

Coalition for Healthy Communities



Community Advocacy Tool Kit

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Steps to Planning a Legislative Event

One of the best ways to get the Coalition for Healthy Communities agenda in front of your legislator is to get your legislator in front of the Coalition family. By planning a media event around a legislator's visit to your community's behavioral healthcare treatment system, your community is taking a significant step toward being represented by a legislator that understands the challenges faced by individuals with addictions and brain disorders and their families.

Now

- Set the date, time and site for the event. Work with your legislator's aide to determine what days and times would be best. Ohio's General Assembly is in session Tuesday through Thursday, allowing most legislators time in their districts on Friday through Monday. The site for your event should be chosen based on its potential impact on the legislator and the media. A drop-in center, clubhouse, treatment center or halfway house gives you an opportunity to help the legislator and the media focus on the positive outcomes associated with access to treatment and support services while a crisis center or emergency services program would help demonstrate the urgency of the need faced by your community.
- Your events should be no longer than 90 minutes.
- Send invitations to legislators. Ideally, the legislator should receive a personal invitation from a key constituent – someone that has a personal connection to the legislator. Once the legislator is committed to the time and date, it should be communicated that this event will be canceled if they cannot attend on that date (unless you have more than one legislator committed.)
- Also send invitations to local officials including county commissioners, the chamber president, probate judges, faith community leaders, union leaders and presidents of local civic groups.
- Make every effort to involve every family and consumer advocacy group that has members in the legislator's district. This should also include treatment providers, support services providers and your local Alcohol, Drug Addiction and/or Mental Health Board.
- When planning the agenda for your event, follow a schedule that would give behavioral healthcare professionals, consumers and family members an opportunity to tell their stories. Try to script this "testimony" so that an accurate picture is presented to the legislator, guests and media.
- Follow up the invitations with a personal phone call and a confirmation letter once confirmation is made. This should also be done for the local officials.
- Develop and make copies of materials to distribute at the event including a fact sheet.

One – Two Weeks Before the Event

- Develop talking points for the event and the order in which people will speak. Include introductions for Legislators. For biographical information regarding Legislators, click on www.house.state.oh.us and www.senate.state.oh.us. Conduct a dry run with event coordinators.
- Draft a news advisory to announce the event and send it to all the daily and weekly newspapers, radio and television reports the week before the event. Follow up with phone calls on the day before the event.
- Arrange for a photographer.
- Arrange for refreshments/lunch to be served.
- Call legislators to confirm their attendance a few days before the event.
- All media invitations should be confirmed with phone calls a week prior to the event and then again the day prior to the event.

The Day of the Event

- Distribute the News Release at the completion of the event. Fax it to those members of the press who did not attend.
- Place signage at all key intersections leading to the facility to insure that everyone that is invited arrives AND to give all participants a sense of attending a very important event. Consider making campaign-style signs and banners to post around the outside of the facility and in the halls and the meeting room where the event will be held. The audience can wear badges advocating for increased access to services (funding) in their community.
- Supply a sign-in sheet so these advocates can be mobilized for other grassroots lobbying activities. Nametags should be provided for all participants. Information table by sign-in should have Board, agency, NAMI, NIMH, etc. information available for participants.

Immediately After the Event

- Send personal thank you letters to all those who helped in the preparation for the event.
- Send thank you letters to all public officials and reiterate your key messages.
- Call the Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities, the Ohio Citizen Advocates and/or NAMI Ohio to share any comments and/or reactions from the Legislators. Include any tips that you would like to share with other communities who are hosting events.

Other Ideas

- If your organization has a newsletter, write an article about the event and include photos. Send a copy of the newsletter to the legislator.
- Send a follow up News Release with a photo of you and your legislator(s) to the local papers.

Sample Event Invitation

(Date)

The Honorable John Doe
Ohio Senate
Statehouse
Columbus, Ohio 43215

or

The Honorable Jane Doe
Ohio House of Representatives
77 South High Street
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0603

Dear (Representative Doe or Senator Doe):

On behalf of the (Event sponsor or name of local event planning committee), I am writing to invite you to attend our (Town Meeting/Community Forum) on (time and date). This will be an excellent opportunity for you to hear from the members of our community -- your constituents -- who are the most closely affected by mental illness, alcohol and other drug addiction.

Reductions in funding, the growing demand for services, and the ever-present Medicaid crisis, are making it increasingly difficult to address the needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens -- those with mental illness, alcohol and other drug addiction. We would like to take this opportunity to share our ideas with you on how we can work together to improve this situation.

At this event, you will have the chance to visit with consumers of services and their families who will share with you their personal experiences living with mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction. You will also meet Board members, staff, and local treatment providers who will convey to you their daily struggles to ensure that they are making the most effective use of limited resources.

During this event, we would also welcome your comments on issues related to behavioral health and would like to hear any thoughts you have on how we can assist you as you work to represent our interests in Columbus.

I will follow up with a call to your office next week to learn of your availability. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your consideration of this invitation.

Sincerely,

(name)

(title)

Sample Media Advisory

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(Date)

For more information, contact:
(Name/phone #)

(Event sponsor or name of local event planning committee) to Host (Name of Event) to Call Attention to the Impact of Behavioral Healthcare Funding Cuts on the Community

Who: Over (approximate number) consumers and advocates of people with mental illness, alcohol and/or other drug addiction will meet with (State Representative/Senator) to share their concerns about reductions in funding for behavioral health and its effect on them. The (name of event) is being hosted by (insert host organization or committee name).

What: Consumers and families will share their personal experiences about living with mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction, while Board members, staff, and local treatment providers will be on hand to talk about their daily struggles to ensure that they are making the most effective use of limited resources to treat these individuals.

When: (Date and time)

Where: (Place)

Why: The purpose of the event is to call attention to the impact that funding shortfalls are having on (County name(s)) and to the members of the community who are affected by mental illness, alcohol and other drug addiction.

An estimated 2.3 million Ohioans suffer from some form of mental illness and approximately 1.1 million Ohioans are addicted to alcohol and other drugs. In (name of board area), there are approximately (___) people receiving publicly funded services and another (___) awaiting services. Gone untreated, these illnesses are predicted to cost Ohio over \$10 Billion in terms of lost work productivity, injuries on the job, hospitalizations, traffic accidents, court hearings, incarceration, cash assistance to adults too impaired to work or hold a job, and removal of children from addicted caregivers.

“Reductions in state funding, the growing demand for services, and, most significantly, the ever-present Medicaid crisis, are making it increasingly difficult to address the needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens – those with mental illness, alcohol and other drug addiction. We welcome this opportunity to share our ideas with our state lawmakers on how we can work together to improve this situation,” said (name of Executive Director of Board or other Committee official).

Sample Media Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(Date)

For more information, contact:
(Name/phone #)

(Event sponsor or name of local event planning committee) Hosts (Name of Event) to Call Attention to the Impact of Behavioral Healthcare Funding Cuts on the Community

(City), Ohio – Over (approximate number) consumers and advocates of people with mental illness, alcohol and/or other drug addiction met with (State Representative/State Senator) today to express their concerns about the emerging funding crisis and its effect on them. The (name of event), was hosted by the (insert host organization or committee name).

Consumers and families shared their personal experiences about living with mental illness, alcohol and other drug addiction, while Board members, staff, and local treatment providers spoke of their daily struggles to ensure that they are making the most effective use of limited resources to treat these individuals.

“Include a compelling quote here from a consumer,” said (consumer’s name and any other relevant information regarding the consumer and his or her current situation).

“We appreciate the time (State Representative/State Senator) spent today to meet with us to learn about the challenges Ohioans who cope with mental illness, alcohol and other drug addiction face everyday,” said (name of Executive Director of Board or other Committee official).

“This event provided the opportunity for us to educate our policy makers and others in the community about the impact that cuts in behavioral health are having on our system. Over the past few years, our community has (include information here on how your community has been impacted by cuts already taken, such as cutting back on services, reducing services for Non-Medicaid eligible clients despite their need for treatment, increasing the waiting lists for children to receive services, cuts in Medication, etc. State that additional cuts will result in the further erosion of services, etc. If appropriate, conclude with a sentence that states something to this effect: No doubt, these cuts in services are contributing to the increase in crime, unemployment, and demand for social services in our area.),” said (Name of Executive Director).

Sample Event Agenda

Welcome	Board President	6:00 p.m.
Overview of Local Services	Board/Provider CEO	6:05 p.m.
Advocacy and Training Update	NAMI Rep./ Ohio Citizen Advocate Rep.	6:15 p.m.
Legislator(s) Comments	Legislator(s)	6:30 p.m.
Consumer/Family Testimony*	MH Consumer/Family Member AoD Consumer/Family Member	6:45 p.m.
Q&A	Audience	7:15 p.m.
Close/Acknowledgements	Board President	7:30 p.m.

* Testimony of consumers/family members should be tightly orchestrated. Individuals should be recruited based on the issue upon which they can testify. Examples of issues to be touched on include; housing, criminal justice problems, parity/private insurance, services to help consumers when caregiver is unable to provide care, elderly/neglected populations, treatment resistant, consumer receiving adequate mental health services, access to community support services, access to inpatient/crisis care, and access to long term hospital care. Testimony should be in writing and time limited.

Sample Thank You Letter

(Date)

The Honorable John Doe
Ohio Senate
Statehouse
Columbus, Ohio 43215

or

The Honorable Jane Doe
Ohio House of Representatives
77 South High Street
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0603

Dear (Representative Doe or Senator Doe):

I want to express my sincere appreciation to you for attending the (name of event) earlier this week. It was a tremendous opportunity for us to familiarize you with our system and to share our concerns regarding future funding for mental health, alcohol and other drug addiction services.

I urge you to support efforts at the state level that will result in improved mental health, alcohol and drug prevention, treatment and support services and greater accessibility to those services for the people in our community.

I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead. Please do not hesitate to call me if you have any questions or concerns relating to behavioral health.

Sincerely,

(name)

(title)

Tips for Talking with Your Legislator

Keeping in mind that your goal is to develop an on-going personal relationship with your elected representatives, as well as to influence their position on specific issues or bills, here are a few things to remember when speaking to them:

- Know who your legislator is before making initial contact on an issue.
- Find out what legislative committees your legislator serves on.
- Do not be intimidated. Legislators will view you as the expert on the issue.
- Make the legislator care about how mental health and addiction services consumers and providers feel, what they believe and what they want.
- Share your personal story if it helps to make your point.
- Do not assume that your legislator understands the issues surrounding the community alcohol, drug addiction and mental health system. Take the time to educate him/her. Do not use jargon.
- Know your issue. Provide facts and figures to back up your position.
- Remember all causes are good causes. You must convince your legislator that there is something extra special about yours.
- Don't debate with a legislator or give ultimatums such as "I won't vote for you if you do not support my position". Respect the legislator's right to disagree with you.
- Know your opposition. Be able to address the objectionable part(s) of the opposition stance directly and effectively, using verifiable examples and statistics.
- Put the legislator at ease by convincing him/her that you are there to serve as an educational resource. Act like a partner, not an adversary.
- Put broad policy issues in a local perspective. Legislators who know how issues will impact local voters tend to grasp ideas more easily and are generally more receptive.
- Be a good listener and hear out what your legislator has to say on the issue.
- Be sure to thank the legislator for taking the time to hear your position.
- Once a legislator gives you a commitment, it is all right to check back with him/her later. Do not badger him/her with phone calls.
- Do not be disappointed if your legislator sends an aide. Aides are critical to the process.
- Spend your time working with legislators who haven't made up their minds.
- Be brief; prepared; clear; honest; accurate; persuasive; timely; persistent; and grateful.
- Always follow up with a thank you note, and amplify your main points.
- When your legislator goes the extra mile, you may consider acknowledging his or her efforts by writing a letter-to-the-editor in your local paper.

Tips for Working with the Media

In many ways, the rules that apply to educating your legislator also apply to members of the media. In each case, it is easy to become unnecessarily intimidated, and you must remember that these "experts" need us to provide the information required for their job. Develop your media relations' plan by focusing on establishing relationships and crafting a consistent message and repeating it in all your communications.

- Press Releases should be brief, concise double-spaced and contain name and phone number of a contact person. They should be written in the third person, using quotes if applicable.
- Wait one day and then follow – up on your Media Advisory with a phone call. Be persistence. If the journalist is not available, ask for the Photo Desk.
- When speaking with the journalist, ask if this is a good time to talk. If not, schedule a time to call back.
- Keep in mind that many reporters do not get in until 10:00 a.m. Also, do not call after 4:00 p.m. as most journalists are up against a deadline by this time.
- Be upbeat, energetic and excited about your event. State the reasons why you think the event is important and ask if the journalist has any questions.
- Be a good resource to reporters; develop personal rapport with members of the press.
- Include contact information on the Media Release of someone who is available after 5:00 p.m. and include a website address.
- Develop a Media Kit to distribute at the event and include a copy of the Media Release. Include information regarding the number of adults and children served by the local behavioral health system, a list of local programs, and the sources of funding.
- Line up a spokesperson and individuals to be interviewed ahead of time.
- Don't be afraid to say you don't know or you aren't sure. Get back to the reporter with the requested information, if you don't have it
- Greet the journalist when he or she arrives at the event.
- Be sensitive to privacy and confidentiality of those present. Do not let the journalist roam around.
- If you are expecting the television media to be present, remember to keep the event visual and think in terms of 7-8 second sound bites.
- Fax copies of the Media Release to those members of the media who were unable to attend the event. Follow up with them and invite them to do a related story.
- Small dailies or weekly community newspapers are always looking for local news items. Be sure to send them your press releases. Get to know the editor of the local newspapers.

For more information or assistance in
planning your event, please contact:

The Ohio Association of County
Behavioral Health Authorities
42 E. Gay Street, Suite 1600
Columbus, Ohio 43215
(614) 224-1111

...or

Ohio Citizen Advocates
For Chemical Dependency Prevention & Treatment
1350 W. Fifth Ave. - Suite 327
Columbus, OH 43212
(614) 486-2430
1-888-229-1285 Toll-free

...or

NAMI Ohio
747 E. Broad Street
Columbus, Ohio 43205
(614) 224-2700