

## PUBLIC RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS: COMMUNICATIONS TIPS FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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Federal, state, and local governmental officials respond to concerns that they perceive among their constituencies. Their actions need to be based on informed decision making. Special interest groups and lobbyists make sure their voices are heard on a continuing basis. Consequently, such groups are frequently able to convince governmental officials that their groups' needs are ones that require action. Lobbying efforts are more likely to be successful if governmental officials already know and understand the needs, concerns, and accomplishments of the advocates.

A good, basic public relations program can provide the foundation for a strong advocacy program. Yet, many cultural organizations do not have any program aimed at keeping elected representatives informed about their activities. In part, this stems from a reluctance by some to engage in lobbying. Although lobbying by nonprofit 501(c)(3) groups is permitted, with certain limitations, cultural organizations frequently choose not to take this course of action.

Unfortunately, an organization's reluctance to lobby often results in its developing such a hands-off position that it cannot keep abreast of legislative activities that might affect them or develop any lines of communication with governmental officials. This isolation can result because an organization's board, committees, and personnel do not understand what lobbying is or what is permitted. These individuals are fearful that lobbying could cause the organization to lose its tax-exempt status. Some organizations find the concept of lobbying distasteful. Some do not want to be bothered with the record-keeping involved. Others are part of a governmental body (a village or park district, a forest preserve, a state or federally owned site) and are not permitted to use tax funds for lobbying.

Tax-exempt organizations that *do not* wish to lobby can benefit from a public relations program directed at keeping governmental officials informed about their current activities and about the broad

concerns of the cultural community. This technical insert describes some effective ways for museums and similar organizations to establish ongoing public relations programs without lobbying governmental officials. To help to clarify the issue further, a section at the end of the insert identifies actions that *do* constitute lobbying.

### Developing Legislative Strategies without Lobbying

#### *General Guidelines*

There are some general rules that apply to working with all governmental levels:

1. Be informed about current issues.
2. Concentrate on issues, not personalities. An opponent on one issue may support another cause affecting your organization.
3. Know the players. Identify the most likely sources of support or opposition, as well as officials who are neutral or undecided.
4. Let your membership know the position of officials on issues that affect your operation. Report facts. State views of both proponents and opponents.
5. Keep officials informed about your activities and your broad concerns on a regular basis; don't wait for a crisis to develop.
6. Make your members aware of pending legislation.
7. Let your members know that contact by phone or mail from individuals is the most effective means of reaching governmental officials. Make it easy for them to do this without urging a specific action.
8. Toot your own horn. Publicize your good fortune, hard work, community service, educational programs, and other accomplishments.
9. Identify others who share your goals

and concerns. Develop information networks with them.

10. Thank officials for a favorable vote on a specific issue that affects you and similar organizations; respond to a negative vote with a courteous note that lets the officials know that you are aware of their actions.
11. Invite local, state, or federal governmental officials to attend or participate in activities and special events at your facility, and promote media coverage of such events.

### Activities at the Local Level

City councils, village boards, county governmental units, and appointed committees and commissions are most likely to respond directly to an individual cultural organization or to a coalition of such organizations within a community. These government officials are the easiest to reach personally and to keep informed about programs and activities. Board members and personnel of nonprofit organizations should get to know the key players at the local level. Provide them with opportunities to present certificates of appreciation, recognition, or awards for assistance to the organization. Take advantage of opportunities for local officials to participate in on-site special events. Maintain continual communication. Send newsletters, press releases, information about public recognition of your organization's educational programs, and other such notices to appropriate governmental bodies.

Follow local issues closely. These could pertain to zoning, annexation of property, protection of historic properties, local taxes, opportunities for loans, or grants or other funds from local government. Monitor council and board meetings on a regular basis. A local organization that may be helpful is the League of Women Voters, which keeps tabs on many local governmental issues. Collaborate with organizations that have similar goals

in order to monitor issues that could have an impact on operations. Local visitor and convention bureaus, chambers of commerce, and downtown development groups may be allies. If your members are kept informed about issues, they may independently initiate phone calls or letters to officials or turn out in large numbers for a key meeting. Such actions are very effective at the local level and may make a difference in the outcome of a vote on a particular issue.

### Dealing with State Government

Monitoring activities at the state level is more difficult for an individual organization. It is important to begin by learning about the legislative process and about legislative timetables. Watch agendas — be aware of pending legislation that may affect funding or services for organizations like yours. Seek information from organizations such as preservation or environmental groups, museum associations [Editor's note: such as the Oklahoma Museums Association], or service organizations such as the Illinois Heritage Association, which can keep you up-to-date about current or pending state legislation. Network throughout the state with local organizations that share your goals and concerns.

Know your legislative district and the people who serve you at the state level. Learn their schedules and make contact with these officials on a continuing basis. Learn about their interests, biases, and voting records. Get to know key staff members and communicate with them. Add the names of elected state representatives to your mailing list and send them newsletters, press releases, or notices of awards of achievements. Take the time to highlight important items in these communiques. It will save your legislators time and may mean that they will be more likely to read your material. Learn the names of those who serve on government boards or councils that deal with issues of concern to you. Here is a place where your board members, who know your organization thoroughly and understand its needs, can be helpful in taking the initiative to contact these officials. Always acknowledge their support. Share the glory. Promote media coverage. Keep your membership informed about legislative activities.

### Approaching the Federal Level

It is especially useful at the national level to work in concert with organizations that share similar goals and experience sim-

ilar needs. Both state and national organizations are good sources of information and can help to ensure that common concerns coalesce. The Governmental Affairs Office of the American Association of Museums is such an organization. It monitors national legislation affecting museums and also tracks state legislation that sets a precedent or forms a pattern that could affect other museums. The AAM maintains a hotline that provides timely information to AAM members of the Museum Advocacy Team (MAT). The IHA keeps up-to-date on this and passes information about current situations to our membership through our newsletter and other means. [Editor's note: The Oklahoma Museums Association also provides this information to its members.]

Individual organizations also need to develop lines of communication with federal officials. Know your congressional district, your representatives, and your state senators. Follow the activities of your legislators — their committee appointments, the bills they do or do not support, and their voting record — and let them know that you follow their actions. Thank them for support of causes that affect your organization. Inform your membership of

their record. Make it easy for your members to take their own initiative to communicate with federal officials by providing names and addresses.

Let your senators and members of congress know about the educational programs of your organization and about your achievements. Network with other organizations; together send information that illustrates the value of your cultural institutions to your communities.

Actions of federal, state, and local governmental bodies can have a great impact on nonprofit organizations. The recommendations in this insert are intended to assist such organizations to establish ongoing communications with elected and appointed officials. A good public relations program is an effective means of keeping governmental representatives up-to-date about their contributions of cultural organizations to their communities. Such a program can also make the officials aware of the needs and concerns of these nonprofits.

Some of the suggested tips for communicating with governmental officials in this insert originated in the office of Rep. Debra Danburg of Houston, Texas, and are used with permission.

What is Lobbying? Lobbying is an activity that encourages action to influence legislation or the election or defeat of a political candidate. Tax-exempt organizations may not engage in "substantial" lobbying, or they could lose their tax-exempt status. The measurement of what constitutes "substantial" is vague, but is suggested to be more than 5 percent of an organization's total activities.

A further clarification of what constitutes lobbying lies in the distinction between grassroots lobbying and direct lobbying. Grassroots lobbying is directed toward influencing actions of the public in regard to legislation. This includes suggesting to the general public or to a segment of the public (such as a membership) that specific action should be taken about legislation. A tax-exempt organization may not spend more than 25 percent of its lobbying funds for grassroots lobbying. An organization may inform its membership about how governmental officials have voted or what positions they have taken on issues. It can provide addresses and phone numbers. This is not lobbying. If, however, the organization suggests a course of action to influence legislation, that activity is considered lobbying. Any actions that could be perceived as endorsing a candidate for office would be also considered lobbying.

Direct lobbying is communicating directly with governmental officials who may formulate legislation about specific issues. It is an attempt to influence legislation. An organization that does this is still subject to the lobbying test for "substantial" activity, but there is no limitation on the amount of actual dollars that can be spent on direct lobbying. A good description of lobbying can be found in "A Layman's Guide to Lobbying without Losing Your Tax-Exempt Status," which is available to borrowers from the IHA circulating library. [Editor's note: The following publications are available through the lending library of the Oklahoma Museums Association and may be borrowed on interlibrary loan from most public libraries in the state:

Finch, Andy. Congressional and IRS Actions on Museum and Tax Issues. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1995.

Hall, Jason. How To Be Your Museum's Best Advocate. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1994.]