



Top Ten Provider Tips

Grassroots Advocacy Best Practices

Advice from your peers on how to make grassroots advocacy come alive and become a permanent part of your company culture.

Grassroots advocacy puts a human face on a compelling issue, and it helps ARRM advance our mission of ensuring sustainable, adequate funding for the provision of private services for people with disabilities. For many ARRM members, grassroots advocacy can feel like an intimidating, time consuming process. To make grassroots engagement easier for you, ARRM has assembled practical information and useful tips generated by your peers.

Tip #1: Find a buddy, form a group

When you were young, the buddy system served as a familiar bridge to the unknown, providing invaluable support and information. Buddies never go out of style! Forming this peer-to-peer connection is a great way to get your feet wet with grassroots advocacy.

The foundation of ARRM's grassroots advocacy plan is our mentor system, which we call the Advocacy Partners program. We've paired every ARRM member with a buddy to answer questions or pass along information from ARRM. Your Advocacy Partner can help you understand how the legislative process works, and can alleviate any anxiety you have about meeting with your legislator.

Another good idea is to partner with other providers in your geographical area to strategize and share limited staff or financial resources. ARRM members in different parts of the state have discovered that meeting on a regular basis is a good way to bolster enthusiasm, disseminate information and get a legislator's attention (i.e., strength in numbers).

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Contact Barb Brynstad at bbrynstad@arm.org if you'd like to become a grassroots mentor or mentee, or if you'd like to be connected to other providers in your area. Spread the word about the grassroots work you're doing by talking to businesses and social clubs in your communities, like the Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce and American Legion.

Tip #2: Assemble a grassroots advocacy team within your agency and encourage rising stars

Many ARRM members have discovered that an internal grassroots advocacy team, comprised of staff, self-advocates and family members is a great way to brainstorm, maintain motivation, and engender a culture of advocacy agency-wide. A public affairs group or committee can help plan activities, disseminate legislative and grassroots news, and promote grassroots involvement internally, so provide ample opportunities for your stakeholders and staff to get involved.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Make no assumptions about who will be the most engaged—ARRM members report that unlikely staff have stepped comfortably into grassroots leadership positions. It may just take one positive experience to motivate a staff, self-advocate or stakeholder to become a rising grassroots star! Therefore, be on the lookout for employees who display an interest in political affairs or grassroots organizing.

Tip #3: Make a plan to practice grassroots advocacy year-round

Effective grassroots advocacy requires planning, so be sure to formulate a year-round plan to keep your grassroots efforts on track. ARRM's grassroots plan is divided into two phases: the legislative mobilizing phase (during the legislative session) and the education and engagement phase (during the summer and fall months). Year-round advocacy is critical to keep the momentum going as well as keep our issues on legislators' radar screens.

The best time to connect with legislators is during the summer and fall months, when the legislators are back in their home districts. Be sure to invite your legislator to a program site, an existing fundraising event, company picnic, or BBQ. Every six to 12 months, evaluate your plan to assess its effectiveness and adjust strategies and tactics, if necessary.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Not sure where to start? One small step you can take is to add your advocacy mission to your employees' email signatures or create a grassroots blog—both activities cost nothing (except your time, of course). Also, visit our webpage, “Six concrete steps CEO's/Executive Directors can take to get more practical tips” at <http://arrm.org/advocacy/ProviderResources/>.

Tip #4: Provide a menu of opportunities

There are a myriad of grassroots activities to participate in: choose the ones that work best for you—one size does not fit all. You'll get increased participation from your stakeholders and staff if you provide a menu of grassroots opportunities and allow them to choose the activities best suited to their interests or level of commitment.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Download ARRM's “Getting Started with Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit” from our website: <http://arrm.org/advocacy/documents/GrassrootsToolkit.doc>

Tip #5: Cultivate a culture of advocacy from the top-down and provide incentives for staff to get involved

While grassroots organizing is by definition a bottom-up approach, your staff are looking for cues and support from the agency's upper-level management to do this important work. Demonstrate your commitment to grassroots advocacy by becoming involved, offering incentives—or at the minimum—by demonstrating significant support when your employees indicate an interest in getting more involved. You'll get more buy-in from front line managers and Direct Support Professionals when you do.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Competitions are a great way to generate excitement and keep the enthusiasm for grassroots advocacy high. One fun competitive activity to try internally is the “keep the ball rolling” challenge: Give a small squishy ball to an employee and ask them to contact their legislator with a particular request or message. After they've made contact, they must select another employee to give the ball to, indicating it's their turn to contact their legislator.

Tip #6: Involve family members

Along with staff and self-advocate stories, family members' stories are a key part of our grassroots success. During past legislative sessions, ARRM members held trainings for family members, partnering with the Arc, and convened small informal workshops to teach family members about the necessity of grassroots organizing and how to tell their story. Having family members take an active role in advocating for their loved ones will be a big part to our success in future years.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Identify motivated or influential family members who will serve as “grassroots evangelists,” connecting other families and the public to your agency. In addition, consider joining an existing parent/sibling group to keep them informed of the grassroots work you’re doing and get their feedback about how to engage family members.

Tip #7: Use Web 2.0 tools to engage grassroots advocates

Social networking tools are a great way to build your grassroots movement online. Use your organization’s Facebook page to tell your story by posting videos and photos. Also, encourage your stakeholders and members of the general public to join your social networking groups, as well as ARRM’s Facebook page. Use Twitter to connect with others in the disability industry, or stay up-to-date on legislative events and issues; nearly every state legislator has a Twitter account.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Join ARRM’s Facebook page and follow us on Twitter. Go to our home page at www.armm.org to join these online communities.

Tip #8: Attend legislator town hall meetings or coffee chats

During session legislators often hold town hall meetings in their district to connect with their constituents. These town hall meetings and coffee chats are a great opportunity to have some one-on-one time with your legislator. ARRM members have told us that more often than not, these informal meetings are lightly attended, so they offer ample opportunities to talk about disability issues.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Visit ARRM’s online calendar, which contains town hall forums and county fairs throughout the state. <http://armm.org/calendar.html>

Tip #9: Celebrate successes (and acknowledge setbacks); make grassroots advocacy fun

Often times, we focus too much at the task at hand and forget to step back and celebrate the amazing work we’re doing. Think about how you can interject levity and fun into your grassroots work, and take time to thank your grassroots advocates. Conversely, there will be times when we experience setbacks and disappointments, so acknowledge these moments, but don’t let them derail our powerful grassroots movement.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Publicly acknowledging staff efforts in all agency publications; reward your grassroots advocacy “high achievers” with a pizza party for those who made the most calls, sent the most

emails or penned the most letters to legislators; host an awards ceremony for outstanding advocacy work; or offering bonuses for exemplary efforts.

Tip #10: Incorporate grassroots advocacy into regular trainings or consumer planning meetings

Every time you convene a meeting within your agency, take a few minutes to review upcoming grassroots activities and events or past work. Also, talk about why doing this work is important, and highlight ways for staff, self-advocates, board members and families to get involved.

ADVOCACY ADVICE: Where appropriate, incorporate grassroots advocacy into every meeting you have: new employee orientation, regular trainings and workshops, staff meetings, board meetings, and consumer planning meetings.

--By Barb Brynstad and Sara Krogman