A Case Study in Direct Lobbying

How an Alzheimer’s Association Used Lobbying to Create Respite Care Subsidies

Relevant Lobbying Regulations

- “Direct Lobbying” occurs when a nonprofit attempts to influence specific legislation by stating a position to a “legislator or other government employee who participates in the formulation of legislation.”

Public Policy Problem and Lobbying Goal: An Alzheimer Association chapter serving Washington, DC and surrounding Baltimore suburbs received a windfall first-time gift of $140,000 and a pledge of $140,000 per year, as part of a charity drive. Though many of the families the association represented had a desperate need for state-subsidized respite care, existing state law only subsidized such care for people with physical disabilities. With a steady stream of new revenue in hand and a clear policy gap, the question the group’s board faced was how best to use the money.

Principal Lobbying Strategy: An estimated 33,000 people in the chapter’s target area had Alzheimer’s disease. Leaders figured that if the organization gave away the new money in direct grants to families for care, each family would get only one hour of respite care per family per year. With some hesitation, the group’s board began to examine legislative lobbying as a way to shape new state subsidy policy.

Case Study Vignette: The group first sought legal advice and learned that it had wide latitude to lobby and engage in other types of advocacy. While leaders first feared and resisted the idea of lobbying, ultimately they understood that though lobbying could not be the primary activity of their chapter, it could play an important part in fulfilling the organizational mission. Once this understanding was reached, leaders created a collaborative relationship with the Baltimore Alzheimer’s chapter for the purposes of lobbying, set aside part of the new revenue for lobbying, and hired a part-time lobbyist to work on state policy issues.

Public Policy Outcomes: The resulting lobbying efforts helped guarantee passage of a new law that continues to subsidize respite care on a sliding scale for families of Alzheimer’s patients as well as others with similar disabilities (providing roughly $1 million a year in new subsidies for families who could not otherwise afford such care). Other advocacy efforts have focused successfully on state rules, ultimately requiring that (1) eligibility for nursing home subsidies include people with cognitive impairments, and that (2) “assisted care” homes provide enough supervision for people with dementia to ensure their safety.

Direct Lobbying Lessons for the Future: Seeking authoritative guidance on advocacy and lobbying regulations can help remove psychological barriers to exercising these powerful rights.
Definitions

- **Lobbying** is virtually any advocacy activity aimed at influencing a “legislator’s” vote on a specific legislation.

- **Legislation** is defined as action by a legislative body including the introduction, amendment, enactment, defeat or repeal of acts, bills, resolutions, appropriations, and budgets. Also included are the U.S. Senate confirmations of executive and judicial branch nominees and proposed treaties that need U.S. Senate approval.

- “**Legislator**” refers to:
  - a member of Congress or their staff
  - state legislators or their staff
  - local legislative representatives (e.g., on county boards and city councils)
  - the public, in the case of a ballot measure
  - members of an organization (if asked to take action on legislation)

- **Lobbying is Legal.** The term “lobbying” carries negative connotations for many people because it may raise the specter of violating federal law and losing tax-exempt status, or because it is often associated with scandals involving paid lobbyists representing corporate interests. Nonetheless, lobbying by nonprofit organizations exempt under 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code is a legal and acceptable activity that is often essential to creating good public policy and stronger, more democratic communities.

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Source: Case study facts were drawn from “Lobbying Success Stories: Examples of How Nonprofit Lobbying Has Changed Organizations and Changed Lives,” a publication of the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, www.clpi.org.