

## Part 5: Media Advocacy



### **Never underestimate the power of the press!**

Not only does the press help shape public opinion, it can also be one of the most influential advocacy tools. Sometimes educating our political leaders alone is not enough to ensure that children receive the attention they deserve. It is important to garner wide-based public support of child and family issues. To do this, the public must be informed and educated about the issues and current proposals. The media play a key role in getting information to the public.

Media is also a great way to get the attention of your policy and decision-makers, from local elected officials to members of Congress. Every congressional office has a dedicated staff person who monitors newspapers in the district or state and clips articles that mention the Representative or Senator by name. These articles are circulated each week. Decisions to support legislative initiatives are often influenced by media coverage. To get the most legislative impact, when you talk to members of the media, refer to your members of Congress or your state and local officials by name, and cite legislation by name and bill number.

What do we mean when we refer to “the media?” The media include many different channels of communication – radios, television, newspapers, magazines and internet. Each of these entities provides different opportunities to reach particular audiences with a specific message. As advocates, it is crucial to understand how the media work and how you can engage the media to further your advocacy agenda. This chapter will address how to most effectively use the media for your purposes, including sections on how to:

- Cultivate a relationship with the press
- Prepare a press briefing kit
- Write letters to the editor and op-ed letters
- Approach editorial board meetings
- Hold a press conference
- Write a press release
- Participate on radio and television talk shows

## **Top 10 Tips for Effective Advocacy Media Relations**

- 1. Stay local.**  
One strong article in your hometown newspaper may be worth 10 in the New York Times.
- 2. Keep it focused.**  
You may have many issues to bring to the media, but stick to one at a time or they will get buried.
- 3. Clip and use your good press.**  
A good article can have a long life. Make sure to send press clippings to your members of Congress, coalition partners, and other decision-makers.
- 4. Don't forget your own media outlets.**  
Take advantage of your coalition newsletters, publications, local radio and cable programs to educate and get others involved in your advocacy efforts.
- 5. Just the facts.**  
Stick to what you know and never exaggerate. Remember, you can always get back to reporters after finding the right answer.
- 6. Don't just say it – show it.**  
A demonstration or real-life testimonial goes a long way to illustrate your point and make it more colorful.
- 7. Build media relationships.**  
Get to know the reporters who cover child and family issues and take time to meet editorial boards. Relationships develop over time.
- 8. Put media relations in your advocacy agenda.**  
Media relations should be a year-round function – part of the “official” functioning of your coalition or organization in its advocacy role.
- 9. Appoint a press spokesperson for your coalition or organization.**  
This contact person must be fully informed about your advocacy agenda to know what to tell and what not to tell.
- 10. Take advantage of all media outlets.**  
Congressional offices may read newspapers most often, but radio and television have a powerful impact on public opinion and should not be overlooked.

## **Cultivate Relationships with the Press**

As with most types of advocacy, “It’s all about relationships.” This is a common theme throughout this guide. Developing good relationships with reporters and other media contacts is an important part of developing a media strategy. You want them to value what you say and give you favorable press. By maintaining contact with reporters who cover stories related to child and family issues, you will be more likely to have them take the time to come to your events, write an extra article, and keep you informed of press opinions on child and family issues that arise.

A good place to start (if you have not already done so) is to create an up-to-date media list of contacts who cover your issues. This is perhaps the most important tool for conducting media advocacy. Developing such a list takes time and the list is always evolving. The following are some hints for getting started:

- **Research media directories.** Local libraries will often have a copy of resources such as Bacon’s Media Directories, Burrelle’s Media Directories, News Media Yellow Book, and Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media. These resources will provide a starting point for creating your local media list.
- **Share a list.** Ask partner groups or coalition members to share their media lists with you.
- **Contact the media.** Call your newspapers, radio and television stations and ask for the appropriate contact person, address, phone number, fax number, and e-mail information. You will want to know who covers children’s issues, public policy and other pertinent topics. Your list should include reporters, producers, editorial writers, news editors, assignment editors, and so on.
- **Follow the media.** Read the newspaper bylines and watch broadcast reports of good stories that cover child and family issues. Add these reporters to your list.
- **Update your list.** Make changes to your list by adding new contacts or updating existing records. Keep a log of your contacts with the media.

- **Provide sign-in sheets.** Have the news media sign in when they attend your press events. This helps you to keep track of which members of the media are following your areas of interest.

### **Press Briefing Kit**

Having a comprehensive media list provides you with the foundation to move forward and incorporate the media in your advocacy efforts. A press kit should be sent, along with an introductory cover letter to all local media contacts.

A press kit is really an information kit that will give a journalist the background information they need. Basically, it is a folder that contains the following elements:

- Recent press releases
- Background material about your agency/company/coalition
- A one-page fact sheet about your agency/company/coalition
- Biographies of your top staff
- Pertinent brochures
- Contact names and numbers

Remember, this is not a sales brochure, but a tool in helping reporters to write their stories.

### **Letters to the Editor and Op-Ed Letters**

Letters to the editor and opinion editorials (op-eds) written by readers are useful ways to speak up on an issue, respond to an article or editorial, or express your opinion in your own words.

A letter to the editor is one of the simplest ways to communicate an opinion to the general public. Depending on the size of your local newspaper, your chances of having your letter printed may vary. On average, many local papers publish up to 80% of the letters submitted. Here are some points to consider when writing your letter.

- Be brief and focused. Focus your letter on just one idea or concept. Limit yourself to 250-300 words. If the letter is too long, the newspaper may edit out some important facts.
- Refer to a recent event or article. If possible, refer to other articles, editorials or letters the newspaper has recently published. This will increase its chances of being printed.

- Include contact information. Include your name, address and phone number so the paper can contact you with any questions and verify authorship.
- Send your letter to your members of Congress and state legislators. This will ensure that they are informed of your opinion on the issues.

A final point to keep in mind when writing both letters to the editor and op-eds is timeliness. Letters are most effective when they are written while an issue is already in the public eye because of either recent or upcoming events. For example, it would be entirely appropriate to send a letter urging elected officials and citizens to take action on issues affecting children the week that the General Assembly convenes and news of what is happening at the Capitol is already a hot topic. That same letter would probably not be as effective if sent in September when legislative initiatives are not on the minds of the readers. This is not to say that these tactics should not be used outside of the legislative session. Letters to the editors and op-eds can be a powerful way to keep the issues in the forefront of the minds of the public and your legislators and policy makers. These are also good tactics to use surrounding a special event being sponsored by your coalition or organization. The point here is that timeliness can influence the impact of your letters.

## **Editorial Board Meetings**

Probably the most powerful way to win support for your issue or reach your member of Congress or state or local official through the media is to gain the editorial support of your local newspaper. This section will help you prepare for meeting with the editorial board of your local newspaper.

### **Setting Up the Editorial Board Meeting**

Begin by calling the publisher, editor-in-chief, managing editor, editorial page editor, editorial writers or the secretary to the editorial page editor. Describe the issue and why you think it is important for the newspaper to support children and families. If the paper is fairly large, you should make your first contact to set up the meeting a week to 10 days before you wish to meet.

### **Before the Meeting**

The meeting will probably take place at the newspaper's office. You will have the opportunity to talk to the key people who deal with your issue and who will hopefully become your primary media contacts.

Get old clippings of positions taken by the paper in the past. The newspaper librarian can be helpful in finding articles pertaining to your issue. Most papers now have websites where you can search for editorials and news stories.

Prepare a press briefing kit to leave with the editorial board after your meeting.

### **During the Meeting**

- Begin your meeting by introducing yourself, your position on the issue, who or what organization you represent, and what you hope to accomplish.
- Explain your current situation and your ideas on how to work toward solving or alleviating the current problem.
- Summarize the newspaper's history of coverage on your issue (citing old clippings), and how you would like to build on this coverage in the future. Share upcoming events that are planned, and invite the newspaper to attend.
- Let your spokespeople (preferably prominent community leaders and/or your organizational leaders, limited to two or three) present their information about the importance of the issues, and then let the board question them. Share why the general public would be

interested in children and family issues and how it could affect them.

**After the Meeting**

Send a thank-you not immediately after the meeting. If the paper writes a favorable piece, send a thank-you note to the writer. Also, share the article with others, including your members of Congress. Even if the paper does not write an article on your issue, ask them to print an editorial or an op-ed for you.

## Holding a Press Conference

Holding a press conference is a major undertaking and should be reserved for a time when there is a significant development on which to comment – such as the creation or launching of a new program, the creation of a coalition, a celebration of a historic event, or the launching of a legislative campaign. This is an effective way to deliver a message once to a large group rather than making multiple individual media calls. When organizing your press conference, keep the following in mind:

- **Pick the date.** Try to find a date for your press conference when there is a “news hook and articles have already been written about your subject. As with most of your advocacy efforts, timing is everything! Also make sure that there is not some big competing event that will attract media attention away from your conference. Avoid conferences on Fridays and Saturdays. Sunday events can sometimes be effective if there are local TV news programs that evening. But in general, try to hold your even on other days during the week.
- **Pick the time.** Press conferences should be held at 10:00am, 11:00am, 1:00pm, or 2:00pm to assure TV news coverage that day and newspaper coverage the following morning.
- **Notify the press.** Let the press know several days in advance about your press conference by sending a Press Advisory. This should include the date, time, and location of the event and very briefly explain its importance. Follow up with phone calls to remind reporters the day before the event.
- **Pick the location.** Choose a room with appropriate space and enough chairs just for those who will attend. It is better to have to add chairs than have empty seats! The room should not be so large that it looks empty. It is also a good idea to provide a visual backdrop by holding the press conference in a location that reinforces the message you want to convey.
- **Select a moderator.** Identify a person to be in charge, make opening remarks, introduce each speaker and field questions.
- **Keep it brief.** Keep all comments to a few minutes at most. You should have no more than three or four speakers, preferably each with an important point of view and different perspective. A press conference is for the media to ask questions, not attend a lecture!

- **Distribute press kits.** You should be prepared to provide information to the attendants. This information should include the press releases you have prepared, the day's agenda, the text of any speeches to be given, background on the issue, and information about the sponsor organization.
- **Provide resource people.** Have a couple of people available to assist journalists before and during the conference to provide them with media kits, manage a sign-in list, direct them to the nearest phone, and handle other last-minute details.
- **Follow up.** After the press conference, call the reporters who attended. Ask them if they need further information and thank them for attending. Be sure to add any new contacts that you made to your media list!

## Writing a Press Release

A press release is the basic means of official communication with the media. A news release is meant to give the **who, what, when, where, why** and **how** of a new story – all the information a reporter needs to determine whether to write an article or otherwise cover your “news.” Here are some tips for writing a winning news release:

- **Provide the name of your organization.** Print the release on organizational letterhead if possible.
- **Provide a contact name and phone number.** The name of the contact person and a phone number should run at the top of the release where a reporter can quickly get more information.
- **Include a headline.** This descriptive phrase gives the reader a capsule phrase summarizing the essence of the release.
- **Include a release date.** This information should be at the top of the release and should tell when the information can be published or broadcast. It can read: “For immediate release” or “Embargoed until [a certain date].”
- **Keep it simple.** Usually one or two double-spaced pages is sufficient. (Put only two or three sentences in each paragraph, using plain language.)
- **Structure of release.** Start with the who, what, when, where, why and how; more information should follow in order of importance.
- **Develop a strong lead.** The first sentence, or the lead, tells the reporter the most important information. It needs to grab his or her attention.
- **Quote a spokesperson.** Quoting someone from your coalition or organization allows reporters to use the quotes directly in their stories.
- **Establish the end.** Editors and reporters look for a “###” or a “-30-” at the end of a release signifying its end.

## Interviewing on Radio and Television Talk Shows

Radio and television are critical ways of delivering a message to a broad audience. And while legislators may typically pay more attention to newspapers than radio and television, local talk shows have become a significant force in politics. Positive television and radio exposure lends credibility to your advocacy position and can raise your issue to a new level of public awareness. As child and family advocates, you are uniquely situated to share your concern and knowledge on a local talk show. The following steps provide guidance on utilizing this form of the media:

- **Arrange an appearance.** Call or write the talk show host or producer. Explain your interest and experience in child and family issues, and outline why people in your community should care. Have a packet of materials ready to provide background information on your organization or coalition and the person interested in appearing on the show. It is preferable to have an upcoming event or a local angle to make your story more attractive.
- **Familiarize yourself with the program.** Learn the name of the host, the show, the station and names of other guests appearing on the day you will be there. Find out whether the interview will be live or taped, if there will be call-in questions, and the length of the interview. Listen (radio) or watch (television) the program to become familiar with the style and positions of the host.
- **Know the format.** Make sure you know if it is a show where guests debate and who you will be debating. If you don't like the format, ask if they can restructure. Otherwise, consider whether or not you will be comfortable with the show.
- **Prepare for the interview.** Write out the most important points you hope to make, including personal stories you want to share, questions you might anticipate, and answers to those questions. Practice communicating this information by role playing with a partner prior to the interview.
- **Conduct the interview.** Remember to dress professionally. Avoid flashy clothing and jewelry. You should bring a brief outline of notes. Speak in a natural, audible tone. When on television, try not to use your notes. Look directly at the host, and not at the camera. Relax and avoid nervous gestures. (Watch non-verbal eye-rolling, etc.)

- **Answer interview questions by stating your main message first.** Follow this with your supporting points. Use the questions as springboards into developing your message. Present your arguments as concisely and enthusiastically as possible. Try to avoid jargon and acronyms. If you do not know the answer to the question, just say so. Don't get defensive or angry, and do not argue with the host.
- **Follow up.** Send a thank-you note to the host or producer of the program. You can often request a taped copy or written transcript of the program for your files.