

“All Politics is Local”: Grassroots Advocacy

It sounds complicated, but grassroots advocacy is simply the act of an individual constituent communicating ideas and opinions to government officials. Policy makers – whether a local school board member or U.S. Senator – need to hear from constituents on key issues, as you are the ones that understand and can articulate the true impact of legislation. The following should help ease any concerns about utilizing grassroots advocacy to show Congress, State and local officials the importance of school nutrition programs.



GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

Why does grassroots work?

The key to successful grassroots advocacy is to assemble people with common goals and concerns. You have already done this by joining SNA! Grassroots efforts are how SNA can best protect and improve school nutrition. It is incumbent on school nutrition providers to educate elected officials on our concerns and successes.

As a citizen, you have the most powerful tool available on Capitol Hill: your vote and your voice. Without hearing from you, your legislator does not know what is important to you as a school nutrition professional! During SNA’s LAC, the Charge to the Hill is one of the most effective grassroots actions SNA undertakes. Members of Congress and their staff often mention how impressed they are by SNA members and their knowledge of the issues. SNA members leave an impression and information that helps move our issues forward. The stories and data you share shape the picture of child hunger and solutions to address this critical issue.

How does it work?

Communication. The more people who receive your message, the more influence you will have. By utilizing mail, email, social media, and radio/television coverage you can get the message out to anyone who is interested. SNA uses email blasts, web stories, Action Alerts, and social media (Facebook, Twitter) to spread our message not only to SNA members, but Members of Congress and other key stakeholders. Your school or affiliate can also quickly reach interested parties with similar mechanisms.

Coalition Building. SNA believes in fostering stronger relationships with a variety of partners. Not only does this include USDA, but other associations that focus on hunger, schools, children’s health, and any other organization that shares our goals. It is important for you to also develop similar coalitions to grow the number of people focused on your goals. You should not only look to local or state groups like those above, but be creative and perhaps reach out to local athletes, religious groups, community groups, or hospitals. Working with others that also have their own grassroots network can truly make a difference in making an issue visible.

Method of Outreach. The simpler the better. An email or phone call is all it takes to begin developing a relationship with local politicians. Be sure to introduce yourself, be specific about why you are reaching out, and provide contact information. This is also a good time to invite the person to visit your program or to set up a meeting at their office. SNA has on its website a Cafeteria Site Visit 101 toolkit that helps our members invite and set up visits with Members of Congress and others to their schools. Additionally, SNA members have gone to the legislators and brought them “breakfast in the office” or artwork made by students.

SNA encourages you to take a few moments and reach out to your Member of Congress when an Action Alert or eblast is sent with specific requests. Your voice is important and politicians need to hear it!

Follow-up. This is often overlooked, but is crucial to any grassroots effort. Not only do you need to act, but you need to let people know that their labor and interest in your goals are appreciated by thanking them. This contributes to a relationship of trust where both sides can depend on each other for facts and action.

These simple steps for grassroots advocacy are you all need to leverage your expertise on school nutrition programs to those who make impactful decisions. The more policy leaders that understand how legislation truly impacts the work of providing students with healthful meals, the more improved legislation will be. So now is your chance!

Grassroots may begin with a single seed, but with some care and support it can grow into this:



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