



State Disability Advocacy Toolkit



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Introduction

The Autism Society of America is the oldest and largest grassroots organization representing approximately 70+ affiliates across the country. Our affiliates work to advocate at the local, state, and federal levels to improve the lives of people with Autism and their families.

Goals and Outcomes

This toolkit is intended to help affiliates and other allies to more effectively advocate at the state and local levels so that they can understand the legislative process, contact local officials regarding advocacy efforts, and build statewide coalitions to become more effective.

Know Who to Contact

State and local officials are elected to represent the people, including you. One of the most important steps in advocacy is to know who your officials are and how to contact them. Once you know who your officials are, you can connect with them to advocate about the issues that matter most to you. Remember, as a person with Autism or other disability, family member, or ally, YOU are an expert about the policy issues impacting your life or your loved one's life.

Meeting with an Elected Official or Staff

If you are meeting with a state legislator or their staff, you will need to be prepared to share information with them so that they can become educated on the issue. Continue to page 3 for a few key ideas to keep in mind in order to have an impactful meeting.

State Officials:

In most states, these officials include elected members of the state House of Representatives and state Senate, Governor, Attorney General, State Legislators, and State Superintendent.

Local Officials:

These officials include mayors, city council, county council, and district superintendents.

For help finding who your state and local officials are and how to contact them, visit the [Autism Society of America's Action Center](#).

Meeting with an Elected Official or Staff

1. Advocate for your issue.

Identify the problem you want to solve and find the policy solution that will address the problem. For example, the waiting list for services in the state is too long. The state legislature must provide additional funding for Medicaid waiver services to reduce the waiting list.

2. Know your policymakers.

Do research on your state legislators and staff before meeting with them. Find out what committees they are on and if your issue is being considered by that committee.

3. Share your experiences.

Give examples of lived experiences that relate to the policy objective; briefly and succinctly describe how it impacts you, your family, and other constituents in your district, state, or nation.

4. Bring a self-advocate.

If you are not a person with Autism, consider bringing an Autistic self-advocate that can speak about their first-hand experience related to the policy objective.

5. Provide evidence.

Provide research and data that back up your policy objective.

6. Form a state coalition.

Create opportunities to meet with other advocates and organizations in the state that share the same policy objectives and values. Share data and resources and advocate together to show strength in numbers. See links below for a sampling of national organizations with state contacts with whom to join forces.

7. Know all sides of the issue.

It is important to learn and acknowledge arguments that may disagree with your view. Learning about different sides to an issue will help all parties come to common policy solutions.

Here are a few additional tips:

- Be early to the meeting
- Create and review main points of your issues
- Practice what you want to say
- Keep introductions brief
- Provide examples or data that helps to make the case for your issue
- Focus on one or two issues and stay focused
- Be sure to have a specific “ask.” e.g. Can we count on your support for X?
- Exchange contact information and/or take a picture
- Follow up with any promised materials and thank you letter
- If hosting a day at the Capitol, be sure to schedule the event ahead of time

Understand the Legislative Process and Pressure Points

To be a more effective advocate, it is important to understand the legislative process.

Bill Drafting

Advocates can request that a bill be drafted by their legislator to fund services, address a problem or issue, change policy, and many other things. Also, advocates can provide legislators information and point of views on proposed or existing bills. Provide research and data to the staff of the legislator to strengthen your position and the legislation. A request does not mean it will be drafted, but do not get discouraged. Seek other legislators to introduce the bill.

Bill Introduction

Once introduced to the governing body, bills are assigned a number and referred to the committee with jurisdiction over the issue. At this point, advocates may write letters to support or oppose the bill's introduction. Legislators value their constituents' opinions and when their work is shared with others.

Bills Referred to Committee(s) of Jurisdiction

Committee chairs and ranking minority members decide which bills will be considered. During this time, advocates may write to committee members and urge a hearing on a bill that is important to them. Advocates may be invited to provide oral and/or written testimony providing details about how the bill impacts them using personal stories, research and data.

Floor Action on a Bill

State advocates may contact legislators before a floor vote to ask them to speak either in favor of or in opposition to a bill. It is beneficial for advocates to provide legislators with talking points or a very brief "floor letter" outlining key points.

Conference Committee

When two chambers of the legislature pass different bills, advocates can urge the committee to adopt the best of both bills so that the final bill is as strong as possible.

Educating the Governor

State advocates should develop a relationship with the Governor and his staff. Volunteer to be on disability-related committees or workgroups.

Use the Media

Advocates may write letters to the editor of a local newspaper and/or organize a peaceful rally or press conference highlighting the need for the policy change.



State Resources

Voting Resources

For state information about elections, including voter registration and candidates running for office in your state, visit the Autism Society's Action Center to [find candidates](#) and to [register to vote](#).

Dates of 2023 State Legislative Sessions

Each state has its own legislature and different dates for legislative sessions. [See the dates in your state](#) to plan advocacy efforts.

National Governors Association

Contact information for state governors, committees, staff, and publications.

National Conference of State Legislatures

Information on state legislatures, including calendars, contact information and bill tracking.

Coalition Building

Build or join a state coalition with other disability organizations to advocate together such as [The Arc](#), the [Developmental Disabilities \(DD\) Councils](#), [University Centers for Excellence in DD](#), and state [Disability Rights](#) network.

Partners in Policymaking

Affiliates should consider hosting or participating in Partners in Policymaking, an innovative, competency based leadership training program for adults with disabilities and parents of young children with developmental disabilities. The purpose of the program is two-fold: to teach best practices and to teach the competencies needed to influence public policy.





National Organizations

Here are some other national organizations that advocate on behalf of Autism and other developmental disabilities.

National Association of State Directors Developmental Disabilities Services represents state agencies serving individuals with developmental disabilities.

The Arc of the United States represents individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities with state chapters in most states.

ANCOR represents providers of services to individuals with developmental disabilities.

Easter Seals provide advocacy and direct services with local chapters nationwide.

Autistic Self-Advocacy Network seeks to advance the principles of the disability rights movement with regard to autism.

Autism Speaks is a national organization advocating for research and services at the national level.

Public Policy Resources at Autism Society of America

Autism Society's Public Policy Resources: Learn more about our efforts, and ways to take action.

Legislative Goals of the Autism Society of America and eight other national developmental disability organizations. Shorter brochure.

Autism Society's Capitol Connection Newsletter: Stay up to date on federal and state public policies that affect the Autism Community with this free twice-monthly newsletter. Feel free to share it widely with state constituents.

Autism Society of America's Action Center: Take action on federal legislative issues by responding to Action Alerts using sample letters, view legislation and check cosponsors, visit the Election Center, and find out who your state and local representatives are.

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Learn more at autismsociety.org