

Part
Three



Why Lobby In The Public Interest?

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For many people, the idea of being a “lobbyist” is not very appealing. As John Sparks writes in this part, when he was young, his image of a lobbyist was “a kind of specialized crook who wore good clothes and knew famous people in Washington.” For others such as Bev Adcock, the idea of being a lobbyist never even crossed their minds.

But as the following essays make clear, being a public interest lobbyist can be an extremely effective way for people to live out their values and feel that they are having an impact on people and causes they care about. Six people who have very different causes and experiences write about how they got into lobbying. They explain how lobbying has helped their causes, their organizations, *and* their careers, many saying that lobbying has been the most rewarding, stimulating work they have done in their lives. Many also offer insights about how to be an effective lobbyist that come from long experience.

This is particularly true of David Cohen’s essay. David believes so strongly in public interest lobbying that he helped start a national organization devoted to helping people do it—The Advocacy Institute. He contends that lobbying is important not just to win policies that can help many people, but also “to help balance the many special interests that, naturally enough, push policy in ways that benefit narrow parts of the population.” He explains that public interest lobbyists often bring to the process the views of people who are excluded. “Finding ways to organize and amplify the voices of your members and constituents is one of the most satisfying—and challenging—aspects of being a public interest lobbyist. Seeing people who never participated in anything become engaged and empowering themselves—seeing their lives change—is extremely gratifying.”

For Bev Adcock, the key was trying to change the life of one person: a child named Becky who had severe disabilities. “As I fought for changes that would make Becky’s life better, I kept running into problems that could only be solved by changing the system.” Eventually, Adcock came to realize that “changing systems is the best way to affect the lives of thousands of people at once.” She adds that becoming a lobbyist “has been a marvelous journey.”

Hilda Robbins, a life-long volunteer, also became a lobbyist after trying to help a few individuals whose lives were being wasted in a state mental hospital. She started by trying to create a single “half-way house” that would allow a handful of patients to return to their communities. But someone asked her, “What about all the patients at her state’s 18 other mental hospitals?” That question helped change her life, embarking her on a 40-year career as a lobbyist for mentally ill people across the country. She does lobbying because “it is the most effective, dramatic, exhilarating, rewarding and usually most practical way” to help people.

For John Sparks, the key was not a decision to become a lobbyist, but to apply his lobbying skills to the public interest. Just being a lobbyist for a series of clients was becoming both boring and dispiriting for him. “I didn’t have a lust for widget promotion,” he writes. But then he went to work for the organization that lobbies for the country’s symphony and chamber orchestras. He quickly was immersed in fighting attempts to cut off public funding for all of the arts. He has found great passion for this work, not only because he cares about music and the arts, but also because he believes in this country’s democratic process. He writes that those who were trying to cut off public support for the arts were “totally corrupting” the democratic process through their “demagoguery, distortion, and outright fiction.”

Eden Fisher Durbin came to lobbying because it gave her a way to help people that didn’t involve providing direct services, which requires an “extraordinary gift” and patience that she found she simply did not have. She learned that lobbying can help those who can provide direct services. She tells the story of lobbying against legislation that threatened to prevent her organization—the YMCA—from doing something that it was doing very well: providing child care for school-age children across the country. “To ensure the development of sound programs,” she writes, “service providers should share their knowledge and understanding” with those who pass laws and set policies.

Dorothy Johnson’s story points out how an organization like hers—the Council of Michigan Foundations—often must get involved in lobbying to accomplish its mission. This association of foundations wanted to make

sure that every community in the state could support and had access to a “community foundation.” But state law provided no tax incentives for charitable gifts to community foundations. Through lobbying, the Council changed the law, a change that has stimulated a big expansion in Michigan’s community foundations. She asks a simple but important question: “If we do not speak for ourselves, who will? In whatever field in which we work—education, the arts, social well-being, the environment, philanthropy—we are the experts.”

What it all comes down to, writes David Cohen, is the immense satisfaction of being part of a process that helps society “move from ‘what is’ to ‘what ought to be,’ carrying out the values you believe in and stand for. As I reflect on my lobbying career, it is the sense that I was part of some extraordinary changes—changes that have brought this country a little closer to what it ‘ought to be’—that makes me proud that I chose this career.”

How I Became a
Nonprofit Lobbyist
by Bev Adcock, Executive Director
The Arc of Utah

“When I grow up, I want to be a nonprofit lobbyist,” were words that never came out of my mouth as a child. Until 1980, when I started working for The Arc (a nonprofit organization that advocates for people with mental retardation and their families), I never thought about lobbying at all. In fact, I worked for The Arc for two years before I really understood why they did what they did. It was a child that made it all clear.

“I need to go visit a two-year old who’s living in a nursing home.” I feel the same horror now at those words that I did when a co-worker from The Arc said them to me almost 16 years ago. I went with her to visit this child and in a few short minutes, the course of my life changed forever.

Becky was two and lived in 68 different places before ending up in the nursing home. Given up for adoption by her birth mother, Becky was dropped from the adoption lists when they discovered she had disabilities. Profound mental retardation, cerebral palsy, and seizures were only a few of her problems. She was fed through a stomach tube, was considered blind and deaf and screamed if anyone touched her. The nursing home solved this last problem by touching her as little as possible and leaving her alone in a dark room for most of each day.

I was horrified that anyone would treat a child this way and I wanted to stop it. My co-worker had been asked to find a volunteer advocate for Becky. After

one look, I knew I wanted the job.

Meeting Becky was really the beginning of my lobbying career. At first, my focus was purely on changing things for Becky, but over time I learned that much of what was wrong in her life was wrong for a lot of other people with disabilities too. I became more and more angry at a child care system that didn’t seem to care about children.

At first, I spent time on issues that just affected Becky. Why had her caseworker not seen her since she was six months old? Why had they assumed she was blind and deaf instead of testing her to find out for sure?

As time passed, however, I started to wonder about the whole system. Why didn’t they require caseworkers to visit their kids regularly to make sure they were all right? If a child had disabilities, why weren’t they treated?

What had started out as a crusade to fix things for this child I had grown to love became a need to make sure no other child got treated the same way. The more I learned about the “child protective” system that was intended to help kids, the more I believed the system itself was something from which children needed to be protected.

As I fought for changes that would make Becky’s life better, I kept running into problems that could only be solved by changing the system. Before I knew it, I was lobbying, although I certainly didn’t think about it in those terms! I was just trying to help Becky. The fact that I had to talk to state employees and elected officials to change things for her was just part of the process.

As Becky’s life changed, my interests grew. When Becky was moved from the nursing home to a state institution, I had

to learn how the system worked and how to change it. I also started looking at issues that didn't affect Becky yet, but would eventually, like school and adult services. As I looked ahead at what Becky would face as she grew older, I saw a lot more things that needed to be changed. There didn't seem to be a place to stop.

I have worked on a lot of issues in the 16 years since I first saw Becky in that nursing home. But the image of that small child lying alone, dirty and in the dark, remains etched in my heart. It has driven me to fight to keep children in families and out of nursing homes and institutions. It has forced me to work to change the system so neglect is not an accepted part of the treatment of people with disabilities. It has made me care about issues like family support, special education, quality residential programs, training of direct care staff, and services for adults. It has even, to my surprise, involved me in lobbying local, state, and federal legislators.

For me, lobbying will always be about Becky. Through my experiences with her, I learned that changing systems is the best way to affect the lives of thousands of people at once. But we

must never lose sight of the individuals in that system. Although she died in 1987, I still measure proposed changes in the law by how they would affect her if she were still here. Would her life be better or worse if proposed legislation passed?

Lobbying is nothing more than trying to help someone understand an issue from my viewpoint. Of course, that's easier if they actually want to know what I think, but even if they don't, I have to find a way to get the message across. Since my goal is to help them understand the impact on people with mental retardation and other disabilities, it helps that I can use Becky and my other friends with disabilities as examples. My job is to make the human impact real to those I am lobbying.

My experiences with Becky changed the course of my life forever. While lobbying for a nonprofit wasn't the direction I expected to take, it has been a marvelous journey. I started out to make the world a better place for Becky because I cared about this one child. Her gift to me was a career that gives me a chance to make the world a better place for all of us.

Thoughts about
Lobbying by Volunteers

by Hilda H. Robbins, Volunteer Lobbyist

I first became aware of such a thing as “advocacy” and “social action” in 1954, when I tried to convince the executive director of the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania to finance and operate what was then called a “half-way house.” I was doing volunteer work with long-term patients at a state hospital, patients I knew should not have been in the hospital.

The executive, Richard Hunter, explained gently and convincingly that supporting one half-way house for six or eight patients would be commendable. But he challenged me with the idea that the Association could be more effective convincing the state legislature to support many out-of-hospital residences, which would allow patients from all 19 state mental hospitals to have a better life. I was sold on the concept, and immediately began working on that goal. In the early 1950s I never thought I’d become a lobbyist for the rest of my life, nor that I would get more satisfaction from this volunteer activity than any real “career” I was considering.

Why do I lobby? Very simply, because it is the most effective, dramatic, exhilarating, rewarding and usually the most practical way to cause change or stop unwanted change. Lobbying is an especially important role for volunteers, who can be extremely effective advocates.

The most satisfying and exhilarating lobbying effort I’ve been involved with shows why lobbying by a charity’s volunteers and staff is so important. It involved the re-authorization of the

Community Mental Health Centers Act in 1975. The act was the centerpiece of the movement to return patients to their communities. But it had been vetoed for the second time by President Ford.

The key was the Senate. The coalition fighting for the Act identified every senator who didn’t either strongly support or oppose the bill. Each senator was assigned to someone. It wasn’t easy getting in to see them, but our lobbyists were so intent on getting the message directly to the senators that we hung around in the halls and waited in offices for hours just to get a one-on-one discussion and commitment. We met each night to plan strategy. All this intense work of volunteers and staff paid off when we easily got the two-thirds vote we needed to override the veto. We celebrated!

In my many years as a volunteer for the National Association for Mental Health, I often made speeches to our affiliates in hundreds of cities. I never failed to make two forceful points. The first reminded people what it takes to be an effective advocacy agency. I often summarized the succinct requirements of John Gardner, the founder of Common Cause and INDEPENDENT SECTOR:

1. Have stamina and persistence;
2. Have a narrow focus;
3. Have accurate knowledge;
4. Have a stable financial base;
5. Have credibility;
6. Have visibility; and
7. Be able to work with other groups.

The second point I made summarized how to lobby, especially for volunteers. What I hoped to communicate was that, by following a few simple rules, anyone

can lobby. You do not have to be a professional. These rules included:

1. Keep your letter short and accurate. Use your personal letterhead. Ask the person you are lobbying some specific question that requires a response.
2. Don't shy away from using a personal experience. For example: "My aunt was in a state mental hospital for 33 miserable, un-therapeutic years. This is not only inhuman but costly and totally unnecessary." (I never hesitated to use my personal experience with mental illness when appropriate.)
3. Establish a good relationship with everyone in a Congressperson's office, especially the appointment secretary and the legislative assistant. Never underestimate the helpfulness of the legislative assistant.
4. Be punctual, but calculate considerable waiting time in your agenda.
5. Have something in writing that concisely and clearly states your position or request and includes your name, address and phone number, along with that of your Association. Leave this with the Congressperson.
6. When making a series of personal calls, wear very comfortable shoes and an especially eye-catching hat, dress, or tie.

I was always a volunteer in the business of lobbying, so it took me many years to have the confidence to boldly proclaim my occupation as "lobbyist." By that time I had gained some credibility and was certain that lobbying was the best way to use my energy, no matter what organization or "cause" I was involved in.

I would never underestimate the need for well-qualified, highly motivated professional staff. They coordinate and direct the whole effort, provide needed research and keep a keen ear on any movements in legislative committees.

But volunteer advocates and lobbyists can be extremely valuable to a public interest campaign. As Margaret Mead said, "If you look closely, you will see that anything that embodies our deepest commitment to the way human life should be lived and cared for, depends on some form of volunteerism." Every successful social movement has relied on motivated volunteers.

But an impartial evaluation of these successful movements—civil rights, human rights, women's rights, children's rights, patients' rights, and more—would show two almost diametrically opposed conclusions: (1) They have made tremendous strides forward. (2) But there is so much yet to be done before we can speak too proudly of a nation that is the most wealthy, generous, and informed in the world.

Someone wrote about the construction of the pyramids: "No one was angry enough to speak out." We've devised the governmental and political mechanisms to make it easy for people to speak out. Yet many do not even vote. This apathy undermines our rights. And it makes it even more important for those of us who feel passionately about a cause to speak out.

The volunteers and staff persons I have worked with on public interest lobbying campaigns have been without exception highly motivated, well-informed, keenly sensitive, and, above all, enthusiastic about the cause. This is exactly what a democratic system desperately needs.

Why I Lobby in the
Public Interest

by John Sparks

Vice President for Government Affairs
and Public Policy
American Symphony Orchestra League

Since I was six, I knew I wanted to be involved in politics. But as with most kids, the specifics of my future employment were a little hazy. Other than thinking about maybe being a high profile politician, people like me with a life-long interest in politics and government don't really know what they will do until they actually plop into the work world.

I never said I wanted to be a lobbyist of course. I didn't know what a lobbyist was, but I guessed it was a kind of specialized crook who wore good clothes and knew famous people in Washington. I *did* know that I wanted to be in politics. As soon as I grasped the concept of the nation-state, I was drawn to ideas about fairness and freedom, feeling for people who had been brutalized by governments less benign than our own.

I can remember two powerful images that pushed me down this path. One is pictures of black people being chased by police dogs and water from fire hoses in civil rights demonstrations in the South. The second is a magazine picture of a massacred family in a bathtub of blood in Cyprus.

Where I grew up, black people were about as rare as millionaires, but I could not fathom why they would be treated that way, especially in our own country. And I knew nothing about Cyprus or the history of ancient hatreds there, but I

sensed how lucky we were to be in a country that, although quite flawed, had a history that promised that things could be better.

If you share this desire to make things better, public interest lobbying may be your slice of pie. My experience includes 13 years of grassroots issue organizing and Washington lobbying, 7-1/2 years of journalism and government service, and on-again, off-again involvement in political campaigns (that frequent graveyard of good intentions).

Being a charity lobbyist has been good work for me. Professionals in this field do not get rich, but we do not necessarily starve. And in a place such as Washington, DC, where most people spend their waking hours talking about work, thinking about work, and largely being defined by work, having work I really care about is crucial to personal sanity.

I didn't always do charity lobbying. For several years I had represented various clients—some for-profits, some governmental, some nonprofit. I carried our message to Congress and the Executive Branch, and also helped clients frame their messages for policymakers and the general public. The most deeply satisfying work I did was for an Indian tribe, when I not only sought more money for social needs on an economically depressed reservation, but I was also dealing with a centuries-old clash of cultures. This was great work, but it was in the context of a for-profit private firm (the Tribe was one client), which meant little control over the kinds of clients we had to represent. For some, I found the work less than galvanizing.

Some clients had such piddling objectives and concerns that, to attract

attention, we had to make their problems/threats/achievements seem greater than they were. I was a bit morally bored: I didn't have a lust for widget promotion.

In 1992, I became a lobbyist for a specific charity field—America's 1,800 symphony and chamber orchestras. Lobbying for something I care about has been a tremendous source of satisfaction.

The past few years has been a very interesting time to be one of the country's handful of professional arts lobbyists. Thanks to controversies over "obscene" art, the National Endowment for the Arts had been transformed from a sleepy, rarely noted agency into the right-wing's favorite whipping boy. I found myself helping wage legislative war to protect federal funding for the arts, as well as dealing with tax policy and many other issues.

"The arts" were not the linchpin issue of my life, but there were some interesting underlying issues about culture, government, and *how we make laws*—the process of democracy, in other words. Plus, there was my interest in a really cool job (I mean, *the lobbyist for the nation's great orchestras*—how many people get to do that?). To many people, lobbying for music may sound like fun, but it doesn't exactly sound like saving humanity, either. But I have found great passion for this task, for two reasons. First is the importance of the arts to human creativity, which strongly relates to survival. The arts deal with one of our most basic, powerful needs: to express ourselves and find a common language.

The other reason I've found great passion for this work goes back to my interest in our political process. I believe in our democratic process: that it can make things better for people, as long as the process is not totally corrupted by demagoguery, distortion, and outright fiction. Which is precisely what I believed our opponents were doing, terribly distorting the work of the arts endowment, with terrible consequences for charities and artists. And some people were buying it. It can make you furious, frustrated, or depressed.

I got furious, which can be a useful thing. I can only work effectively if I feel passionate about what I do, while trying to retain a sense of balance and humor.

The key is not getting so frustrated or depressed that you withdraw from these battles. Public interest lobbyists are needed not only to fight for a good cause such as the arts, but also to fight to make the process of democracy work, refusing to allow demagoguery and distortion to win in the end.

Here is some of what I've learned about how to be effective:

- Remember that Congress, and probably your average state legislature, does generally function as intended: to represent the views of the majority, while observing some respect for minority rights. When you are on the losing side of an issue, this is hard to acknowledge; it will seem as though the politicians are a bunch of hooligans who can do no right. And there are plenty of elected officials with attitudes that can make nearly any citizen cringe. But democracy is inherently untidy and frequently disappointing, and this

simple mantra has helped me bite my lip many a time when confronted by some absurdity: my cause has to live to fight another day, and a little discretion can help you in that next battle.

- Most legislators, even many of those who make me wonder how they ever got elected, want to do the right thing. Their definition of right can sometimes be pretty bizarre, but most of them will at least listen to legitimate information. Do not underestimate their capacity for learning something.
- Charities wear a presumptive white hat in public policy. That is good and can be useful. But beware the thin line between “white hat” and smug do-gooder. If you push a point of view too hard and allow the public or the legislator to get the idea that you think you are morally superior, you are in big trouble. Most people accept

that we are lobbying for our vision of the public interest, but they want to feel free to disagree without being tagged as enemies of our noble cause.

- As comfortable as I am with talking (surprised?), as an advocate, I try to flip on a little listening switch. Doing so can help make me more persuasive over time. Some lobbyists are bad at listening, and it *is* hard to do when you must quietly listen to some freshly-minted legislative assistant spout nonsense for 10 minutes. But patiently listening helps you lay the groundwork for “requiring” them to listen to you. It can also help you understand how they think, which can lead to more effective language and arguments.

It is a challenge. But it is the struggle and self-discovery that make this work so stimulating, all in the service of a cause bigger than yourself. Not a bad way to make a living after all.

Why Public Interest Advocacy?

by *Eden Fisher Durbin, Director,*

Public Policy

YMCA of the USA

Some people have the heart and head for direct service. They have the extraordinary gift that enables them to sit through seemingly directionless discussions with temperamental teenagers, Head Start classes of noisy four-year-olds with runny noses, and General Equivalency Diploma (GED) courses where the multiplication table appears insurmountable. I do not share this gift. I learned rather quickly while working with abused pre-schoolers in Philadelphia that my strengths were working *on behalf of* children, not with them.

I grew impatient performing direct service. Yes, we taught Lyndell to talk in complete sentences and maintain eye contact, helped Missy refrain from eating her hair, and gave Hector the skills to cope with his chaotic household. But what about the other Lyndells and Hectors—the ones without the fortune of an intervention program? What about the flawed social service delivery system that allowed these vulnerable children to succumb to such abuse under the guise of “family preservation?” How could this system be fixed in order to prevent more Hectors?

I grew dissatisfied with the microcosm that Lyndell and Hector represented and became eager to get my arms around the bigger picture. I turned my attention away from the invaluable experience of front-line service delivery in Philadelphia to advocacy work at the YMCA of the USA. While absolutely nothing can improve without that direct

intervention at the individual level, advocacy allows one to make change that affects more than one person.

The impact of advocacy was not initially clear to me. I found myself preparing for days for a 20-minute meeting with a member of Congress to try to educate him or her on the critical issues facing youth. You have but a brief window to explain the child care crisis facing working families, the struggles facing single-parents, or the challenges facing inner-city youth. I would talk, cajole, and educate, but often it felt as if policymakers had limited time or interest in those I cared so deeply about—children and families. I understood that public interest advocacy was important—because it gives voice to those who do not have it. What I didn’t understand was how long it sometimes takes for public interest advocacy to influence policy—and policymakers.

I came to understand the power of advocacy when Congress took on the issue of child care. YMCAs are the largest single provider of child care in the country, serving nearly half a million children every day. In 1989, the House version of what became the Child Care and Development Block Grant would have made public schools the only eligible recipient for federal school age child care funds. The YMCA of the USA put together a list of the many communities around the country that had chosen YMCAs—not the schools—to run school-based child care programs. Local YMCAs (and other community child care providers) urged their Representatives and Senators to support a more flexible

approach. This information and advocacy enabled Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) to lead a successful effort to prevent Congress from overriding local decisions and imposing a single, federally mandated approach to school-age child care.

But the need to advocate about how to spend federal child care funds was not over. Once the Child Care and Development Block Grant became law, more than \$7 billion began to go to state governments, with few strings and little guidance. There was talk of limiting reimbursement rates, diverting funding from school-age care to pre-schools and lowering standards, all to make the dollars stretch. “Serve more kids” became the mantra in state capitols across the country. Very little thought was given to who would be served, how they would be served, and by whom.

YMCAs realized they could maintain their long-time focus on providing services and not get involved in the struggle to decide how this government money should be spent, but the dance of legislation would continue without them. Decisions about the use of this money would be made with or without their input—behind closed doors, at the eleventh hour by well-meaning but ill-informed lawmakers.

The YMCAs decided to expand their mission and adopt a new role in their communities: public interest advocates. They sat through hearings on funding distribution, positioned themselves as the primary providers of school-age care, and participated in local task forces charged with re-writing standards. Advocacy enabled the YMCA to expand beyond the reach of its programs. As a result, the movement became a leader on issues affecting youth and families.

As the YMCA experience makes clear, the power of public interest advocacy is extraordinary. Unfortunately, there are too few public interest advocates in Washington and fewer still in state capitals. There is room in advocacy for those like myself—with limited skills for direct service—*and* for those who want to balance their traditional role as service provider with the role of lobbyist. And while I would recommend public interest advocacy as a full-time profession, I am convinced that service providers are in an even better position to influence or inspire policy.

Advocates can help lawmakers marry the often-competing worlds of theory and practice. Providers—front-line workers—understand how to meet the needs of families. Their advice can help temper the ideological agendas of politicians. The result is more effective policies that successfully help those in need become contributing members of society. The result is better government.

To ensure the development of sound programs, service providers should share their knowledge and understanding beyond their staff, board, and contributors. They should join with those in Washington, in their state capital and on their city council in making the laws that affect those they are struggling to serve. What is learned from working with the Lyndell's and Hector's must be shared with policymakers. We know the needs of kids, families, and communities will continue to grow, so we must make sure the voices representing them also continue to grow.

Charity Lobbying in the
Public Interest

*by Dorothy A. Johnson, President and CEO
Council of Michigan Foundations*

Webster's defines a lobbyist as "a person, acting for a special interest group, who tries to influence the introduction of or voting on legislation or the decisions of government administrators." Except for the special interest part, this shoe fits. So, while I would not call myself a lobbyist, there is no question that I try, regularly, to influence government decision-making. In fact, I submit that those of us in the nonprofit sector are at great risk if we do not do so.

Our experience at the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) shows why involvement in the policy-making process is so important. The Council is a membership association of private, community, and corporate foundations as well as giving programs in Michigan. Our mission is to increase, enhance, and improve philanthropy and to assist grantmakers in effectively giving their money away. Advocacy has made CMF better able to accomplish this mission.

Michigan has a long and influential history of giving. This history involves some of the most well-known names in philanthropy, including Charles Stewart Mott, Margaret and Harry Towsley, Henry Ford, Herbert and Grace Dow, W.K. Kellogg, and Sebastian Kresge.

This philanthropic tradition continues: in 1996, more than 1,200 Michigan-based foundations gave away

more than \$800 million. Between 1994 and 1996, more than 150 new private foundations were created. And each of Michigan's 83 counties is served by a community foundation. CMF and our lobbying had a great deal to do with this success.

CMF was the principal advocate for a unique provision in Michigan law that provides an income tax credit to taxpayers making contributions to community foundations. Unlike the federal government, Michigan does not allow deductions for charitable giving. Michigan did, however, allow a tax credit—up to \$200—for gifts to Michigan's state-run universities and public broadcasting stations. CMF saw this as a problem and an opportunity.

The problem was that there was no incentive for small givers to support other important institutions. Michigan's community foundations were doing great work. We wanted to enhance Michigan's rich history of individual giving by extending this credit to cover gifts to community foundations, a step that would help expand the reach and effectiveness of our state's community foundations. CMF members took the lead in advocating the credit, drafting the proposed statute, and bringing it to the attention of state officials, including the governor. Our proposal became law, with a Community Foundation Tax Credit line appearing on the annual Michigan income tax return.

More than any other factor, this tax credit has led to the expansion of our state's community foundations. Today, every Michigan resident is served by a community foundation, which they can choose to support as well as petition for

assistance. Of all our advocacy activities in the past decade, I am most proud of this one. And it would not have happened had CMF not been willing to commit to the effort and had I not been willing to go to bat. You do not have to like the word “lobbying” to like the result of a good public policy, achieved through advocacy.

CMF’s advocacy role is not new. Since 1977 we have sought legislation favorable to the creation and growth of private and community foundations, as well as corporate giving programs. To me it comes down to this question: if we do not speak for ourselves, who will? Charitable and philanthropic organizations need to speak out about government actions that affect us.

Because I believe Americans are the most generous people on earth, government has a responsibility to enhance philanthropy, not discourage it. In fact, government ought to be our strong ally: As welfare and entitlement programs are restructured, the burden on charities increases. Our work should have the respect and the assistance of government, not its suspicion. The best way to clear the air is to talk to each other. That means both parties, government and charity, need volunteers and staff who can talk each other’s language.

To me, government relations is an educational undertaking. In whatever field in which we work—education, the arts, social well-being, the environment, philanthropy—we are the experts. We know more about our agencies and our work than outsiders. We can and should

communicate this knowledge to those in government who take actions that affect us.

While few of us are professional lobbyists, we can still effectively communicate with those in government. We are their constituents. We elect them. Sometimes, as private citizens, we work as campaign volunteers, or contribute funds. Exercising our civic responsibility in this way is important for us all. New staff members ought to see civic activity as being part of their career, as it pays dividends for society as well as our agencies.

My recommendations are unambiguous. Charitable and philanthropic organizations need volunteers and staff who have the skill to work with government. (In our case, we hired a professional lobbying firm to give us advice.) Our organizations need to regularly exchange information on what we know about government activity. And when we agree about an issue, we need to work together.

Our organizations have the responsibility to communicate with government with the same level of expertise we bring to our philanthropic and service work. Those we serve deserve it. They count on us to do it well, and I know we can.

Being a Public Interest
Lobbyist Is Something
to Write Home About
*by David Cohen, Co-Director
Advocacy Institute*

David Cohen has been lobbying for the public interest for nearly four decades. He has fought for civil rights, voting rights, congressional reform, and campaign finance reform. He has fought against poverty, the Vietnam War, the MX Missile, and Star Wars. In 1985 he co-founded The Advocacy Institute, which works to strengthen the advocacy capacity of social justice organizations to set their public agenda.

If there is one person who can speak to the value of lobbying for the public interest—and who can tell us how to do it effectively—it is David Cohen. We think his reflections on what he has learned during his long and distinguished career are invaluable. He reflects on why he has devoted much of his public life to lobbying, how lobbying has changed, what these changes mean for public interest lobbyists, and what combination of values, skills, attitudes, and knowledge will make someone an effective public interest agenda setter.

Why I chose to be a lobbyist

I am a partisan of public interest lobbying. I have done it much of my professional life. Even when my job titles and descriptions changed, I worked at it. If a wrong can be repaired by lobbying, my juices flow.

Today many people disdain all lobbyists. But to me, being a public interest lobbyist is a career you can write home about and wear proudly at class reunions. My children knew I was a lobbyist. They were proud!

Such pride does not come from greater virtue or wisdom, nor does it come from enjoying life's luxuries. Being a public interest lobbyist can and should allow you to enjoy a decent life and raise a family, but you will not eat in posh restaurants, drive expensive cars, or fly first class.

No, I think the pride my children felt about my work came from the importance of what the public interest lobbyist does, combined with the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that an effective lobbyist develops.

The crucial roles of a
public interest lobbyist

Most important, a public interest lobbyist helps create what social analysts call the "civic balance," allowing the public interest to be incorporated into public policy. A public interest lobbyist helps balance the many self interests that, naturally enough, push policy in ways that benefit narrow parts of the population. There's nothing inherently wrong with pursuing self interests. It has a legitimate voice in our process. Each of us has our own specific interests. But these self interests create a cacophony of

special interests that must be balanced by people and groups that pursue the public interest.

By “public interest,” I don’t simply mean people pursuing causes in which I happen to believe. I don’t agree with those who, in my view, are trying to dismantle our system for insuring health and safety and cut back on important public investments. But I do recognize that some of those fighting for these changes are motivated by what they believe is good for the public interest. I don’t agree with them, but I do respect their commitment to their belief system.

Public interest lobbyists are especially concerned with incorporating the views of people who are not normally part of the process. Finding ways to organize and amplify the voices of your members and constituents is one of the most satisfying—and challenging—aspects of being a public interest lobbyist. Seeing people who never participated in anything become engaged and empowering themselves—seeing their lives change—is extremely gratifying. That’s why my colleagues and I see public interest advocacy as people-centered advocacy.

Indeed, the ability to generate sustained grassroots public participation has been one key distinction between public interest and special interest lobbying. This distinction has been blurred recently by various techniques that use money to distort the process. Special interests almost always have lots of money. The policies they pursue usually make a big financial difference for certain industries or individuals. So the money that special interests put into lobbying can easily be justified as an investment

that may lead to a big payoff.

This simply isn’t true for most public interest lobbying campaigns. We may believe that a certain policy change will have a big payoff for society as a whole. But such a change will seldom make a big, immediate difference in the bank accounts of a few rich people or industries, thus public interest lobbyists do not have access to big money.

As a result, we rely on broad public participation. Generating informed grassroots participation is a crucial role of a public interest lobbyist, and it can be one of the job’s greatest satisfactions.

If you help generate this kind of participation, you can experience the greatest satisfaction of the public interest lobbyist: moving from “what is” to “what ought to be,” carrying out the values you believe in and stand for. As I reflect on my lobbying career, it is the sense that I was part of some extraordinary changes—changes that have brought this country a little closer to what it “ought to be”—that makes me proud that I chose this career. But when we achieve an important change, we also know there are “no permanent victories.” We have to be prepared to defend hard fought gains.

The important skills a good public interest lobbyist develops
While big changes are what we strive for, we can’t rely on such successes to justify our decisions to be public interest lobbyists. Any policy can be reversed. Some policies take more than a lifetime to achieve. Some of my lobbying mentors worked for causes all their lives and never completed their work. They instinctively followed the values taught by the Talmud: Theirs was not to complete the task, but to start it and find ways to bring their

visions alive, both in the minds of the public and policymakers. A good example is correcting the abuses of money in politics, an issue that people have struggled over for generations. With an issue like this, when progress can't be achieved in the short run through legislation, you do everything to keep the issue alive over time, educating and activating people so that, eventually, real change will come.

Fortunately, there are many benefits of a public interest lobbying career other than contributing to social change:

- Because the essence of lobbying is relationships (with constituents, policymakers, coalition partners, other staff members), you can learn much about how to relate to people, including those with whom you may not always agree.
- Similarly, being an effective lobbyist means learning how to be an effective team member. No one person can bring about an important policy change. You must learn to work with people both within and outside your organization.
- Being effective also means learning how to communicate with people outside your immediate world. If you are going to build broad public participation, you have to be able to do two things. You must learn to demystify the policy-making process, which allows people distant from that process to learn how to affect it—and to believe they *can* affect it. And you must learn to talk about your issue in ways that make it real and compelling to people who aren't immersed in policy jargon. These are extremely

valuable skills.

- In learning to communicate with a broad range of people, you learn to use modern methods of communication, including audio, video, and computers. These too are valuable skills.

How lobbying has changed, and what these changes mean for us

The need to learn about modern communication methods suggests some of the profound changes in the ways that policies are developed and the tools that lobbyists must use.

The image of a lobbyist used to be a cigar-chomping guy sitting in a bar with a legislator, trying to cut a deal. Over time that image evolved into a slicker looking guy wearing Gucci shoes, offering a legislator big bucks to give a speech at some Caribbean resort. No doubt there are still many lobbyists who smoke cigars and wear Gucci shoes—and legislators who find ways to get that expenses-paid trip to an island—but these images are misleading. The legislative process—and the ways it can be affected—have changed.

For one thing, lobbyists are no longer exclusively men. There are many women lobbyists, and not just those who advocate for issues like better child care. The head lobbyist of the National Rifle Association is a woman.

For another thing, the legislative process—especially in Washington—has changed radically. Whereas once a lobbyist could whisper in the ear of a few powerful legislators, now there are dozens of legislators who have power by sitting on or chairing one of the many

committees and subcommittees that control legislation and oversee the bureaucracy. Plus, there are thousands of staff people who also wield power for these legislators and committees. And remember the invisible technicians and bureaucrats who write the rules that implement the laws.

The days of the lobbyist as sole practitioner have virtually ended. In the recent battle over protecting children's health from tobacco, the industry assigned an individual lobbyist to each senator. In the parlance of sports, this is person-to-person coverage!

Lobbying has changed big time, becoming a full-fledged industry with an estimated 35,000 lobbyists, in addition to researchers, public relations specialists, video producers, traditional organizers and the ubiquitous lawyers. These people surely number more than a 100,000. The lobbyists even have their own trade association.

The lobbying "industry" has grown so much mainly because, no matter which political party is in charge of Congress and the Executive Branch, the federal government remains the manager of the United States economy. Decisions it makes concerning spending, taxation, and regulations have enormous consequences—for individuals, industries, and the country as a whole. And not only do the government's decisions affect our pocketbooks, they also influence nearly every part of our lives—our education, health, environment, child care, the safety of our food and workplaces, and much more.

This is why so many people are

trying to influence these decisions. They understand that Congress and the administration respond to those who are organized.

Indeed, the fact that the government will respond to organized, grassroots campaigns has led to one of the most important changes in lobbying.

Increasingly, industries and others with big money are using modern technology to generate what appear to be large-scale, grassroots lobbying efforts. They will fax or e-mail lobbying messages to enormous numbers of people (the Chamber of Commerce, for example, has the names not only of every business that is a member, but each business's employees). Those people can respond by simply dialing a toll-free number, which will "patch" them directly to the office of their representatives or senators. Or, industries will finance expensive, sophisticated ad campaigns in key legislative districts, generating hundreds if not thousands of calls.

The messages these special interests communicate through their ads or directly through faxes and e-mail have been carefully honed to appeal to certain audiences, mainly by investing still more money in "focus groups" and opinion surveys that test and refine messages. In other words, what used to be the province of public interest lobbyists—grassroots response from people across the country—is now being widely used by special interest lobbyists. Thanks to low-cost technologies such as e-mail, faxes, and the Internet, all of this can happen very, very quickly, another major change in lobbying.

The need to work even harder at involving people in the process

These changes have big implications for public interest lobbyists. It has made it even more important for us to generate broad participation, while at the same time disclosing the “paid for” nature of the public participation generated by special interests.

To generate that broad participation, public interest lobbyists must see that their primary role is to make it possible for others to speak and act for themselves. At times, we may do what a traditional lobbyist does: advocate directly to legislators and staff members. But this kind of direct lobbying should be only a small part of the work.

To generate broad participation, we must work hard to make our issues clear to people, finding ways to get rid of the jargon that policymakers and lobbyists often use. We must frame the choices for our constituency, *not* make the decisions. A perfect example of what happens when the lobbyists make the decisions and don't involve enough people is catastrophic health insurance, a bill that was repealed shortly after it was passed even though President Reagan and the liberals supported it. The way catastrophic health care was funded alienated many people, people who hadn't been brought into the debate before the bill was passed.

In framing the choices, we must work particularly hard at educating people, trying to explain the policies that have led to the problems they are experiencing—with their schools, child care, neighborhoods, whatever. One key step in the long battle against toxins in our environment was the “right-to-know”

provision that was put into a piece of legislation. This provision required disclosure of information about toxins in every part of the country. Local people were trained to use this law, which allowed them to document their communities' problems. This in turn led to much broader public support for stronger environmental laws.

The need to explain the law-making process

To achieve broad participation, we must also make the process clear to people. The process of getting a law passed, especially on the federal level, can seem incomprehensible. Most people don't understand the difference between the Budget committee and Appropriations committees. They may not understand that, just because a bill has passed the House, it doesn't become law. They have no idea of the importance of a “conference committee” (which resolves differences between bills passed by the House and Senate). All most people see is lots of money being poured into lobbying battles and political campaigns, and many conclude that the average person has no power in this process.

Our role is to make clear the important role they can play. We need to be the “diagnostician,” explaining what is happening, why, what *could* happen, and what people can do. Our role is not to “cut the deal,” but to make sure that there are lots of informed lay people who know what's going on, why it's important, and whom to hold accountable. For example, on the tobacco bill that was stopped by some maneuvers in Congress in 1998, supporters understood that this

crucial piece of legislation never even came up for a direct vote. They could then use this outrage to hold those who killed the bill accountable.

Indeed, pointing out outrages like this is another key role of the public interest lobbyist. To generate broad support, people need to care deeply about an issue. Not all issues can generate the kind of passion and commitment that leads to major changes, such as the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam war. But most issues can be made compelling, especially if people see the large ideas that underlie the issue.

At the same time, the effective public interest lobbyist makes the concrete benefits of a policy clear: If this law passes, you will have the tools you need to get rid of toxins in *your* neighborhood.

The need to put it all together

Putting it all together—the big ideas and the concrete benefits—is another key role. Especially today, with the special interests devoting so much money to developing effective messages, we need to work hard at developing effective public arguments, ones that persuade people—particularly the unconvinced—to see the issue from a public interest perspective.

Effective public interest lobbyists must put it together in another way: They must be able to build strong relationships with a wide variety of people, both within and outside their organizations. Within the organization this includes members, organizers, media specialists, researchers, and support staff. Outside the organization this includes legislators and their staffs, journalists, and potential allies.

Public interest lobbyists rarely influence votes by themselves. We all

dream of being the person who sways the deciding vote on some critical issue. But the chances of this happening are about as great as winning the lottery! Instead, the key is being part of a large team of people and organizations that together, over time, can change critical policies.

Especially in a public interest organization, where people are motivated by their commitment to a cause, lobbyists will fail if they exaggerate their importance and try to control the process. All they will accomplish is to alienate their most important asset: people who care enough to participate.

What attitudes make public interest lobbyists effective?

This commitment to being part of a team rather than a lone ranger is one of many attitudes that can help make a public interest lobbyist successful. These attitudes include:

- An internalized belief in democratic values and process.
- Accepting people for whom they are, regardless of race, religion, class, gender, disability, or credentials.
- A sense of possibility that changes can occur. An openness to trying new, sometimes bold, approaches.
- A willingness to challenge entrenched, institutionalized power, without being intimidated.
- A belief in people's capacity to do the job and follow through.
- Respect for other points of view, even those with whom you strongly disagree. By respecting other points of view, you don't make permanent enemies.

- Not personalizing disagreements, recognizing that allies sometimes disagree.
- Ability to express strong emotions such as love and anger in ways that strengthen rather than undermine the team effort.
- Respect and empathy for those you are trying to serve.
- Patience and restraint within your organization, recognizing that there are different roles for different people at different times.
- Stamina to engage in the usually long struggle to achieve—and maintain—significant changes.
- Openness with colleagues, which can allow for critical feedback that can strengthen rather than undermine the joint effort.
- The use of humor, which helps people keep perspective.
- The use of celebration, which helps pull people together, acknowledge their importance and maintain their commitment. You celebrate not just the occasional substantive victory—the new law you win—but also the more common “process” victory—the constructive meeting your members had with a legislator or editorial board member.
- Openness to innovation, which can lead to new techniques for lobbying, organizing, using information, building coalitions, and telling the story of your work.

This openness—combined with a willingness to seize the initiative—is critical. This is especially true today, when the special interests have adapted many public interest lobbying techniques. If we are to keep up, we must innovate.

I have seen the power of invention in each major issue in which I’ve been engaged. For example, in the 1960s before African-Americans gained the right to vote in the South, civil rights supporters adopted senators from states without a tradition of overt racial discrimination. This was a grassroots idea born and bred in the South. By educating these senators from states far removed from the harsh realities of the South, civil rights supporters gained enough support to make changes that went far beyond what most people at the time thought was possible.

Another example comes from the effort to end the Vietnam war. When powerful House chairmen refused to allow a vote on the issue, I helped invent the “Statement of Principles.” With the support of key allies in the House of Representatives, this statement focused legislators on the simple position of ending the war by a certain date, cutting off funds for it, and bringing U.S. prisoners home. It led to a series of test votes on the issue, helping clarify the issues and building momentum for bringing an end to the Vietnam War.

What skills make public interest lobbyists effective?

Advocacy skills come over time, with experience, rather than through a formal credentialing process. But they only come if people are open to learning from their experiences, as well as from colleagues.

The underlying skill is similar to that of a family doctor or lawyer practitioner: someone who is a generalist, who has the ability to diagnose and prescribe remedies for a wide variety of situations. As with a good doctor or lawyer, one doesn’t start

with this ability. It comes over time, eventually becoming second nature.

Specific skills include:

- The ability to listen to what your constituents, allies, and opponents are saying. A good doctor listens closely to a patient, not jumping to a diagnosis, listening for sometimes subtle clues. Every lobbying situation, like every patient or client, is a little different from what you have seen before.
- The ability to communicate effectively to members and the public. This can be harder than it seems. It is easy to fall into certain assumptions about an issue and how people will respond to it. It is easy to assume that everyone understands an issue and its importance as well as you and your colleagues understand it. Again, being able to listen closely to how people respond, to the questions they ask, is critical. If you find yourself isolated in a place like Washington, DC, the key is getting out as regularly as possible. It's too easy to be absorbed by the "insider" world, which can both limit your ability to communicate with people and rob you of your sense of what is possible.
- Being grounded in reality—in what is possible—while at the same time maintaining a vision of what you want and where you are heading. Being able to keep your eyes on the prize, in the words of the civil rights movement. I can name issue after issue—civil rights, the MX missile—where the conventional wisdom (that the MX missile was a done deal, for example) turned out to be completely wrong.
- The ability to write and edit quickly. While the legislative process can move painfully slowly, there are often constant small steps and changes that require analysis and response. The ability to produce quick drafts is very useful.
- The ability to analyze and synthesize diverse and complex material.
- The ability to motivate others by telling stories, using humor and drama, and building strong teams.
- The ability to negotiate, mediate, and drive a hard bargain. This requires adapting to different situations, being realistic about your opponents and allies.
- The ability to build strong personal and public relationships that can survive disagreements and allow you to work with former adversaries.

Don't let this long list of skills discourage you. One reason working with others and building a team is so important is that different people and organizations bring different skills. You may be a great negotiator. Someone else may be a great writer. Another person may be a superb strategist. You need a range of skills, but you don't need to be great at every skill.

What knowledge makes public interest lobbyists effective?

There are two types of knowledge that good lobbyists need. One is simply knowing the basic tools of the trade: how to identify possible allies on an issue, how to work with a coalition, how to set up a meeting with a legislator or staff member, which people should meet with the

legislator and what should be said, how to summarize an issue into a few, cogent “talking points,” how to testify at a legislative hearing, and much more.

The other type of knowledge is less concrete. As with skills, this type of knowledge comes from experience. It involves things like the interaction between the formal and informal rules and procedures of a legislative body. You need to know the rules and procedures of the legislative body you are trying to influence. Equally important is knowing the answers to questions such as: How does the formal structure mesh with the informal practice? Who actually makes decisions? What procedures must they follow? To whom does the decision-maker listen? Who will take public responsibility? Are there budgetary or legal restraints?

You also need to know as much as you can about external factors that could influence decision-makers. How sensitive are decision-makers to public pressure, media attention or embarrassment? Are there certain people or groups to whom a decision-maker must be particularly sensitive for political reasons? Has there been a recent event that may sway a decision, such as a child killed by a drunk driver or a teenager killed by a handgun?

I gained this type of knowledge not by reading but by observing and talking with lots of people. This type of knowledge usually can't be found in guidebooks.

If this isn't enough, many decisions today are affected by larger forces. Decisions by a state government are often affected by the rules or direction of the federal government. Decisions of the federal government can be affected by

international concerns. This is particularly true for economic, trade, and environmental issues.

Given all this complexity, you also need to know how to help your organization forge a realistic strategy. What are your potential advantages and strengths? Challenges and weaknesses? What factors could undermine your goal? What ties do you have to individuals or groups that can be helpful? What's the best way to frame the issue and generate public support?

Concluding thoughts

The task of creating change can easily seem daunting, and it is for one person or one organization. You must have allies, including those with whom you may not always agree. And you must keep in mind that you are engaged in a long-term process, one that involves building broader public participation in decision-making as well as building more relationships with those who can influence policy decisions.

You may well lose in the short-term, but the key is what happens over time, both in relation to specific policies and in how people and policymakers think about your issues. We had over a dozen votes before Congress was convinced to vote to stop funding the Vietnam War. But over time we were able to erode support for the war by changing people's perceptions of it, getting them to focus on its enormous cost in lives and dollars.

Even if you win in the short-term, there are no permanent victories in this work. As Yogi Berra put it, “The game isn't over until it is over.” The reality is, the game is never over. I've been working on campaign finance reform for more than 30 years. We have won some

victories. But we are obviously still a long way from gaining the comprehensive institutionalized changes necessary to end the corrupting effect of money in politics. The same is true of civil rights and the social safety net: Laws that once seemed permanent face threats. Which is why you have to be in public interest lobbying for the long haul, celebrating victories but not being lured to sleep by them, learning from defeats but not being overwhelmed by them.

What it all adds up to is that the public interest lobbyist must be prophetic and priestly. The prophet is the visionary, helping us see what could exist, recognizing that we must move past ourselves, that we cannot be only for me, as the sage Hillel pointedly reminds us.

Similarly the public interest lobbyist draws out the ideas that can energize people and keep them involved for the long-term struggle that real change always requires.

The priest helps people keep their faith. Similarly, the public interest lobbyist must keep alive the belief and faith that our democratic political system will respond to those who participate in it, that it will reach out to those who have been historically excluded. It doesn't always pass this test. But it has passed it often enough to make it continuously worth testing. Think about the many fundamental changes our system has experienced over time, from voting rights for minorities and women to a safety net for seniors.

This strategy of change through broad participation diminishes the fantasy of leader-rescuers: the idea that a president or a charismatic leader will

make the changes we think are needed. Today in a democracy, a leader can only act if the path has already been laid out, by citizens who have been effectively pushing for changes over many years.

This strategy, by emphasizing the need to inform and involve people beyond Washington's Beltway, also diminishes the importance of the "inside" experts with their narrow technical fixes. Certainly a technical change in a regulation can make a difference. But those working for the public interest must keep the long-term focus on the major changes that will really improve the lives of many people, changes that can only happen as a result of widespread participation and understanding.

Just as the religious leader keeps the group's focus on its mission, so the public interest lobbyist must keep the group's focus on its mission. That can only be achieved when the group organizes, educates, engages and involves large numbers of people.

The challenge is to blend the prophetic vision with the priestly attributes of faith and attention to the mundane and ordinary—the day to day work of building an organization, strengthening a coalition, making room for new leaders, nurturing public and personal relationships, doing the research and raising the money. We need it all. Each reinforces the other, helping make real and lasting improvements in people's lives, insuring that their voices will be heard and their concerns become the public agenda.