

Policy Advocacy



The Basics

What is policy advocacy?

Here are a few definitions of “policy advocacy”:

- ▶ “Public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.” (OxfordDictionaries.com)
- ▶ “Policy advocacy is defined as active, covert, or inadvertent support of a particular policy or class of policies.” (Wikipedia)
- ▶ “Advocacy’s end goal always is to change policy.” (Advancing Women’s Leadership and Advocacy for AIDS Action Training Manual)
- ▶ “Advocacy is a process that brings about change in laws, policies and practices by persuading individuals, groups or institutions.” (United States Agency for International Development)

How is it different from other types of advocacy?

The goal of policy advocacy, as the name suggests, is to change official policies, laws, and practices. It is different from the work of educating individuals or communities; rather than advocating for broad community understanding or behavioral change, with policy advocacy we are specifically looking for people in positions of power to change, eliminate, or create policies that will better support our efforts.



Authors of the the groundbreaking “Denver Principles” holding up a banner in Denver for the Fifth National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference.

By changing a local, state, or federal law; the official policy of an administrative body in government; the official policies of a medical school; the official policies of a religious institution; etc, we can create change that is impactful, lasting, and further reaching than an educational campaign. It’s about letting the policy and the people in power do some of the work for us, rather than burdening communities with the endless task of educating every community member and helping each one adapt to bad policies.

Community education vs. policy advocacy

Community Education	Policy Advocacy
Designing social media-based comprehensive sex ed tools for students	Pressure a school board to officially endorse evidence-based comprehensive sex ed for all students in the district
Design a campaign to educate physicians about PrEP and PEP	Pressure state medical boards and associations to officially support greater access to PrEP and PEP and mandate HIV prevention education as part of license renewal

In the rest of this handout, we will look at how to prepare ourselves for policy advocacy, how to develop policy advocacy action plans, including clear objectives and targets, as well as advocacy/activist tools we can use to persuade people in power to change policy. Our focus is HIV prevention policy advocacy, though many of the tips here can apply to many causes.

TAG

Treatment Action Group

How do we get personally prepared for policy advocacy?

- ▶ Don't just be opinionated—be informed!
- ▶ Just because we feel passionate about something doesn't mean that we're right. All forms of advocacy should be based upon the best available evidence, otherwise we may be advocating for something that actually doesn't support, and may in fact hinder, the cause we're working on.

How do we become informed?

Like any good detective or reporter, we want to get as much high quality information as possible to get to the bottom of the story. A reporter should never publish a story without any sources or factual basis; similarly, we should never develop policy objectives and agendas without doing a bit of investigation. We want to understand the intervention we're promoting, who needs better access to it, what the barriers to access are (i.e., social and structural barriers), what the potential policy targets are to remove barriers, and more about the people who have the power to change those policies. So how do we do that?

- ▶ **Get in touch with your inner student.** It's time to think about all those old high school term papers and to sharpen those researching skills again. Where you feel comfortable, dig into peer-reviewed literature (i.e., articles published in academic and research journals) to see what the evidence says about the topic you're interested in. Be curious, inquisitive, and thorough. The good news is that online tools are making it easier to do research. Google has a simple search engine for peer-reviewed literature (scholar.google.com) that you can use just like the regular Google search engine. You can also get regular e-mail updates on a topic through Google Scholar (look for the link saying "alert" at the top of the page) or through PubMed (you have to register an account at the top right corner of the page, then create a saved search in "My NCBI"). **PRO TIP:** Librarians can be your best friends in researching a topic. Public libraries are still fantastic resources where you can get all sorts of help.



The iconic SILENCE=DEATH image was developed by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in the 80s and continues to resonate with many current HIV/AIDS advocates

Emotional Intelligence

While self-care and self-awareness are useful for everybody, it is especially important for policy advocates. The topics we work on are often very personal to us, which makes doing advocacy even more intense. A few tips for taking care of and empowering yourself:

- ▶ **Prioritize self-care.** Don't sacrifice yourself to the cause—hold on to the rituals, the people, places, and things that keep you sane. Maintain a strong support network. This isn't just for your own benefit; a burned out advocate can become a real liability to the advocacy work being done.
- ▶ **Keep the focus on the cause as much as possible:** Even though the topics may feel personal, try to not take things personally all the time. If you feel like you're putting yourself on trial rather than advocating for the cause, it may be time to take a step back and re-focus.
- ▶ **Be confident: speak truth to power:** YOU are the expert. You have the life experience, you've done your research, and you have the passion. People in power don't know everything—they need to be informed and watched by community members to have a chance of making the right decisions. Let go of any internalized shaming or feelings of inferiority and speak up.
- ▶ **Accept what you cannot change** (while working to change what you cannot accept). Just because you don't or can't win a particular battle doesn't mean you lost. Every policy advocacy effort is an opportunity to learn, to grow, and to prepare for the longer war ahead. Accept setbacks, and keep showing up anyway.

- **Be a news hound:** You can learn a lot about your issue by following some trusted news sources regularly. Reputable national publications like the *New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *the Wall Street Journal*, etc., can keep you aware of any new developments related to your cause. Following state and local papers will also help to inform your work. HIV-specific media outlets, such as POZ.com, thebody.com or aidsmap.com can also help keep you up to date on science and policy related to your topic. Again, thanks to Google, you can also get media updates on a topic directly to your e-mail (1. Enter search terms for www.google.com. 2. Click on the “News” tab toward the top of the page. 3. Scroll to the bottom of the News page and click the button “Create alert”).
- **Get connected to organizations/coalitions that can help keep you informed.** There are often foundations, academic centers, and community-based organizations that specialize in your specific area of interest. See how you can get connected to them via listservs, social media, newsletters, etc.
- **Call somebody who cares:** If you don’t know where to start or don’t feel research is your strong suit, reach out to researchers, community-based organizations, or other experts to help start the conversation. No one person has all the answers, but it can be a good way to get the ball rolling.

Developing and prioritizing policy objectives

Armed with more information, we now have a sense of what we’d like to change and what strategic barriers we need to address to increase access to HIV prevention services. Now we need to clarify a target policy and set a clear objective.

- **Identifying policies and potential targets:** Once we identify the problems/barriers, we might feel tempted to start jumping into building an educational campaign or diving into any number of actions, but first we need to know which exact policy/policies we want to change. To do this, we need to have a sense of who holds the power related to our cause. For example, if we want to change sex education in schools, we might say that school administrations, the school board, the

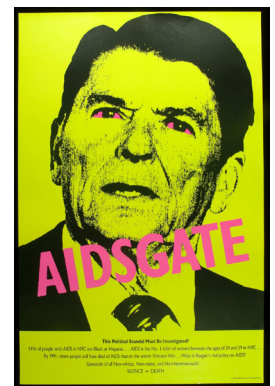
Power mapping

One technique that can help you better understand potential targets and allies is called Power mapping. [On TAG’s Prevention Module homepage](#), you will find one version of this technique that was drafted by Mel Medalle of SisterLove Inc. that you can try applying to your own work. Some of the key strategic questions it seeks to answer:

- Who are the power players for your issue?
- What is the mission/purpose for these players?
- In what ways do these players have influence over your issue?
- What law, higher authority, or community constituency are these players accountable to? Who does it purport to serve?
- What legal authority (if any) do these players operate under? What are their mandates?
- How are these players funded?
- In what manner do these players make decisions and what policies and authorities guide its decision-making processes?

PTA, the students, the local government, the state government, the federal government, etc., all have power related to that particular cause. Among all those power players are several laws and policies that are related to sex education; depending on your situation and available resources, you may want to approach the task by focusing solely on one law or policy, or you may try to take on several at a time. The point is, you should have a policy or policies in mind before moving into action.

So you have researched an HIV prevention-related cause, got information on the problems/barriers you’re facing, identified the power players in the situation, and even identified some key policies you’d like to change/eliminate/create.



Another powerful ACT UP image that called attention to the Reagan administration’s neglect of people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS

Now you need to clearly define what success would look like. One common way to look at this is to get SMART with your objective(s):

- ▶ **Specific:** Be clear about what success would look like.
- ▶ **Measurable:** By being measurable you will know exactly at what point you have succeeded.
- ▶ **Attainable:** Objectives should be ambitious, but not impossible.
- ▶ **Relevant:** Make sure that the objective is actually related to your cause/vision and that it is actually aligned with available evidence.

▶ **Time-bound:** Setting a timeline increases the likelihood of making progress in a timely manner.

Example: Work with state legislators to draft a bill by the end of 2017 that would reform outdated laws requiring abstinence-only education in schools. (Specific: We know what policy is being targeted and who the target is. Measurable: We know that we will have succeeded once one bill has been drafted. Attainable: This seems like an ambitious, but not impossible step towards improving sexual education. Relevant: Evidence-based sex education is very relevant to HIV prevention. Time-bound: We know we want a bill drafted by the end of 2017).

Here is one way of looking at advocacy tools:

Voting (and helping to get the vote out)	Voting is one of the most important forms of advocacy available in a democracy. All of our advocacy efforts will turn out better or worse depending upon the political structure of our cities, states, and nation. We should all vote and help others to vote in every single election that we are allowed to vote in—not just presidential elections, but all elections.
Get your message directly to law makers/ key decision makers	This is what some may call an “inside” strategy. If you have some way to get your voice heard on the inside of your target institution(s), it could be very effective at changing policy. Some examples of this inside advocacy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying/direct negotiation • Providing public testimony • Working from inside the system • Taking part in community advisory boards
Community mobilization	This is more of your “outside” strategy. If you can’t work within the system, get organized and find ways to put pressure on institutions from the outside. The organizing may help lead you to more discussions on the inside, or it may effectively put enough pressure on people in power to get the policy changed. Some examples of outside strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build coalitions/networks • Start an organization that fills a gap • Letters/petitions, etc. • Trainings • Protests and civil disobedience
Information, education, and communication	Involving media, social media, and educational materials is always useful and can accompany advocacy from the inside or the outside. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications • Media coverage • Press releases • Social media
Litigation/go through the courts	If you can’t legislate, litigate! This is a bit trickier, but if you don’t have faith that you can change the system via other routes, and if you believe you have a legal case to be made (or can find someone with a good case), this is another important way that advocates can advance our causes.

Not SMART example: Get rid of abstinence-only education in the state.

Why does this matter? Better-defined objectives make it easier to make progress towards success. It also makes enormous tasks like improving sex education seem more manageable and possible. Tackling challenges one objective at a time is much easier than trying to take on the entire problem at once.

A note on setting policy priorities: When determining what causes, policies, or targets to pursue, we may consider a number of factors. Oftentimes we follow what we are interested in or excited about, which is important and certainly makes sense. However, when building a policy agenda and its accompanying strategy, also remember to look at what is achievable given the level of opposition you may face, your resources, what you're good at, what you're not good at, etc. One acronym people often use is SWOT: look at your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats before finalizing your agenda.

Now you have the information, the problem/barriers, the targets, the policies, and even HIV prevention policy objectives! But how are you going to achieve those objectives? What are your potential advocacy tools?

In shopping for advocacy tools, consider what you're good at, whom your allies are, and what your targets are likely to respond to (i.e., look at your power map). You may need to employ a number of different tactics and see what sticks.

- ▶ As you finalize this action plan, you'll need to ask yourself: what resources will you need?
- ▶ Financial: For each tactic/task, what are the expected costs? How will you cover those costs? Can you get monetary or in-kind donations to help out?
- ▶ People: For each tactic/task, who will be in charge? How many people will you need to make the work successful?
- ▶ Now get to work!! You have your action plan: SMART Objective(s), Targets, Allies, Advocacy Tools, Specific Tasks/Next Steps, and List of Necessary People and Resources. You now have everything you need to move forward. However, there are a few final things to consider:

You may need to go through this process for a number of different causes, policies, and objectives that you're working on. Remember not to overburden yourself or your organization across multiple objectives, and always keep an eye out for synergy and overlap. This can help you to avoid duplication of efforts and identify additional opportunities.

Never stop the planning and re-planning process. Monitor and evaluate your efforts and keep an eye on the changing research and policy landscapes—you may find that you need to revisit your plan and make adjustments from time to time.

An example of HIV prevention policy advocacy from TAG's recent history

The case of the Chelsea STD Clinic in Manhattan

In 2015, members of TAG's staff as well as members of ACT UP/NY became very concerned when they heard that a major hub of sexual health in Manhattan, the Chelsea STD Clinic, was closing for renovation for nearly three years with no nearby replacement. In order to advocate for a better solution, we followed many of the steps contained in this handout.

We got informed: we dove into research to discover the magnitude of the problem, who it was likely to affect, possible solutions, and who the power players were. In this process, we discovered that services were being cut across all the STD clinics in New York City due to a total loss of \$40 million dollars in funding over the previous four years. We also found that many of the reductions in services seemed to correspond with increases in STDs among men who have sex with men, making our case even more compelling.

We determined the policies/decisions we wanted changed: Based on the evidence, we knew that we wanted at least two demands to be met: we wanted an immediate replacement for the Chelsea Clinic made available in the same neighborhood immediately, and we wanted funding and services restored for the STD clinics.

We determined our primary targets: We knew that the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) in New York City was the primary decision maker for the Chelsea Clinic and that the City Council would be our primary target for increasing funding.

We determined our SMART objectives:

1. Put pressure on the Health Commissioner and DOHMH to commit to immediately establishing an equivalent replacement for the STD clinic in the Chelsea neighborhood by no later than the end of 2015.
2. Put pressure on City Council to restore funding to DOHMH for the STD clinics before the end of 2015.

We determined our allies: We knew that a number of HIV/AIDS and LGBT organizations would work with us in coalition and reached out to them.

We shopped for advocacy tools that would work:

Having some inside connections within both DOHMH and the City Council, we started by requesting meetings with key players inside both institutions. When inside strategies seemed to be going nowhere, we looked for more outside and media-related strategies. Knowing that both targets cared about public appearance and voter opinions, we decided to hold a large community town hall in partnership with several organizations while also issuing a press release and getting media to attend.

We identified tasks and resources: We kept a list of tasks to be completed, assigned them to several individuals across organizations, identified resources needed, and got organizational commitments to cover them.

We got to work: With a full plan in place, we held the town hall—successfully putting pressure on DOHMH and the City Council in the media and even getting the crowd to march to the clinic and protest in the streets. We followed up with more media and inside conversations.

We got our demands met: Shortly afterward, DOHMH agreed to station a mobile testing unit outside the clinic in order to both help with providing services and help direct individuals to other nearby private clinics where they would be able to obtain services for free. City Council members fought for funding and ended up giving

\$7 million to DOHMH to restore and improve services throughout New York City.

VISIT www.treatmentactiongroup.org
LIKE Treatment Action Group on Facebook
FOLLOW @TAGTeam_Tweets on Twitter
EMAIL jeremiah.johnson@treatmentactiongroup.org

TAG
Treatment Action Group