

Giving Voice: The Power of Grassroots Advocacy in Shaping Public Policy

BILLIE HALL

President and CEO, Sunflower Foundation

Efforts to shape public policy often include building the capacity of nonprofit organizations to more effectively advocate on behalf of their causes, communities, and, most importantly, the people they serve. Within advocacy work, there exists a wide spectrum of strategies that can be employed to change or shape public policy. Yet, too often, nonprofit health organizations tend to limit themselves to a narrow range of strategies that typically includes education, policy/data analysis, and limited legislative advocacy. While these strategies are important to public policy work, they may not be enough to influence policymakers in today's increasingly special interest and ideological-driven political system.

INTRODUCTION

After observing more than a decade of proposed legislation on public smoking bans die for lack of support in the Kansas state legislature, the Sunflower Foundation decided to develop and support a grassroots campaign with the sole objective of getting a statewide law prohibiting smoking in public settings. After a year of planning and with the support of all foundation trustees, the campaign was launched in January 2009. Fifteen months later, the Kansas legislature passed and the governor signed the Kansas Clean Indoor Air Act.

THE "A-HA" MOMENT

In 2007 I was observing a legislative committee hearing on a proposed smoking ban when I began to look around the filled-to-capacity room. Two things caught my attention: the profile of those providing testimony and their respective arguments.

The proponents of the smoking ban were represented by public health practitioners, educators, and advocacy groups. The collective written and oral testimony of this group was impressive and powerful. Armed with the 2006 U.S. Surgeon General's report *The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco*, they presented an ironclad argument that public health protection is the responsibility of the state and, as such, should not be left to the discretion of municipalities.

The opponents were represented by a significant group of everyday Kansans holding their handwritten testimony. They were not the expected "opposition lobbyists." They shared personal stories about how the proposed legislation would affect their businesses and their communities, they did not attempt to refute the science, and they made a compelling case for keeping the government out of their business. One legislator said he was impressed by the testimony of those who are "very passionate about the health issues," but he was also mindful of the fact that "all the wisdom of the State does not reside in this building" (the Kansas State Capitol). He ended by saying that the appropriate place for this regulation was the local level.

The proposed indoor public smoking ban died for lack of support. The opposition delivered the "people of Kansas," and lawmakers responded. These people were average, regular citizens – their neighbors, their constituents. What if one of the advocacy strategies for proponents of clean indoor air used grassroots to bring the "average" Kansan's view to the statehouse?

SUPPORT FOR GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

One of the most effective and often underused strategies available to nonprofits is grassroots advocacy. Generally defined as "the basic source of support from the ground up," grassroots advocacy includes organizing, mobilizing, and engaging the public to advocate for themselves. The value of this form of advocacy is that it is driven by the people. It is grounded in the belief that people matter and that their collective voices are powerful in influencing elected officials and in shaping policies at all levels of government.

A Kansas lawmaker once said that three anecdotes make policy. While this exaggeration is humorous, it also explains why the grassroots efforts of the opposition were so effective, especially in the face of irrefutable science that second-hand smoke is harmful. Was it possible that the advocates had not delivered the "public voice" in making their case for a public health law on indoor smoking bans? Was the "public" missing in public health?

Looking back on the history of the Kansas experience, there were many public health efforts that influenced public opinion about smoke-free public places. According to a public opinion poll commissioned in 2007 by the Sunflower Foundation, 71 percent of the voters were in favor of a state law; yet, the Kansas legislature was listening to the minority voices of the opposition. Determined to give voice to the majority, the foundation hired a national firm in 2008 to conduct a grassroots assessment and develop a plan to get a state indoor public smoking law passed in 2010. This process led to the creation of a comprehensive campaign known as Clean Air Kansas. Supported by the Sunflower Foundation and the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City, the campaign included direct lobbying and non-lobbying strategies.

When the Sunflower Foundation made the decision to support this campaign, it evaluated options for issuing a grant to one or more organizations. Due to the concerns about the capacity of existing organizations, the extensive lobbying, and the short window of opportunity to implement the campaign, the foundation contracted directly for the services needed to run the campaign. Because the Sunflower Foundation is classified as a public charity organization, it can engage in lobbying under the Internal Revenue Services regulations for public charities. The foundation also chose the section 501(h) expenditure test as its measurement of lobbying expenditures because the guidelines and limits are clear and definitive, unlike the “insubstantial part test,” which is considerably more vague. Private foundations may support public charities that lobby, but there are specific rules that they must follow.

With an emphasis on grassroots lobbying, the campaign was able to identify over 10,000 supportive Kansas voters in 20 targeted legislative districts by phone. Thanks to an innovative system created by the campaign team that gave supporters the option of recording a personal message for their legislator during their call, over 4,000 messages and stories were recorded on CDs and given to targeted lawmakers. Legislators were urged to listen to the CD while driving between their home districts and the capital. Lawmakers recognized the voices of their friends and neighbors, though they had never discussed this issue with them before. The records were also catalogued and featured on the Clean Air Kansas campaign Web site, which enabled the media to connect real people and real stories across Kansas to the issue.

The results of this effective campaign were seen during the vote in the Kansas House. Thirteen of the targeted lawmakers (whose likely vote prior to the campaign was “no”) voted “yes”; one did not vote. On February 25, 2010, lawmakers finally heard what the voters of Kansas wanted and passed a strong indoor smoking ban.

BUILDING GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY CAPACITY

As foundations and their grantees focus more resources on policy solutions, engaging the public in this process may be

the most important advocacy capacity building strategy that foundations can support in the future. This campaign shaped how we look at our work in public policy and the strategies we support to assure that the public voice is part of the process.

- **EMPOWER** grantees to use advocacy strategies by providing training and access to expertise and resources like Alliance for Justice. Many nonprofits do not feel they can even begin to engage in this work and need empowerment to do so.
- **STRENGTHEN** grassroots advocacy capacity by supporting technical assistance. Too often, advocacy groups underestimate their ability to mobilize their supporters. Action alert e-mails are a common tool used by nonprofits; yet, the response rate can be disappointing. In the 2009 E-Nonprofit Benchmarks study, the typical action alert had a 17 percent open rate and a much lower response rate of 2.8 percent.
- **KNOW** where the public is on an issue. Support polling and research to help inform the strategies needed to gain public support and to get the policy win. In Kansas, following the release of the Sunflower poll, the state’s largest newspaper published an editorial on July 5, 2007 – “Smoke-Free Places Are Coming.” The public voice was beginning to be heard.
- **SUPPORT** advocacy and lobbying. We need to incorporate political thinking and strategies in all of our public health policy work. The most effective campaigns include direct lobbying, grassroots advocacy, and media. All of these components were crucial for the victory in Kansas. Learn about the legal issues that apply to your grantees and to your foundation. We can do more to bring the public voice to our work and that of our grantees.

Details of the campaign, including the Voices project, are available at www.sunflowerfoundation.org.

For more information on the legal aspects related to foundation advocacy and lobbying, visit the Alliance for Justice Web site, www.afj.org, and click on the “For Nonprofits and Foundations” tab.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or fmitchell@gih.org.