Government Communication

Best Practices & Strategy Tip Sheet

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OVERVIEW

- Given the power and influence government leaders wield, it is essential nonprofits successfully communicate with and engage elected and non-elected leaders. Here are examples of how to leverage communication to advance an issue or cause:
    - Point out how a proposed policy can help or hurt the community.
    - Bring attention to community needs that require government collaboration.
    - Advocate for greater resources to support local residents.

WHO ARE CONSIDERED GOVERNMENT LEADERS?

- Who are our government bodies and leaders? Two main types of stakeholders:
    - Elected leaders (and their staffs): e.g. school boards, city council members, mayors, governors, state legislators, members of Congress, etc.
    - Agency representatives (local, state or federal): e.g. health department, school districts, department of parks and recreation, etc.

GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

- When communicating with government officials, consider the following:
    - **Your approach matters.** Government leaders and staff often are resistant to change and are wary of ideas they perceive add to their workload. Disarm them by emphasizing how a recommended policy you are advocating for has the potential to make their jobs easier.
    - **Reputations matter.** Many elected leaders are motivated by actions that will enhance their reputation and are cautious about policies that can backfire and make them look bad. Explain the benefits of your idea, provide evidence of how it will work and highlight opportunities where they can take credit.
    - **Relationships matter.** Who government leaders hear from can often be more important than the idea itself. Decision-makers are more likely to be receptive to your advocacy position *if* they hear it from people they trust and matter to them.
    - **Community voices matter.** When constituents bring forth an issue, government leaders are more likely to listen. It's important to show you have access to community

insights; gathering testimonials and conducting surveys is an efficient way to demonstrate that you are connected at the grassroots level.

- **Data and research matter.** Data and research can go a long way in persuading government leaders to support your cause. For example, case studies can be an effective tool for presenting your argument.
- **Lobbying rules matter.** Before you do anything, work with your legal counsel to understand the lobbying limits applicable to your organization and whether or not a specific activity constitutes lobbying.
- **Money matters.** Be clear about the budget implications of a particular issue. How much will it cost? Does it require new dollars to be allocated? What are potential sources of funding? How might the proposed policy ultimately save money or make better use of existing dollars?

DEVELOPING A GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION PLAN

- Your government communications approach should include the following:
  - **Do power-mapping.** This involves identifying leaders who wield the most influence on the issue. Is it the head of a department? The mayor or the governor? Consider whether the issue requires state or local approval. There are multiple players active in government circles. You want clarity about who are the key decision-makers that you must direct your communication and attention toward.
  - **Do your research.** Learn more about the priorities of these government leaders and what they value. What is their reputation? Who are their allies and opponents? Ask your network what they know about them. This will not only help inform your message, but determine who you need to have on your side to yield the most influence.
  - **Consider timing and community context.** Become knowledgeable about the decision-making process, including what steps need to be taken and the timing of those steps. You need to align engagement activities with this process. For example, it might be more impactful to schedule a press conference the day before and the day of an important government hearing, versus doing so several weeks in advance. It's also important to understand what is happening in the community: Is there something going on that will help government leaders pay more attention to the issue? Or, is there something your target elected is focused on that could help or hurt your advocacy priorities?
  - **Tailor your message and find the right messenger.** The head of a state agency might be persuaded by data. An elected official may be interested in understanding how a particular issue impacts their constituents. Be sure to make your message relevant to

the values and priorities of that leader. Focus on the most important things a person needs to know, and what action you want them to take. Lastly, identify people who have relationships with these leaders that you can activate as trusted and key messengers for your issue.

- **Identify stories and data you want to include in your message.** Showcase in real-world terms how the community will be impacted by the issues in which you are advocating. Determine what types of stories will resonate most with government leaders. Don't overwhelm them with too many data points, rather, identify data most relevant to your issue and package them alongside stories in an easily digestible way.

COMMUNICATION TACTICS

- In developing your communication plan, consider these tactics to best engage government leaders.
  - **One-on-one meetings.** Set up meetings with government leaders and their staff — staff members are often the gatekeepers and the ones you need to convince first to ultimately influence a government leader. Leverage your network to get in touch. Be sure to include in those meetings key people who may have relationships with your target audience and are trusted.
  - **News coverage.** Government leaders pay close attention to news coverage. Assess opportunities to drive news articles or place opinion-editorials about your issue. This might cause officials to pay closer attention to a community issue or proposed policy, and to take some type of action.
  - **Develop briefing materials.** Create concise materials to help educate government leaders about an issue. For example, you could develop a two-page document that summarizes key data, community needs, recommendations and potential impact and benefits of a proposed policy.
  - **Provide testimonials.** Government leaders often are swayed by hearing first-person accounts from local residents and community leaders. Testimonials from key messengers can help validate specific needs, demand action be taken and provide support for a particular policy.
  - **Leverage coalitions.** Utilize the power of coalitions to demonstrate that there is a critical mass of people who care about your issue. This could involve a letter writing campaign; having coalition members tag government leaders in social media posts and make comments on their social media feed; or having groups of people seek meetings with that person.