Public policy job descriptions

Board Chair
The board chair leads the board in ensuring that the organization has been intentional in adopting public policy as a component of its work. The board chair works with the board to affirm the organization’s positions on public policy measures and to determine the priority of public policy in the overall mix of the organization’s work. The board chair guides the board as it shapes plans and allocates resources for lobbying. In some organizations the board chair may be a community leader in a strong position to be a public spokesperson for your issue.

Board Members
Board members make the key decisions to move the organization into public policy initiatives that are consistent with the organization’s mission and goals. Board members may serve on the planning team that determines what role public policy will play in the organization’s program, and they may also serve on the public policy advisory committee if one is created. Board members’ responsibilities for the management of organizational resources and for organizational accountability are important in their governance of policy work. Often board members have relationships and status in the community that position them to be good spokespersons and lobbyists. Their role should include advocating on behalf of your organization’s public policy positions in coordination with the board chair.

Executive Director
The executive director has oversight responsibility for public policy and works with the board chair to ensure that the board shapes the organization’s direction on policy. The executive director may also serve as spokesperson for the organization and is likely to be one of its official lobbyists (registered, if required by state law). His or her responsibilities for hiring, program design, program accountability, and resource management all apply to the public policy component of the nonprofit’s work.

Public Policy Coordinator
This staff person or volunteer tracks and manages all information relevant to your nonprofit’s public policy work. He or she is the steward of the plans and systems essential to your policy initiatives. This person also coordinates communications and activity. The coordinator’s responsibilities may range from knowing how to access all statements ever made by the organization on a given policy issue to being sure that there is enough postage to get out a call to action on schedule! This person knows where every policy spokesperson is and needs to be. The coordinator ensures that all spokespeople are promoting the same key messages, that the lobbyist’s report from the capitol gets to the organization’s directors and members, and that the rapid response team is convened to deal with a crisis or course correction.

Lobbyist
The lobbyist works to persuade decision makers to adopt your organization’s position on an issue. Some nonprofits have a full-time lobbyist because of the priority placed on lobbying and the intensity of the issue. For many nonprofits, an executive director or program staff person serves in this role. If you plan on long-term involvement in policy work or are addressing a complex major issue, your organization may want to have at least one lobbyist who is often (preferably always)
present at the legislative body where you are working to create change. He or she should know the legislative process and players. Your lobbyist's credibility, timeliness, savvy, and ability to present clear and compelling arguments will be a keystone to your success.

Some nonprofits may hire a contract lobbyist who is familiar with nonprofit lobbying. Contract lobbyists have developed experience and access to the legislative arena that can serve you well, especially when you expect to have only short-term involvement in a lobbying effort. Because smaller nonprofits can rarely afford their own lobbyist if they are seeking someone with significant experience, hiring a contract lobbyist can be cost-effective. The contract lobbyist will need to have clear responsibilities, and the lobbyist's work will have to be coordinated well with the efforts of the organization's staff and board. The policy coordinator should work closely with the contract lobbyist in such cases.

Public Policy Advisory Committee
This committee can be either a committee of the board or an advisory committee that includes both board members and other interested stakeholders. This committee can add a focus and perspectives that you might not otherwise have. Its role can include shaping your organization's long-term policy agenda and assisting in building grassroots support for positions. A key role for this committee is to work with your organization in building strategic relationships with public officials, nonprofit colleagues, and other sectors.

Rapid Response Team
The team should include the executive director, a board member, the lobbyist, and up to two other people who are authorized by the board to mobilize quickly and make crucial decisions during the fast-changing legislative process. Compromises, media opportunities, and proposed alliances will have to be addressed between board meetings, and this is the team to do it.

Organizer
This staff person or volunteer organizer informs and mobilizes your supporters by building support in key legislative districts; holding briefings or press events that garner understanding and attention; and managing an action alert network that can muster calls or letters to decision makers on short notice.

Media Specialist
This person builds rapport with the members of the media who cover your organization's issues. This communications specialist knows how to reach the media, how to handle the tough questions, and how to become a resource— the person the reporters call when they need a community connection on a story about your issue.

Just a note: **DON'T LET THIS LIST BE DAUNTING.** In most nonprofits, the lobbyist, the organizer, the policy coordinator, and the media specialist are the same person. For small nonprofits, even those with only a few staff and volunteers, some minor shifts in work priorities make it possible to do the advocacy work that furthers your mission strategically. Lobbying requires good planning and strategic thinking. It does not always command a lot of time if you focus on a very specific agenda and especially if you collaborate with other organizations.