



ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Becoming a Mental Health ADVOCATE

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What is advocacy?

Advocacy is an activity by an individual or group that aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social institutions. Advocacy includes activities and publications to influence public policy, laws and budgets by using facts, their relationships, the media, and messaging to educate government officials and the public.

Advocacy can include many activities that a person or organization undertakes including media campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research. (Source: Wikipedia)

NAMI advocates to improve the lives of people affected by mental health conditions. From the U.S. Capitol to state legislatures to local city councils, the NAMI Alliance uses the power of lived experience to shape how our country helps people with mental illness.

Our NAMI national office advocates on the federal level and engages members to reach out to their members of the U.S. Congress to support or defeat bills or budget items.

Our team at NAMI Tennessee will be teaching you how to conduct state-level advocacy with members of the Tennessee General Assembly.

What is lobbying versus advocating?

Lobbying (often by lobby groups) is a form of advocacy where a direct approach is made to legislators asking them take a certain action for or against a specific issue or specific piece of legislation.

Myths about advocacy

MYTH: You have to be a registered lobbyist in order to talk to a legislator.

TRUTH: Citizens asking their elected officials to vote for or against a measure aren't required to register.

Only individuals who are paid by an entity to ask legislators to take specific action on a policy, bill, or funding issue are required to register.

MYTH: Non-profits can't lobby.

TRUTH: Non-profits are allowed to lobby, but that cannot make up the majority of their activities or their budget or it will jeopardize their non-profit status with the IRS.

The NAMI organization and advocacy

Here's how advocacy works and how you can get involved.

National level

NAMI shapes national public policy for people with mental illness and their families and provides volunteer leaders with the tools, resources and skills necessary to save mental health in all states.

At our U.S. Capitol, NAMI is at the table when important bills are being discussed involving mental health. Our national NAMI office has an effective policy team that reviews mental health-related legislation and policies and funding initiatives under consideration by Congress, federal agencies, and the White House. We even have an in-house person who serves as NAMI's national lobbyist.

How to get involved:

- When you become a member of NAMI, you will receive periodic emails from our policy staff encouraging you to write emails to your U.S. Senator or Representative. Form letters are provided and submitted with the click of a button.
- If you'd like to learn what federal legislation is tracking or what NAMI's position is on issues, please visit www.nami.org/Advocacy.
- Learn who represents you in Congress.

State level

Many important mental health policy decisions happen at the state level at the Tennessee General Assembly. Policymakers want to know how mental illness impacts their constituents. We have an advocacy team in Nashville, but lawmakers want to hear from you!

- Download important state-specific mental health statistics to share with decision makers to help inform their policy positions.
- Sign up for our advocacy network.
- Be a part of our Policy Advisory Committee.
- Represent your affiliate as its Advocacy Representative.
- Arrange to take a NAMI SMARTS for Advocacy class.
- Attend our annual Day on the Hill at the state Capitol and meet with legislators.



Affiliate level

The role of advocacy at the affiliate level can be spread among a few people, depending on their interests, contacts and skill sets. It's important for the affiliate to be the voice of NAMI mental health advocacy in your community.

What it entails:

- Serve as your affiliate's Advocacy Representative.
- Read NAMI Tennessee emails on advocacy.
- Forward NAMI Tennessee calls to action and emails to members, board members and steering committee members.
- Encourage members of your community to write or email legislators
- Encourage affiliate members to attend Day on the Hill.
- Promote seasonal events such as Mental Illness Awareness Week or Mental Health Month.

So you want to be a mental health advocate?

NAMI advocates to improve the lives of people affected by mental health conditions. From the U.S. Capitol to state legislatures to local city councils, the NAMI Alliance uses the power of lived experience to shape how our country helps people with mental illness.

The power of NAMI's advocacy lies with people and their ability to share their stories of mental health challenges, journeys, and recovery. These stories can help move policymakers to vote on mental health issues in a beneficial way.

If you're interested in becoming part of our advocacy efforts, there are a few roles you can play.

- **Storyteller** – You have or previously had a mental health challenge and can talk about it in a calm and articulate manner about the journey. You have a story to share and with a little bit of coaching, you can learn how to tell it effectively and efficiently. You don't have to be an expert on policy and legislation to be a mental health storyteller. Your lived experience makes you a subject matter expert.
- **Affiliate Representative** – Each NAMI affiliate is required to have an Advocacy Representative. You would be the point person for your affiliate on mental health policy. You would participate in our Policy Advisory Committee calls and relay information to your affiliate about Days on the Hill, advocacy efforts, and related activities.
- **Advocate** – In this role, you'd be reaching out to state legislators by phone or email to introduce yourself and let them know NAMI Tennessee is available as a resource. You have an interest in legislation and learning more about what it means to people affected by mental illness. You have some thoughts you'd like to share and a story to tell.
- **Policy Leader** – You know a lot about policy areas touched by mental health and may have studied or worked in these areas (criminal justice, health care, etc). You may also have a lived experience with mental illness, either your own or that of a loved one.

**No matter what level you are, there's an advocacy role for you to play.
We're here to show you how.**

Becoming a Confident Advocate

Meeting or speaking with an elected official can feel overwhelming and intimidating. It's easy to think of legislators in a "different" category as the rest of us, but consider the following:

- Legislators have the same challenges with jobs, careers, families, and friends like the rest of us.
- They have physical and mental illnesses just like us.
- Their jobs can be stressful just like ours, except their job is open to scrutiny every minute by the public and the media.
- Many of them view themselves as public servants and really do want to make a difference in the lives of people they are elected to represent.

When we start thinking of our elected officials as "regular" people, we become more likely to engage them with more ease and confidence.

What is your "why"?

Another way to become more comfortable with advocacy is to recognize and understand what drives you to be an advocate.

In other words, why are you passionate about telling your story?

The worksheet on the below will help you sort through concerns you might have about advocacy.

I want to tell my story about mental illness because _____

The concerns I have about meeting/talking with legislators are _____

If I set aside these concerns, the following becomes possible when I meet with a legislator (Think big! Imagine!) _____

I know I can become a powerful advocate for mental health because _____

When I tell my story to a legislator, the best outcome would be _____

Visualize success!!!

The 4 c's of Becoming an Effective Advocate

Contact

Once you have identified your legislators in the House and Senate, contact their office and ask to speak with the aide. Explain that you are a constituent (this is very important) and would like to meet with the legislator about issues surrounding mental illness. It will be helpful if you can give the exact bill numbers of the legislation you are discussing. You may be referred to another person who schedules appointments.

Connect

Prior to your meeting, look up the lawmaker's bio online. It is helpful to know if the lawmaker sits on a committee that deals with health care or appropriations. Also, see if you have anything in common with the legislator. Did you graduate from the same high school? Do you attend the same place of worship? Be sure to mention it during the meeting to build rapport.

Communicate

Lawmakers enjoy meeting their constituents – you're a potential voter, after all – and they want to learn how they can help. This is a great opportunity to communicate NAMI Tennessee's legislative goals. Please share a copy of the NAMI Tennessee's Policy Priorities with the legislator. It is very helpful if you can share stories about your experience with mental illness and relate it to the bills you are discussing.

Cultivate

Now that you have made a connection with the lawmaker, it is important to cultivate that relationship. "Follow" them on their Twitter account or Facebook page. Drop them a thank you note. Contribute to his or her campaign. Invite the lawmaker to visit your clinic.

REMEMBER: Success at the state Capitol hinges upon the relationships and goodwill you build with the lawmakers who decide the fate of your legislative agenda.

Source: Topsail Public Affairs

Advocacy Do's and Don'ts

Advocacy Do's

- Share a personal story, but make it very brief (two to three minutes).
- Be aware of your time with the legislator – meetings are usually only 10 to 15 minutes.
- Thank the legislator for meeting with you.
- If meeting in person, leave a business card or contact information with the aide.
- Offer NAMI as a resource.
- Follow up with a thank you note or email.

Advocacy Don'ts

- Don't feel like you must get a committed vote from the legislator; your job is to educate.
- Don't argue with the legislator, there are some people you simply can't convince.
- Don't dominate the conversation; let others talk.
- Don't threaten a legislator if he or she doesn't agree with your position.
- DO NOT discuss recent presidential elections. It's too polarizing.
- Don't discuss campaign contributions (it's illegal for the legislator to do so on state government grounds).
- Never connect a campaign contribution to an expected outcome or vote on legislation.
- If meeting in person, don't gossip in the hallways about the outcomes of your meetings, you never know who is around the corner.
- If reporting back to your affiliate, be very careful what you put in writing. You never know where your words will end up.

REMEMBER: Not all lawmakers sit on committees that address behavioral health policy bills and budgets, so they may not be familiar with these issues.

Relax. You'll find that lawmakers will be kind and will want to learn the needs and interests of the people who live in their communities.

You don't have to be an expert on legislation or budgets. You're the expert on the lived experience with mental illness.

Anything you put in writing in an email is subject to public review and scrutiny under Tennessee's open records laws.

IMPORTANT! If a lawmaker asks questions about a bill that you can't answer, simply say you don't know and you'll have the lobbyist follow up. Please send an email to advocacy@namitn.org and we'll handle it.

Know your legislators

The first step in effective advocacy is to identify the lawmakers who represent the state House and Senate districts in which you work and live.

To find your legislator

My state **HOUSE REPRESENTATIVE MEMBER** is

Email:

Phone number:

Address:

Committees:

My state **SENATOR** is

Email:

Phone number:

Address:

Committees:

Find My Legislator

Street Address

1

City or Zip Code

2

Remember My Address

Interactive Map

Search

In This Section

3

Senate Members

Select one

House Members

To find your Governor

Select your state in dropdown menu

My state **GOVERNOR** is

Email:

Phone number:

Address:

Format for letters or emails to legislators

Dear Rep. _____/Sen. _____,

My name is _____ and I am a constituent of yours in (City/County).

I am contacting you in support/opposition of House Bill # /Senate Bill# _____.

We support/oppose this legislation because _____

This affects people like me because (enter your story here – two to three sentences _____)

I am not the only one affected by this (enter statistics about mental health here _____).

We respectfully request that you support/oppose this legislation. If you'd like more information about mental health policy and resources, please contact Alisa LaPolt, Policy & Advocacy Director at NAMI Tennessee at alapolt@namitn.org, as well as our local affiliate at _____.

Sincerely yours,

Your name (Please include your professional title and any association affiliations)

Address

City, State, Zip

Phone number and/or email

Sources for Further Policy Reading and Research

National Alliance on Mental Illness

www.nami.org/advocacy

NAMI Tennessee

www.namitn.org/advocacy

Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/research.html

Tennessee General Assembly

<http://www.capitol.tn.gov/legislation/>

The Kennedy Forum

www.thekennedyforum.org

U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality www.samhsa.gov/about-us/who-we-are/offices-centers/cbhsq

National Institute for Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov