

Advocacy for beginners

How to influence change & make a difference in 5 easy steps

This toolkit is for anyone who wants to make a difference — especially if you have no previous experience or you don't know where to start (DYK: if you've ever spoken up for your patients, your profession or even yourself, you've already done advocacy!). We're hoping to inspire you to action with these simple but helpful tips for influencing change and making a difference in the world.

Step 1. Articulate your ask

A cause is easy to articulate — “fighting climate change” is a good example of a cause. But what, specifically, are you asking to change? What is the ultimate outcome you're hoping to achieve? A well-articulated, clear and specific ask is important. It keeps you focused and helps you define success. What change do you want made? What's the desired outcome of this change?

Start with why

Start with why this is an important issue. What is the current situation and who does it affect? What difference would this change make? Who else would benefit from this change?

Make it personal

Tell your story. What does this issue mean to you? What expertise or unique perspective do you offer?

HELPFUL TIPS

- Prepare a short “elevator speech” of 30 seconds or less that sums up what you’re asking for. Practice it on your friends, family or even your cat. You’ll be able to effectively articulate your position whenever the opportunity arises.
- Use plain language and avoid jargon or overly technical or complex information. This makes your messaging accessible, no matter the audience.

Step 2. Gather supporting evidence

Statistics, data and findings from published research or reports (such as editorials or articles from the Canadian Journal of Cardiology) are all examples of evidence that can help support your ask.

Reach out

It can also be helpful to identify any other individuals or groups who are advocating for the same or similar outcomes or who might benefit from this change. Consider reaching out to them to introduce yourself, explain what you’re doing and find out about their approach and any lessons they may have learned along the way.

Letters of support

Another option is requesting a letter of support, particularly if the group or individual is well-known and/or well-respected. This could include the CCS or other professional associations with a relevant mandate. Well-documented success stories in similar situations can also help build your case.

HELPFUL TIPS

- Evidence intended for a clinical or academic audience should be summarized in plain language.
- Anticipate any counterarguments or rebuttals — for example, “we can’t afford it” or “this money wasn’t in our budget”. Try to identify the potential return on investment or the value of making this change.

Step 3. Know your audience

Determine who has influence or ability to make this change. Start with finding out in what jurisdiction this issue managed, for example, is it federal, provincial/territorial or municipal?

Who is/are the key decision makers that have authority to make the change (e.g., your local MP, the provincial Minister of Health, Health Canada, etc.)? Who else might be able to influence this change (e.g., Assistant Deputy Minister, policy advisors)?

Identify the “WIIFM”

WIIFM or “what’s in it for me” drives many decisions, it’s just human nature. And since you’re (most likely) advocating to humans, it counts for advocacy, too!

What is the current mandate or mission of the organization/group/individual you need to speak to? How does your objective align with that? If you can find common ground, you can potentially help them deliver on their mission, which makes your ask more compelling.

Step 4. Choose your channel(s)

Raise awareness on social media

Social media is being used more and more in all levels of politics and policy. It can be a great way to reach out and raise awareness — Twitter being the easiest and most effective option.

LinkedIn can also help raise awareness but be mindful of your employer’s social media policies. If in doubt, include the disclaimer “Views are my own and don’t necessarily reflect those of [my employer].”

Write a letter

A good, old fashioned letter can be a thoughtful and effective option. There are lots of helpful websites where you can look up your MP's name and mailing address of their constituency office. If you're sending a letter to your MP in Ottawa, you don't even need to buy a stamp! Mail may be sent postage-free to any Member of Parliament at the following address:

[Name of Member of Parliament]

House of Commons

Ottawa, Ontario

K1A 0A6

Request a meeting

Reach out by phone or e-mail to request a meeting with your MP, MPP or city councillor. Share your specific objective(s) and desired outcome(s) for the meeting.

Take time to prepare. Familiarize yourself with what they or their party has said or published about the topic. Get to know their role, where they're from (which riding they represent). Think of a way that the pressing or timely issues in their riding or portfolio may relate to your topic. Bring copies of any supporting materials you have.

Don't forget to send a thank you note after the meeting!

HELPFUL TIPS

- Don't forget to tag decision-makers or influencers and include relevant hashtags (e.g., #cdnhealth, #cdnpoli).
- Follow influential organizations or people who may retweet or like your posts. You never know who's paying attention!
- Using social media can invite scrutiny of your previous posts or online presence, so think about removing or making private anything that might make people take you less seriously.

Step 5. Don't give up!

Advocacy isn't easy. If it was, more people would be doing it! It requires patience and persistence to build the connections and relationships you need to make change — years in some cases — and too often people or groups give up before they achieve success. Don't try to do everything at once, share the load if you can and don't forget to celebrate the small wins along the way.

Did you know the CCS does advocacy? Here's one recent example:

When Health Canada stopped covering access to a specific drug through its Special Access Programme, despite clinical indications of its effectiveness and endorsement by expert societies, members of the CCS took action. We worked with the Canadian Heart Rhythm Society and the Chair of the International Society for Adult Congenital Heart Disease and Pediatric and Congenital Electrophysiology Society to request that access to the drug be restored for patients for whom this drug was the best and only option.

Our approach included a joint letter sent to the drug's manufacturer and to Health Canada, as well as follow-up meetings. Our letter included examples of how lack of access to this drug was impacting patients. Our supporting evidence included best practice guidelines from similar societies around the world. Acknowledging the concerns raised when the drug was removed from the program, we suggested a list of strict criteria that must be met for the drug to be prescribed.

As a result, active discussion among clinicians, the drug manufacturer and Health Canada are ongoing with signs of access being restored.

Contact healthpolicy@ccs.ca for more information.

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