

Guide to Effective Citizen Involvement and Legislative Advocacy



**COLORADO BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE
COUNCIL**

WWW.CBHC.ORG

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Importance of Advocacy



Develop Support for MH & SA with Policymakers

- Educating local officials and legislators about the importance of behavioral health is the first step to ensuring continued support.

Protect and Increase MH & SA Funding

- Grassroots advocacy and effective communication with elected officials is crucial to ensuring behavioral health funding increases and policy objectives are achieved.

Understand the Legislative Process



It is important to understand the legislative process.

This will help you:

- Understand where policymaker's can affect change
- Know when it is important to communicate with your elected officials
- Develop reasonable expectations from the process

What your Elected Officials Can Do For You



- Sponsor legislation to help with a specific issue facing the mental health system
- Offer amendments to current legislation to accommodate specific needs
- Sponsor resolutions/proclamations recognizing the importance of mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Offer and support funding increases

Preparation Prior to Making Contact



Do your homework, and learn about the elected officials you will be meeting:

- Do they support and value mental health and substance abuse treatment
- What are their key issues/interests
- Have they sponsored/supported any behavioral health initiatives in the past

Making Contact



Depending on the reason for making contact, you should choose the most effective method of communication:

- In-person
- Email
- Phone
- Letter/fax

The First Meeting



Depending on the time of year, your first meeting with your elected officials should generally be in-person.

This can be done at their office, or by inviting them to visit your organization.

During the Meeting



- Address the elected official by their title (Representative/Senator)
- Be well informed--know what issues you would like to discuss beforehand
- Be concise and respectful of their time
- Provide written information about your issues and leave them materials about your organization
- Follow-up from your meeting with a thank you note, and any additional information that may have been requested during the meeting.

Meeting With Staff



Staff are a key part of the process!

- Don't decline a meeting with staff in lieu of meeting with the elected official
- Elected officials make decisions on numerous issues, so often rely on their staff to be the subject-matter experts

Opportunities for Ongoing Communication



- Invite staff and elected officials to visit your programs/facilities
- Attend their town hall meetings
- Thank them for supporting specific pieces of legislation/funding increases
- Keep them informed of issues affecting your organization

Written Communication



Written communications can include:

- formal letters
- thank you notes
- email

Learn what types of communication are preferred by your elected officials.

Communication with State-Level Elected Officials



Try to schedule a meeting with your elected officials prior to the beginning of session in January.

Once session begins, your legislators will be very busy from January through the first of May.

During session—be sure to attend in-district town hall meetings as one way to stay connected.

In-Session Communication



The strength of our grassroots advocacy is highly dependent on your connection to your state-level elected officials.

Strategic communication with policymakers will ensure continued support for community-based mental health and substance abuse treatment.

Key to Success—Educate Policymakers about the Importance of Community Behavioral Health



Identify opportunities to continue to **educate** about the importance of community-based behavioral health

- Get on the legislative agenda
 - Mental health and substance abuse treatment providers compete with many other “well-funded” entities and organizations for limited resources
 - Sometimes it takes a crisis or a powerful advocates to attract attention to behavioral health issues

Importance of CBHC Day at the Capitol



- In order to demonstrate the strength of Colorado's community-based mental health system, we must:
 - have a large presence
 - utilize all opportunities to educate policymakers
 - develop a clear message and effective messengers
 - communicate the importance of behavioral health to the larger healthcare system of the state
 - communicate that resources directed to behavioral health are dollars well spent

Getting on the Legislative Agenda



- Efforts such as the organized Day at the Capitol, keep legislators and staff focused on the importance of behavioral health
- To be successful:
 - Focus on personal communication
 - Include well developed and tailored messages

The Current Fiscal Situation and Opportunities



- **Remember:**
 - The current economic situation will be on the mind of the elected official you are meeting
 - Any new spending programs will have little chance of getting much traction as a result of the economic crisis
 - Long-term cost savings do not carry much weight with legislators that need to find immediate cost savings

Goals of CBHC Day at the Capitol



- **Educate** policymakers
- Build and nurture support for behavioral health issues
- Demonstrate the commitment of the community

Policymaker Outreach Strategy



- **Specify the Goal**
 - What specific change or action needs to happen?
- **Identify the target**
 - Which policymaker has the power to make this action happen?
- **Link your issue to the policymaker**
 - What is the policymaker's history of support on your issue?
- **Who is the best messenger**
 - Who in your organization has influence with that policymaker?
(you, a board member, a consumer?)

Developing Effective Messages



- What expertise do you bring to the issue?
- What does the policymaker care about? (What do you have in common?)
- What would keep her from supporting you?
- What will you ask the policymaker to do?
- What does she get if she says yes?

The Big Picture



Term limits have created a dynamic in Colorado where we have many newly elected officials each election cycle.

These newly elected officials generally have a steep learning curve to understand the legislative process, as well as the impact of their votes on the local community.

The Big Picture



Cultivating and nurturing relationships with elected officials and staff is never a waste of time.

Even people who initially appear to have little interest in behavioral health, can end up being a huge asset in the future.

Your Role in the Process



- CBHC cannot effectively carry the message to policymakers without you
- Constituents and community members are the most effective messengers
- Building relationships can have a long-term benefit to help secure resources and additional supports in the future

CBHC Day at the Capitol



- 7:30-8:45 AM—Breakfast and welcoming remarks
 - State Capitol—first floor/west foyer
- 9:00 AM—Observe House and Senate Floor Work
- 10:00—Noon—meet with elected officials/observe committee work
- Noon—Lunch on own/or with elected officials
- 1:30—Budget Updates and Closing Remarks
 - Committee Room-TBD
- 3:00—Adjourn

Logistics



- On Feb 10, check in will be at the State Capitol—1st floor/west foyer area
 - Registered participants will receive a packet and nametag at that time
- Before Feb. 10, Brian Turner will email an agenda for the day and a map of local parking lots that are near the Capitol
- Before Feb. 10—Participants must set up meetings with your elected officials
- If you have any questions before Feb. 10, please contact:
 - Doyle Forrestal—303-832-7594 xt. 11 or dforrestal@cbhc.org
 - Brian Turner—303-832-7594 xt. 10 or bturner@cbhc.org

Resources



The Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council—
www.cbhc.org

Colorado General Assembly—
www.leg.state.co.us