

Advocacy - What is it?

What do we do?

We use “people power” to achieve advocacy victories in the legislative and regulatory arenas on the state and federal levels. AARP is nonpartisan and does not endorse or support candidates or parties, and we do not operate a political action committee that donates money. Our power in the legislative and regulatory arena lies in the perception of our ability to mobilize considerable segments of our 3 million AARP Florida members on our issues.

How do we do that?

By reaching, training and activating AARP members and others who are interested in the issues AARP has committed to working on, and by finding and using the most effective tactics to achieve success. Tactics include direct contact with legislators, contact with community groups and individuals to prompt them to action, and contact with the media to tell our story to a broader audience.

What roles do volunteers play?

Volunteers provide the face of our membership, both personally and by mobilizing others who present themselves as AARP supporters. Volunteers also communicate AARP’s messages on our issues, broadening the range of the organization’s reach as well as the depth of face-to-face contact with targets.

What does success look like?

- An ongoing team in each community of advocacy volunteers who can react quickly to take action on our issues.
- Trained and up-to-date on the issues.
- Trained and comfortable using a variety of tactics.
- Able to mobilize substantial numbers of other members as required by the particular tactics that are appropriate for the campaign.
- Able to collaborate with staff in assessing what tactics are both feasible and most effective in achieving successes in their communities.

Guiding Principles

For more than three decades, AARP has focused on objectivity, balance, and non-partisanship. Going forward, AARP must maintain its non-partisan, non-endorsing stance with respect to candidates, incumbents, political parties, and public events. Volunteer leaders are representatives of AARP, and therefore must be nonpartisan when acting in their AARP capacity and must reflect a nonpartisan image. This means avoiding the appearance of any association, in the public mind, with one political party or another.

AARP does not:

- Endorse candidates, elected officials, or political parties
- Give money to candidates, elected officials, or political parties
- Have or donate to a Political Action Committee (PAC)

AARP does:

- Raise visibility on issues that matter to people 50+
- Work across political and partisan lines
- Take position on issues
- Provide basic information on key 50+ issues
- Encourage AARP members and the general public to exercise their constitutional right to vote

In order to maintain this posture, volunteer leaders of AARP must not:

- Engage in any activities of a partisan nature while representing AARP
- Represent AARP in political party work
- Speak in the name of AARP on legislative issues unless asked to do so by an AARP staff person

Volunteers are representing AARP when:

- They are actively working on a volunteer assignment for AARP
- Their involvement with AARP so closely identifies them with AARP that others will assume any public statement made by the volunteer is made on behalf of AARP

Under these circumstances, AARP volunteers may not express opposition to AARP public policies or positions. If there is no approved policy on an issue, volunteers may not express a position on behalf of the Association.

When outside of representing AARP, you are welcome to contribute to candidate campaigns, display political signs, sign candidate petitions, and attend candidate events, coffees, forums. However, you must not use AARP resources, name and/or logo.

If a volunteer is identified in the local community as an AARP leader, he/she must be very careful that any of his/her activities on behalf of a candidate are not misinterpreted as an AARP endorsement of a particular candidate.

Legislative Advocacy Tips

Remember when contacting your elected officials:

- He or she works for us! When the legislator was elected, we “hired” them. While lobbyists have money, you have a vote. Legislators need to be made aware of problems.
- They cannot help if they don’t know what the problem is. Individual phone calls, letters, faxes, or e-mails are much more effective than petitions.
- Most people are uneasy the first time they call an elected official. As you call more often, they will come to know you and talking to them will get easier.
- Know that the person who answers the phone is almost always a staff member and you may rarely talk directly to the legislator. Legislators listen to what their staff tell them; treat them with as much respect as you would the legislator.
- Each call that a legislator receives probably represents ten (10) other constituents who feel the same way and don’t call. A legislator who receives three (3) or more calls on the same issue is alerted to a problem.
- Visit your elected official in the district. For state officials, it is hard to build a relationship if you see them once in a while in Tallahassee. Get to know them when they are home.
- Know that when you speak to elected officials, you represent AARP – and other members.
- An important part of what you are doing is building a relationship (which takes time).
- Being positive (as well as giving feedback) helps create an opportunity for dialogue.

Ways to increase your impact:

- When you write to a legislator, consider sending a copy to the editor of the newspaper.
- Invite your family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers to get involved and contact legislators.

Know before you go! Things to do when you visit an elected official:

- Make sure to turn off our cell phone.
- Learn the Legislators’ committee assignments and where their specialties lie.
- Know their occupation or something about them – check the House and Senate websites.
- Develop strategies before your meeting, so that when the elected official moves off topic you have bridging comments to bring them back to our message for the visit.
- Arrive on time for appointments. Recognize that you might have to wait.
- Don’t be offended if a legislator is unable to meet and requests that you meet with his/her staff.
- Spend time in developing relationships with Legislative staff.
- Relate situations in his/her home district.
- Ask the Representative’s or Senator’s position on an issue and why.

Legislative Advocacy Tips

- Don't expect Legislators to be specialists. Their schedules and workloads tend to make them generalists.
- Spend time with Legislators whose position is against yours. You can lessen the intensity of the opposition and perhaps change their opinion.
- Know the concerns, arguments and position of the opposition.
- Show openness to the knowledge of counterarguments and respond to them.
- Don't be argumentative or confrontational. Speak with calmness and commitment so as not to put him/her on the defensive. Avoid partisanship, rhetoric and jargon.
- Admit what you don't know. Offer to try to find out the answer and send information back to the office.
- Take a stand on the issues, but stay on message. If you are representing AARP, it is essential that you stay on message on AARP's issues. If you would like to address other issues, set a separate appointment as a private citizen.
- Don't mix messages or make up policy.
- Don't overload a visit with too many issues. Be concise, and have a clear, specific agenda: Oral presentation should be limited to 5-10 minutes.
- Be concise. Elected officials need brief statements and if they feel they need more detail, they will ask for it.
- Don't make promises you can't deliver.

After meeting:

- Don't leave behind hand-written notes, and *never leave behind talking points that are designed to help you address the legislator.*
- Thank the person you meet with at the end of the appointment, and follow up with a thank-you note repeating the key points of your meeting.
- Send a brief report to your AARP staff contact about the visit: including such items as: date you went, which issues you discussed, where the legislator stood on each issue and whether or not they needed additional information.

Remember it is your visits that help to develop a relationship with your legislator. Mailing AARP material, or dropping packets at the legislator's office will not create a relationship. If, after several tries to visit your legislator or their staff, you have not made contact, talk to your AARP staff contact about strategies for securing a visit.

Common Advocacy Tactics

Organizing Communications

Petition Drive/Signature Drive:

This involves asking hundreds or thousands of people to sign on to a statement demanding certain action on your issue. These petitions are then presented to the elected official in a public setting. Use this to show strong and widespread support for your issue in a community, educate large numbers of people one-on-one, and recruit new volunteer leaders. This is a labor-intensive effort, so large numbers of signatures show that people really care. This approach is most valuable if signers include people who tend to vote for the elected official and/or swing voters—and if done in conjunction with other tactics. Lead by AARP Staff.

Legislative Phone Calls:

A well-organized initiative to get members and the public to call their elected officials and express their views on upcoming legislation. Action can be triggered by a mailed alert, a telephone tree, an e-mail alert, offering flyers at every issue campaign event, or offering people in a public place the opportunity to make a call on the spot, using a regular telephone or cell phone (e.g., public hearing, issue forum, or information table at a shopping mall).

Call-in Day:

Organize phone calls into the elected official's office on a certain day. This method can be effective when the elected official has demonstrated that he/she is not listening to your concerns. Monopolizing their office phone lines for several hours offers a way to get the attention of the elected official. Lead by AARP Staff.

Letter-Writing Campaign:

A group of constituents gathers many individual letters raising the same issue and point-of-view, to an elected official or public official. This generally occurs over a fixed period of time. The goal is to get the official's attention, convey voter concern, describe the impact of the issue on individual voters, and persuade the elected official to do the right thing. Use this to show the elected official that you have deep support on your issue (enough to get lots of people to send an old-fashioned letter!) You may decide to collect letters at every place people gather during your issue campaign. This tactic is particularly useful if some of the letters you generate come from the elected official's supporters, or swing voters.

Common Advocacy Tactics

Below are a few of the approaches we use as advocates at AARP.

Issue Education

Information Table:

Use at every meeting or activity, to disseminate simple fact sheets that describe the issue. Also should include an immediate action step, such as signing a petition, calling or writing a letter to an elected official.

Issue Forum / Tele-town hall meeting:

Forum at which a panel of experts educate people/voters on an issue. There's time for comment and action steps are offered (sign petition, write letters to elected official, call elected official). Attendees may include AARP members or the general public.

Lawmaker Briefing:

Useful in presenting lawmakers with your perspective on the issue, and how it affects voters in the district—particularly on issues that are being considered. A small group, not just one individual, attends these briefings.

Testimony:

May be delivered at a public hearing. This is particularly useful if the testimony reveals how proposed changes would affect the lives of people in your community, including the number of people in the community who would be affected. Such testimony may be from “experts” who really know the policy ramifications, or from regular people who understand the issue enough to describe how it affects them personally.

One-on-One Organizing - Issue Education & Action Steps

Friend-to-Friend Action:

Often in an issue campaign, people are asked to take an action step, and also to recruit spouse, neighbors, and friends to do the same. This may be useful if your goal is to involve additional people in the issue campaign, identify additional volunteer leaders, and/or recruit new members to AARP and an issue campaign.

House Party:

This can be used to educate people on your issue, offer an action step, and recruit supporters for an issue campaign. House parties sometimes also are used to raise money.

Use Social Media:

Use when you need to reach a large number of people in a short period of time. Contact an AARP staff member for an pre-approved post on a given issue. Use approved hashtags and links provided by the AARP communications team.

Common Advocacy Tactics

You Go to Them

In-District Legislative Visit:

Citizens meet with their lawmaker to discuss concerns and issue goals, convey the kind of pressure you're organizing, and urge a specific action or vote. This works when you can get a meeting scheduled. Lawmakers include elected members of Congress, state elected officials, governors, mayors, county/city/town council members, school/neighborhood boards, etc.

Lobby Day:

Large groups of people go to the Capitol on the same day, to rally around a pressing issue or issues, and to meet with their individual elected officials about the issue(s.) Lead by AARP Staff.

Public Actions

Demonstration/Rally/March:

This tactic usually is used when a group has little power. It may be helpful in calling attention to your issue or for kicking off your issue campaign. However, if your demonstrators include people who tend to support the elected official, and/or you recruit a very large number of people, this can be a powerful tactic. Done by AARP Staff.

Elected Official Comes to a Meeting on Your Turf

Public Hearing:

People testifying tell their own story about how the issue affects them and that they represent a larger constituency. Good speakers, good turnout and media coverage all are important. Lead by AARP Staff.

Demonstrate Effects on Real People

Gather "Authentic Voices":

Often, people agree to do this if they feel strongly and feel their voice will help win — respect those perspectives. Survivor testimony is useful in visits with elected officials and high profile media events, including public hearings, legislative hearings, press conferences, accountability sessions, etc.