



Getting Involved: 10 Tips for Becoming an Effective Advocate

The ACLU of Virginia needs your help in advocating for civil rights and civil liberties. You can get involved as a “grassroots advocate” in monitoring legislative activities and speaking to federal, state and local legislators and officials about pending legislation and administrative policies.

If you become involved as an ACLU grassroots advocate, you’ll want to know how to be most effective. Here are ten tips that will help you be a better advocate, whether your focus is on issues pending in Congress, the Virginia legislature or before a local governing body or local school board:

1. **Learn the culture – staff vs. member.** *In Congress, you have to build a good relationship with staff before you’ll get to see the member. In the Virginia legislature and in local governing bodies, this is less likely to be true. Regardless, find time to meet with legislators and officials in their home offices and in the “off season” when they are not in session.*
2. **Learn the procedural rules (formal and informal).** *If you want to make something happen, you need to know what process you must follow to get something done. Is there a particular subcommittee or committee that will hear an issue first? How is legislation or an ordinance introduced? You need to know how the game is played before you take the field.*
3. **Be fearless.** *Be courteous, but don’t feel intimidated. It is your right to lobby your elected official on issues that are important to you. Don’t hesitate to be assertive. As Robert Grudin says, “[t]he years forget our errors and forgive our sins, but they punish our inaction with living death.”*
4. **Recognize your limits.** *Don’t make promises that you can’t keep. Don’t be afraid to admit you don’t know something. If you’re asked a question and you don’t know the answer, say you don’t know. Then, offer to get the information, and do it! Be sure to get back to them promptly with the information you promised.*
5. **Find your allies, don’t burn bridges.** *Build coalitions with other organizations and people who share the ACLU’s goals and objectives. It is easy to get emotional over strongly felt issues. But, it is far more important to maintain good relationships. Remember that your strongest opponent on one issue may be your greatest supporter on another!*
6. **Identify your opposition.** *Find out who’s likely to be against you on an issue, and determine whether there is any common ground.*
7. **Prepare, prepare, prepare.** *You are presenting a “case” to a difficult jury. If you don’t know your stuff, no one will pay any attention to what you say. Want to know more about how people align on issues? Check out www.pollingreport.com. Want to become a better speaker? Read *Leading Out Loud* by Terry Pearce. Do your homework. Research policymaker’s positions on your issues through voting records, speeches, newspaper articles, debates, or a policymaker’s website.*
8. **Pay attention to how you are marketing yourself.** *Show respect for the institution/people you want to influence. Don’t take yourself too seriously. Use humor to defuse “difficult” situations. Be gracious. Always begin meetings by thanking the policy maker or staff member for the opportunity to share your ideas and opinions.*
9. **Keep things professional.** *Develop relationships by providing information and opportunities and making yourself indispensable. Be professional in both dress and manner. Don’t say negative things about other policymakers or public figures.*
10. **Understand the arguments against your position.** *Be sure to disclose that there is another side and what it is. Don’t put the person you are seeking to influence in the position of finding out about the opposition from someone else. Tell the truth. There is no faster way to lose credibility than to give false or misleading information.*

If you follow these tips, you’ll be on your way to becoming an effective grassroots advocate for the ACLU of Virginia. One last thing, be sure to sign up as a grassroots advocate on our website, www.acluva.org so that you’ll receive alerts and information about issues on which we need your help and advocacy!