

Government Relations & Communications — A Primer for Social Good Organizations

Navigating the complex world of government relations and communications can seem daunting, especially for social good organizations focused on creating positive change. This step-by-step guide is designed to simplify the process, providing you with practical insights and strategies to effectively engage with government officials and communicate your mission to key stakeholders. Whether you're aiming to influence policy, secure funding, or raise awareness for your cause, this primer offers the tools you need to make an impact.

It's important to remember that not every organization will need to follow each step outlined in this guide. Your goals, resources, and unique circumstances will determine which strategies are most relevant to you.

Use this guide as a flexible framework — adapt the steps that resonate with your needs and skip those that may not apply to your current situation. The ultimate aim is to empower your organization with the knowledge and confidence to navigate government relations and communications effectively.

Step 1: Define Your Objectives

Clarify Your Goals

- Identify what your organization is aiming to achieve. Are you trying to:
 - Influence policy and legislation?
 - **Objective:** Shape or influence the creation, modification, or repeal of laws, regulations, and policies that impact the organization's interests or the community it serves.
 - **Example:** Advocate for changes to environmental regulations that align with your organization's sustainability goals.
 - Raise awareness of key issue?
 - **Objective:** Educate government officials and the public on important issues related to the organization's mission.

- **Example:** Launch a campaign to highlight the need for increased funding for mental health services in your neighbourhood.
- Secure funding or grants?
 - **Objective:** Obtain financial support from government programs or initiatives to fund the organization's projects or operations.
 - **Example:** Advocate for more government grants that support community development projects.
- Increase your organization's visibility?
 - **Objective:** Position the organization as a thought leader and key stakeholder in discussions about relevant public policy.
 - **Example:** Participate in government consultations or advisory committees to represent the organization's viewpoint.
- Foster collaboration or partnerships?
 - **Objective:** Develop collaborative relationships with other organizations, government agencies, and stakeholders to achieve common goals.
 - **Example:** Form alliances with other non-profits and government agencies to jointly advocate for social justice issues.

Target Audience

- Determine the audience you want to reach. This could be voters, candidates, policymakers, the media, or your internal personnel, such as your staff, volunteers, or board members.

Step 2: Understanding Government Relations

Understanding government relations is key to driving meaningful change in the public sector. It's about building relationships, influencing policy, and ensuring your organization's voice is heard by those in power. By engaging strategically, you can help shape decisions that align with your mission and create lasting impact for the communities you serve.

There are two key components of government relations that are most beneficial for non-profits and smaller organizations:

Lobbying

Lobbying is the act of attempting to influence decisions made by government officials, often legislators or regulators.

- **Direct Lobbying:**
Direct interaction with policymakers or their staff to advocate for specific legislation or regulation.
- **Grassroots Lobbying:**
Mobilizing the public or members of an organization to contact policymakers to influence legislation.

Advocacy

Advocacy involves activities aimed at influencing public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems.

- **Public Campaigns:**
Utilizing media, social platforms, and public speaking to raise awareness and support.
- **Coalitions:**
Forming alliances with other organizations to strengthen your advocacy efforts.

Step 3: Understanding How Government Works

To effectively engage in government relations, it's essential to have a solid understanding of how government operates, particularly in British Columbia. This step will guide you through the structure and functions of government, providing you with the foundational knowledge needed to navigate the political landscape.

Understand the levels of government:

Federal, provincial, and municipal governments are responsible for — and provide services around — different issues and functions within our society. [Learn more about the roles of governments here.](#)

Before engaging with any level of government you have to be able to answer these questions:

- What level of government has jurisdiction over your issue? (ie: Is this a local issue, provincial issue, or federal issue?)
- What department or departments do we need to engage with?
- Who are the decision makers in these departments?
- Who are the influencers?

Familiarize Yourself with Key Players:

It's crucial to understand the roles and responsibilities of key players in government. Here is an overview of these roles in British Columbia:

- **Premier**
 - **Role:** The Premier is the head of the provincial government in British Columbia, equivalent to a Prime Minister at the federal level. The Premier

leads the Executive Council (Cabinet) and is the chief decision-maker in the province.

- **Influence:** The Premier sets the overall government agenda, prioritizes issues, and often has significant sway over legislative priorities and policy direction.

- **Cabinet Ministers**

- **Role:** Cabinet Ministers are appointed by the Premier and are responsible for specific government departments, known as ministries (e.g., Health, Education, Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation). They develop policies, oversee the implementation of laws, and manage the day-to-day operations of their respective ministries.
- **Influence:** Ministers are key decision-makers within their portfolios and are often the most direct point of contact for organizations seeking to influence specific policies or programs. They have the authority to propose new legislation, allocate funding, and set departmental priorities.

- **Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)**

- **Role:** MLAs are elected representatives who serve in the BC Legislative Assembly. They represent the interests of their constituents, debate legislation, and hold the government accountable. There are 87 MLAs in British Columbia — this will increase to 96 after the 2024 election.
- **Influence:** MLAs can be powerful allies in advancing your organization's objectives, especially if they represent a constituency that is directly affected by your issues. Building relationships with MLAs can help in gathering support for your cause, influencing legislation, or advocating for specific community needs.

- **Opposition Parties and Critics**

- **Role:** Opposition parties, led by the Leader of the Opposition, provide alternative policies and hold the government accountable for its actions. Critics within these parties shadow specific ministers and focus on particular portfolios.
- **Influence:** While they don't have the same decision-making power as the governing party, opposition members can influence public debate, introduce private member's bills, and bring attention to issues that might not be on the government's radar. Engaging with opposition parties can be useful for amplifying your message and gaining broader political support — and remember, it's always good to prepare for the eventuality of a different party forming government, especially during election years.

- **Public Servants and Bureaucracy**

- **Role:** Public servants, also known as civil servants or bureaucrats, are the non-political staff who work within government ministries and agencies.

They are responsible for the day-to-day administration of government policies, programs, and services.

- **Influence:** While public servants don't make policy decisions, they have significant influence over the implementation of policies and the administration of programs. They can provide valuable insights into the feasibility of proposals, the details of policy implementation, and the operational challenges within their departments.

- **Committees**

- **Role:** Legislative committees are groups of MLAs who review specific issues, such as public accounts, health, or indigenous relations. They conduct hearings, gather evidence, and make recommendations to the Legislative Assembly.
- **Influence:** Committees are often where detailed scrutiny of legislation and policy occurs. Engaging with committees can be an effective way to influence policy development, as they provide opportunities for public consultation, expert testimony, and in-depth discussion on specific issues.

- **Advisors and Stakeholder Groups**

- **Role:** Advisors to government officials, such as chiefs of staff, policy advisors, and special assistants, play a crucial role in shaping the advice that ministers and the Premier receive. Stakeholder groups, including industry associations, NGOs, and advocacy groups, often lobby these advisors and government officials to influence policy.
- **Influence:** Advisors often act as gatekeepers and are instrumental in filtering information that reaches key decision-makers. Building relationships with these individuals can provide a direct line to influencing government priorities and decisions.

- **Local Government Officials**

- **Role:** Although not part of the provincial government, local government officials, such as mayors and city councillors, can play an important role in influencing provincial policy, especially on issues that intersect with municipal responsibilities.
- **Influence:** Local government officials often advocate to the provincial government on behalf of their communities. Collaborating with them can strengthen your advocacy efforts, particularly if your issues align with local government priorities.

Identify who oversees relevant departments and portfolios that align with your organization's goals.

Grasp the Legislative Process:

Understand legislative calendars [both in BC](#) and at the [federal level](#), including when bills are debated, budgets are passed, and committee work is conducted. Knowing the timing and procedures will help you plan your advocacy efforts effectively.

Identify Decision-Making Drivers:

Recognize the factors that influence government decisions, such as public opinion, stakeholder input, and political priorities. Use this understanding to craft messages that resonate with policymakers and align your objectives with the government's agenda.

Step 4: Assess Your Organizational Capacity

Before diving into government relations, it's essential to understand your organization's internal strengths and limitations. By assessing your organizational capacity, you can determine what you can realistically achieve and where you may need to seek additional resources or partnership:

Evaluate Your Resources

- **Human Resources:**
Identify the staff, volunteers, and board members who have experience or interest in government relations. Consider whether you have the necessary expertise in policy analysis, advocacy, and communications.
- **Financial Resources:**
Review your budget to determine how much you can allocate to government relations activities. This includes costs for research, lobbying efforts, events, and any external consultants you may need to hire.
- **Time:**
Assess the time commitment your team can realistically dedicate to government relations. Effective advocacy often requires sustained effort over months or even years.

Analyze Your Expertise

- **Knowledge of Government:**
Determine if your team has a solid understanding of how government works, who the key players are, and the legislative process. If there are gaps, consider training or bringing in experts.
- **Policy and Issue Expertise:**
Assess whether your organization has deep knowledge of the issues you want to address. This expertise is crucial for developing credible and compelling arguments to present to policymakers.

- **Advocacy and Communications Skills:**
Evaluate your team's ability to craft persuasive messages, engage with media, and mobilize supporters. Effective government relations often hinge on strong communication skills.

Identify Gaps and Opportunities

- **Gaps:**
Where does your organization fall short? Whether it's in resources, expertise, or time, identifying these gaps early allows you to seek partnerships, training, or other forms of support.
- **Opportunities:**
Consider whether there are any internal strengths or external factors that could enhance your government relations efforts. For example, a board member with strong political connections or an upcoming policy review that aligns with your goals.

Plan for Capacity Building

- **Training and Development:**
If you identify areas where your team lacks knowledge or skills, consider investing in training programs, workshops, or hiring experts to fill those gaps.
- **Partnerships and Collaborations:**
Look for opportunities to partner with other organizations, coalitions, or stakeholders who can complement your capacity and help you achieve your goals.
- **Sustainability:**
Ensure that your government relations strategy is sustainable over the long term. This means building capacity not just for immediate campaigns but for ongoing advocacy efforts.

Step 5: Know the Lobby Laws Within Your Jurisdiction

Lobbying activities are subject to legal regulations, and it's crucial to understand and comply with these laws to avoid penalties and maintain your organization's credibility. Here's how to navigate the [lobbying laws](#) within your jurisdiction:

Understand What Constitutes Lobbying

- **Definition:**
Lobbying generally refers to any attempt to influence government decisions, including legislation, policies, or regulations. This can include meetings with public officials, submitting reports or briefs, organizing grassroots campaigns, and even informal communications like emails or phone calls.

- **Activities Covered:**

Different jurisdictions may define lobbying differently. It's important to know what activities are considered lobbying in your area, whether it's direct communication with officials, or public campaigns aimed at swaying government policy.

Familiarize Yourself with Local Lobbying Laws

- **Federal vs. Provincial vs. Municipal:**

Lobbying laws vary depending on whether you're dealing with federal, provincial, or municipal governments. Each level of government may have its own set of rules, registration requirements, and reporting obligations.

- **Specific Requirements:**

For example, in British Columbia, organizations and individuals engaging in lobbying activities must register with the [Office of the Registrar of Lobbyists \(ORL\)](#) and regularly report their lobbying activities. Other jurisdictions may have different registration processes or thresholds for what constitutes lobbying.

Register Your Lobbying Activities

- **Registration Process:**

If your organization's activities fall under the definition of lobbying, you'll need to register with the appropriate regulatory body. This typically involves providing details about your organization, the issues you're lobbying on, and the government officials you plan to contact.

- **Reporting Obligations:**

In many jurisdictions, you'll also need to submit regular reports detailing your lobbying activities. This may include the dates and nature of your communications, the public officials involved, and the outcomes you're seeking.

Adhere to Ethical Standards

- **Code of Conduct:**

Many jurisdictions have established codes of conduct for lobbyists, outlining ethical standards and best practices. These codes may include guidelines on transparency, conflicts of interest, and the prohibition of gifts or incentives to public officials.

- **Conflicts of Interest:**

Ensure that your organization's lobbying activities do not create any conflicts of interest, and that all interactions with government officials are conducted with integrity and transparency.

Stay Informed and Up-to-Date

- **Changes in Law:**
Lobbying laws and regulations can change, so it's important to stay informed about any updates or amendments that could affect your organization's activities. Regularly review the guidelines from the relevant regulatory bodies and consider legal counsel if needed.
- **Training and Education:**
Consider providing training for your staff and volunteers on lobbying laws and ethical standards. This ensures that everyone involved in government relations is aware of the legal requirements and can act accordingly.

Step 6: Steps to Effective Government Relations

a. Research

- Understand the legislative process and identify relevant stakeholders.
- Analyze existing and proposed policies that could impact your organization.

b. Strategic Planning

- Develop a clear strategy for engagement, including goals, key messages, and target audiences.
- Identify the best channels and tactics for reaching and influencing policymakers.

c. Building Relationships

- Identify the key players in government, the wider political landscape, coalitions, and other allies
- Establish and maintain relationships with legislators, regulators, and their staff.
- Participate in networking events, committees, and advisory groups. For more information on creating Leave-Behind documents for meetings, see our [Leave-Behind Guide](#)

d. Communication and Advocacy

- Craft compelling messages and present data to support your position.
- Use various communication tools, such as position papers, briefings, and media outreach, to convey your message.

e. Monitoring and Compliance

- Continuously monitor legislative and regulatory developments.

- Ensure ongoing compliance with laws and regulations, adapting strategies as needed.

Step 7: Understanding Internal vs External Communications

When the time comes to begin publicizing your advocacy efforts, mastering the distinction between internal and external communications is crucial for your organization's success. While internal communications keep your team aligned and informed, external communications shape your public image and influence key stakeholders.

Internal Communications:

- **Purpose:**
Inform and engage your team, ensuring everyone is aligned with the campaign's goals and strategies.
- **Methods:**
Use regular meetings, email updates, internal newsletters, and collaboration tools (e.g., Slack, Trello) to keep everyone informed.
- **Content:**
Share detailed plans, progress reports, and any changes in strategy. Encourage feedback and input from team members.

For more information on internal communications, see our [Internal Communications Guide](#).

External Communications:

- **Purpose:**
Raise awareness, influence public opinion, and engage stakeholders outside your organization.
- **Methods:**
Utilize press releases, social media, public events, and newsletters to communicate with your audience.
- **Content:**
Focus on key messages, campaign goals, and calls to action. Ensure clarity and consistency to maintain a strong public image.

For more information on external communications, see our [External Communications Guide](#).

Step 8: Craft Key Messages

Developing clear and compelling key messages is essential for effectively conveying your organization's goals. These messages should resonate with your target audiences and reinforce your overall objectives in government relations. For more information on developing these, see our [Key Message Development Guide](#).

Core Messages:

- Develop clear, concise messages that align with your goals. Ensure they are easy to understand and resonate with your target audience.

Supporting Data:

- Use statistics, personal stories, and case studies to support your messages and make them compelling.

Leave-Behind Document

- When meeting a government official — staff or politician — or election candidate, it is good to have a leave-behind document that summarizes the points you want to discuss. Whether this is a postcard, a brochure, or a one-pager, keep it concise.

Step 9: Develop an Elevator Pitch

An elevator pitch is a brief, persuasive speech that you can use to spark interest in your organization or campaign. It should be concise and compelling, capturing the essence of your message in a short amount of time.

Steps to Develop an Elevator Pitch:

- **Identify Your Goal:**
Clearly define what you want to achieve with your pitch (e.g., raising awareness, gaining support, influencing policy).
- **Highlight Key Points:**
Focus on the most important aspects of your campaign – the issue, the impact, and the solution.
- **Make It Relatable:**
Use language that resonates with your audience and connects emotionally.
- **Practice:**
Rehearse your pitch until it feels natural. Be prepared to adjust it based on your audience and context.

Example Elevator Pitch:

"Hi, I'm [Your Name] from [Your Organization]. We're working to unmask the myths about natural gas, which is often falsely promoted as a clean and safe energy source. Our campaign highlights the real environmental and safety risks, and advocates for a shift to renewable energy. By supporting us, you can help create a healthier, more sustainable future for everyone."

Step 10: Build Relationships

Establishing strong, lasting relationships with key stakeholders is the foundation of successful government relations. Based on your government relations goals, and the key players you've identified above, these relationships could be elected officials, bureaucrats, other organizations/agencies/partners, sectors that can help towards your objective (economics, industry, private sector), etc. These connections can amplify your influence and open doors to meaningful collaboration.

Bureaucrats:

- Building relationships with government bureaucrats is essential for non-profits to effectively advocate for their causes, secure necessary resources, ensure compliance, and collaborate on initiatives that advance their missions and benefit the communities they serve.
- Contact candidates and their teams early in the campaign to introduce your organization and issues.

Influence Policy and Legislation:

- Non-profits often work to address social issues that can be significantly impacted by government policies and regulations.
- By building relationships with bureaucrats, non-profits can advocate for policy changes that support their mission and the communities they serve.

Access to Funding and Resources

- Government agencies provide grants, contracts, and other funding opportunities that can be vital for non-profit operations.
- Strong relationships can enhance a non-profit's chances of securing these resources.

Collaboration on projects

- Government agencies often partner with non-profits to deliver services and implement programs.
- Collaborative relationships can lead to joint projects that leverage the strengths of both sectors to achieve common goals.

Advocacy and Support

- Non-profits often need advocates within the government to champion their causes.
- Bureaucrats who understand and support a non-profit's mission can be instrumental in pushing forward initiatives and securing support within the government.

If you are unsure where to begin on connecting with the right individuals, you can start with a government directory, such as the [BC Government Directory](#).

Step 11: Enhancing Your Campaign Through Optional Tools

Maximize the impact of your government relations efforts by leveraging media and social media. This is an optional step to amplify your message, engage a wider audience, and build momentum for your campaign.

Press Releases:

- Send out press releases about your organization's activities, position on key issues, and any events you are hosting.

Opinion Pieces:

- Write op-eds and letters to the editor to share your perspective and influence public opinion.

Social Media Campaigns:

- Use platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to share your key messages, engage with candidates, and mobilize supporters. Utilize hashtags related to the election for broader reach.

For more information on how to use tools such as those listed above, see our [External Communications Guide](#), [Media Prep Playbook](#), and [Press Release Template](#).

Step 12: Mobilize Your Supporters

Email Campaigns:

- Use your email list to update supporters on your election activities and how they can get involved.

Volunteer Opportunities:

- Organize volunteer activities such as phone banks, canvassing, or attending campaign events to show support for candidates who align with your issues.

Petitions and Pledges:

- Create online petitions or pledges that supporters can sign to demonstrate widespread support for your issues.

Step 13: Stay Non-Partisan

Although your organization's goals and values may differ from different political parties, elected officials, and political candidates, it is important to maintain fairly equal relationships. This helps in two ways: it ensures your organization maintains a non-partisan reputation, and helps you prepare for the eventuality of a change in

government. It ensure all sides of a political system are familiar with your organization and your advocacy on issues.

Regardless of your political alignment, do not share your personal views on a party when you are building relationships. Be mindful that you are there as a representative of your organization.

Equal Treatment:

- Ensure you engage with all parties and/or candidates to maintain your non-profit's non-partisan status.

Issue Focused:

- Focus on issues rather than endorsing specific parties or candidates. Emphasize the importance of policies over politics

Step 14: Monitor and Respond

Follow Up:

- Use your knowledge of the legislative calendar to follow up with government officials at key times to ensure your issues are addressed. You can also continue to invite them to events or to address your community.

Track Coverage:

- Monitor media coverage of the election and your issues. Use tools like Google Alerts, Feedly, and social media monitoring tools to stay informed.

Be Responsive:

- Quickly respond to any misinformation or opportunities that arise during the campaign. Issue statements or updates as needed to keep your supporters informed and engaged.