

Advocacy is the act of promoting an idea with varying degrees of wanting to influence an outcome. As an advocate, you might support or oppose an idea. You might not want something to change, or you might be advocating for a change. You might have a great idea that no one has thought about or considered, and you might want others to know about it, too. You might advocate because you need something, you may advocate in response to something, or you may advocate to prevent something from happening to you, your community, or to someone you care about. You might also have a story to tell about something you experienced, and you want others to understand your experience, too.

All these notions about advocacy are applicable to advocating lawmakers in Congress or your state legislature just as much as these are also concepts that you employ in your everyday life as a patient, employee, relative, or member of a community. Being an advocate doesn't mean you have to know everything about what you are advocating to make a difference. Advocacy is usually a very long process that takes one step at a time and often requires tenacity, patience, fortitude, cooperation, and a little bit of luck to realize your goal. Your experiences in your profession, your life, and your relationships with others are enough to compel change in small ways that can often lead to bigger things.

Below are several examples of advocacy.

Policy and Legislative Advocacy

Policy and legislative advocacy is the act of promoting, supporting, defending, opposing, or changing an aspect of public policy. **Public policy** is how our country has collectively decided through our established democratic processes (such as elections) to use our shared resources (such as tax dollars) to respond to something that can have an impact on each of us as individuals or as a society. **Legislation** (which can either change existing laws or create new laws) is typically the vehicle that initiates and sustains debate around public policy decisions. The **legislative process** (whether it occurs at the federal, state, or community level) is often how matters of public policy are determined and become laws that direct and establish how agencies carry out policies and administer resources to programs for states, communities, and individuals.

Advocacy is part of the democratic process that allows for public feedback on how our laws are formed, debated, decided, and enacted. In the United States Constitution, advocacy is considered part of the First Amendment that, in addition to protecting freedom of speech, allows for citizens to petition their government for redress of grievances. At almost any point during the legislative process, advocates can help shape decisions to achieve an outcome that they believe is in the best interest of the public. Advocating on policy or legislation often means promoting an idea sometimes in competition with other advocates who are trying to influence policy and legislation to achieve other outcomes. The goals that others are advocating may not always align with what you want to achieve. Even as you may not necessarily oppose what other advocates are trying to accomplish, as a policy and legislative advocate, you also want to ensure that your idea is considered and ultimately realized in legislation.

To convince lawmakers that your idea is the best of all the ideas they are debating during the legislative process, there are many advocacy strategies to generate support around an idea. These strategies include:

- **Grassroots Advocacy:** Often called campaigns, grassroots advocacy such as Legislative Action Alerts through Prevent Blindness's Legislative Action Center alert and inform the public about a potential harmful or beneficial legislative action and encourage the public to contact their legislators.
- **Media Advocacy:** Informing the public and legislators through the media (such as a letter to the editor or an article about an idea or connecting an idea to a bigger issue) about the consequences of not enacting an idea into legislation.

- **Social Media Advocacy:** Using social media platforms to spread a message quickly and encourage the public to contact their legislators through social media platforms.
- **Coalition Advocacy:** Strength is often reflected in numbers, and finding other organizations and advocates who have a similar idea or share the same goal can help gain support for your idea and have a bigger impact.
- **Patient Advocacy and Storytelling:** When policy and legislation is complex, abstract, and hard to understand how individuals would be affected, leveraging the stories of people who have been helped or harmed by a policy or legislation is often a very powerful way to achieve a policy goal.
- **Informational Advocacy:** Lawmakers may not fully understand every angle of a policy or piece of legislation, or they may not be aware of certain trends (such as emerging research); thus, providing information and resources to lawmakers about an idea that can help answer questions, provide ideas for policymaking, and ensure you are a resource to the lawmaker.

Patient Advocacy

Patient advocacy occurs when a patient speaks up on behalf of their health care needs. Patient advocacy can take place on the individual level between a person and their health care provider and care community or on the organizational level in representation of collective patient concerns and experiences. Prevent Blindness is a patient advocacy organization; meaning, we represent the concerns of patients who live with vision loss and eye disease.

The complexity of our national health care system often requires that patients take on the role of advocating for themselves not only in receiving the level of care or treatment they desire, but to make their personal and professional needs known so that they are accounted for when exploring and making health care decisions with their chosen provider. The idea of advocating for your own needs and preferred outcomes can be overwhelming and intimidating, especially when you are facing medical treatment or a change in lifestyle due to a medical condition that is uncertain to you. You may also feel empowered to be your own advocate! However, it is important to use your voice in representation of yourself so that you can ensure your health care needs are fully addressed.

Community Advocacy

Community advocacy occurs when individuals, organizations, and communities work together to change minds and perceptions about populations and communities through the sharing of experiences. Community advocacy helps all of us understand what individuals experience both on their own and together as a group while ensuring those individuals do not feel their struggles are happening in isolation.

Prevent Blindness continually engages in community advocacy to ensure the needs of people who live with vision loss, eye disease, or a disabling severe visual impairment are reflected in our advocacy and resources.