Two approaches to public policy: initiate and respond

As you envision your future policy work, think about a dual path: your nonprofit can initiate new ideas and respond to existing proposals that you support or oppose.

**Take the initiative:** introduce a new legislative idea. Your organization—your staff, board, constituents, and stakeholders—is likely to know more about your issues and the community’s needs in your program and service areas than most public officials. Without your involvement, the public policy debate is not fully informed. You have an instrumental role in developing and advocating for new and improved policies that will address problems and promote the general welfare.

Given your experience and expertise, your organization can take a proactive leadership role. Work with legislators to promote solutions that you know will work. Offer new ideas for policy and programs. Provide positive alternatives to weak budget proposals or unfair tax policies. Develop an idea, support it with solid information and stories about how your idea will make a difference, and then lobby until your idea becomes law.

**Be responsive:** lobby to support an idea proposed by others or to stop a bad idea from becoming law. You know the issues, the affected populations or places, and many of the stakeholder groups relevant to your mission, so you have an important role to play in responding to legislative ideas. Your support can make a strategic difference in whether or not legislation now “in play” passes. You can oppose an idea by pointing out its harmful consequences and by offering alternative solutions to a problem.

In either case, your organization should have a voice, and it should encourage the people you serve to be their own best voice about how proposed legislation will affect them. Become responsive by being vigilant about.

- Monitoring legislative activity
- Identifying proposals that will affect your work as soon as they are introduced
- Alerting people to proposals that will touch their lives
- Coordinating efforts to inform and persuade decision makers to develop policies and funding streams that will address your organization’s concerns responsibly

Specific techniques for initiating and responding are covered in Chapter 3.