

My Voice Counts!

Campaigns for Youth's Reproductive and Sexual Health

Advocacy and Organizing Toolkit

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Advocates for Youth—Helping young people make safe and responsible decisions about sexual health

Advocates for Youth is dedicated to creating programs and advocating for policies that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. Advocates provides information, training, and strategic assistance to youth-serving organizations, policy makers, youth activists, and the media in the United States and the developing world.

Acknowledgments

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to know exactly what organizations and/or position each speaker represents. To open discussion after an opposing question or comment, you could say, *It sounds like there are some different views on this issue. It is important to hear different views, so who has a different viewpoint to express.*

Do I Need a Checklist for the Big Day?

Yes! Your forum will run smoothly if all the important details are taken care of. Checklists can help you to ensure that nothing has been forgotten and that you have done every thing you can to make the event a success.

At least a week before the forum:

- **Confirm** that the room is still booked for the event and all necessary paperwork has been submitted.
- **Confirm** that all the presenters will attend and that you have all the information and equipment they will need.
- **Confirm** that all the audio-visual equipment, podiums, microphones, etc., have been ordered.
- **Finalize** any materials you plan to hand out on your issue, on the *My Voice Counts* Campaign, Advocates for Youth, and/or your campus club. Make sure you have enough copies for everyone you anticipate showing up.
- **Copy or Print** any petitions you wish to have at the event.

At least a day in advance, make sure that you have:

- **Enough chairs** for the number of people expected to attend as well as table, chairs, dais or podium, and props for the speakers.
- **Sign-up sheets** for participants so that you can contact them after the event.
- **Media sign-in sheets** for attending members of the press.
- **Organized handouts** that can be quickly distributed.
- **Petitions** on hand so youth can sign and support the issue right on the spot.

On the day of the event, make sure you:

- **Arrive early** to ensure that the room is properly set up.
- **Assign volunteers** to key locations to properly service the event.
- **Place sign-in sheets** and materials where people will enter the event.
- **Test all audio-visual equipment** to ensure that everything is in working order.

What Follow-Up Is Needed?

- **Send thank you notes** to the presenters for supporting the event and coming to speak!
- **Thank**, via e-mail if possible, the people who attended, reiterating what they can do to become or get more involved! Include a link to any petition, requesting that participants pass the petition on to friends and family.
- **Complete** an evaluation form for Advocates for Youth about how the event went. Don't forget to send the evaluation to Advocates!

B. Petition Gathering

An important part of achieving change is to show that a lot of people agree with you. Gathering signatures on a petition about your issue is a great way to educate and activate people. Petitions help to build a movement without a lot of effort for you or the people who are signing the petition. The larger the movement becomes and the more signatures you get, the more likely it is that the public, the media, and policy makers will pay attention to you and the issues of adolescent reproductive and sexual health.

What Is Petitioning?

Petitioning is collecting signatures on a form in support of an issue, a bill, or a candidate. In some cases, a candidate or an electoral initiative requires that those who circulate the petition and those who sign must be registered voters. However, a petition designed to build an activist movement for an issue—like comprehensive sex education, confidential health care, or non-prescription status for emergency contraception—does *not* need the signatures of registered voters. These petitions still have a significant impact because they demonstrate public support for the issue. Thus, young people who are most affected by adolescent reproductive and sexual health issues can sign a petition and have an impact on policy makers. Petitions usually include a position statement on the issue followed by space for people to sign and provide contact information. When people sign the petition, they are agreeing to the positions spelled out in the petition.

Who Can Petition?

Anyone—youth, senior citizens, registered voters, you, your mom, your dad, your little sister, or your dog! (Okay, not your dog.) For a campaign in support of adolescent reproductive and sexual health, youth activists encourage other **young people** to lead in petition gathering. Anyone under age 25 can sign the petition—regardless of whether she/he is registered to vote or even a citizen of the United States.

Why Should I Petition?

In the United States, petitioning has had a long history as a way for people to make their voices heard. It is an easy way for a large number of people to voice their concerns about an issue.

Where Should I Petition?

Anywhere! Pick your spot! Your answers to the following questions will help you pick a great spot.

- Is it a visible area? (Pick a spot with good visibility, where you can see and be seen!)
- Do a lot of people pass by this area? (Pick an area with lots of foot traffic!)
- Do you need permission (say from a school or store) or a permit to use a park or public space? (That's okay, just check it out in advance, and get permission or a permit, if you need it.)

Good places to petition include:

- Online (Advocates for Youth includes all *My Voice Counts!* petitions on its Web site at <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth/advocacy/myvoicecounts/forms.htm>.)
- In or in front of the cafeteria during lunch hour(s)
- At the student union or outside class buildings
- In front of a grocery store
- In or outside of youth centers
- In front of any local hangout for youth
- Near a subway station or bus stop.

A. Working with the Media

Media coverage is important because it carries your message to a much larger audience than you can reach by yourself. The media influences many people—the public, youth, parents, community leaders, educators, health care professionals, businesses, and elected officials at all levels of government. With some media savvy, you can draw positive attention to your issue and identify supporters of your cause.

The media can also lessen criticism by providing a forum where you and others can explain the complexities of adolescent reproductive and sexual health issues in a thoughtful and factual manner.

There are many parts to working with the media. This section addresses how to write a media advisory, give a good interview, create a good press kit, and write an op-ed/column or a feature article.

How Do I Give an Interview?

Being interviewed does not have to be scary. It's actually easy if you break down your efforts into some simple steps beforehand.

- **Talking points.** Always go into an event or interview with *three key messages or talking points* that you want to make. Then *make them*, no matter what questions are asked.
- **Bridge** to your key messages or talking points. If a question seems off topic, bring it back around to *what you want to say*. For example, you might bridge by saying, "That's an interesting question. However, I think the real issue is (insert your media message/talking point)..."
- **Be concise.** Give answers that are *10 to 15 seconds* in length, and always speak in complete sentences. Speaking in complete, short sentences means reporters will not mistake your message or edit it into something else. So, it is less likely that your words will be taken out of context.
- **Do not lie.** If you do not know an answer to a question, *don't make something up*. It is okay to say, "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." Always offer to find the answer. Then be sure to get back to the reporter **before** his/her deadline.
- **Ask the deadline.** Be sure to ask the reporter's deadline for finishing the piece. Then make sure any follow-up information, statistics, quotes, are sent to the reporter *prior* to the deadline.
- **Prepare answers** for tough questions on your issue. Imagine what the tough questions might be and have ready responses.
- **Listen to the question carefully.** If you did not understand the question, ask the reporter to repeat the question or to clarify what he/she meant. Even when bridging, do not evade tough questions on your issue.

Should I Approach Print Media Differently from Electronic Media?

Yes and No! Short, concise answers are better with all types of media. However, there are differences in the ways television or radio and print media will cover the issue. You will have less time to make your points in a television or radio interview than with print. The "*30-second sound bite*" is the stuff of television and radio. While print reporters have more flexibility to provide background information on your issue and to include their own narrative in setting up the issue, your quotes should still be short, concise, and punchy.

How Do I Work with Print Media?

Besides being interviewed for a news or feature story, there are other ways to get your issue covered by a newspaper, including (from easiest to hardest): writing a *letter to the editor* about something that appeared in the newspaper; submitting an *op-ed* piece (a column giving your point of view on an issue); or getting the newspaper to publish an *editorial* in support of your issue. All of these are published solely at the discretion of the paper's editors.

B. Advocacy—the Art of Persuasion

Once you’ve raised awareness, educated the public, and worked with the media, you’re ready to take your message to policy makers. Because policy makers pay attention to issues that get a lot of media attention, it is a good idea to try to raise the visibility of your issue before setting meetings with the policy makers who affect your issue.

What Is Lobbying? It’s the *Art of Persuasion!*

People vote to let their elected officials know how well they’re doing. But there are other opportunities to communicate with decision makers, and many different methods for doing so. You can visit, call, or write your elected officials and you can present testimony. Advocacy can occur any time you interact with a policy maker.

Particularly with local policy makers, such as members of the city council or school board, you have many opportunities to share your opinions. For example, you can advocate when you meet a policy maker in the grocery store or at the post office. You can sign up to speak at a public hearing or write to elected officials about your viewpoint.

How Do I Go about Advocating?

Interacting with policy makers can be very exciting. Target your efforts. Survey the policy makers who will be involved in approving the policy or in funding and implementing the program of concern to you. Decide whom to approach and in what order. Develop objectives for each meeting. Start with firm supporters and then move on to those who may be moderately supportive or are undecided on the issue. For example, in regard to a bill pending in the state legislature that would broaden funding for state and local family planning services, begin with legislators on the committee that will first hear the bill and members of a friendly caucus, such as the women’s caucus. In regard to school board policy about sex education curricula, start with the school board members who might support a more comprehensive approach.

- **Be gracious.** Always begin by thanking the policy maker for the opportunity to share your ideas and opinions. Elected officials who support adolescent reproductive and sexual health, in particular, receive a lot of negative attention from the opposition. They will greatly appreciate a sincere “thank you.”
- **Be professional.** Be professional in both dress and manner. Don’t say negative things about other policy makers or public figures.
- **Be focused.** Stick with *one issue* per call or letter. Talking about more than one topic will only confuse the message and dilute your point.
- **Do your homework.** As part of your preparation, research the policy maker’s position on your issue. You can find this position through voting records, speeches, newspaper articles, debates, and from other organizations that work in related areas. Advocacy organizations, particularly those with political action committees (PACs), often track elected officials’ votes and can provide guides to their voting record. Explore the policy maker’s personal connection with the issue—does she/he have teenagers or pre-teens? For maximum effectiveness, frame your presentation within your knowledge of the elected official’s constituency, views, background, and interests. People find different arguments compelling; use the most persuasive argument for *this* person at *this* time. It may help if you role-play what you will say at the meeting, and practice responding to possible comments or questions from the policy maker.
- **Make a personal connection.** No matter how insignificant you may feel the connection to be, if you have friends, relatives, and/or colleagues in common, *let the policy maker know!* Especially let the policy maker know if you are a constituent! The decision making process can be very informal and, although a personal connection will make no difference to your presentation, it may make a big difference in how effective you are.
- **Consider yourself an information source.** Policy makers have limited time and staff to devote to any one issue. They can’t be as informed on all the issues—or on the ones that concern you—as they would like to be. You can fill the information gap. Encourage the policy maker’s questions about the program or issue by engaging in discussion and offering more information.
- **Tell the truth.** There is no faster way to lose credibility than to give false or misleading information to a policy maker.
- **Know who else is on your side.** It is helpful for a policy maker to know what other groups, individuals, state agencies, and/or legislators are working with you on an issue. Providing this information also illustrates that you

group represents many voters. Bringing coalition members and other youth in on lobbying efforts is important. So, keep in touch with your allies, coordinate advocacy efforts, and share relevant information.

- **Know the opposition.** Anticipate who may be in the opposition—both individuals and organizations. Tell the policy maker what the opposition’s arguments are likely to be and provide clarification and rebuttal. Elected officials appreciate being able to anticipate criticism, so this will make a real difference in your effectiveness.
- **Don’t be afraid to admit you don’t know something.** If a policy maker wants information you don’t have, or asks something you don’t know, say you don’t know. Then, offer to get the information, and **DO IT!** Be sure to get back to him/her promptly with the information you promised.
- **Be specific in what you ask for.** If you want a vote, information, answers to a question, a signature on a petition—whatever it is—make sure you say so directly. Make sure you get a response—yes or no—to your request.
- **Follow up.** Find out if the policy maker did what he/she promised. Send a letter, restating your position and thanking her/him for supportive action taken or asking for an explanation for an unsupportive action.
- **Stay informed.** The status of policy decisions and/or legislation changes quickly and often. Amendments or other committee actions can change a policy radically and with little publicity. The sponsor of the policy or legislation can identify where it is and what its current language is.
- **Don’t burn any bridges.** It is easy to get emotional over strongly felt issues. But, it is far more important to maintain a good relationship with the policy maker so that you can return to her/him on this or another issue. Don’t get into a heated argument with a policy maker. Never threaten elected officials! Remember that your strongest opponent on one issue may be your greatest supporter on another!
- **Remember, you are the boss.** The government works for you. Tax dollars pay elected officials’ salaries, the paper they write on, and the phones they use. You are the employer; the policy maker is the employee. So, be courteous, but don’t feel intimidated.

How Do I Communicate with Policy Makers, by Letter, Fax, or E-Mail?

- **Identify policy makers you want to target.** Mail, fax, or e-mail a letter to your own representatives, to all members of the committee dealing with your issue, or to every member of the policy making body. You can access a database of elected national and state officials by going to Advocates for Youth’s Take Action Center (<http://capwiz.com/advofy/home/>). Still, if you send e-mail to policy makers, just remember that a few policy makers still pay less attention to e-mail than to letters sent through the mail. On the other hand, mail is extra slow in getting to many policy makers these days, because of safeguards against terrorism. Whether you send e-mail, fax, or a written letter, it is *very* important to include your contact information, including home address and phone number, so that the elected official knows that you are a constituent.
- **Always ask for some action.** If you are writing about a specific bill remember to ask the elected official to either *support* or *oppose* the legislation. Your letter will be more effective if it concentrates on a specific issue or a particular bill. Refer to the issue at the beginning of the letter, or, if referring to a bill, cite the sponsor, bill title, and bill number. Include the bill’s status, what committee has it, and when a public hearing was held or will be held on it. Following are samples of how to start your letter:

Dear Ms. Jones

I am writing to address the school board’s policy on sex education in the public schools of this District.

Dear Representative Jones:

I am writing to urge your support of H.R. 2931, currently before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

- **Be brief and succinct.** A succinct one-page letter will have far more impact than a letter that goes on and on for ten pages. Outline your main point in the first paragraph and discuss only one issue. State clearly how you want the elected official to vote. For background, you might also include a newspaper clipping or single fact sheet presenting the issue in greater depth. Remember, your letter should speak briefly to five W’s: *who* you are, *what* you are writing about, *why* it’s important, *what* you want the policy maker to do, and *where* you can be reached.
- **Make it personal.** Elected officials and their staff are more likely to pay attention to and remember letters that include real life experiences. Explain why the issue is important to you and how the policy, legislation, or decision will affect you and others in your area. *Briefly* describe a personal experience that illustrates your point. Mass campaigns with stock messages impress policy makers less than heart-felt letters from constituents.

How about Communicating with Policy Makers by Telephone?

- **Identify yourself**, giving your name and address. If you are a constituent, say so.
- **Identify the issue** of concern to you. When referring to a bill, use its number and its title.
- **State your position and how you would like the policy maker to vote.**
- **Ask for the policy maker’s position** on the bill or issue. If supportive, ask for a commitment to vote for your position. If opposing or undecided, thank the policy maker for the information, but don’t argue. Ask what information would help her/him to become a proponent. If the policy maker is unavailable, leave a *detailed* message with a staff member. The staff member may also be able to describe the policy maker’s position on the issue.
- **Follow up** by sending a note thanking the policy maker for his/her time. Include information that he/she can use to support the position you want, or which may move the policy maker to support your position.

What If I Want to Provide Testimony?

When committees and subcommittees hear views from constituents on a certain topic, it is called “testimony.” Arrangements for presenting testimony vary by the policy making body. In most areas, you can speak at meetings or make a presentation to the city council or school board. Call the offices of your representative to find out how to schedule a presentation. If you want to present testimony before the state legislature, the state legislative research office will be able to tell you the procedure to be followed. Usually, you can arrange to present testimony by calling the bill’s sponsor, the chair of the committee considering the bill, or your legislator. Once your testimony or presentation is scheduled:

- **Draft a five-minute speech.** Begin by thanking the committee members for allowing you to present your views. Make the testimony interesting, personal, and compelling.
- **Include information** about what you believe the policy’s effects would be, as well as a few compelling statistics about the situation the policy will address.
- **Print your testimony.** Include your name, address, organizational affiliation, and the policy topic or bill number at the top of the first page. Ask staff how many copies of your testimony to bring to the hearing.
- **Attach easy-to-read background information**—such as a newspaper article or fact sheet.
- **Practice your speech** until you are very comfortable with it. Practice will also help lessen your nervousness. Time your delivery to ensure that you don’t go over five minutes.
- **Expect questions from the policy makers**, particularly from those opposing your viewpoint, and come prepared to address their concerns.

How Do I Deal with Agreement or Opposition from Policy Makers?

What if the policy maker **STRONGLY AGREES** with my position?

- Thank the policy maker.
- Ask the policy maker to take a leadership role on the issue in the policy making body, the media, and/or the community. It is appropriate to ask the policy maker to:
 - Write an article for a newsletter
 - Sign a petition or letter of support
 - Permit public use of the his/her name
 - Sponsor a bill
 - Offer amendments to policy or legislation
 - Make speeches at public forums
 - Agree to vote for, or against, a resolution.
- Ask the policy maker’s advice about others to talk with, what arguments make the best case for the issue, and what media strategy will be most effective in gathering support for the policy.
- Ask what information or constituency would be helpful in swaying additional policy makers to your position. Then work to produce these materials or advocates.
- Ask the policy maker to “lobby” undecided colleagues. Provide a list of these undecided colleagues.
- Thank the policy maker again.

Considerations

- **Know the law.** While the right to assemble peaceably is protected under the Constitution of the United States, each state and local community has specific laws regarding organized assemblies in public spaces. Contact your local police to determine what these laws are. Then follow them. This normally involves, at a minimum, obtaining a permit that alerts the local police about your event and that sets the limits you must observe—such as limitations on noise, littering, etc.
- **Remember that non-violence works.** As many social movements have shown, non-violence is safe and highly effective. Mahatma Gandhi put Thoreau’s theories of nonviolent civil disobedience to incredibly effective use in the 1940s, orchestrating an immense, nonviolent movement that earned India its freedom from British rule. In the 1960s, the NAACP and its allies used nonviolent methods to bring down segregation in the United States and to change for the better the future of all Americans.
- **Identify a target.** The target is the person who can fix the problem—someone who has the power to make the changes you seek. Your target might be a member of Congress, state legislative committee, principal or mayor, or an entire school board.
- **Identify a location.** The location might be the local or “district” office of your representative or senator in Congress or the state legislature, the school board’s office, your school or the principal’s office, or the state capitol. Ask yourself—what location is associated with the target? Also consider where people will be willing to come, what will look good in front of television cameras, and what will enhance the appearance of your group. For example, a small group of demonstrators appears much more impressive in a small space than in a large, open area.
- **Analyze your target.** It is important to determine who can influence the chosen target. Maybe she/he doesn’t care about the opinions of young people, but does care about those of parents, teachers, or voters. Or perhaps, he/she dislikes bad press.
- **Build a coalition.** You need a core group of at least two to three others who will work with you. It is difficult to organize a protest, rally, or direct action all by yourself and even more difficult to get people to attend. When more people are involved in planning the action, the action will be better and more will attend.

The rally—At a rally, people gather to express their outrage at a problem and their support of a solution. It is important to keep the target in mind when picking the location for a rally—the location must show that you want the target to hear the message. For example, if you are holding a rally about the school board’s refusal to allow condom availability in the school health center, it is important to have the rally at the school board’s offices or at a meeting of the school board.

- You will need a permit for a rally held in any public space. For information on how to get a permit to hold a rally, contact your local police. If you want to hold a rally on school grounds, talk to your school principal and/or school superintendent for information about a permit. The permit will also place limits, such as noise and littering limits, on your rally. Obey all the rules that are set out for you.
- Identify a speaker and an emcee as well as someone to work with the press. The speaker should be someone who can communicate excitement to those at the rally and to anyone who might be watching. The emcee introduces the speaker or speakers and gets people to chanting. Speakers might include a peer educator, someone who’s been harmed by abstinence-only education, a teacher, or an adult ally from a family planning clinic. Have no more than three speakers.
- Make signs that convey a clear message! For example,

SCHOOL BOARD LEAVES STUDENTS IN DARK!

OR

INFORMATION + SERVICES = HEALTHY YOUNG PEOPLE

OR

IGNORANCE IS *NOT* POWER!

OR

FAMILY PLANNING SAVES LIVES!

You can undoubtedly think of better ones. Individual signs can carry different statements (but not more than three statements). Just make sure that all the signs convey the point of the rally.

- Develop chants! Have chants that get the message across and that are fun for people to say. The emcee or speakers can introduce the chants. There are many Web sites that list chants used for rallies of various kinds. Feel free to do some research.

Picketing—Picketing is an event for locations where you can’t legally hold a rally, but still want to show up and let the target know what you think. Picketing has similarities to a rally and is usually smaller.

- Make signs that convey a clear message!

SCHOOL BOARD LEAVES STUDENTS IN DARK!
 or
INFORMATION + SERVICES = HEALTHY YOUNG PEOPLE
 or
IGNORANCE IS *NOT* POWER!
 or
FAMILY PLANNING SAVES LIVES!

You can undoubtedly think of better ones. Individual signs can carry different statements (but not more than three statements). Just make sure that all the signs convey the point of the picketing.

- Check with your local police to see if you need a permit for picketing. If you need a permit, get it.
- Develop chants! Have chants that get the message across and that are fun for people to say. The leader can introduce the chants.
- Have props or visuals! Eye-catching props, like a giant condom, can make the picketing more interesting to the press or to people who walk by.
- Bring a bullhorn. Local laws govern amplification at protests, but it is usually okay to use a bullhorn to make your voice a little louder. Check with local police prior to your picketing event, to see if use of bullhorn is permitted. Then, you can use the bullhorn for short speeches, to energize people, or to keep a chant going.
- Be aware that picketing can be boring if it is the only thing you do. Remember, a major component of a successful protest is making participants feel like they are doing something worthwhile as well as exciting and fun!

Follow up—Evaluate to see if your protest was effective. Go back to your original goals—did your protest empower the people involved in it? Did it spread public awareness of your issue? Did it change a decision maker’s mind? Don’t forget to share the evaluation with Advocates for Youth!

Additional Resources

- Sample Media Advisory
- Sample Invitational Letter
- Online Resources
- Contacting Advocates for Youth

Sample Media Advisory



Your logo goes here. Or, put the advisory on organization letterhead.

Media advisories should never be longer than one page. The best way to send the advisory is by fax. You will need to follow-up with the reporter closer to the event to confirm their attendance or to make a last-minute pitch.

The media have varying hours and deadlines. Include a number that they can reach at all times, such as a cell phone.

Send the advisory 3 to 5 days in advance.

Contact: Jane Doe
202-555-5729

Thursday, February 20, 2003

Media advisories can be addressed to a specific person or to a beat, such as "Health Reporters" or "News Editors."

TO: All young people interested in savvy media skills

MEDIA ADVISORY

MEDIA ADVISORY

MEDIA ADVISORY

Answer the question: WHY should I cover your event?

This Is How to Write a Media Advisory

The title should be written like a news headline. Make it clear, catchy, and concise.

A media advisory is designed to catch the media's attention to convince them to attend an event for more information.

WHO: Young Person, 16

This is where you can really emphasize the newsworthiness of your event. The fact that you are young and making a difference is unique, and the media love the unique. Include pertinent details.

WHAT: A step-by-step guide to writing a media advisory.
A demonstration will be available for TV cameras.

WHERE: Your School
Location
Your City, State

Give a brief description of the event. Include facts about whether there will be speakers, a presentation, visuals, etc.

WHEN: Tuesday, February 25, 2003

For more information or to schedule an interview with Young Person, please contact Jane Doe at 202-555-5729.

If your event requires a reporter to RSVP, state so here. But, be aware that most media will be reluctant to commit to anything in case something "more important" suddenly happens.

Press materials usually use -30- ; -end- ; or ### to signify the end of the document.

