

[Your Name]  
[Your Title]

## Involving Political Leaders

Sexual Assault Awareness Month provides an invaluable opportunity for individuals, rape crisis programs, and other organizations to build positive relationships with political leaders. Elected officials deal with a wide range of issues, which can make it difficult for them to completely understand all of these issues. SAAM provides you with the ideal chance to educate them on issues facing sexual assault survivors and the agencies that serve them. By doing so, you are not only building a relationship with your legislator, but you could also be an influential voice in the public policy making process.

Invite your political leaders to agency activities, events and fundraisers. For new and old legislators, this is an opportunity to get to know their constituents better, learn more about your issues, and also gain visibility in the community. Furthermore, having legislators present can help ensure the attendance of the media at your event (see “Involving the Media” Section).

Many programs are apprehensive when it comes to contacting their political leaders. This uneasiness often comes from the confusion around what is and is not lobbying. Lobbying “includes any attempt to influence the passage or defeat of specific legislation by presenting views to people who affect that process, including members of Congress, congressional staff members, state legislators, or city council members” (Sparks, John D. (1997) *Lobbying Advocacy and Nonprofit Boards*. Washington, DC: National Center For Nonprofit Boards, p. 5). While the lobbying efforts of many nonprofits are limited, they are still able to advocate. By advocating, you are educating your elected officials on the importance and impact of sexual violence; you are not persuading them to vote a certain way. There are several ways to involve your political leaders in SAAM activities:

- Host an open house and invite your political leaders to attend. This allows them to see firsthand what services your agency offers and what services are still needed. Have your Board, staff, SART members, and volunteers present and encourage them to have conversations with the political leaders in attendance. Make sure everyone is “on message.”
- Send your political leaders an informational packet for SAAM with up-to-date statistics so they can see that sexual assault does happen and happens frequently in their own districts, to their own constituents.
- Send your political leaders invitations to all of your SAAM activities.

Communicating with your elected officials is easy. All you have to do is visit, write a letter or make a phone call. SAAM is an excellent time to form relationships with elected officials. It is vital that we create a foundation that ensures the needs of sexual assault victims and service providers are heard now and in the future.

### **Visiting Tips**

- ✓ Schedule your visit at least two to three weeks in advance.
- ✓ Be prompt, or better yet, early.
- ✓ Even if your meeting is scheduled to last half an hour, plan to say everything you need to say in the first ten minutes. Meetings are often cut short and you not get as much time as you planned.
- ✓ Bring your three most important points on a one-page memo you can leave for whomever you speak with, as well as a business card or brochure for your organization.
- ✓ Don't dominate the conversation. Allow the official or staff person to make points or ask questions. If that person veers away from your "message", gently bring the conversation back, but don't interrupt or ignore their thoughts.
- ✓ Thank your political leaders for their time and hard work.
- ✓ Send a thank you note within a week of the meeting.

### **Letter Tips**

- ✓ Note that you are a constituent in their district.
- ✓ Keep it short and to the point. Focus on one issue and keep it one page in length.
- ✓ Include accurate facts that can be referred to by the legislator at a later date.
- ✓ Make it personal by providing a story to illustrate your point.
- ✓ Address the envelope "The Honorable\_\_\_," or use "Dear Senator/Representative," whichever applies.
- ✓ Only send an email if time is a factor and the issue requires immediate action.
- ✓ Thank your political leaders for their time and hard work.

### **Phone Tips**

- ✓ Be brief, to the point and polite.
- ✓ You will most likely talk with a staff person who will relay your message.
- ✓ Stick to one issue but answer any questions that are asked.

- ✓ If you are asked a question you cannot answer, say so and offer to get the information.
- ✓ If you are able to visit with your legislator personally, make sure you note with whom you spoke and leave your business card or personal information, including if you are in that legislator's district.
- ✓ Thank your political leaders for their time and hard work.

## **Resources**

NCCASA's resource center has the following materials related to political leaders:

- *Advocating for Your Issue at the State Level.* (2000) N.C. Center for Nonprofits. Audio Tape.
- *Nonprofit-Government Connection: Public Policy Challenges in Shaping a Future Agenda.* (2000) N.C. Center for Nonprofits. Audio Tape.
- P. Kohl, W. Bowen and J. Tolle. *Building Public Support for Your Issue.* (2000) N.C. Center for Nonprofits-Audio Tape.
- *Worry-Free Lobbying for Nonprofits.* (2000) Alliance for Justice; 12 pgs.
- Bob Smucker. *The Nonprofit Lobbying Guide.* (1999) Independent Sector; 144 pgs.
- N.C. Center for Nonprofits. *You Can Lobby: Learning the Laws.* (1999) The Conference Cassette Company-Audio Tape.
- John D. Sparks. *Lobbying Advocacy and Nonprofit Boards.* (1997) National Center for Nonprofit Boards; 16 pgs.
- Willard C. Richan. *Lobbying for Social Change.* (1996) The Haworth Press; 362 pgs.

Helpful website links for locating and working with elected officials:

- NC General Assembly <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/>
- U.S. Senate [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)
- U.S. House [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)
- Charity Lobbying in the Public Interest <http://www.clpi.org/>
- National Council of Nonprofit Associations (NCNA) <http://www.ncna.org/>