

Getting on the Agenda: Tips for Influencing Policy

Social planning organizations today can ill-afford to ignore policy makers in their efforts to affect positive change. In this issue, SPARC BC presents an approach to getting issues on the political agenda—and keeping them there.

INFLUENCING POLICY MAKERS in their decisions is challenging and oftentimes frustrating for social planning groups. Presented here is one approach to effective policy influence.

A Directed Approach

Collaborate with the right parties. Include experts, advisors to policy makers, and those directly affected by the policy in a collaborative process. Do the groundwork then go forward with concerns, facts, guiding principles, and examples of other successful approaches. Emphasize your willingness to develop reasonable solutions.

Be positive. The culture of Canadian politics is increasingly combative, which is disconnected from the way policy decisions are actually made. Collaboration and strategic compromise are the basis of sound, representative policy.

Be persistent (and polite). In-person meetings are best. Setting up meetings takes persistent phone calls and letters.

Speak to policy makers' local concerns. Policy makers are beholden to their constituencies. Even if policy makers' posts have wider responsibilities, relating issues to their local concerns can further engage them in the process.

Relationship Management

Include government employees in your planning process. Contact policy makers or their direct advisors and invite them into your planning group. Let them see opportunities for collabora-

tion and give them every reason to support your concerns—engage them in the process.

Develop relationships with policy makers. Use every means at your disposal—Board contacts, networks, calls and letters—to create a dialogue with policy makers. Direct, positive contact with policy makers builds trust in and credibility for your organization.

Build networks. A chorus of voices is more likely to be heard. Offer workshops and group meetings to provide 'protected time' for stakeholders to find common ground and set priorities. Provide information resources to the network and keep them up-to-date on the process.

Tend your policy makers carefully. Don't over-stress them. But remember to supply them with local information they can use with confidence in their own speeches and materials. Give them plenty of notice for meetings and events.

Ongoing Support

Work on an issue does not end with a presentation to policy makers. Most times, follow-up letters, calls, and meetings are needed to see a positive policy resolution on the issue. Keep the issue alive by mentioning it in every forum and attract media attention by exploiting contacts and timing news releases to coincide with related newsworthy events. ■

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