LOBBING ELECTED OFFICIALS

Lobbying can take many forms – letter-writing campaigns, petition drives, personal visits with elected officials, telephone calls, providing background information about your issues, testimony before legislative or local government committees, and even an official Lobby Day. Here are some things to keep in mind when lobbying elected officials:

• Don’t be intimidated. Some people think authority figures such as legislators or the governor are out of the reach of ordinary people. However, they are generally quite approachable. Most lawmakers are glad to hear from their constituents, and those that aren’t should be suspected of not doing their jobs.

• Coach group members. Be sure all members of your lobbying group know the basics of how to approach elected officials and have solid background on the issues before they start writing letters or charging the Capitol. Offensively aggressive or ill-informed members can destroy a group’s credibility quickly.

• Pace activities. Effort may be needed at every step of the legislative process, right up until the moment the governor or president acts on a bill.

• Keep in touch with elected officials on an ongoing, year-around basis. Be sure they get to know your group and what it represents. When appropriate, send notes of praise and encouragement.

• Be realistic. Realize from the onset that lobbying can be frustrating – being right is no guarantee of winning. A clear understanding of the legislative process will help members of your group have realistic expectations.

• Anticipate that maintaining interest may be a problem. Some hot topics generate their own interest, but some of the most important issues are dull. Funding for human services is a notable example, but nothing is more basic.

• Seek legal advice. As long as all members of your group are volunteers for lobbying purposes and stick to issues affecting the people they serve rather than endorsing particular candidates, they may not need to be registered as lobbyists. Organizations receiving various types of government funding have less latitude than individuals. If in doubt as to which kinds of lobbying can be done without getting your agency into trouble with funders or jeopardizing your tax-exempt status, seek legal advice.

• Express appreciation. Conclude any lobbying effort by sending appropriate thank-you notes to legislators, representatives of organizations and other volunteers who assisted in any way with the lobbying effort.