

Advocacy and Families

We've given you a lot of reasons why advocacy is important as well as a lot of how to's but we haven't yet made the connection with the question of "so what"?

To get to this we really have to focus on the individual and the family, after all, the ultimate purpose of advocacy is to make things better for ourselves and our families. Active advocacy on issues of importance can go a long way toward achieving positive change—the flipside of this, is that lack of involvement has the potential to result in bad policy being implemented that could be harmful to children and families.

Let me share with you a few of my advocacy experiences that help to illustrate this.

1. Way back in 1985, I was a young professional working as the Associate Director of Programs for the March of Dimes in Hawaii. There was a bill before the state legislature to make it mandatory for alcoholic beverages to have warning labels that drinking during pregnancy was hazardous to unborn children. My boss asked me to testify about drinking and fetal alcohol syndrome. I then testified before the committee and the chairman opened up the floor for questions. One Senator then proceeded to ask the representative from the alcohol bottlers association if there was a relationship between alcohol and birth defects to which he answered unequivocally "no". I asked if I could respond but was told no, I could only respond if I were asked a direct question---so I waited for one of the Senators to ask me a question which never came. A vote was taken and the bill was defeated in committee.

I learned a lot from that experience—and I've got a much better idea of how I would deal with this now, but I'd like to get some ideas from you....

2. Fast forward a few years and I'm sitting in front of another Senate committee in Maryland considering a bill to control sodas and vending machines in schools. There was a representative from the CDC testifying, I was an Extension Specialist with the University of Maryland testifying, along with a number of other advocates. The primary group of people testifying against the bill were the state School Principal's association. Once again a vote was taken and the bill was defeated in committee. What might have been done differently? How can you advocate on an issue if you are a member of the faculty at a University?
3. A couple of years ago I participated in a Lobby Day on Capitol Hill on the issue of Welfare Reform and the work requirement to maintain assistance. We wanted to push through a provision that would count hours spent going to school as part of the work requirement and include a child care benefit. Although there were twelve of us, representing many different stakeholders in this issue from MD, our group had specifically invited a young welfare recipient from Baltimore who was able to complete her associate's degree while on welfare by counting her school hours toward the work requirement—she had two young daughters with her and she was then fully employed and no longer receiving welfare benefits. What do you think happened when we sat down to meet with our representative? Can you think of

situations where working with folks at the very grassroots of impact of the proposed policy might help in your advocacy?

So what's the "So What?" All of these issues get at the very basis of advocacy—we want to improve the quality of life for all citizens, as individuals and families. It is also important to recognize that much of what you do in your jobs every day can be considered advocacy for families—including that grant proposal you've been working to get submitted for additional funding to support your programs. We have chosen to focus on the more formal aspect of advocacy and we further challenge you as nutrition professionals and leaders in your communities to take this message to the constituents in your own communities—both grassstops and grassroots—utilize your networks, formalize your partnerships and collaborations around issues of importance to your citizenry and move your advocacy forward to the next step of engagement with your decision-makers—for the benefit of all families everywhere.