

Advocates Tip Sheet

Communicating with the News Media



Effective communication is the foundation of effective advocacy. This tip sheet provides useful information on how to effectively gain coverage of your issue in the local news media.

The news media can be an incredible asset in both raising awareness of an issue and influencing policymakers decisions. Legislators and policymakers tend to read the newspaper and watch the news, so hearing your message from those channels can be particularly persuasive. Getting coverage of an issue in the newspaper or on the airwaves can help move people to support a cause and take positive action.

Here are some tips for getting coverage of your issue.

Know the local media. Read the paper, listen to the radio station or watch the television program in which you want your story covered. Find out what kind of stories they usually cover, who covers them and what kind of angles they like on stories. Some have particular audiences or formats and you should tailor your message or approach to their formats.

Provide solid information. Reporters are looking for stories and need facts to write them. The more accurate information you can provide, the more likely it is to get covered. It's best if you have data that document the problem and real people who illustrate it.

Find a news peg. Because you care about an issue doesn't mean a reporter will. They care about covering the news. So try to find an angle that makes your story newsworthy.

Opinion pages. Sometimes you don't have news but you want to express your opinion. The best way to do that is through a letter to the editor or op-ed. These appear opposite the newspapers' own editorials. The opinion pages of a newspaper provide great opportunities for advocates. See **Tips for Writing a Letter to the Editor**.

Write good news releases. If you decide to do a news release, it is important to produce a professional looking and quality document. Answer the five W's – who, what, where, when, and why. Try to make the "lead" (first sentence) short and newsy.

Don't rely solely on your news release. Even a well-crafted and perfectly executed release can easily get misdirected or misplaced in a newsroom. Follow-up with a phone call to the reporter or editor to be sure they received it.

Know your material and purpose. Remember your objective and that you are the expert on the topic. Let the interviewer or reporter rely on your expertise.

Don't be afraid to say you don't know. Although it helps to anticipate possible questions, you can't always be prepared to answer everything. Instead of replying with vague or incorrect information, simply state you need to verify your answer and that you would be glad to supply them with the information. You can also offer to put them in contact with another person. Your integrity and credibility are more important than a quick answer.

Tips for Writing a Letter to the Editor

1. Put your full first and last name, address, phone and/or fax numbers (day and evening) and your e-mail address at the top of the letter. Most publications call the writer to confirm authenticity.
2. If you are referring to a previously published letter, news story or column, identify it by its headline and the date it was published (i.e. Davenport grinds out a win, Aug. 17). This enables the editor to quickly check the original item to verify any references you have made to it (i.e. quotes, statistics, etc.).
3. Cut to the chase. You don't need a long introduction to your subject. Just focus on one or two key points that you want to make. Letters to the Editor should be no longer than 200-250 words.
4. Write short, punchy sentences, grouped in two or three paragraphs.
5. If you are responding to a columnist's views (or any other opinion piece), don't launch a personal attack on the columnist -- attack his/her views. Offer a countervailing opinion. Try to advance the debate so that other readers might join in the discussion in subsequent letters.
6. When possible, put your own personal twist on the subject, but remember to keep it brief.

The Advocates for Children of New Jersey is the state's foremost child research and advocacy organization. For more than 30 years, ACNJ has advocated for policies and programs that improve the lives of children and families in New Jersey. Over the years, ACNJ's issues have expanded from child welfare and juvenile justice to include early learning, health and family economic success.

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