



COHHIO Statehouse Advocacy Toolkit

2024





Dear Advocates,

Thank you so much for taking extra time out of your busy schedules to participate in COHHIO's 2024 Advocacy Day!

COHHIO's advocacy team put together this toolkit to prepare you for the event. In this document, you will find tips on conducting meetings, an overview of logistics related to Statehouse days, advice on engaging lived experience advocates, and other helpful tips and advice.

Statehouse Day is an opportunity to meet with lawmakers to highlight all the wonderful things you are doing to combat homelessness and promote affordable housing in your communities. This event is also a way to politely demand that our policies in Ohio should support housing investments and evidence-based best practices needed to prevent and end homelessness. This toolkit focuses on preparing you to effectively meet with your elected officials to positively influence their perspectives. The information provided is also applicable to advocacy efforts, such as presenting testimony before a state or local legislative committee.

We also hope you will use this Statehouse Day as an opportunity to connect with other advocates and most importantly, have fun! Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have questions! See you on Cap Square!

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1 What is Advocacy and Why does it Matter?

A healthy democracy requires active participation from all levels of society. “Ordinary” citizens are the grass roots that nourish the plant so that it can grow.

Advocacy requires passion, patience, persuasion and persistence.

Advocates stay focused on their objective as they push policymakers and the public to support their position on a specific issue. This can take many different forms, such as:

- An informal coffee break with your city council member
- Testifying at the Statehouse on a piece of legislation
- Sending an e-mail to your member of Congress
- Drafting changes to existing policies, laws, and budgets
- Educating policymakers’ staff about the need for new programs.

The bottom-up approach works. Your voice matters!

PEOPLE HAVE KNOWLEDGE

Few elected officials have any experience with housing insecurity. You might be their only exposure to homelessness issues and the affordable housing crisis. Explaining your work or sharing your personal story could be the key that opens the door for necessary change.

POLITICS ARE LOCAL

Politicians care about their constituents – the voters who will decide whether or not they get another term in office. Hearing from local constituents can be pivotal in forming their position, especially when they get the same message from a variety of individuals with different backgrounds who are all unified around one issue that ties directly into local politics.

Is Advocacy Lobbying?

Nonprofits can legally engage in advocacy to educate the public and government officials. Lobbying is a kind of advocacy activity aimed at influencing the outcome of legislation. For example, expressing a position of support or opposition to a specific bill or amendment.

501(c)(3) nonprofits and their members are legally allowed to engage in lobbying to support their charitable missions, as defined by the IRS. However, lobbying may not constitute a “substantial part” of the organization’s activities. In addition, 501(c)(3) nonprofits may not support or oppose specific candidates or political parties.

2 Preparing for the Meeting

Educate yourself on your audience – who are the key legislators involved?

Determine your asks keeping the reality of Ohio's political climate in mind.

Research your issue – what have other states done, current and past policies?

Stay engaged in current affairs – read news, blogs, op-eds, etc. to know what's at the front of legislators' minds.

Develop simple and effective message.

Evaluate your arguments and get feedback. Fine-tune the message.

Have a plan: Expect meeting to last only 15 minutes regardless of scheduled time.

Find out if your legislator holds a leadership role and if they sit on a committee that has jurisdiction over any of the policy issues you are advocating about. This will impact your policy request. Important committees include the Senate Finance Committee, House Finance Committee, Senate Select Committee on Housing, etc. COHHIO will work with you to identify these Statehouse members.

Gather materials with local information to help build a strong argument. Elected officials are most interested in how policy issues directly impact the people in their district. Bring materials with local information that briefly describe what your organization has accomplished, share data that demonstrate outcomes, and concretely explain why your program works and how the policy issues directly affect peoples' lives.

- Example: highlight the effectiveness of the Housing First approach in your community by sharing housing retention rates.
- Write down one or two real stories about your provider experience or lived expertise that might illustrate the needs in your community.
- COHHIO will always try to provide district fact sheets for each district. Local data can help further provide context for decision-makers.
- Anticipate questions you may be asked. Why is homelessness increasing? Isn't it a result of individuals' bad choices? Why should the state be involved?
- Take notes. Before your meeting, designate an advocate to keep track of what's being said in each meeting.

3 During the Meeting

Use the “Meeting Agenda Worksheet” (see Section 6) to plan your meeting. Determine what each person in the meeting is going to say. Run through the agenda and even role play the meeting a few times. Everyone should feel comfortable and prepared for possible questions and responses from the Member or staff person.

It is crucial that you run a “tight” meeting and stay on focus with the agenda. (See the detailed Meeting Agenda Worksheet in the Appendix.) Be friendly, but get to the point. The role of your team leader is to help ensure things run smoothly and that everyone in the group has the opportunity to participate.

Here are some general tips to have an effective, successful meeting:

- **Be punctual.** Arrive at the office at least five minutes prior to your meeting. Make sure you have enough time between meetings to get there.
- **Have a clear and a concise message.** Elected officials work on dozens of very different issues. They’re most likely to remember a brief, clear message.
- **Personalize the need and your request.** Stories that illustrate the circumstances for real people can mobilize elected officials to take action. You will have a better chance of success if you can make a personal connection that makes them care.
- **Never argue,** even if you encounter misinformation or an entrenched position. And avoid partisan politics. Stay polite and try to find an area of agreement, even if it is small. Don’t burn the bridge; you might need their help in the future.
- **Diversify your approach.** Try to get your message across in a variety of ways. Be creative in thinking about new tactics. Use arguments based on data and emotional appeals based on personal experience.
- **Focus on one or two policy issues or requests.** If you bring a laundry list of concerns to your meeting, it will dilute the importance of everything discussed.

Remember to debrief afterwards. Gather your team together and share what you learned, including: which legislators and staffers seemed supportive or unsupportive of your issue, what you learned about the prospects for your bill, next steps, etc. If you can’t gather your team after, then designate someone to compile everyone’s feedback. This is where your notetaker can really make a big difference, too.

4 After the Meeting

Following up after the meeting helps solidify your message and your request in the legislator's mind, and reminds them to follow through with any commitments they may have made during the meeting.

Ideally, try to follow-up within 24 hours. However, it is never too late to send a follow-up email or handwritten note after a meeting. This promotes an open line of communication and will be helpful when you are ready set up another meeting in the future.

Send the legislator or the appropriate staffer a "thank you" letter by mail or email. Thank them for meeting with you and for their commitment. Don't forget to:

- Summarize any key points covered or discussed during the meeting.
- Outline action items and assign roles as well as deadlines for next steps.
- Attach or link to any relevant resources, articles, and documents that are relevant to your conversation.

Keep in Touch!

Maintain contact with the legislator and the staffers you spoke with in the coming months. One way to do this is to send them news articles that are relevant to your conversation and the issues you discussed.

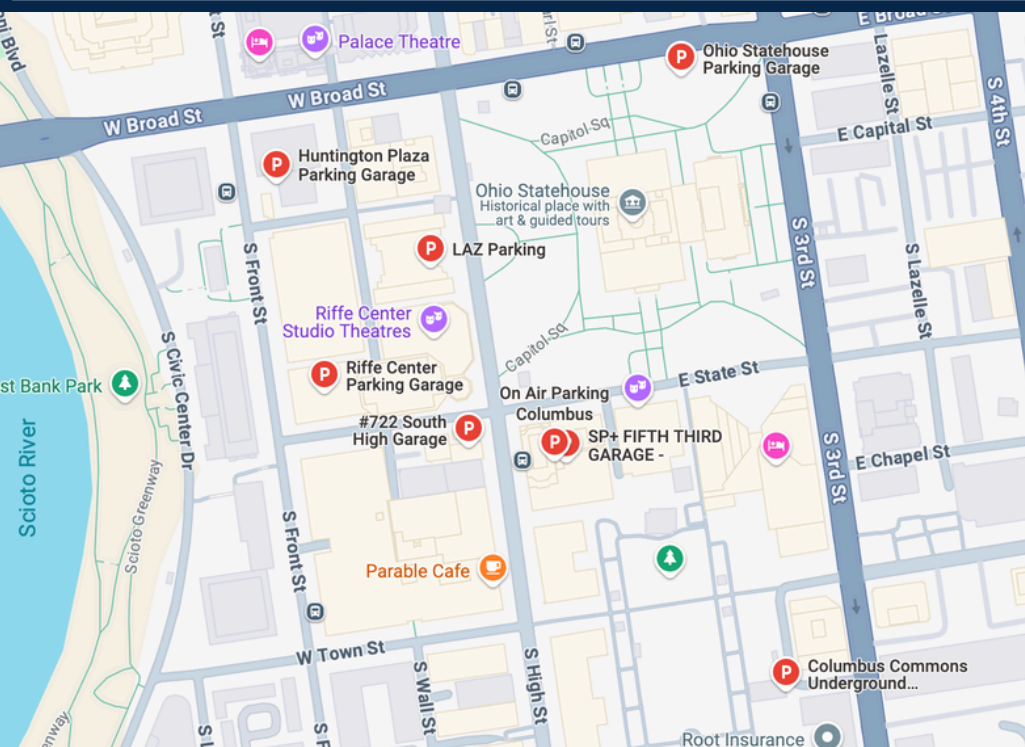


5 Navigating Capitol Square

State Representatives have offices in the Riffe Center (the office tower on the corner of High St. and State St.) State Senators' offices are in the Senate Building, which is connected to the Statehouse by the Atrium (its front doors face Third St.).

Parking: The most convenient place to park is the underground garage directly underneath the Statehouse at 1 Capitol Square, Columbus, OH 43215. Vehicles can access the Statehouse parking garage from Broad Street, State Street and Third Street (there is no High Street entrance.) If the Statehouse garage is full, there are other garages nearby, including the Huntington Center (37 W Broad St, Columbus, OH, 43215), which has the parking entrance on Front Street, and the Columbus Commons Garage (55 E. Rich Street, Columbus, OH, 43215).

Security: You will be required to scan your belongings and pass through a metal detector before entering both the Statehouse and the Riffe Center. REMEMBER to bring your ID. If you are entering the Riffe Center for a legislative meeting, you will need to get a pass from the security desk on the first floor main entrance before passing through the metal detectors. Sometimes there are crowds so we highly recommend arriving at least 20 minutes early for any scheduled meetings to allow time to park, go through security and locate your meeting room.



Find My Legislator

Who are my state legislators?

- [Ohio legislative maps](#)

Where is my Representative's office and contact info?

- [Ohio House Directory](#)

Where is my Senator's office and contact info?

- [Ohio Senate Directory](#)

6 Meeting Agenda Worksheet

1. Introductions (BRIEF)

- All attendees introduce themselves and their agency and say one or two sentences about their involvement with the issue of homelessness. If there are more than three people in the meeting, a previously designated chair might want to do the introductions.
- Mention any positive relationships or prior experiences you've had with your legislator.

2. Purpose of the meeting

- "We are here today to talk to you about the local progress being made in (CITY/STATE) to implement solutions to homelessness and how we can work together to advance our progress. Specifically, we ask that you work in support of..." (RELEVANT POLICY ISSUE).

3. Thank the legislator for something

- What is the senator's/representative's history of support on this issue? If possible, thank them for something specific. For example, co-sponsoring a bill or working to support legislation, voting to increase federal funding for key programs, or visiting your program recently.
- "We would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your dedication to supporting policies that will allow us to better address homelessness in..." (COMMUNITY).

4. Tell local stories of personal and community-wide success

- Members are more likely to support your request when you can demonstrate how much you have accomplished with the resources that you have. This shows that you can put the resources to good use.
- Share any community or program-related outcome data. Describe what you do, and concretely explain why your program works. Relate the policy issues to your community's success.
- Tell the story of how you (or someone you know) benefited from a local homeless assistance program.
- Discuss the involvement of interested partners in the community who have come together in your local movement to end homelessness (i.e., business owners, community organizations, local leaders/elected officials).

6 Meeting Agenda Worksheet (cont.)

5. Describe how this policy issue will impact people and programs in your community

- Discuss the number and types of individuals, families, or youth who would benefit from the policy, and some details or examples of how they would benefit.
- COHHIO can help you decide what to say if you are not sure.

6. Make a SPECIFIC ask

- “We ask that (SENATOR/REP. X) support a specific funding level for a program in the appropriations process, co-sponsor legislation, send a letter, join a sign-on letter, etc...”

7. Response from legislator/staff

- Think about what questions you expect the legislator to ask based on past contact with them.
- If the meeting is with a staff person (not the legislator), the staff person will have to ask his/her boss before giving you an answer. Ask when you can follow up with them.
- If the legislator is there, you should ask, “Who on your staff can I follow up with?”

If, in response to your specific ask, you get a ...

- Yes, then say: “Wonderful, thank you!”
- Maybe, then ask: “Is there any additional information I can provide to help you decide?”
- No, then say: “Is there a reason why you will not do this? Is there any information I can provide that might address some of your concerns?” (This is a good way to keep the lines of communication open).

8. Closing

- Summarize any commitments made by the legislator/staff.
- Repeat any questions you need to answer in follow up that you couldn't answer in the meeting.
- Invite them to see a local program the next time they are at home.
- Thank them and ask when and with whom you should follow up.

7 Additional Resources

The following fact sheets and reports are intended to provide you with additional background and data to help prepare you for your meetings. Some may be appropriate to share with legislators and staff, but use discretion. Flooding legislators with too much information will dilute your message.

- **Out of Reach Report:** NLIHC's annual report detailing the difference between the cost of rent and what renters earn. The data is broken down by county.
- **The Gap Report:** NLIHC's annual report detailing the shortage of housing available to extremely low income renters. (**State Housing Profile** with Gap data)
- **Ohio Housing Needs Assessment:** The Ohio Housing Finance Agency's online report provides a wealth of county-level data about housing insecurity, the lack of affordable housing, and other housing-related challenges.
- **About the Ohio Housing Trust Fund:** COHHIO's fact sheet on the primary source of state funding for local homelessness and housing assistance programs.
- **What You Need to Know About Homelessness:** NAEH's general fact sheet about homelessness.
- **Johnson v. Grants Pass:** COHHIO's fact sheet on the Supreme Court's ruling and efforts to criminalize homelessness.
- **What is Affordable Housing?:** COHHIO's fact sheet on affordable housing.
- **Reducing Homelessness with Housing First:** COHHIO fact sheet provides an overview of the Housing First approach with recommendations for legislators to improve services.

