



# How to Advocate in your State

## Why advocate?

We advocate to:

- Provide a voice
- Foster understanding
- Support policies or a cause
- Defend rights
- Promote responsibility
- Provide a solution for a problem
- Bring change

DEC advocates for the creation and strengthening of policies and positions that support and for the abolition of policies and positions that marginalize exceptional children and their families, service providers, and caregivers.

Advocating is not lobbying. We advocate for/against policies, issues and actions and not for/against individual people. We are bipartisan. We do not make political statements but speak out in support of/against something that aligns with DEC's mission.

## What can advocacy look like?

Advocacy can take many forms. You can advocate in person, through social media, or in written form. Advocacy can be at the local level or statewide. You can advocate for issues important to DEC as well as issues important in your state.

Here are some examples of what advocacy can look like:

- Be familiar with **CEC Legislative Action Center** and how to use it. <http://cqrcengage.com/cek/?0>
- **Keep informed** about issues through DEC <http://www.dec-sped.org/news> and CEC <https://www.cec.sped.org/Policy-and-Advocacy/Policy-Insider-Blog>
- **Share DEC Calls to Action** with your members and other stakeholder groups.
- Make **calls** to your legislators stating support for or opposition to an issue or proposed piece of legislation. Find your legislators at CEC Legislative Action Center <http://cqrcengage.com/cek/?0> or use <https://openstates.org/>
- Send **emails** stating support for or opposition to an issue or proposed piece of legislation. DEC has sample emails and letters you can use.

- Use **social media** to advocate- tagging your officials and using any related hashtags
- **Invite local officials** to your programs, special events, and/or community events
- Attend **town halls** or another event with legislators and bring questions and/or data
- **Write letters** to the editor of your local or state paper with information supporting your position
- Enter **public comment** for a proposed legislation or policy
- Set up **meetings** with your legislators sharing your thoughts. Organize a legislative advocacy day at your state capital and invite members to meet their legislators.
- Make yourself a **resource to others**. Connect with stakeholders, including legislators. Let them know you are available to share information on important issues.

### How to communicate your message

**Develop your message** - What are the facts? Do your research, present facts, and cite evidence. What is a compelling, personal story you can attach to the facts and data? Be clear and concise in conveying the issue and your position. Have a 30 second “elevator speech” in case you get a face to face with a key stakeholder. Ask for what you want.

**Identify key stakeholders** – Networking with allies and those who align with your message will help you mobilize when you determine issues or a problem in your state. Key stakeholders may be legislators; policymakers; federal, state, or local agencies; and community leaders and organizations. Understand who is responsible for what part of your issue. Who else is advocating for or against your issue? Think about how to best connect and engage with those who might be your supporters. Build relationships, mobilize and align with others who share your position.

**Be clear on action and timeline** - Identify timelines for advocacy and opportunities for increased engagement among stakeholders. Know how systems work. Find out about when legislators will be working on committee markups and floor votes.

**Share your message** - Develop a system of communicating with your members and other allies. Use an email distribution list or listserv to share briefs and calls to action with your members. Do as much of the work as you can for your members; make it easy for them by providing a scripted email, letter, phone call or elevator speech. Use multiple methods of communication but prioritize what is easiest or has the greatest impact.

**Follow up** - Be persistent and consistent in your message. Send a thank you note or follow up call if you have a meeting. And stay connected. Take any opportunity you can to build upon these potential relationships. If a stakeholder, particularly legislators, can connect you with your issue they may reach out to you when it comes up in the news or as legislation.