COMMUNICATIONS AND TRACKING SYSTEMS – By definition, advocacy involves reaching people—decision-makers as well as the media, the general public, and your members. Make sure you have clear systems to allow you to communicate efficiently with various audiences. Also make sure you are keeping track of your advocacy activities—with whom you meet, the status of the bills you are watching, communications with members and others. Tracking allows you to build on past efforts and report on them easily. Your tracking systems can be either low- or high-tech—just make sure they are clear, easy to update, and easy to use.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES – Diversifying funding is not only good management practice, but also a crucial capacity to engage in legislative advocacy. While you need to allocate some financial resources to advocacy, getting involved in policy change may actually attract funding. Nonprofits that engage in the public policy process are seen as experts, and many donors and funders are attracted to organizations that are working to address the issues they care about through policy change.

HUMAN RESOURCES – Before you think, “legislative advocacy is just one more thing to add to my to-do list,” remember that it can be a natural extension of the work you already do. That funder report or donor letter can be re-worked into a call to action on a policy issue and solution. A programmatic collaboration could expand to include joint advocacy on shared issues.

Often, nonprofits come into the policy arena reactively. By designating someone—either a staff person or volunteer—as your point person on public policy, you immediately increase the likelihood of being proactive and more strategic about your legislative advocacy efforts. The SNAP research mentioned earlier showed that executive directors alone cannot carry the responsibility for legislative advocacy. An initial investment in developing staff, board, and volunteer capacity can lead to long-term gains.

RELATIONSHIPS – Personal relationships are the lifeblood and greatest asset of nonprofits. Take time to identify all of your resources, especially relationships that can be leveraged to advance your legislative advocacy goals. Consider not only who you know directly, but also contacts through your board members or other volunteers. Take stock of current relationships and build relationships strategically with policymakers, government agencies, the media, other nonprofits, and constituents.

DEVELOP THE INFRASTRUCTURE & RESOURCES TO SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT IN LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

In order to effectively engage in legislative advocacy, particularly for the long run, make sure to set the stage with a policy on advocacy activities. Be sure to institutionalize your commitment to advocacy with a policy that states your overall policy goals, the kinds of policy activities in which your organization will and will not engage, and how decisions about your advocacy activities will be governed (for example, through a board committee on advocacy—in our experience, getting your board engaged in and properly informed about legislative advocacy can accelerate your organization’s efforts.). Also include in the organizational policy how the policy agenda will be set and how decisions will be made on an ongoing basis. You can find sample policies on advocacy activities at www.clpi.org.

Once your nonprofit’s board has adopted a policy on advocacy activities, you will also need some resources to support your efforts. Note that nonprofits can begin advocacy work without substantial resources. In fact, advocacy can be a natural extension of your fundraising, communications, and even programmatic activities. The following list is a guideline for building organizational capacity.