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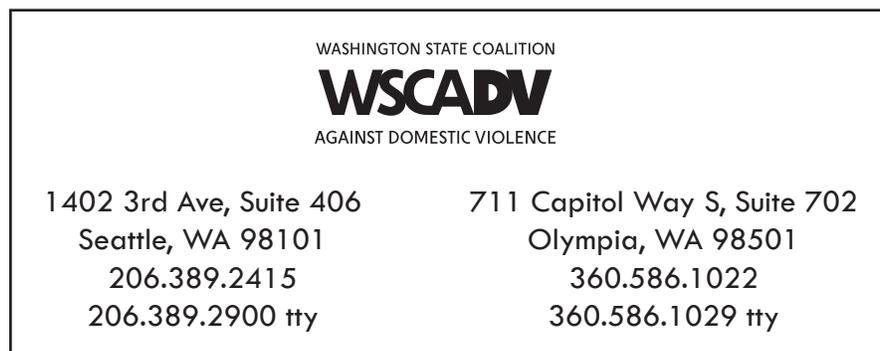
**Public Policy Advocacy:
Five Steps, Five Strategies,
Five Things to Remember**

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Five Steps to Public Policy Advocacy: How To Do It Quickly and Effectively

Are you somebody who wants to be a better, more engaged citizen—someone who speaks up and involves other people—but cannot make it fit into your busy life? Well, hold onto your hat: I have a deal for you!

In the pages that follow you'll find five easy actions, requiring only a few minutes each week, to help you (and all of us collectively) have an impact on the laws and budget decisions of our state. If everyone takes just one action spelled out in the first article, or all five, the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) will have a stronger, more effective voice in our state's Legislature. It's that simple.

This plan does not require that you turn yourself into an expert on the legislative process or even on the details of the policies we care about. WSCADV's staff need to do those things, but the rest of us can benefit from what they know. The plan does require that we all remember two basic facts about our form of government: democracy is not a spectator sport, and doing nothing is a political act.

First, a quick distinction: *Advocacy* just means "speaking up." Anyone, including people employed by state and local governments, can be an advocate. Advocacy includes such activities as: educating the public; providing information and resources to individuals in need of help; going into court; commenting on regulations; and helping individuals get benefits or services to which they are entitled.

Lobbying is just one kind of advocacy. It applies to communication with elected officials that takes a position on a pending piece of legislation and urges action. Public employees may not engage in lobbying while at their jobs or using public resources (unless they were hired to do government relations). But public employees do not give up their rights as citizens when they take a public job. During their personal time, everyone has the right to speak up or express a point of view on proposed laws and budgets and to communicate those views to elected officials.

In other words, you have no excuse for not speaking up. Now that that's settled, here is the five-point plan for fitting advocacy into busy lives—yours and others.

STEP ONE: Get on a good legislative alert list.

The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence sends out frequent alerts throughout the state legislative session that begins in early January each year in Olympia. These fax and email alerts are a quick, easy way to learn about critical domestic violence issues before the state Legislature. The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) provides legislative alerts to state domestic violence coalitions on key issues before the U.S. Congress. More importantly for busy people, legislative alerts will tell you when your voice is needed and what a good message would contain. They do all the work of sifting through the bills and budget items; you just have to read about the items that are most important to you.

To sign up for state legislative alerts on domestic violence-related issues, just send a message to: action@wscadv.org at the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

STEP TWO: Wear a conspicuous badge or pin.

During the state legislative session, everyone who cares about the issue of domestic violence should wear a purple ribbon or button (for example, stating “Women, you can’t beat them”) that quickly identifies this issue. That way, when you shop for groceries or take your children to the park, you’re calling attention to the issue of domestic violence for countless fellow citizens and voters. If you are spotted by an elected official, go to Olympia for a lobby day or attend a town hall meeting with your legislators, those elected officials will know from your ribbon, pin or button that voters in their district care about domestic violence.

And if enough people start wearing them, it may come to the attention of the media—much the same way that pink ribbons are now associated with breast cancer and red ribbons with AIDS in public awareness campaigns.

This is a low- to no-cost item, and requires no more effort than the time involved in finding and pinning on the ribbon or button.

STEP THREE: Recruit and train people to use the telephone.

When I ask state legislators how many calls or letters it takes to get their attention on an issue, the answer I often receive is: “about a dozen,” or “ten to fifteen.” That isn’t enough to get a bill through the legislative process and signed by the Governor, but it is enough to get an issue on the “radar screen” of our legislators. Because they have to make their way through about 2,000 bills a year, it is important to call attention to the priority issues on our lists. Most of us know 10-15 people with access to a telephone, and you can use the message recommended by the WSCADV Legislative Alert. That’s right: you don’t even have to come up with something.

In our state, using the telephone is made easy by the existence of a toll-free hotline to the Legislature: 1-800-562-6000. Not only is this line toll-free, it offers language translation and TTY for people with hearing difficulties or who are deaf. It is a great service.

Plus, it’s a quick, low-stress way to send a message. Answering your call will be one of eighteen incredibly helpful operators who are standing by from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on weekdays, and 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays. If you don’t know who your legislators are, they can tell you. If you are feeling shy, they’ll coach you through a message, and they never ask questions. They won’t even ask whether you are registered to vote or a citizen.

All they want is a brief, clear message to transmit by email to your Senator, two Representatives, and if you choose, the Governor. It only takes about two minutes to send a message to four critically important elected officials. And did I mention that this service is toll-free?

STEP FOUR: Make it easy for others to get involved.

Wherever people gather (e.g., religious community, professional association, college cafeteria,

PTA meeting, hospital corridors), you can help others send a message to their legislators. Just follow the easy instructions in the next section, Five Strategies. This section includes a description of setting up “Take Five” tables as a strategy to involve community members. Copy the latest legislative alert and use it to write a message. Individuals can convey messages on a laptop computer, a pad of paper or blank post cards. If mail is involved, accept donations for the stamps. Ask everyone who stops by the table to “Take Five For Victims of Domestic Violence.” If you are part of a group that meets weekly, send a weekly message during the legislative session.

STEP FIVE: Talk.

I always know when Super Bowl Sunday is coming up, but not because I care about the game. It’s because all around me, people are talking about it. I hear it in the grocery store, while waiting for a light to change—it’s in the air all the time.

We can do the same for an issue like domestic violence. Just imagine if everywhere you went, someone was talking about domestic violence and the actions that the Legislature needs to take to keep people safe in their own homes. You could strike up conversations in the grocery store, while waiting on the corner for a light to change, or standing in line for coffee. You could talk to total strangers (and if it feels a little odd, who cares—they’re strangers after all) or get a friend to agree on a little talking script. Then, every time you take a ferry, you could get into the coffee line with three or four people in between you, and innocently call out to your friend: “Hey! Did you hear what they are talking about doing in Olympia? Cutting out the funds for domestic violence programs!” Then carry on a brief exchange, while everybody in the line is listening.

And, if you get a chance to meet with an elected official, now or during the legislative session, take advantage of the opportunity and talk to them. Be ready with a persuasive 90-second speech. The 90-second speech is an effective way to start a legislative visit and lets them know your issue. The 90-second speech should include: your name and that you are a constituent of the elected official, the number of people in your group (or served by your program), the bill or budget item you are following, and what you want them to do about it.

FOR BONUS POINTS: Ask four friends to do the same.

If everyone reading this article pledged to make one contact each week with an elected official in Olympia, by mail, email or phone, the elected official would get 300 communications every week. That act alone would be terrific. But if everyone reading this article also enlisted four individuals— neighbors, colleagues, family members, friends—to do the same, then we’d have 1,200 communications each week. And that would be tremendous.

Every year is a tough year in the Legislature. Legislators always worry about the budget and frequently health and human services are at risk. More than ever, our voice is needed. And, as this five-point plan demonstrates, it can be done, even in the midst of busy lives.

Five Strategies: Public Policy Advocacy Made Easy for Busy People

Just like the famous Paul Desmond musical refrain, here's something deceptively simple—and as likely to stay with you—that just “takes five.” Experienced public policy advocates know the following four things:

1. Phone and letter campaigns remain effective. Elected officials and their staff note the issues that generate the most letters and calls; they are a useful gauge of community support for and against an issue.
2. Broad appeals for action don't move readers to act. Alerts that sound too general, or too complicated, get set aside.
3. The competition for attention is very keen. There are so many groups sending out emails and “snail mails” requesting action that readers ignore much of what comes their way. And groups with tight budgets cannot afford to waste scarce staff time or resources on maintaining lists, paying for postage, and sending mail/emails for long alerts that don't get results.
4. If you want your appeals to produce results, they have to be quick. Make taking action easy, make it time-limited, and design it to fit into busy lives.
5. Consider using “Take Five” alerts and tables as part of your legislative plan. These work to: generate letters, sign up members for a grassroots network and win involvement in a community education campaign. People on the receiving end say that knowing they can be advocates for something they care about, in five minutes or less, is empowering.

Here's one example of a “Take Five” legislative strategy that got results. A few years ago, University of Washington social work students tried to get other students to write letters about legislative proposals they thought might harm children, but the answers they got seemed like excuses. In response to their pleas, people said:

- “I don't have time”
- “I don't know what to say”
- “I don't know my legislator”
- “I don't know the address”
- “I don't have any envelopes, paper or stamps”
- “I can't do it”

To their credit, the students took the “excuses” seriously, treating them as real barriers to be eliminated. In the process, they developed “TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS,” a way to be a public policy advocate for children in just five minutes or less.

During lunch hour, at a strategically located table, they provided answers to all the “excuses,” which included: sample letters, brief fact sheets, people to answer questions, blank paper, envelopes and stamps, plus the names and addresses of all the state legislators. Visible to all was a big sign reading: “TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS.”

Immediately, they generated a couple dozen letters. A week later, they were back at their table with new information and this time they got twice as many letters. Before long, people were referring to the “Take Five” tables and creating new variations.

Some public policy advocates adapted the idea by renaming and re-formatting their legislative alerts, with a section for “actions you can take in five minutes or less,” or “TAKE FIVE FOR HOUSING” (whales, etc.). Like the students at their table, these alerts include all the key ingredients, in a simple, easy-to-complete format that enables concerned citizens to fit public policy advocacy into busy lives.

On a single page, usually within a box, “Take Five” alerts provide brief facts and messages, and the information needed to contact a legislator by mail, email or phone. This allows the participant to communicate the message in any form quickly and clearly.

People who receive “Take Five” alerts in written form say they prop them on their telephones or computer keyboards every week until they have made their calls or written letters. (Guilt, they admit, is part of what makes it work: “You mean I couldn’t take *five minutes a week* to help out?”) Those who work for public agencies get their “Take Five” alerts at home; they cannot lobby while on the public payroll. But on their own time, they are citizens like anybody else and lobbying is allowed.

“Take Five” tables are popping up everywhere: in the lobbies of social agencies and hospitals, after services on Sunday, at PTA or professional group meetings. Examples include:

- One group set up a “Take Five” table at the beginning of the cross-Iowa bike ride, hoping to expand their network in support of a new bicycle helmet law. They got 400 members signed up in just a couple of hours.
- Women who were eager to see the Violence Against Women Act renewed in 2000 set up “Take Five” tables beside the “Silent Witness” silhouettes of women murdered in domestic violence and over 400 letters resulted.
- Psychology students at the University of Utah set up tables in the cafeteria, seeking letters in support of higher education for foster children. They generated over seven hundred letters during the course of a week.
- As one participant reported later, *“with only two days (four hours each) at the tables, we got 271 letters signed in support of the bill! I am so thrilled at this success not only for the bill, but for the amazing number of students that wanted to get involved and learn a little more about the legislative process, not to mention learning who their legislator was!”*

Remember, because legislators get so much computer-generated mail, many legislative offices make a distinction between “astro-turf messages” (i.e., identical cards or letters that might all be signed by the same person using different pens), and real grassroots messages signed by individuals with addresses and a brief note. Both are noticed, but actual grassroots communications get more attention.

To make sure the letters generated by your “Take Five” tables fall in the grassroots category, even when the content of the letter is identical, have senders do three things:

- Sign and print their names,
- Put their home address, and
- Add a personal note—even something as brief as “I really care” or “This means a lot to me” sends a message to the staff opening the mail. The possibilities are endless—use your creativity and energy.

Five Things to Remember for Advocates and State Employees

Here are five things to think about with respect to your role as public policy advocates.

1. Advocacy and lobbying are not the same:

Advocacy: Speaking up; to plead a cause, make the case for another.

Lobbying: Attempts to influence decisions of legislators about a pending piece of legislation. (Note: Discussing an issue is not lobbying.)

Much of what you are likely to do is *advocacy*, not *lobbying*, and you can advocate for people, programs and issues you care about.

2. The legislative process is set up to answer three questions:

- Is the bill a good idea? (answered in policy committees)
- Is the bill a good use for tax dollars? (answered in Appropriations/Ways and Means committees)
- Is the bill able to win support of 51% of voters? (answered on House and Senate floors)

You can help provide information to determine the answers to all three questions. It's part of the job.

3. Along the way, there is much you can help with:

- Background and history (provide context to the issue)
- Statistics (collect and interpret)
- Budget estimates
- Educating the public
- What changes in laws would mean
- Helping others who do all of the above

- Telling individual stories
- Forming positions and educating legislators

4. Some possibilities of ways you can get involved:

- Join groups or coalitions as “informational members”
- Participate through unions and influence unions as to their positions
- Volunteer for campaigns on your own time; be part of telephone and/or letter trees
- Exert influence through membership on religious community committees or as part of professional organizations
- Encourage family members to play active roles
- Participate in local, state or national advocacy groups
- Serve on non-profit agency boards
- Invite legislators to agencies and prepare site visits, or help participants set up and conduct site visits with elected officials

5. Plus, you can help public policy advocates in more ways:

- Aid in issue campaigns; for example, provide reports, statistics, educational information
- Explain regulations and how they are developed
- Help others understand the process as well as the content of specific bills and policies
- Be accessible to advocates, which helps you reflect their views accurately
- Contribute to newsletters of non-profit groups
- Attend lobby days (just be sure to take the day off if you plan to lobby)
- Help with fact sheets: preparing accurate information is in everyone’s interest
- Supervise interns, let advocates “shadow” you
- Speak at classes, congregations, PTAs, other community groups
- Distribute tools like voter registration forms or League of Women Voters pamphlets

Bottom Line — think of your job as including:

- Outreach: You can and should reach out to community groups and help them become

effective public policy advocates.

- **Motivation:** By making laws and policies understandable, you motivate others to get involved and to speak up.
- **Basic tools:** Information about “Take Five” tables, letters, personal visits and telephone trees to communicate a message to elected officials.

Careful Communication:

When lobbying as a private citizen, you only speak for yourself, not your agency. But you do not give up your rights as a citizen—to speak up on your own time, using your own resources, and in your own personal style. And, you do have the right to help others be more effective public policy advocates for themselves, their families, their communities, and the programs that help them.