

Advocacy Essentials for Nonprofit Professionals

January 22nd, 2026



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Audience Question

**Who is in the room
with us?**



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Learning Objectives

- What is Advocacy?
- Advocacy vs. Lobbying
- Advocacy Tools & Tactics
- Storytelling
- Nonpartisan Voter Engagement
- Q & A



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Audience Question

**Who knows if they can
advocate?**



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What is Advocacy?

Public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.



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Why Advocacy Matters

- Advocacy amplifies your mission beyond direct services
- Shapes systems and policies for long-term change
- Ensures decision-makers understand community needs



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Advocacy vs. Lobbying

Nonprofit Advocacy V Lobbying – Main Points



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This information is **geared towards**
nonprofits.

Nonprofit Tax Status Provides Unclear but Some Limitation to Lobbying

What is the 501c3 tax status?



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QUIZ



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Nonprofits can NOT

- A. Talk to a candidate for public office
- B. Support / tell others to support a candidate for public office
- C. Meet with an elected official
- D. Talk about the impact of a specific federal program (aka CDBG, HOME, Homeless Assistance Grants, Housing Choice Vouchers)

ANSWER

Nonprofits can NOT (choose one)

- A. Talk to a candidate for public office
- B. Support / tell others to support a candidate for public office**
- C. Meet with an elected official
- D. Talk about the impact of a specific federal program (aka CDBG, HOME, Homeless Assistance Grants, Housing Choice Vouchers)



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QUIZ



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The IRS limits how much of the following a nonprofit can do.

- A. Education
- B. Advocacy
- C. Lobbying
- D. Support of a candidate for public office

ANSWER

The IRS limits how much of the following a nonprofit can do.

- A. Education
- B. Advocacy
- C. Lobbying**
- D. Support of a candidate for public office



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Nonprofit Advocacy V Lobbying – Main Points



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Call it “education” and not “advocacy”

Nonprofit Advocacy V Lobbying – Main Points



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Nonprofits **CAN EDUCATE** about the
impact of federal program on our work and
communities



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Nonprofit Advocacy V Lobbying – Main Points

Here's how to explain that you are
EDUCATING and not lobbying.

“Lobbying is expressing support or opposition for a specific bill by naming the bill number and title.

What I'm doing is educating. I'm explaining the impact that this federal program has on our work and community.”

QUIZ



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**Lobbying is recommending
that an elected official
support or oppose a specific
bill**

True or False?

ANSWER

**Lobbying is recommending
that an elected official
support or oppose a specific
bill**

True



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Nonprofit Advocacy V Lobbying – Main Points

Nonprofits are limited in how much lobbying they can do.

BUT NOT REALLY...

The substantial part test

QUIZ



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If your organization is mostly federally funded and there is no other funding source, you may be limited in how much of the following you can do.

- A. Education
- B. Lobbying

ANSWER

If your organization is mostly federally funded and there is no other funding source, you may be limited in how much of the following you can do.

- A. Education
- B. Lobbying**



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QUIZ



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**Only money influences the
decisions of elected
officials.**

True or False?

ANSWER

Only money influences the decisions of elected officials.

False



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But Nonprofits CAN lobby. Why do so many think they can't?

What are the other reasons that are preventing people from educating and lobbying?



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Advocacy Tools & Tactics: Getting Started



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- **Host an event** – Invite elected officials to see your work firsthand
- **Share resources** – Provide information and updates to elected officials and their staff
- **Respond to action alerts** – Act on calls from advocacy groups
- **Engage in research** – Take part in surveys and focus groups to shape policy
- **Leverage existing networks** – Collaborate with groups already leading advocacy efforts

Audience Question

**Which of the follow
advocacy activities
have you engaged in?**

Check all that apply



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Changing Hearts and Minds Through Storytelling



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Storytelling for Advocacy

- **Be Personal:** Share a real story that connects to your experience or work to the policy priority.
- **Find Common Ground:** Highlight shared values like community, family, or opportunity.
- **Keep it Focused and Brief:** One story that shows both the *problem* and *solution*. Aim for 1–3 minutes.
- **Inspire, Don't Overwhelm:**
 - Lean into: Hope, pride, empowerment, love
 - Use care with: Fear, anger, sadness

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” – Maya Angelou

Telling the Story



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- **Whose life was changed?**
Think of a person or family whose life improved because of a program. What were they facing before? What changed?
- **What program helped?**
Be specific – was it rental assistance, utility support, street outreach, housing vouchers, etc.? How did it work?
- **What difference did it make?**
Focus on what's better now. Are they safely housed? Were they able to stay in their home?
- **What role did your work play?**
How did you or your organization help? What does this show about the value of the work you do every day?

Rapid Rehousing Gives Families a Safe Start and a Brighter Future



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Our program provides more than rental assistance—it offers compassionate case management, vital information and referrals, and a safe space for parents and children to process their emotions, heal from trauma, and set goals for a future free from abuse.

The Collin's family came to our Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) program while fleeing domestic violence. Although the children- Henry and Lydia- were not directly abused, they were deeply affected as witnesses to the violence. Dana— determined to create a safer future—was juggling both a job and part-time college classes. Without the program, securing stable and a safe home would have been impossible.

Today, the Collin's family have a stable home and is financially secure. Dana has a degree that has opened the door to better job opportunities. Their journey is a powerful reminder that with the right support, families can break free from violence and rebuild their lives with strength and hope.

What is the Program that Helped? Rapid Rehousing



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- Rapid Rehousing is a homelessness assistance program that helps people move into permanent housing.
- It provides short-term rental assistance, financial help with move-in costs, and supportive services like help with budgeting, finding jobs, or connecting to community resources.
- The goal is to stabilize people in housing as quickly as possible and help them maintain it long-term.



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What are we asking Congress?

We call on Congress to fully fund all HUD housing, community development, and homeless assistance programs to prevent currently served families from losing their homes.

BUILDING A STORY OF SELF

PREPARATION

Who is your audience?

CALL TO ACTION | What do you want them to do after hearing your story?

THEIR VALUES | What do they care about most? *The intersection is your shared values.* **YOUR VALUES** | What do you care about most?

BUILD YOUR STORY

Choose the part of your story that best achieves the above.
(Story of YOU; Story of US)

FOCUS

VALUE

Tell the story so the shared value is highlighted.

Describe what you had to deal with or overcome.

CHALLENGE

What choice did you make?

CLIMAX

Describe the resolution.

OUTCOME

What is your Call To Action? (Story of ACTION)

ACTION

Collecting Stories for Advocacy



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Client / Lived Experience Stories

- Build trust and relationships first
- Ensure they are in a safe, ready place to share
- Ownership & agency: they control how their story is used
- Informed, ongoing, enthusiastic consent
- Provide training, coaching, mentorship as needed
- Offer compensation when possible
- Seek feedback on story use



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Voter Engagement & Education

Voter Engagement is Advocacy



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- Policy change starts with who is at the table
- It builds long-term power, not just short-term wins
- Nonpartisan voter engagement is 100% legal for nonprofits
- Centers the voices of those most impacted by policy decisions
- Policymakers respond to engaged communities
- Reinforces your mission

What does this look like for Nonprofits?



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- Voter registration, education & turnout reminders
- Sharing nonpartisan resources
- Integrating voting into existing programs & events
- Empowering community members to use their voices
- Amplifying stories about why voting matters



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When We Engage People, They Vote

- Through our housing & community partners, **83% of the individuals we talked with about voting showed up at the polls in 2024.**
- **Why it matters:**
 - Shows the effectiveness of trusted service providers
 - Demonstrates that civic engagement supports advocacy
 - Confirms that people with lived experience *want* to participate when barriers are removed

Do you want to learn more about how to prioritize voter engagement and education at your organization?

- Contact Jen Thomas at jennifer@housingalliancepa.org



Avenues to Advocacy



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Unsheltered Homelessness & Eviction Sealing Webinar

- Thursday, February 12th | 2:00pm-3:00pm

Zoning and Land Use Reform

- Thursday, February. 19th | 12:00pm-12:30pm

Home Repair Webinar

- Wednesday, February. 25th | 11:00am-11:30am

Advocacy is a Muscle that Needs Worked!



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- **Building Relationships Takes Time:**
 - Effective meetings and securing commitments can be a slow process.
 - Developing strong advocacy skills requires ongoing practice.
- **Measure Success Beyond Immediate Wins:**
 - If you've positioned yourself as a reliable resource, you're making progress.
 - If you've shown genuine interest in the challenges legislators face, you're making progress.

FY 2026 THUD Bill – At a Glance



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- **\$77.3B for HUD programs (+\$7.3B from FY25)**
- **\$34.9B for Tenant-Based Rental Assistance (covers voucher renewals)**
- **\$601M for Tenant Protection Vouchers (+\$264M; includes EHV transitions)**
- **\$4.4B for Homeless Assistance Grants (+\$336M; stronger CoC renewal protections)**
- **Eviction Protection Grants cut to \$7.5M**

**Action Alert: Urge Congress to Pass the FY26
HUD Spending Bill**

Additional Resources



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National Council of Nonprofits (NCN): Everyday Advocacy

- <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/everyday-advocacy>

Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations

- <https://pano.org/pano-advocacy/>

Alliance of Justice: Bolder Advocacy

- <https://afj.org/bolder-advocacy/>

We Would Love to Hear From You!



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- **Jennifer Thomas, Community Engagement Manager**
 - Contact: jennifer@housingalliancepa.org

- **Gale Schwartz, Director of Programs and Outreach**
 - Contact: gale@housingalliancepa.org

Thank you!