

Putting Prosperity Within Reach: Advocating for Equitable Public Policies

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When too many families are struggling to get by—much less get ahead, something is wrong. Prosperity Now is working to make it right by creating a clear path to financial stability, wealth and prosperity. But the change we want to see is massive, and we can't create it alone—we need advocates' help.

This guide is designed to help long-time advocates and those just getting started understand the “why” and the “how” of advancing public policies at all levels of government that put financial well-being within reach for everyone in our country.

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Have questions about how Prosperity Now can help you hone your advocacy skills? Send us an email at community@prosperitynow.org.

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Getting Started: What Is Advocacy?

Advocacy is the process of influencing lawmakers to adopt, reject or modify the rules that govern a particular group of people, geographic area or society as a whole. Policy advocacy is the act of taking a position on an issue and sharing that position with someone who wields the power to do something about it, ultimately resulting in small-scale reforms, lasting social change or something in between.

For those of us seeking to create prosperity, effective advocacy is critical to catalyzing policy changes that strengthen financial security and create opportunity for all. Simply put, the impact of effective advocacy can be the creation of a more equitable society for the people you serve.

Need an [advocacy glossary](#) to understand unfamiliar advocacy terms?

Learn more about the [basics of policy advocacy](#), read Bolder Advocacy's [What is Advocacy](#) and find out how Prosperity Now Community member Idaho Asset Building Network thinks about [advocacy](#).

Who Can Be an Advocate?

Quite simply, anyone and everyone can be an advocate!

Advocacy is the number-one way that nonprofits and community-based organizations advance social change that affects the people they serve. There is a common misconception that nonprofit organizations cannot engage in advocacy, but in fact, nonprofit organizations can:

- Play a vital role in developing and implementing public policies that promote an informed, healthy and strong democratic society.
- Make connections between policymakers and their constituents.
- Educate lawmakers and the public about policy issues and how public policy affects particular groups of people.

Lawmakers are experts in making laws, but laws get made in a range of ways and cover a variety of topics—and lawmakers cannot possibly understand every protocol for making a law or every nuance of the topics on which they must govern. Thus, in order for lawmakers to feel comfortable adopting a policy, they must (1) care about the people affected by the policy, and (2) be educated on the issue. That's where you come in!

As practitioners, direct service providers or simply as generally concerned citizens, you have perhaps the best view of how policy issues play out in your community. As a result, you are uniquely positioned to educate lawmakers and inspire them to care about the issues playing out in your community. In turn, you can persuade your lawmakers that your call to action is one worth heeding.

Although you may not think of yourself as an advocate, chances are that you have advocated more than once in your life. After all, advocacy takes many forms. Advocacy can be as simple as calling the utility company on behalf of an elderly neighbor who has been wrongly charged for services they didn't receive, or it can be as advanced as meeting with your members of Congress to educate them on how a policy decision might impact a program in your community and the clients served by that program. In the latter example, by educating your lawmakers, you are equipping them with data and facts that help them make an informed decision about the policy in question.

Featured Resource

Learn why members of the Prosperity Now Community advocate for change! Read stories from [Rodolfo](#), [Jessica](#) and [Kalitha](#).

In addition to the fact that advocacy happens on a spectrum from simple to complex, the outcome of advocacy can happen directly or indirectly. In some instances, you may ask your city councilmember to vote "no" on a particular measure, and in these cases, your advocacy is relatively direct. However, in other instances, advocates must consider the "long game." Longer-term activities, often focused on building lasting relationships with lawmakers, can help them see you as a credible source of information. Over time, lawmakers will seek your counsel as they consider particular measures. In this way, the work you do as an advocate is indirect, but can have a significant impact on the rules and ordinances put into effect in your community.

How Does Policy Change Happen?

Policy change happens in several ways and at all levels of government.

Statutory or Legislative Advocacy

Legislative policymaking refers to the process by which elected officials (e.g., members of Congress, state legislators, school board officials, etc.) introduce and pass legislation that becomes law. In some instances, legislation directly mandates a rule of law, as in the case of a bill that places a cap on what payday lenders can

charge for the loans they make. In other instances, legislation only dictates broad structural parameters, and when this legislation passes, it is up to a governmental agency (or group of agencies) to design and implement the law in a way that is applicable to the constituency of the agency and which abides by the parameters set forth in the legislation. For example, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (often referred to as the ACA or “Obamacare”) gave states the flexibility to expand their Medicaid programs, and while the Act specified particular eligibility requirements, it was up to states to determine how they might expand eligibility and to decide which other strategies they might employ to lower uninsured rates among low-income residents.

To understand legislative advocacy more deeply, take state-level, automatic-enrollment Individual Retirement Account programs, or AutoIRA, as an example. A small handful of states now offer AutoIRA programs, and these programs emerged from legislation that laid the groundwork for large-scale, state-run programs. In most cases, the enacting legislation focused largely on broad structural aspects to create an environment conducive to the success of these programs. At the same time, the enacting legislation established financial boards under state administrative control to work out the precise details of how to establish, launch and administer the AutoIRA programs. Notably, the enacting legislation did not mandate that states create AutoIRA programs, nor did it dictate the specific ways in which AutoIRA programs were to be established and administered.

In this example, advocacy contributed to the creation of AutoIRA programs because:

- Advocates educated members of Congress during the legislative process—ranging from the introduction of a bill all the way through passage—on the possible impacts of an AutoIRA law and the ways early iterations of the law could be improved to meet its goal.
- Advocates shared data and stories with elected officials highlighting the implications of the policy to further galvanize their lawmakers’ interest in making retirement savings more accessible.

Regulatory or Administrative Advocacy

Once a law is passed, the responsible agency, or agencies, develop the rules and regulations to implement and enforce the underlying law. Advocating to inform or influence this process is known as regulatory or administrative advocacy.

For example, The Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform Act created the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and tasked it with writing rules to reform the mortgage

lending market and protect mortgage borrowers against the practices that led to the financial collapse of 2008-2009. Advocates who educated Bureau staff and shared stories about the importance of mortgage lending reform were engaged in administrative advocacy because they informed the rulemaking process without ever advocating for a piece of legislation to be introduced or passed.

Of course, administrative or regulatory advocacy happens at the state and local levels, too. Often, rulemaking at these levels of government leads to the creation of entirely new state programs. For example, in Nevada, the State Treasurer’s Office used fees collected from 529 college savings plan providers to develop and institute a statewide Children’s Savings Account (CSA) program. In this instance, no piece of legislation demanded that the Treasurer’s Office establish a CSA program or find a use for the fees collected from 529 savings plan participants. Rather, it was the work of advocates interested in creating a college-bound identity among all Nevada students that led to the establishment of the statewide CSA program.

In this instance, advocacy led to the establishment of a statewide CSA program because:

- Advocates met with federal and state agency officials to educate them on the possible impacts of the CSA law and the ways the law could be improved to meet the goal of making higher education more accessible.
- Advocates offered public comments—formal, written input on the law—during a period in which state agencies sought to hear from constituents.
- Even well before the establishment of the law, advocates had spent time building relationships with lawmakers and had cultivated champions who were interested in doubling down on their commitment to making higher education more accessible.

Budgetary Advocacy

Budgetary advocacy refers to the process of informing or influencing decisions about how public money will be allocated. This is an especially important process because in addition to passing broad legislation (legislative policy) and tasking agencies with transforming legislation into applicable rules (regulatory policy), elected officials also make decisions about how much money will be spent on the various programs that are funded by the government. These funding decisions can have big implications for how an agency can write rules, how it can implement its programs and how it can enforce particular laws.

At the federal level, budgetary decisions get made by appropriations committees, and need to be voted on by Members of Congress. For example, in 2016, Congress approved an additional \$3 million in funding for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. While this was the first funding increase for the program since 2010, members of Congress likely would not have appropriated this additional funding had it not been for the years of hard work advocates put into the process of educating appropriators (and the rest of Congress) on VITA's impact in communities throughout the country.

At the state level, budgets are often introduced by the Governor and approved or voted upon by the state legislature. In these contexts, budgets are frequently used as a means for introducing or enacting new state policies. For example, California was able to enact and fund a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) during its annual budget process. Whereas the establishment of such a program might not have been possible had a member of the state legislature introduced a California EITC bill, the program could successfully be established when considered as a small part of a much broader budget to fund the state's programs across a wide range of issue areas.

In this instance, the establishment of a state EITC program in California was possible because:

- Advocates met with appropriators to make the case for the program and their desired funding level, including sharing stories about what the program would mean for appropriators' constituents.
- At the state level, advocates started with agency heads and members of the Governor's budget staff who, over time, began to see the potential power of the EITC program and could convince their colleagues and other key influencers of the value of the program.

While budgetary advocacy can often be a successful strategy for implementing new policies at the state level, caution should be taken with many budget-enacted policies requiring annual renewals or review, as is the case with California's EITC.

How Do I Advocate for Policy Change?

For an overview of how a bill becomes law, there's no better resource than [this](#)! Or, for a more detailed overview on the federal legislative process works, check out these [videos](#). Each state's legislative website can also explain how a bill becomes a law at the state level (take, for example, [Washington](#) or [South Dakota](#)).

While getting the results you want may be difficult, making the pitch for the policy change you want to see isn't! In our own ways, we're all advocates for something—whether it's asking for that raise, trying to get into your school of choice or speaking up on behalf of our children. One way or another, we're all advocates.

Don't think so? Well, take a look at how easy it was for a [seven-year old boy in Arkansas](#) and a [10-year girl old in Utah](#) to advocate for what they believe in.

Now that you realize just how easy it is to advocate, here are a few things to keep in mind in order to be as effective as possible.

1. **Data and research are critical**, as they help to make a concrete case to the public, the media and policymakers about the problem and the efficacy of the proposed solution. Moreover, for existing problems, it helps to have data to show the impact those problems have had on you or your community more broadly. In other words, reliable data and facts about the issue can help make the case for policy change, and are important in influencing and convincing policymakers on the need for change.

For state and local data on indicators of financial well-being, visit the [Prosperity Now Scorecard!](#)

2. **Effective communications require the right messaging and framing, targeted to the right audiences.** Effective messaging and framing can build awareness, change public perception and move people to action. Importantly, those messages should target the individuals you are trying to persuade by considering their motivations. For example, if a lawmaker in your community is an avid supporter of creating a balanced budget, they may not be eager to fund a costly workforce development program. What can you say to this lawmaker that appeals to them, even if they are hesitant to approve legislation that would cost taxpayers more money?

Of course, lawmakers are always motivated by the need to represent their constituents, so when we advocate for public policies that improve communities, it is important to emphasize stories from your clients about the impact your programs have had on those clients' lives. In fact, telling your story is easy and effective, and has the potential to engage elected

officials and the public on a deeper level. See how Statewide Poverty Action Network tells [client stories](#) when advocating for TANF supports.

Looking for some basic communications tools to help frame your messages? Here are some [Tips for Writing and Placing Op-eds](#) and [How to Get Your Op-Ed Published](#). You can also learn how to effectively message your policy agenda in a way that moves people to action using Neighborhood Partnership's [values-based messaging](#) or FrameWorks Institute's Building a [New Narrative on Human Services](#) toolkit.

3. **Educating and engaging policymakers is important even when you don't have a specific ask.** Educating your lawmakers is the most direct opportunity you have to influence policy. It allows you to develop strong relationships and create policy champions who will advocate for the kinds of changes that benefit the people and communities you serve.

Pro Tip!

Have a story that's worth telling, but aren't sure where to start? Prosperity Now can help you interview a client, write up their story and share it with the world. Drop us a line at hello@prosperitynow.org to get started!

4. **Building a strong, diverse and engaged partnership base will amplify your impact.** You can be an effective advocate on your own, but if members of your networks and coalitions can sound a unified voice, your chances of success will multiply. By building relationships with your partners and identifying the ways in which your partnership can be mutually beneficial, you will be able to bring partners to the table to reinforce the messages you use to influence the policymaking process.

Highlighted on the next page are commonly used advocacy strategies and examples of calls to action that can inform and influence future policymaking. Not all of these examples will be relevant to your advocacy efforts at any given time, but instead are meant to serve as starting points as you brainstorm strategies to strengthen your advocacy efforts.

Advocacy Strategies	Calls to Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize and mobilize your stakeholders (e.g., your coalition partners) to speak up, take action and advocate for change • Educate legislators by providing them with data, research, stories and general information about key issues • Produce data and research that highlights pressing needs in your community • Host educational conferences and trainings to gather, network and share information on policy priorities • Educate the public about the legislative process, and/or introduce communities and constituencies to the legislators who represent them • Build public awareness by educating community members on relevant issues that impact them • Organize a rally, town hall or press conference to build public awareness about an issue and to hold your policymaker accountable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite policymakers to your site to learn about an issue or program • Meet with your member of Congress in person while they are at their in-district offices during congressional recess • Call your elected officials' offices to weigh in on a legislative issue • Share stories, data and resources with elected officials to illustrate the implications of their decisions • Participate in lobbying visits or hold advocacy days to advocate for or against specific legislation. (Note: 501(c)(3) public charities can engage in some lobbying; more information about the rules of nonprofit lobbying are here.) • Draft a petition or sign-on letter to express views on an issue and ask coalition members to sign on • Write an op-ed or letter to the editor to share your expertise on an issue that recently became salient in your community • Participate in a Town hall and ask your elected officials questions about his/her policy positions • Encourage citizens to vote (through nonpartisan voter mobilization efforts) • Submit comments or feedback on regulations as they are being developed • Use social media like Twitter and Facebook to educate the public and lawmakers about your issue. Don't forget to tag them and include relevant hashtags!

Advocate Now!

Now that you know how you can be an advocate, it's time to put your skills to the test! To take advantage of opportunities to advocate on behalf of the communities you serve, visit our [Advocacy home](#).