



Alabama Department of Mental Health

**Making a Difference:
Consumers and Families
Shaping Policy**

Advocacy Manual

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Section 1: The Importance of Grassroots Advocacy

What is Grassroots Advocacy?

Grassroots advocacy is community activism on a local level.

Grassroots = *People or society at a local level rather than at the center of major political activity, or the groundwork or source of something.*

Advocacy = *active support of an idea or cause etc.; especially the act of pleading or arguing for something*

Grassroots advocacy is necessary for change to occur. It is where public policies, laws and misconceptions can be changed or improved. You hear the term used often, but what does it really mean? It means that in order for change to occur, it has to start with you in your community. Accomplishments/results on a state or federal level occur because of the advocacy efforts that begin at the local level.

Without grassroots advocacy to increase awareness of a particular issue, the issue is likely to remain unheard.

Questions for you:

- Who brings attention to your issues in your community?
- Do you feel that there are misconceptions and stigma surrounding individuals who have a mental illness, substance abuse disorder or intellectual disability?

Attention to your issue is not going to occur without involvement from those who it directly impacts. Education must come from the self advocate/consumer/family member. Advocacy must start with you because you are directly impacted by the issue!

How Can I Be An Effective Advocate in My Community?

- 1.) **Be Persistent** - You must be willing to have your voice heard and continue to advocate for your issues on an ongoing basis. One time will not necessarily be enough to effect change.
- 2.) **Have a Unified Voice-** Advocating for an issue is much more effective when you have a large number of people advocating for the same issue.



- 3.) **Don't Give Up** - A lot of people will give up when they don't get what they want when they ask for it. Patience is important when advocating for an issue. Changes in public policy take time and advocates must be diligent!



- 4.) **Be a Leader** – Effective advocacy equals leadership! You need someone who will lead the advocacy efforts for the group.
- 5.) **Stay on Top of the Issues** – You can learn about the issues that effect you by signing up to receive email alerts from advocacy groups and legislative updates from the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation.



- 6.) **Keep Relationships Going** – Once you decide to get involved and develop relationships with public officials, you need to continue to foster your relationship!

Section 2: Understanding the Legislative Process

The Basics...

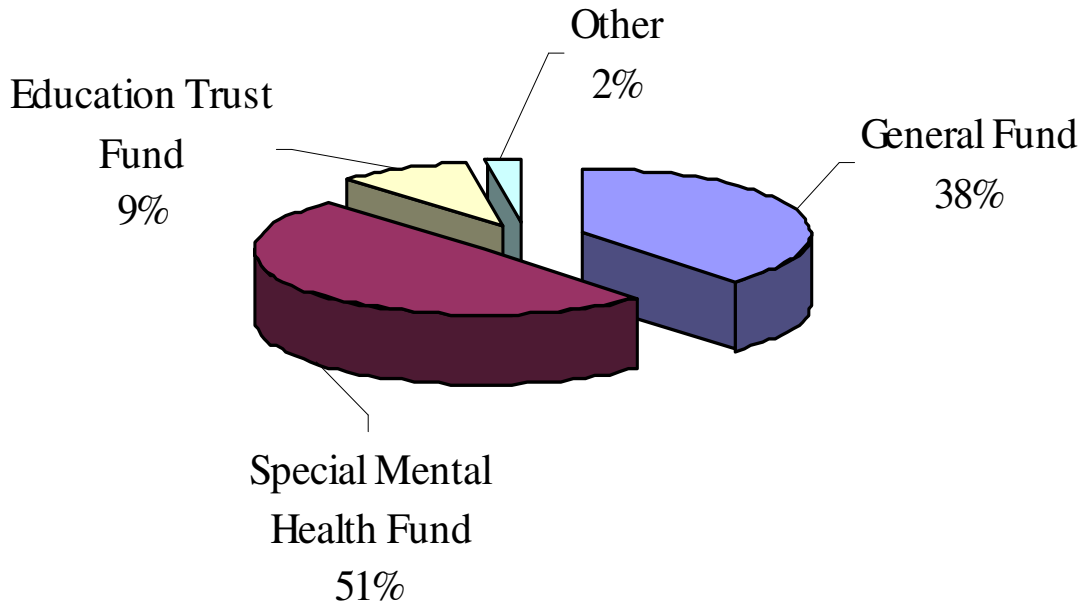
- The AL Senate has 35 members. Each Senator represents a district of approximately 125,000 Alabamians.
- The AL House of Representatives has 105 members. Each member represents a district of approximately 40,000 people
- Key Committees- Both the House and Senate Appropriation Committees for the General Fund and Education Budgets, Judiciary, Rules, Health, Governmental Affairs/Operations and Public Safety.
- The Legislature usually meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays for a maximum of 30 meeting days within a period of 105 calendar days. Committee meetings can be scheduled on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, but the majority of meetings are held on Wednesday.

Factors that Play a Role in Legislation

- **People**- It is important to have as many people involved in advocating for a particular issue as possible. The more people that contact their legislators about a particular issue, the more likely it will receive adequate attention from public officials.
- **Lobbyists**- Many groups rely on paid lobbyists to communicate their needs to legislators. On average, for every state legislator there are 4 lobbyists at the state house during the session.
- **Time**- There is not much time during the legislative session to pass a bill. More often, bills die in session due to lack of support or lack of time getting them through both the House and Senate. Therefore, it is important for you to develop a relationship with your legislator throughout the year to ensure that attention will be given to your issue.
- **Money**- Many groups rely on Political Action Committees to influence legislation and garner support from politicians. When an interest group gets directly involved within the political process, a PAC may be created. PACs receive and raise money from the group's constituents, and on behalf of the special interest, makes donations to political campaigns. However, most advocacy groups can have a tremendous influence on legislation even if they do not have lobbyists or PACs. This is due in part to effective grassroots advocacy on the local level.

Section 3: Sources of Revenue for Mental Health Services

State funds for mental health, substance abuse and intellectual disability services primarily come from the state's general fund, education trust fund and special mental health trust fund. Most of the revenue for services is received through the general fund and special mental health trust fund.



Section 4: Building Relationships with Public Officials

Who is a Public Official?

Examples of public officials include state representatives, state senators, mayors, county commissioners, city council representatives, the governor, federal representatives and senators and circuit, district and municipal judges.

Find out Who Represents You!

Before meeting with public officials, it is important to know who they are and what district they represent.

To find your state senator and state representative, go to www.legislature.state.al.us- Click on **Zip Code Look Up** and enter your address.

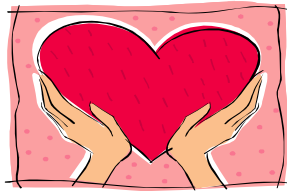
Tips for Building Relationships:

- Know how to identify and contact your local public official
- Try not to confront, challenge or put anyone on the defensive when meeting with public officials
- Earn and nurture respect between you and your public official
- Build relationships **BEFORE** you need to call for help.
- Compliment your public official if he or she has done an effective job on an issue
- Thank your public official when appropriate
- Provide positive media opportunities by submitting op ed pieces, articles about local events, updates on programs, etc...
- Share information and stay in contact with the public officials that represent you on an ongoing basis
- Build relationships with persons who work for public officials including their administrative assistants, office managers, clerks, etc...
- Build a relationship whether or not you have a specific issue to address. Your public officials need to get to know you before you ask them for their help.

Section 5: Enhancing Communication with Public Officials

Develop a Personal Message

It is important to tell your story from the heart. A personal message can convey a lot about your issue and why it is important to you. Remember to limit your contact primarily to those officials who live in the district where you vote. Public officials particularly pay attention to their own constituents and may not respond to those living outside their district.



- Tell your story--- you have something valuable to contribute.
- Communicate your issues or concerns along with your personal story.
- Present the facts- don't make it up!
- Make your message your own- be candid.
- Be positive and provide suggestions or solutions – IF you ask for help, be prepared to offer some help

Meeting with Public Officials

- You can go to meetings or forums that your elected officials will be attending
- You can invite your local official to come to your meeting or visit your local center
- You can schedule an appointment to meet with your official in their local district office
- Invite a public official to lunch as your guest. Create a way to meet and make regular contact



Writing Letters

- Writing a letter is an effective way to communicate a problem that needs resolving, show support or opposition to an issue or thank someone for a job well done
- Letters written in your own words make a big impact
- A letter can be handwritten or typed
- A letter needs to be brief and to the point
- Clearly state your reasons for writing
- Do your homework...understand the issue and how it affects your life
- Thank the person for his or her attention to the letter
- Include your name, address and signature in your letter
- You can also email or fax your letter

Sample Letter

DATE

The Honorable (Full Name)
Address
City, State Zip

Dear Senator (Last Name):

As your constituent, I am writing to you in regard to (include your issue). This is important to me because (explain the reasons why this is important to you). I am asking that you (explain what you want them to help you with).

Please know that I am available to talk with you further about (include the issue) at anytime. I look forward to hearing back from you regarding your position. Thank you for your attention to this letter and for serving our district with diligence and perseverance.

Sincerely,

Full Name
Address
Phone

Making a Phone Call

- When you make a call, identify yourself, where you live and the reason for calling
- Let them know you are a constituent
- Always be brief
- Have your information written down to help you
- Identify the issue or bill that you are calling about
- Always thank your elected official in advance and always be courteous



Section 6: Sustaining Your Message and the Importance of Follow Up

- Always follow up after making a new contact
- Write a follow up letter that includes what you discussed in your meeting, your initial letter or your phone call
- In your letter, phone call or after an in person meeting, always thank the person for their time
- Later on, write thank you notes especially when you notice positive change
- Provide ongoing communication by mailing newsletters or updates with a personal note attached
- You can send holiday cards and invitations to community events
- Never forget to foster the relationships you have established

Section 7: Resources

- Official Website of the AL State Legislature www.legislature.state.al.us; Click on “Zip Code Look Up” to find out who represents you
- Contacting Your Federal Congressmen <http://www.visi.com/juan/congress/> or www.congress.org
- State and Local Government- www.statelocalgov.net
- The Alabama Department of Mental Health www.mh.alabama.gov
100 North Union Street / P.O. Box 301410
Montgomery, AL 36130-1410
1-800-367-0955
Fax Number: (334) 242-0725 (general information)
- Official Website of the State of Alabama www.alabama.gov
- Governor of Alabama www.governor.state.al.us
Governor Robert Bentley
State Capitol, 600 Dexter Ave.
Montgomery, AL 36130-2751
Phone: (334) 242-7100
Fax: (334) 353-0004