
Keys to Engaging Decision-Makers on the Local, State and Federal Levels

Barbara Coppens



Why Should We Get Involved?

There are decisions being made all the time that affect our lives.

The people making these decisions may or may not understand people with disabilities.

That's why it is so important for us to become involved and speak up and speak out!

Make People with Disabilities a Priority

- ❑ Not every decision-maker is aware of the disability community or their needs
- ❑ Not every decision-maker prioritizes people with IDD – they all have their own policy areas they want to focus on
- ❑ Increase awareness of people with disabilities by meeting with decision-makers, inviting them to visit programs for people with disabilities and making sure you have a presence at community events



Why We Need to be Involved at the Local Level

This includes your mayors, town councils, Commissioners and township or county committees.

These folks make decisions about things like:

- Accessibility of buildings, sidewalks, etc. in your community
- Money spent on local services like recreation, education, etc.
- Local laws that could allow or prevent something from happening
 - For example, in New Jersey we had towns that had ordinances that made it very difficult to open group homes and supported housing



State Level

This includes State Senators and general Assembly Members. It can also include the heads of Departments like the Commissioners of Health or Human Services.

These folks make decisions that affect:

- The funding for supports and services, like how much money is in the State budget for DD services
- How people can access supports and services, such as the eligibility rules for services
- How people with disabilities are viewed and treated, such as strengthening or weakening discrimination laws

Their decisions can give and take away our rights!



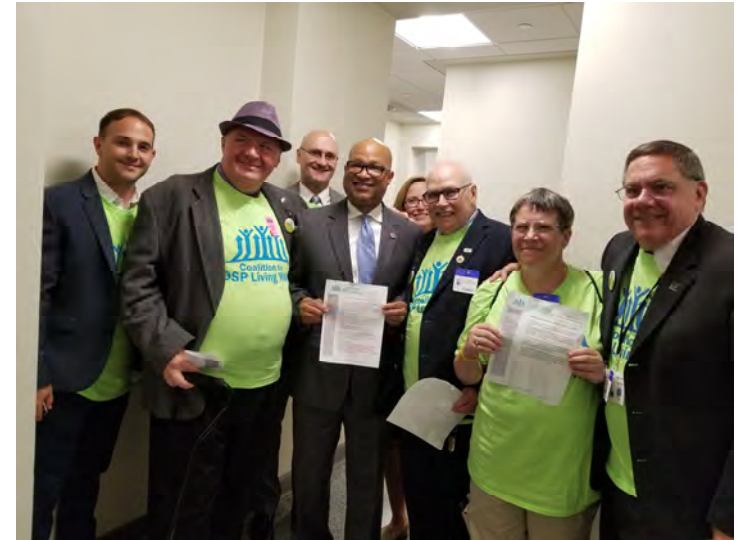
Ways to Advocate at the State Capitol

- **Weigh in** on all legislation relevant to people with IDD, their families and Chapters of The Arc
- **Meet** with lawmakers to advocate for new legislation
- **Work to change** legislation as needed



State Budget Advocacy

- ❑ Your State's budget is very important to funding for services for people with IDD
- ❑ Involvement of the grassroots: **ESSENTIAL!**
- ❑ Budget advocacy is a year-long process
- ❑ Advocacy starts with the Administration, then the Governor and then the Legislature
- ❑ Ways to advocate include testifying during hearings, meeting with Committee members, answering action alerts and more



Federal Level

This includes your State's two Senators and your Representatives in the House of Representatives. It can also include officials from Departments such as the US Departments of Health or Education.

These folks make decisions about:

- How the federal government will help pay for supports and services, such as how much Medicaid will pay for services
- Who is eligible for services, such as what eligibility requirements will there be for Medicaid
- What laws should or shouldn't be passed that affect how people with disabilities are seen and treated, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which upholds the rights of people with disabilities



Federal Advocacy



- On a federal level, The Arc US helps to guide our public policy advocacy
- We work closely with them to keep informed about:
 - national issues
 - pending legislation
 - the federal budget

Sign up for Capital insider and Action Alerts!

Current federal issues we care about:

- SSI Reforms
- Autism Cares Act Reauthorization
- Keeping All Students Safe Act
- Disability Funding: Protecting Medicaid and increasing HCBS dollars

Federal Relationship Building

- ❑ Sharing our stories with federal representatives is very important
- ❑ It gives lawmakers the chance to learn more about the local issues in their home District and the impact of federal policy on these programs
- ❑ Example: meeting individuals who would be directly impacted by cuts to Medicaid and hearing their stories makes the issue “real” to Legislators and can help them make better decisions



How Do We Get Involved?

- Learn about the issues
- Connect with other advocates and organizations
- Find out where and when you can take action
- Prepare your ideas
- Practice your speech
- Get out into the community
- Speak up and speak out!



Relationship Building

- Relationships are critical to effective advocacy!!!
- Every step you take to be an effective advocate relies on building positive relationships with stakeholders



What is a Stakeholder?

- Stakeholders are individuals and/or groups who have a vested interest in the outcome or success of your advocacy

- Who are the stakeholders you'll want to connect with?
 - People with disabilities and families
 - Disability organizations
 - Local town councils
 - County Commissioners
 - State Senators and Assembly Members
 - Federal Representatives (House members and US Senators)
 - Local Businesses Owners
 - Local Media Contacts
 - Schools and family groups

How to Work with Stakeholders



“Engaging stakeholders can be challenging because it takes more time, effort and resources. But it is worth the investment.”

1. Consider what each group cares about
2. Speak to people in their own language
3. Have clear communication
4. Define a strategy and plan for partnership
5. Be credible
6. Offer a personal point of contact
7. Report progress in a human way
8. Be truly engaged
9. Build relationships over time
10. Confidentiality is key
11. Thank and recognize them often

Get Out Into the Community!

One of the most critical roles of an effective advocate:
Getting out and meeting with the Community!



Why Should We Meet?

- Meeting builds relationships with decision-makers
- Those relationships are critical to push forward with needed improvements and to push back against unwanted changes
- Helps to educate decision-makers about who we are and how their decisions can help or hurt us



How Do You Prepare for a Meeting?

- Create a tight agenda
- Have a “pre-meeting” to practice with everyone who will be there
- Try to tailor the meeting to the issues and/or committees of the individual you’re meeting with
- Make sure self-advocates and families attend



SHARE PERSONAL STORIES!

Having a Successful Meeting

- Bring credible information. Talk about issues that affect many people as opposed to just relating an issue that affects one person.
- Bring data when applicable.
- Be aware of people's time. Many of the people you meet with only have a small amount of time to give you.
- Come prepared and limit the amount of issue areas you plan to cover. Try to keep to 2-3 issues at the most.



Mentoring the next generation

It is important to be a strong advocate.

But just as important is being a mentor to others so they can become strong advocates too. There is strength in numbers!

We should work with young people with disabilities so that they can grow to become strong and effective advocates for themselves as well as the disability community.



And remember.....

Nothing about us, without us!!

Questions?

Contact Information:

Bcoppens@DisabilityRightsNJ.org

609-292-9742

