

ENGAGING YOUR BOARD IN ADVOCACY

Advocacy is a critical tool to mobilize people for the important work your organization is doing in the community. Now more than ever, nonprofit leaders need to actively represent their organization's values and mission. No matter how engaged your board is right now in advocacy, it's never too late to start the conversation in the boardroom. Whether it's talking to media, business leaders, other charitable organizations, or elected officials, board members already have the tools and skills to become advocates for your organization outside of board meetings.

“The most effective charitable organizations have recognized that successful advocacy does not require stepping into the quagmire of partisan politics. It simply means using our voices as committed and informed champions for our missions.”
-Stand For Your Mission.

What is advocacy?

Many smaller organizations avoid advocacy because they assume all advocacy is lobbying - and believe that any form of lobbying is off limits because of their 501(c)3 tax exempt status. However, many 501(c)3 organizations are not taking full advantage of their rights under federal tax laws, which outlines generous lobbying limits. Lobbying as a form of advocacy can take shape in different ways, and is completely legal for nonprofits using the appropriate methods. There are many types of advocacy, as the Alliance for Justice defines:

“While all lobbying is advocacy, not all advocacy is lobbying. Advocacy is any action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for a cause, supports or defends, or pleads on behalf of others. It includes public education, regulatory work, litigation, and work before administrative bodies, lobbying, nonpartisan voter registration, nonpartisan voter education, and more.”¹

For leaders in the anti-hunger network, advocacy can mean supporting legislation to strengthen and protect funding for the programs we run, or inviting elected officials to a food distribution. Getting involved in advocacy can be simple!

Why is it important for board members to get involved?

To truly advance the mission of your organization beyond the day-to-day operations, your board must be ambassadors of your mission and values - and not just to get financial support and donors. Building relationships with elected officials and other decision makers on the issues your organization addresses is critical. It is likely your board members are already key influencers, well-connected, and invested in your community. For advocacy purposes, leveraging the connections your board members have can be impactful on public policy that will shape the work you do. Board members are often the link to other donors, clients, community members, and powerful friends that

¹ <http://www.bolderadvocacy.org/afj-on-advocacy/glossary>

can be supporters and key voices on your issues.

What are some legal considerations the board should make?

If your board is hesitant to develop advocacy initiatives due to legal concerns, check out the “[Guide to IRS Regulations for Charities](#)”. Another helpful resource is Bolder Advocacy’s factsheet “[Can We Really Say That?](#)”. These restrictions are not as limiting or complicated as people believe. This guide is not the official authority on this topic, so please read these other resources and talk to leadership to make sure you understand the legal limitations of your organization.

How do we start the conversation?

Board members can play personal roles in building a culture of advocacy within the organization. Beginning the conversation with your board can start with the following questions:²

1. What are the societal realities or problems that our work seeks to solve, alleviate, or otherwise address?
2. What are the broader issues associated with our core work?
3. Are our strategies actively addressing those issues? If not, what would change if they did?
4. Who can I talk to today to advance our mission?

Many board members in the anti-hunger network might say, “But we just want to focus on food.” While that might be the sole focus of the organization, it is crucial that food banks and food pantries work to “shorten the line while feeding the line”. This is possible by advocating for better programs and policies to support low-income families, and reduce the number of people who suffer from hunger and food insecurity in the long term. The Alaska Food Coalition Program Manager can always help guide you through talking to your board about plugging into advocacy in the coalition network.

Additional Resources:

[BoardSource - Advocacy and Ambassadorship](#)

[Stand for Your Mission Discussion Guide](#)

[Tools for Effective Advocacy](#)

[Comprehensive Resources for Boards and Advocacy](#)

² <http://standforyourmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Discussion-Guide.pdf>