



# GRASSROOTS IN A DIGITAL AGE



## Engaging Legislators and Building Relationships

**Melissa Anese**  
Government Relations Associate  
County Commissioners Association  
of Pennsylvania

**A**s elected officials, commissioners and legislators share one common goal—to aid in the development of policy that positively impacts the lives of their constituents. This shared interest is consistent and does not change, even when put up against a global health pandemic, social justice movement or economic recession. At the end of the day, the goals are the same and people look to government to make those tough decisions.

That said, there are a lot of voices out there driving policy. How can you be sure to have your voice heard? The voices of those in your county and communities? While it may seem like a big task in the day-to-day job, grassroots advocacy really is habitual. It's about building relationships, making connections and establishing rapport.

Often advocacy is thought of in terms of visiting the Capitol in Harrisburg and having that face-to-face meeting with your local legislator. In reality, the conversations that matter are the ones that are had more regularly and more as a coworking effort than a grand gesture. In the hyper-technologically focused time we find ourselves, particularly with the need to continue to communicate at a distance, grassroots advocacy can be a phone call, text, email, weekly webcam meeting, even a messenger pigeon on a fixed route!

Staying engaged with legislators and the administration has never been easier, but as we all shift to digital communications, it is critical to ensure your voice is heard. There are several tips and tricks to grassroots advocacy in a digital age that can be helpful, whether you're a novice or a pro: introduce yourself, be considerate and consistent, and make the local connection.

### **MAKE THE LOCAL CONNECTION**

Remember, at the end of the day you represent the same people. Be able to share local stories that support whatever it is you are discussing, especially if it is an ask of the legislator to make a case for funding or an important piece of legislation. Counties are connected to the people on the ground and the insight you have is extremely valuable.

### **INTRODUCE YOURSELF**

Say hello! You may or may not know your local legislators very well for a multitude of reasons. The first step in establishing that relationship is to reach out, explain who you are and what you do. This can be with a phone call to their district office, an email, or at a public event. Make sure to give them your contact information and offer to be a resource. Even if you know your legislator well, it might be time to just say hi and check in if you haven't in a while.

### **BE CONSIDERATE AND CONSISTENT**

You are building a relationship that is a two-way street. It is important to maintain regular contact, not only to reach out when you need something, and vice versa. Regardless of political ideologies, it is important to have discussions and foster the relationship even if you do not always agree.



## THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

CCAP offers a number of tools to help counties make a difference with grassroots activity and other advocacy on priorities, the state budget and many other bills under consideration by the General Assembly that impact county government. At [www.pacounties.org](http://www.pacounties.org), the Government Relations webpage and Legislative Action Center offer resources such as fact sheets, talking points, sample letters and background information.

### Grassroots Toolkit

This toolkit holds a host of good tips and tricks, from strategies for effective communication to human services advocacy advice. It also features a crash course in the Pennsylvania legislative process.

### Legislative Information

The Legislative Action Center serves as a reference page to link you out to the General Assembly website. You can find contact information for Pennsylvania House and Senate members as well as other commonwealth employees.

### Guidelines for Organizing Legislative Visits

This quick one-pager helps to guide the process of setting up meetings in the county. These could be a sit-down meeting in an office or a guided tour of a county facility. Organizing meetings is more than just logistics, but also careful consideration and preparation of the goal of the meeting.

### Articles on Special Topics

Often articles related to tips, tricks and best practices are featured in the CCAP magazine, Pennsylvania County News. For quick access, some also can be found on the Legislative Action Center. Some topics include legislative engagement, messaging and speaking skills, connecting with media, and how to explain what counties do.

### Legislative Bulletin

The bi-weekly Legislative Bulletin keeps counties up to date on the latest news from the Capitol, including information on recent bill movements, hearings and events. While the bulletin is good reading material to stay in the know, it also is a way to keep members informed of issues going on in Harrisburg. The topics in the bulletin can make for great conversational pivot points with legislators.

### Resources and Reports

Ever wonder where you can find repository information on older or ongoing legislative issues? Perhaps you are looking for guidance on a new Act. This newer edition to the CCAP Government Relations website serves as a landing page for issues ranging from transportation and the hotel tax to election reforms, human services information and the EMS Task Force.

### Priorities

Each year the CCAP membership selects several issues that rise to the top of the legislative agenda for that year. The Priorities webpage hosts resources including fact sheets, talking points, sample social media posts and even a specialized planning guide that can be used for grassroots activities with legislators.

### Budget

The state budget process can be a lot to handle and understand. The CCAP Budget page is an excellent hub of information on the Pennsylvania State budget. You even can register for budget news updates, review spreadsheets or read an analysis of the items critical to counties.

As always, the CCAP Government Relations team is available to help out too. Please don't hesitate to reach out to any of the team members directly via the contact information on the Government Relations webpage or through email at [pacountiesGR@pacounties.org](mailto:pacountiesGR@pacounties.org). Now, get ready, get set and go out and start the discussion! ▼