

Tools of Advocacy: How to be an Activist for Social Reform

Excerpted from: *A Guide to Acting on AIDS: Understanding the Global AIDS Pandemic and Responding through Faith in Action*

The prospect of contacting elected officials may be intimidating. But experienced advocates will tell you that it gets easier with practice. Fortunately, there are many ways that you can communicate with your representatives. Choose the one with which you feel most comfortable and know that even the shortest letter from a constituent speaks volumes to an elected official. Most elected officials keep careful track of how many letters, emails, or calls they receive on an issue as a way of gauging constituents' opinions. The fact that most constituents do not take the time to communicate with them means that when you do, it can represent many voices. As one person you can speak for many who feel the same way but do not write, and in the process promote positive change.

Using the influence of your citizenship can be done in creative, simple, and effective ways. The following are some tools you can use as you start on the road toward advocacy.

Writing Letters

What many people do not realize is that writing a letter to members of Congress can actually make a difference. Congressional staff members say that all it takes is up to 20 handwritten letters to bring attention to an issue in a congressional office. This makes letter-writing a great tool for students since it takes a short amount of time and costs just a few cents. You can have letter-writing gatherings at group meetings or after class. National, state, and local organizations such as Acting on AIDS can provide helpful information like sample letters and fact sheets. If you've been given a sample letter, personalize it by adding information about how the issue affects you, your community, or your program.

In general, an effective letter is only one page long. Address one issue and name one desired response per letter. This way your representative's staff will be able to compile your letter with similar letters in order to tally how many people share your same position. Be brief, courteous, and specific. Start and end your letter by stating why you are writing and what you are asking your representative to do. The tone of your letter should be polite, even if you disagree with a member's position or are expressing disappointment about an action they took.

Always address your legislator properly, making sure you've spelled his or her name correctly and have the right title. (For example, Senator Dianne Feinstein or Vice Admiral Richard H. Carmona, M.D., M.P.H., FACS. State senators should be addressed as Therese Murray, Massachusetts State Senator; Massachusetts State Senator Therese Murray; or the Honorable Therese Murray; state representatives follow this same pattern.) Before you address your representative, look him or her up online to make sure you have everything correct.



For more targeted letters, write to representatives on key committees. Web sites—including the ones listed near the end of this chapter—and congressional guides in public libraries provide lists of the different congressional committees and what issues these committees address, as well as which members of Congress are involved.

If your elected official is not supportive of your request, find out why and see if you can address his or her concerns. If your representative replies, write a thank you note. It shows you care enough to watch how your representative responds. Be sure to track the progress of your issue in Congress, and let your representative know you voted on Election Day.

A few other things to keep in mind: Do not write to a representative who does not represent your area—many congressional offices disregard mail that is not from a constituent in their district or state. Faxing letters following these guidelines is one of the most effective tactics. Prior to the anthrax scare on Capital Hill in the aftermath of 9-11, letters were the preferred method of communication for constituents, but today faxing is more readily received.

Making Phone Calls

Sometimes legislation moves so quickly on Capitol Hill that there is no time to write letters; in that case, telephone calls are a fast and personal way to express your concerns. Calling your legislator is very effective, particularly in the days leading up to an important vote. To prepare for the phone conversation, jot down a few notes containing the key points you want to make, and refer to the notes during your call. Keep your message brief; it is important to request a specific and measurable action.

Unless you know your elected official personally, you will speak to someone on his or her staff. In fact, you may want to ask to speak with the legislative aide who handles health or HIV and AIDS issues. If an aide is not available, leave a message with the receptionist containing your name, address, and phone number. If you are with a group and will be generating numerous calls, ask other callers to also leave a message with the receptionist. Since you are trying to establish a positive relationship with the staff, you don't want to overload the legislative aide with too many calls. A few callers can contact the aide to let him or her know there are other messages with the receptionist.

Setting up a Phone Tree

To generate a persuasive number of calls, form a telephone-tree network of activists. Ask every person in the network to deliver a message to the congressional office. This flood of calls can sway an undecided vote or convince a legislator who wonders where the public stands on a particular issue. Here are a few steps to help you organize a phone tree:

1. Make a list of the current phone numbers of everyone in your telephone tree.
2. Choose a coordinator and several key people. Think of the coordinator as the tree's trunk and the key people as the main branches. The coordinator will construct and pass along a message to the key people, who will be responsible for calling up to 10 people. The coordinator will also maintain the phone tree to make sure it stays current.
3. Give the key people the names and phone numbers of the people in the network they are responsible to call, as well as the name and phone number of the elected official being contacted.

4. Have the coordinator start the tree by passing along a short and concise message to the key people. Since the message will go through the tree, it needs to be clear enough for everyone to write down and repeat to the elected official.
5. Have the key people contact their list of callers to begin the tree. Once the callers make their calls, have them contact their key person to verify that the message went through.
6. Once the key people have heard confirmation from their callers, they should contact the coordinator so the coordinator knows the phone tree was successful.

Other Tools of Advocacy

Here are more tools you can use to mobilize your community or campus chapter to advocate for AIDS issues:

Register to Vote. Voting should be the first way you choose to leverage your citizenship! Use your vote to support candidates who care about the poor and marginalized and who will support policies that affect women and children who are vulnerable to AIDS.

Use lobby days. Use days like World AIDS Day to organize students from a constituency, along with administrators from your college, to visit your congressional representative. Bring specific actions that this representative can take regarding legislation that would help those affected by AIDS. Remember to be respectful and offer measurable examples of success. The idea is to show that you are hopeful that this representative can make a difference and explain how this issue affects you as a voter. Make sure you are registered to vote and active in elections before you take this step.

Host campus forums and speakers. Hold events to mobilize students on your campus by inviting speakers who are experts on HIV/AIDS to educate and encourage your campus into action. Acting on AIDS and World Vision have several speakers who can speak on many of the issues pertinent to AIDS and addressed in this book, and they would be happy to come to your campus. Please contact Acting on AIDS at actingonaids@worldvision.org or 1.253.815.1000 for more information. These speaking events can also help to mobilize your Acting on AIDS chapter and interested members of the community. Invite local politicians and members of the media to maximize the opportunity to raise awareness and encourage others toward action.

Send e-mail alerts. E-mail allows you to distribute detailed information, instructions, and sample letters to Congress to large lists of individuals in an inexpensive and convenient way. The ability to forward an e-mail helps engage others who may not be involved directly in the issue but who would be willing to take action, if asked.

Utilize postcards. From time to time, World Vision and Acting on AIDS will have postcard campaigns on behalf of vulnerable children. These provide sound bites of information to send to your representative or senator in support of upcoming legislation. You can also make your own in support of upcoming votes on important legislation. They are easy to make and distribute, and they can be effective in educating leaders of the community and elected officials

on important issues. Think of them as an easy, brief letter writing campaign to get the attention of your representative.

Write “Letters to the Editor.” Most magazines and newspapers include a “Letters to the Editor” page where readers can respond to a specific article, offering a critique or praise for the way the publication covered an issue. Follow the way your campus or community newspaper covers issues related to AIDS, and use these articles as an opportunity. Carefully considered letters can be a counter argument for articles that do not support the ideals of caring for those affected by HIV and AIDS. They allow you to reach a larger audience and create an impression of widespread support for or against an issue.

Legislative Objectives

The following list contains specific legislative goals supported by World Vision and Acting on AIDS. These objectives focus on governmental actions that will benefit the biggest victims of the AIDS pandemic, primarily orphans and vulnerable children. This list can be used as a platform for your advocacy campaigns.

- The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM) was established in 2002 under the urging of the United Nations to dramatically increase the amount of funding available to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Funding is mainly provided by governments and foundations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. World Vision feels that the Global Fund is a valuable, multi-lateral mechanism for funding AIDS programs globally. We call on the U.S. government to fully fund its share of GFATM’s needs (total needs are \$7 billion). The United States contributed \$100 million when the Global Fund was founded. When the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) was launched in 2003, President George W. Bush proposed an additional \$1 billion in support for the Global Fund over five years. By the end of 2007, the total U.S. contribution to the Global Fund will exceed \$2 billion. The Global Fund is intended to complement bilateral and multi-lateral assistance programs, including PEPFAR. (PEPFAR is the largest international health initiative dedicated to a single disease in history. It is a five year, \$15 billion global initiative to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic by supporting treatment for 2 million people, prevention for 7 million, and care for 10 million.)
- We urge U.S. government leaders to continue to increase global AIDS funding each year with 10 percent dedicated to the care of orphans and vulnerable children as called for in the United States Leadership Against HIV and AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003. This act was created to fund PEPFAR and works to see that 10 percent of these funds are earmarked for orphans and vulnerable children.
- We ask the U.S. government to adopt policies and programs that prevent new infections primarily among children, mothers, and people at high risk of infection; we also ask for policies and programs to care for orphans and vulnerable children.
- Once the global AIDS legislation expires in 2008, World Vision will work to reauthorize this legislation. World Vision will continue to push for higher levels of funding, especially for orphans and vulnerable children.

Web sites on Advocacy, Legislation, and Politics

These Web sites will provide you with additional information on the topics covered in this chapter. All of these are rich resources that will give you more background as you get involved in political advocacy.

Actingonaids.org offers guidelines for starting your own Acting on AIDS campus chapter.

Networklobby.org is a Catholic Web site for social justice. The legislative action center link on the site includes many helpful tools for lobbying Congress and local elected officials. It also details the steps to a bill becoming a law.

Seekjustice.org is World Vision's Web site that provides the latest information on various issues of injustice around the world, such as HIV and AIDS, the use of children as soldiers in northern Uganda, and the sexual exploitation of children. It is very helpful for Acting on AIDS members.

Thomas.loc.gov supplies information on specific legislation; it is a service of the Library of Congress.

Vote-smart.org is a non-partisan organization that tracks voting records and provides contact information of elected officials.

Final Thoughts

As people who have received the mercy of Jesus, it is our responsibility to extend His mercy to those in need. This includes the poor, the ill, victims of injustice, and those who are marginalized, including widows and orphans. The AIDS pandemic offers an opportunity for our generation to act on behalf of the destitute like never before. As His representatives on earth, Christ calls us to respond to this crisis. The sad truth is that the church has responded slowly to the devastation. The only way that the situation is hopeless is if we, who have the privilege and resources to help, don't respond.

If you would like to be part of the answer of hope to this crisis, visit www.worldvision.org/actingonaids for more information on how to start your own chapter and transform your campus for the sake of those desperate for mercy. You can also contact Acting on AIDS directly at leadership@actingonaids.org. There is also information at the back of this book on how to start your own Acting on AIDS chapter.