take (a 'no' or 'yes' vote, for example).
- Be confident even if the legislator disagrees with you.

**Advocating by Phone**

You can call your elected officials at any time....

- Introduce yourself by name and home town.
- Identify the bill you would like to discuss by its name and number.
- Briefly state your position, reasoning and what you want (e.g. a 'yes' or 'no' vote).
- Ask for your elected officials' stance on a bill or issue and ask them for a commitment to vote for your position.
- Do not argue with the elected official or their staff person.
- If they want information, supply it as soon as you can.
- Always be polite and thank them.

**Writing a Letter to the Editor**

- Writing a letter to the editor of your local newspapers is an excellent way to bring visibility to health care issues. The time and effort spent in writing shows your concern for the issue. And, your letters educate the community, media and voters about the importance of addressing health care needs.

**TIPS!**

- Include your name, address, phone number and email on the letter.
- Someone will probably contact you to make sure you wrote the letter.
- Most newspapers recommend 200-250 words. The goal of the letter is to express your opinions, why you feel an issue is important and to cite what you would like to see for the future.
- If you are responding to an article or another letter, send your letter ASAP and cite the date of the original letter or article.
- After your letter has been printed, keep reading the editorial page as someone might respond.
- Keep trying if your letter does not get printed.
- Remember, we live in a sound-byte culture – do not write letters that are unorganized or lack clarity. Get to the point with compelling messages.

- Put your format in the letter requested (e.g. length, font, submission technique, etc.). Check the editorial page to find out how to submit a letter. In our community, you can submit letters to:  
[letters@durangoherald.com](mailto:letters@durangoherald.com) (*Durango Herald*)  
[prt@pinerivertimes.com](mailto:prt@pinerivertimes.com) (*Pine River Times*); or  
[sudrum@southern-ute.nsns.us](mailto:sudrum@southern-ute.nsns.us) (*Southern Ute Drum*)  
[telegraph@durangotelegraph.com](mailto:telegraph@durangotelegraph.com) (*The Telegraph*)  
[independent@fortlewis.edu](mailto:independent@fortlewis.edu) (*The Independent at Fort Lewis*)

Also:

The Open Forum  
*The Denver Post*  
 1560 Broadway  
 Denver, Colorado 80202

Letters to the Editor  
*Rocky Mountain News*  
 P.O. Box 719  
 Denver, Colorado 80201

“Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead

### **Advocating in Person**

- Know the bill number
- Know the bill sponsors
- Identify yourself
- State your affiliation or personal connection to issue
- Tell them what you’d like them to do
- Ask where they stand
- Follow-up
- The legislative session in Colorado runs from January through May
- There are often special interim committees in the summer

#### **Tips!**

- ^ Make it as easy as possible for your legislator to meet with you by accommodating their schedule and by setting an appointment in advance. Most legislators use email.
- ^ You should expect to get about .15 minutes of their time. So be prepared and be on time. (There are some exceptions.)
- ^ Try to learn in advance where they stand on the issue.
- ^ Sometimes your legislator may not know about your issue. Don’t be surprised and remember that you are there to inform and educate.
- ^ Be prepared to explain how a bill will affect you and others in their district. Be concrete.
- ^ If you don’t know the answer to a question, be honest. Get back to them.
- ^ It’s helpful to develop a short talking points sheet. Don’t be afraid to take it with you and refer to it.
- ^ Before you leave, thank them. Ask him/her how you can be of help to them in the future. Leave materials such as a card, fact sheets, a brochure, a letter, etc.

## **Other Thoughts on Being an Effective Health Care Advocate**

- 1) Get to know your legislators before you ask something of them.
- 2) Your main job is education.
- 3) Use data, facts and figures that are accurate and reliable.
- 4) Leave them with a clear message of what needs to happen next to improve health care in Colorado, nationally or in this community.
- 5) Always, always be polite.
- 6) Don't be afraid to contact Colorado's Governor. This person is a key player in our state.
- 7) Be concise and show how a bill or issue will affect not only you – but others who live in your district.
- 8) Coordinate with other groups with similar interests. Get on their email trees. Go to their meetings. There is power in numbers. These groups often have experts who send out fact sheets and talking points on key issues.
- 9) Involve your local media.
- 10) Be gracious in victory and defeat.
- 11) ALWAYS BE PREPARED.

**Join the statewide Consumer Health Initiative to get more information, receive regular email updates and legislative Action Alerts - [www.cohealthinitiative.org](http://www.cohealthinitiative.org) or 303-839-1261**

**Join the local Citizens Health Advisory Council [www.chaclaplata.org](http://www.chaclaplata.org) or 375-0753 sponsored by Operation Healthy Communities**

**Get involved, work together, start somewhere, make a difference...**

### ***Grassroots Essentials in Health Care Advocacy Sponsors***

Citizens Health Advisory Council ([www.chaclaplata.org](http://www.chaclaplata.org))  
*Durango Herald*  
Operation Healthy Communities ([www.communitysummits.org](http://www.communitysummits.org))  
Mercy Medical Center of Durango  
La Plata County Community Summit  
La Plata County Senior Center

[www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) (President)  
[www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) (US Congress)  
[www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) (US Senate)  
[www.leg.state.co.us](http://www.leg.state.co.us) (Colorado's Legislature)  
[www.colorado.gov/governor/](http://www.colorado.gov/governor/)  
(Colorado's Governor)

### **Elected Officials**

President: George W. Bush

Governor: Bill Owens

Colorado's Federal Delegation:

Senators Wayne Allard, R and Ken Salazar, D (newly elected)

Third Congressional District Congressman, John Salazar, D (newly elected)

La Plata County's Senator in the Colorado Legislature is State Senator Jim Isgar, D and our State Representative is Mark Larson, R

**Sources: Colorado Consumer Health Initiative and the Colorado Children's Campaign - It's About Kids project**