

## **Advocacy-Making a Difference**

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Many of us associate the term of advocacy with negative social connotations, such as conflict, confrontation, even violence. The activity of advocacy could not be farther from the truth! In my opinion, advocacy is as democratic as the flag, Declaration of Independence, Constitution and apple pie. Our right to see a need and find a solution, to be proactive in change, small or large, to put concerns out on the table and influence the public agenda is an important part of being a citizen.

Advocacy is about being vocal, taking a stand, education and educating, information gathering, creation and dissemination. While we are all too busy, overwhelmed by the complexity of problems and issues, perhaps complacent with our past effort, or cynical about the ability to affect change, we all need to join together to collectively impact the systems that develop policy and provide mental health services for our children, youth and families.

When doing advocacy, any group needs to know:

- The issue
- What they want
- How to get it
- What is the message?
- Who will deliver the message?
- How they will know when they have made a change

To prepare to advocate, one must realize that there will be disagreement and accept the place conflict plays in our democracy to resolve issues. Part of advocacy is listening to the official and learning what it will take to build an alliance and reach the goal.

One reason many nonprofit organizations resist involvement in advocacy is fear - fear of not knowing what they can do under their IRS tax exempt status or fear of funding repercussions. In fact, there are clear regulations on what nonprofit organizations can and can't do. In order to determine the regulations your organizations are under, it is important to know if you elected to be governed by the "expenditure test" by filing Form 5768.

In general nonprofits:

- cannot support a specific law
- cannot support a specific candidate
- or contribute to a campaign.

Advocacy is about information exchange and relationship building. It is about people coming together to forge new alliances and use this power democratically to improve our

society, and in our case, to improve the care for our children, youth and families impacted by mental health.

All organizations are encouraged to learn more about advocacy and IRS regulations that apply to your specific tax-exempt status. Once you have identified your limitations, then it is time for your board to develop an advocacy policy. All citizens should use their right to advocate by becoming well informed, understand all sides of the issue, and be credible, responsible and active supporters for the positions you are passionate about.

For more information, I would recommend you contacting the Colorado Organization of Nonprofit Organizations (CANPO) Their website is [www.canpo.org](http://www.canpo.org) Click on "Resource Center" then go into their bookstore.

They have a couple of easy to understand booklets on this topic. I have appreciated the one called Being a Player, A Guide to the IRS Lobbying Regulations for Advocacy Carities, published by the Alliance for Justice. It's on clearance too!

On their website right now they also have a direct link to information about the new Charitable Solicitation Law.

Let me know if you found this information helpful or if you have any feedback.  
Ann