



National Prevention Science Coalition

to improve lives

Advocacy at the Local Government Level

Understand your local government structure. There is no consistent structure across localities. Some cities, for example, have strong mayors with a lot of policy-making and administrative powers; other mayors have less power. In some counties, the county executive is an elected position who leads the county council. In others, it's an appointed position equivalent to the chief administrative officer. Some (typically smaller) counties are run by commissions, and each commissioner serves as the administrator of one or more agencies.

Localities can also have differing responsibilities relative to the state and encompassing jurisdictions. The definition of "city," "town," "county," "village," and other such terms differ by state, and the differences can be significant. Often, such differences relate to what types of services the jurisdiction can and does offer, taxing authority, and other important roles and responsibilities.

It is important to understand how your locality is structured and what it is responsible for. Advocating to a town administrator regarding a program that is run by the county will not only be a waste of your time, but it will compromise your credibility.

Often, a jurisdiction's website will provide decent information on how it is structured, what services it offers, and who the decision makers are. Take time, also, to read the budget. The narratives accompanying the figures often explain if services are mandated, tied to broader initiatives, etc. The budget should also provide a good overview of how the jurisdiction is organized (e.g., organizational chart), where revenues come from, and how disbursements tend to be allocated. It is the single most important document for understanding a jurisdiction's operations and structure.

Know your elected officials' interests. Your advocacy efforts will be most successful if you are able to identify the elected officials most likely to be receptive to your message. This may take some time and homework. We recommend three ways to understand officials' priorities:

1. *Follow them on social media and subscribe to their e-newsletters.* Officials have all the discretion in the world when it comes to what they write about. So paying attention to that will give you good insight into the issues they are most concerned with.
2. *Discover their committee assignments.* Most city and county councils have committees that focus on specific issues such as public safety, housing, health and human services, and other topics. Find out who serves on the committees that are of interest to you. Many councils utilize committees of the whole (every member serves on every standing committee); in that case, find out who chairs the committees that are of interest to you.

3. *Track what they discuss at council meetings.* At council meetings, members often have time to bring up topics. They will tend to bring up a wide range of things during this time. They may ask the council to recognize the local high school's championship lacrosse team. But they may also direct staff to investigate the prevalence of heroin overdoses in the jurisdiction and report back with recommended strategies. Watch council meetings or (more easily) read meeting summaries and minutes to learn what types of issues each member tends to discuss.

Find opportunities to speak and provide input. Just like their counterparts at the state and federal levels, local officials tend to be responsive to in-person advocacy. There are multiple opportunities. Take advantage of as many as possible. Become recognizable so that officials associate you with your positions and become likely to learn as much about them as possible. Look for opportunities such as these:

- *Town halls.* Elected officials will often host regular town halls. Some may be open for anyone to speak on any subject, while others may be specific to a topic or proposal.
- *Public hearings.* It is likely that state or local law requires public hearings on budgets and other issues. Note, though, that you often have to sign up in advance to speak at the public hearing and, depending on the issue, available slots can fill up fast. These are often televised, so they may provide some good video clips you can use in future efforts. Public hearings are a good opportunity to bring a group supportive of your cause. Have multiple people sign up to speak on the topic and coordinate the testimonies so they follow a theme but provide new information each time. Have supporters bring signs or wear a designated color and cheer for your speakers to show the level of support.
- *Meetings with individual officials.* Set up a time to meet directly with elected officials. If you meet with staff, be sure to request to meet with staff with responsibility for the topic area. Staff members are often assigned to topics such as human services, parks, transportation, education, etc. Some officials will hold "office hours" on occasion, allowing constituents to come in for a meeting without a prior appointment.
- *Op-eds and letters to the editor.* Local officials often contribute to their local papers. You should, too. Be sure to use such opportunities to praise officials for things they've done to support your cause, and to remind them of promises they've made in public.

Get involved. There are many ways to have a direct role in policy- and decision-making at the local level. Elected officials' offices are often good resources to discover what's available in your community. Some possibilities include the following:

- *County-wide advisory boards and commissions.* Citizen boards range in responsibility from advisory to policy-making. Their scope may be broad (e.g., human services) or narrow (e.g., Head Start policy). In general, the recommendations of such boards are weighed heavily by elected officials, as they are deemed to be fully engaged in their issue area. Experts and citizens with lived experience are highly valued members of these boards. Members are generally appointed by elected officials.
- *Agency-specific advisory boards.* Agencies within the jurisdiction (e.g., Health Department, Social Services Department) may have their own advisory boards, focused on weighing in on agency policy, procedure, and programming. Elected officials may only be concerned with high level policy, while boards such as these may have much more say in how programs and services are implemented. How members are appointed may vary.

- *Elected officials' advisory boards.* Officials themselves often create advisory boards of residents of their districts to weigh in on topics such as land use, budget, and human services. Participating on such boards is a good way to build a relationship with an elected official. Further, these boards often dive deep into specific issues of concern to the elected official.
- *Local advocacy organizations.* Local advocacy groups may already exist to raise awareness and fight for policies around certain issues. They tend to have good relationships with elected officials and are always looking for volunteers and experts to help develop their agendas. Well-established organizations may be granted prime slots or additional time at public hearings.
- *Professional associations.* National associations (and their state affiliates) can play an important part at the local level, too. Professional associations such as the [National Recreation and Park Association](#) and the [National Association of City and County Health Officials](#) drive professional standards, promote best practices, and are a major source of continuing education. The [National League of Cities](#), the [National Association of Counties](#), and other such groups count many elected officials and chief administrators among their ranks. Consider joining relevant associations, and attend their conferences, contribute to their publications, present at their meetings, and serve on their committees. While you may not have a direct impact on the jurisdiction where you live, you may have an impact with a far greater reach.