

Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness Advocacy Toolkit



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How to Develop an Advocacy Program

1. Define your goals and objectives:

- What do you want to happen as a result of your advocacy program?



• A *goal* describes the ultimate policy advancement you want to achieve through your efforts, while an *objective* is a concrete action you will be asking a legislator or group to take to help you reach the goal

2. Prioritize your goals and objectives to develop a solid foundation on which to start:

- Which issues most heavily impact your mission and the population you serve?
- Consider the areas your organization is most likely able to influence.
- Keep in mind the importance of centering the voices of those with lived experience- A wise advocate once said ‘Those that are closest to the problem are closest to the solution.’

3. Identify your stakeholder audience:

- Who are you trying to influence?
- How will your audience shape your advocacy program?

4. Developing a program plan is essential:

- Given your objectives and audience, what key strategies will you use to communicate the issue to them? Choose the strategies that will be most effective to achieve your goals.
 - Choose specific, targeted strategies.
 - Pick concrete numbers (get the community to send 20 letters to their legislators) and outline *specific actions* (“write a letter to the editor” rather than “get media attention”).
 - Remember to include the perspective and voice of persons with lived experience in every aspect.

5. Assign and implement specific actions:

- Who will be responsible for carrying out the program?
- What specific tasks would you like carried out?
- What is your timeline for the projects?
 - Choose a timeframe that is both reasonable and makes sense for your organization.
 - Setting a timeframe helps increase the level of accountability and helps ensure that you successfully reach your goals.

• Keep in mind that there are better times to impact legislation than others. Generally, providing input is easier early in the process, when a bill is being debated in committee. If the bill is held up at any stage, you may also contact your elected representatives to try to urge them to take action.



• It may be helpful to develop strategic partnerships with other organizations and sectors. Working with partner organizations can help strengthen and amplify your advocacy endeavors, while also showing that many groups have a stake in the issue.

* Generally defined as “the basic source of support from the ground up,” grassroots advocacy includes organizing, mobilizing, and engaging the public to advocate for themselves. -Grantmakers in Health

There are many ways to keep informed of action being taken in the legislature. If you want to find information about bills in Michigan, you may go to www.legislature.mi.gov. If you are interested in goings-on in the federal government, try www.govtrack.us or www.opencongress.org. All these sites allow you to search for bills by topic (such as “homelessness” or “housing”), by sponsor or bill number and receive email alerts about specific bills, bills by topic, committee meetings, and more.

When topics or issues that affect you and your community come up in our legislature, it is important that you make your voice heard. Actions a grassroots advocate can take include:

- Writing a letter or email to your legislator.
- Making a phone call to your legislator.
- Attending a rally with fellow advocates to demonstrate support to legislators.
- Telling other advocates about an issue to increase awareness and support.

Writing an Email, Fax, or Letter

Contacting your legislators directly is a great way to get their attention and make them aware of issues that are important to you and their other constituents. To find your legislators, try the following:

- Go to www.opencongress.org, or www.govtrack.us (OpenCongress only has information regarding members of Congress).
- For MI elected officials including legislators, use this link:
<https://lwvmi.org/government-links/>.
 - These sites have search functions that allow you to look for your legislator by your zip code.
 - Depending on which site you use, their office address, email address, telephone number and/or fax number will be made available.
 - If there is any information you are unable to find, their contact information

□ These sites also make information regarding legislator's voting records and other useful statistics available. If you are interested in finding out more about your legislator, it would be beneficial to browse these sites. Each lawmaker has a webpage with a bio.

- You may also call your county clerk to find out who your legislators are

□ Due to post-9/11 security issues, it can (and usually does) take quite a bit of time to get a letter to your legislator, especially at the federal level. The most effective and timely ways to contact your representative are either through email or fax.

Things to Include in Your Letter:

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- Introduce yourself as a constituent.
- If you are part of a group whose participants are all advocating for the same thing, state how many people are in that group.
 - State how the legislation will affect you, your family, community and/or the constituency.
- State exactly what you want done, or why you are contacting them, clearly and concisely.
 - Refer to bills and policies by name and/or number (this information can be found on the websites listed above).
 - Ask for your legislator's view on the issue. If you want them to take specific action, explain why it is important
- **Don't worry if you are not an expert**, your personal experience is what really matters.
- Ask when you can follow up on your request
- When your legislator does what you asked them to, **follow up with a thank you**

Writing Tips:

Keep the letter short – preferably no more than one page!

- The shorter and more concise your letter is, the less likely it will be ignored or skimmed over. Try to customize it if you are writing as part of a coordinated campaign; avoid mass messages with the same content.

Use clear statements to get your point across quickly and effectively.

- If you have them, use statistics to illustrate your point.

The addresses for state legislators are:

The Honorable (Senator's Name)
(Office Number) (Building)
P.O. Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909

The Honorable (Representative's Name)
(Office Number) House Office Building
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909

The addresses for federal legislators are:

The Honorable (Senator's full name)
(Room #) (Dirksen, Hart, or Russell)
Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable (Representative's full name)
(Room #) (Cannon, Longworth, Ford or Rayburn)
House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

- When writing to the Chair of a committee or the Speaker of the House, it is appropriate to address them as Mr. / Madam Chairperson or Mr. / Madam

Sample Letter

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Date

The Honorable Patrick Colbeck
Michigan State Senate District 7
Michigan State Senate
P.O. Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Chairman Colbeck:

As one of your constituents, I am writing to ask that you support SB 1160, providing for the restitution of victims of mortgage-related crimes, funding for foreclosure programs and certain MSHDA programs, as well as assistance for homeless children and veterans.

After personally having dealt with foreclosure on my family's home, I know that the provision of programs to help alleviate some of the burden as well as educate individuals on their options would go a long way in helping those dealing with foreclosure. Additionally, the funding granted in this bill will help provide support for two populations susceptible to homelessness, children, and veterans. Finally, the funding granted to MSHDA will help them to continue to fund programs for individuals and families in need of housing assistance. One such program, the financing of new and rehabilitated units, exceeded its FY 2011 goal by 967 units (per MSHDA's FY 2011 Housing Production Goals Report).

I am wondering when I can follow up with you, and that you do me the favor of providing your view on this issue. I can be reached at:

Your name

Your address

Your email address

Thank you for your efforts,

Your Name



Make a Phone Call

When the legislature is in session, you can call the legislator's office. Members of the **House of Representatives** can be reached at (517) 373-0135, while members of the **State Senate** can be reached at (517) 373-2400. You can find a schedule of when the House and Senate are in session at:

[http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(voau3p45okilj0e4jmgx2n2h\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=SessionSchedules](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(voau3p45okilj0e4jmgx2n2h))/mileg.aspx?page=SessionSchedules)

A few things to keep in mind when calling your legislator:

- Phone calls are best for specific issues that have approaching deadlines.
- **Identify yourself by name and city.**
 - Identify the bill or issue you wish to talk about by name or number
- State your position and how you would like your legislator to vote.
 - Ask for your legislator's stance on the bill/issue and for a commitment to vote for your position.
- **Don't argue** if they have an opposing view or have not yet decided.
 - If your legislator asks you a question that you do not know, tell them you will find the correct answer and get back to them.
 - If your legislator or their staff needs more information on the issue, supply it to them as quickly as possible.
- **Be brief.**
- Follow up the call with an email or card restating your position and thanking them for their time.

If you leave a voicemail keep it brief, simple and make sure you:

- Include your name, address, and contact information.
 - Identify the specific bill or issue that you are calling about, using the bill number if you know it.
- **Briefly** state your position.
- Call to make sure your message was received if you have not heard back **within a week.**

Other ways to connect with legislators and congresspersons:

- Sign up for their newsletters from their webpage.
- Attending coffee hours and other casual events they host to meet and converse with constituents.
- Follow them on social media.
- Invite them to tours, open houses, groundbreakings, annual meetings and other events your organization hosts.
- Invite them to speak at an agency meeting, conference, roundtable, coalition or Continuum of Care meeting. Keep in mind, finding opportunities to connect with legislators, congresspersons and other elected officials goes a long way in forming relationships with them. Remember, every day is advocacy day!

Visit in Person

Legislators like personal visits; it shows them that their constituents are interested and active. Since they are extremely busy, make sure you plan ahead and know exactly what you would like to say. Write down some notes on a note card so you have a plan of how you want the meeting to go, and you are sure to cover all your points.

Before the Meeting:

- Make an appointment with the scheduler in advance and expect to be granted about 15 minutes. Make sure the housing staff person knows you are coming. If you are emailing the scheduler, copy the housing staffer; if you are calling to schedule an appointment, ask the scheduler to include the housing staffer.
- Offer several dates and times of when you would be available to meet.
- Follow up if you do not hear back within one to two weeks.
- Prepare a factsheet on your issue(s). Discuss no more than two issues.
- Learn in advance where your legislator stands on your issue(s).
- Explain how the bill will affect you and other constituents.
- Dress in normal business attire.

Writing an Effective Factsheet

When going to visit your legislator, bring a fact sheet that you can reference in your prepared comments and leave with your legislator, so they have it for future reference.

Things to keep in mind when making your fact sheet:

- Keep it brief and to the point, no more than one or two pages. Make it easy to read and highlight the key points to understanding the issue
- Include your name, address, telephone number, and email address
 - Include the name, address, telephone number, website, and email address of any organization you may be with
- Use sub-headings, bullet points, and key graphs, charts, and statistics
- Provide answers to common questions
- Be honest and factual. Do not exaggerate the statistics
- Draw conclusions or make suggestions of something your legislator can do

During the Meeting

- Be on time (or early) and be prepared when you arrive.
- Start with a brief 90-second summary of the issue.
 - Be sure to focus on the local impact of the issue. If it has an impact on their constituents, they will be more likely to pay attention
- Give the legislator the factsheet on your issue.
- Be firm, but friendly. Once your legislator is aware of the issue and your

position you may start asking for a commitment.

- Your job is to inform your legislator of what you think is the right thing and why, so focus on the issue and do not attack or threaten your legislator. Remember, you may want their support on a future issue.
- Be prepared to go over the basics of your issue.
- If you don't know the answer to a question they ask, tell them that you will find out the answer and get back to them.
- Be realistic with yourself. Remember that much of legislation is about compromise.
- Ask how you can be of help to them. Do they need more information on the subject? Would they like you to talk to others?
- **Thank them for their time.**
- Be sure to know who you can follow up with, and when.

Your 90-second summary/prepared comments

When visiting your legislator, it is helpful to have a brief summary memorized. Your comments should include:

- **Who you are and any group you belong to that has interest in your issue**
- **The topic you came to talk about, how you are impacted**
- **What you want your legislator to do**
- **Reference your fact-sheet and elaborate on a few key points**

Be prepared for responses to your requests:

- **If they say they will support your issue:** Great! Thank them.
- **If they say maybe:** Ask if there is any additional information you can get them to help them decide.
- **If they say no:** Without being pushy, ask if there is a reason they are opposed to supporting the legislation, and if there is any information you can get them to help address their concerns. This should spark good discussion and allow the legislator to clarify their needs. It can also help you put together evidence that shows how the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

After the Meeting

- Follow up with a thank you note and any information that was requested. Keep in mind that you want to continue developing the relationship.
- Any news articles, new fact sheets or local information related to the issue/legislation are a good reason to contact the legislator and update them on the issue.

Public Meetings

Public meetings can be a useful way to establish face-to-face contact with elected officials, especially when issues relevant to you or your organization are on the agenda. Attending a public meeting not only has the benefit of creating a formal role for you or your organization in the decision-making process, but also puts you / your organization on the record as having attended the meeting.

Things to keep in mind:

- Come to the meeting prepared, with good information and fact sheets
- Show up in force. If there are other individuals or organizations that have a stake in the issue, invite them (especially if an issue on the agenda relates to homelessness)
- Be respectful. Those that have opposing views are entitled to their opinion and showing goodwill and respect to all can go a long way in gaining advocates for your position.
- Follow up with the official after the meeting. Ask if there is any additional information you can provide them that might help

Petitions

Petitions are useful to show broad grassroots support for an issue and are usually managed by an organized body or sponsor organization.

Generally speaking, it is easier to get petition signatories than letter writers.

Petition signatures can be gathered at:

- Events and gatherings (it is best to get the permission of the organizer)
- Places of business (with permission from the owner)
- Public areas (such as parks and street corners)
- Online or through social media
- Door-to-door

Petitions tend to focus on specific legislation, laws, or ordinances

- They can be the catalyst for new legislation, through drawing attention to specific groups of homeless people, calling on a city to open a shelter, or increased funding for specific services.
- From Change.org's "How an Online Petition Works" article: *"Successful petitions ask for something very specific the target can act upon. They propose a sensible solution to a problem that is of concern to a large number of people. Generally, if you **CAN'T** articulate your "ask" in one clear and concise sentence, then it is too broad."*
- **Petitions require more time to gather than letter writing**

- **It needs to start with a specific statement that people agree with.**
 - Even if your petition is against something, the statement should be written in a way that shows agreement
- **Your statement needs to be short.**
 - People will not want to stand around and read a page in order to sign something
- **You will need your signatories':**
 - Signature
 - Printed name
 - Zip code
 - District number (if they know it)

Non-Traditional Advocacy

Social media has rapidly developed into an important tool for modern day advocacy. Engaging with policy officials via Facebook and Twitter profiles is proving to be as fruitful and effective as face-to-face meetings or phone calls. Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness uses social media networks to promote its mission by sharing important knowledge. These are strategies that can quickly reach and influence your legislators and concerned citizens.



There are many tools that you can use to help you stay notified of what is going on in Congress, both at the state and federal level.

The **Michigan Legislature website** (legislature.mi.gov) offers a free bill tracking component. To use:

1. Register by clicking on the “Register” button on the top taskbar
2. Once you have registered, you can sign up to receive email notifications by clicking on “Notify” in the top taskbar. From there you may pick a variety of ways to sort your notifications (including by subject, by Senator or Representative, by district or by individual bill)
3. You can also sign up to have committee meeting agendas sent to you by clicking on “Committees” on the right taskbar. This will take you to a page with all House and Senate committees listed as well as the option to be notified of meetings

GovTrack.us has many of the same features as the Michigan Legislature website but offers information about federal (as well as state) legislation and committees. To sign up for email updates:

1. Create an account by clicking on Log In at the top. From this page, you can click “New here? Create a login”
2. Once you have created your account, you can use the browse function to look for information by subject, committee, members of Congress, etc.
3. You can receive email notifications by clicking the “Track this (Subject, Bill, Member, etc)”

The House of Representatives makes their weekly agenda available at docs.house.gov

Michigan House of Representatives calendars can be found at
http://www.house.mi.gov/PDFs/Current_Session_Schedule.pdf

Michigan Senate session calendars can be found at
<http://www.senate.michigan.gov/tvschedule/calendar.html>

Congressional schedules and calendars can be found at
<http://thomas.loc.gov/home/schedules.html>

*Guidance on providing comments or testimony to a Legislative Committee (from the MI Legislature website)

Guidelines

The following guidelines are suggested to assist citizens in making their testimony influential and effective:

1. Write to committee members and to your own Representative, simply expressing support or opposition to the legislation.
2. If you decide to testify, notify the committee as soon as possible of your desire and, as a courtesy, let your legislators know that you've asked for time to present testimony.
3. If you represent a group of individuals or an organization, choose only one person to present the group's viewpoint and bring others along as supporters.
4. Prepare testimony and/or suggested amendments in advance. Read the bill carefully and any available analyses. If necessary, do research and make sure that all your facts, background materials and figures are accurate. Consult with others to determine the scope of the issue and clarify what you, or the group, want to cover in your testimony. Think about the questions you may be asked in developing the information to include.
5. Prepare a clear and concise written statement which has been thoroughly proofread for errors. Review it with others who share the same interest.
6. When you testify, identify who you are. If you represent a group, give the name of the group. In your opening remarks, state whether you are testifying in support of or in opposition to the proposal or bill. Relate your group's or your own experience or views directly related to the issue.
7. Keep your testimony short and to the point. It is best to offer highlights at the hearing and request permission to place your complete position and supporting materials in the record. Anything you present in writing will be placed in the committee members' files and will be available to them at any future meetings. If possible, have copies of testimony available for committee members and staff.
8. Avoid emotional speeches and propaganda. Your role is an important one; don't abuse it. Getting emotional and pitching propaganda is the surest way to invite a hostile reaction and alienate the very committee members you are trying to persuade.
9. If you are asked a question, keep a cool head. Don't be afraid to stop and think for a minute to answer the question properly. If you don't have the answer, never guess, say you are not sure. Instead, request permission to file a detailed response at a later date.

Remember, without the support of the committee involved, the bill or proposal that you are interested in may never make it to the floor to be voted on. Even if you decide not to testify, your attendance at a hearing and personal correspondence with committee members and your own legislators are very important in influencing the decision-making process. You can file a card of support with the committee clerk without testifying.

Testify

If a bill of interest to you has been introduced, find out from the Clerk of the House, the Secretary of the Senate, or an interested organization which committee the bill was referred to. You may then write a brief letter to the Committee Clerk for that committee asking to be notified when the bill is put on the committee agenda for discussion or is scheduled for a public hearing.

You may also write to the Committee Chair requesting that the bill be put on the agenda or scheduled for a hearing. Sometimes only the volume of letters on a particular bill will assure that it receives a committee hearing, since not all bills are “automatically” considered. Many die without ever having been considered by a committee. If you find out about a bill after it has passed in the House or Senate, you may still have the opportunity to be heard before the committee in the other Chamber to which the bill has been referred.

It is important to note that attention given to bills in regular committee meetings may not be as extensive as in a public hearing because of time limitations. A committee may be regularly scheduled to meet for an hour, and may need to consider three or four bills during that time frame.

A public hearing on the other hand, may hear testimony on a single issue for more than three hours. However, only major pieces of legislation or bills in which there is widespread interest will normally be scheduled for public hearings.

When a bill is scheduled on the committee’s agenda for consideration, and if you have an active interest in the legislation and feel there are contributions you can make to the committee’s process, you may decide to testify at either a meeting or a hearing.

The purpose of testimony given should be informational so that committee members can vote on the bill with as full an understanding as possible of all sides of the issue it addresses, and the consequences of its passage.

In a meeting, the bill’s sponsor, along with experts on the issue and informed members of the public, will be heard. If the measure is controversial or if additional information is needed before a decision can be reached by the committee’s members, most committees will hold the bill over to a future meeting date or even a public hearing.

Tips for Working with Others Across the Aisle

- Assume goodwill with members of each party. Put a human face on the issue that is in question, describe who people experiencing homelessness are, tell their stories. Personalize, don't politicize.
 - Avoid using jargon, acronyms or loaded terms. Explain what specific programs mean (such as Housing First).
 - Seek to find common ground. Ending homelessness is a goal we can all get behind. What are areas of potential collaboration, policy commonalities and common goals?
 - Focus on substance not ideology.
 - Best people to speak with conservative members might be caseworkers and direct support staff who do direct work, boots on the ground, along with people directly impacted.
 - Discuss specific programs and the services they offer that could be impacted (negatively or positively by funding cuts or inclusion).
 - Tie back information you share back to the district, "There are 3 shelters in your district and this bill could impact funding to them jeopardizing services to 300 people each night".
 - Any information you share (fact sheets, one pagers) should be brief, comprehensive, actionable and to the point. Do not drop off 500-page packets!
 - Ask the staffer, how can I help you with info? Would a tour be helpful? Join us for coffee at our site, no press or photos, just a chat....
 - Make sure to have an ask at the end of any meeting that is reasonable, such as making the needs of unhoused persons a priority in any spending bill.
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Additional Resources

State webpage:

<http://www.michigan.gov/som>

Find information about elected officials:

www.vote-smart.org

www.legislature.mi.gov

www.congress.org

House of Representative Website:

<http://house.michigan.gov/>

State Senate Website:

<http://senate.michigan.gov/>

Homeless Issues:

The Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness: www.mihomeless.org

Michigan's Campaign to End Homelessness:

www.thecampaigntoendhomelessness.org

Michigan State Housing Development Authority: www.michigan.gov/mshda

National Low Income Housing Coalition <https://nlihc.org/>

Site includes housing needs by state, Out of Reach and GAP reports

National Alliance to End Homelessness: www.endhomelessness.org

For more in-depth advocacy work, you can find NAEH's Advocacy Toolkit here:

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3722>

The NAEH's *Using Advocacy to End Homelessness* and the Indiana Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention's *Advocacy Toolkit*, as well as Change.org were referenced in the production of this toolkit

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