

A Preface to Advocacy What You Should Know as an Advocate

Erin Gilmer

Suggested reference

Gilmer, Erin. (August 26, 2020). *A Preface to Advocacy: What You Should Know as an Advocate*. Disability Visibility Project.

Introduction:

There are a lot of amazing advocacy toolkits out there that teach people how to advocate. They include tools to help you form your advocacy goals, advice on how to contact legislators and convey your story, tips on how to testify, and more. But there isn't a lot of guidance on what it really means to be an advocate – the challenges you'll face, the ups and downs you'll experience, the realities of the commitment involved, the people skills that will impact your work, and the toll it advocacy can take.

What follows are insights from advocates from every walk of life who shared what they wish they knew going into advocacy and what advice they'd give to other advocates. They are based on responses to a tweet I sent out on August 18, 2019 asking:

“What is something you wish you knew before getting into advocacy? And what is a tip you'd give to someone who wants to start advocating?”

Over 100 people responded and I've done my best to include all voices. Please note that including the responses here are not an endorsement of any person or their advocacy. Additionally, know that I purposefully am identifying people by their Twitter handles with any “name” put in parentheses. This is how people self-identify and I felt it was the most important way to convey their experiences.

This preface to advocacy has been divided into sections including:

- I. Committing to Advocacy**
 - a. Before you Decide to Commit
 - b. Seeing the Bigger Picture
 - c. Coming Prepared
 - d. Committing to Those You Work With and Following Through
- II. Advocacy Takes Time**
- III. The Emotional Side of Advocacy**
- IV. Presenting Your Advocacy Issue**
 - a. Your Voice Matters
 - b. No Right Way to Advocate
 - c. Authenticity in Telling Your Story
 - d. Your Story's Impact
 - e. Using Evidence and Data

- f. Knowing It's Okay Not to Know
 - g. Mistakes
 - h. Work Harder and Smarter, Not Louder
- V. Political Realities**
- a. Know Your Opponent
 - b. You May Be Used
- VI. Talking to People in Power**
- a. Meetings and "One-Pagers"
 - b. Connecting in Person
- VII. Personalities**
- a. Not Everyone Will Welcome You or Agree With You
 - b. Advocating Can Get Ugly
 - c. Allies
 - d. Play to Your Strengths
 - e. Mentorship
- VIII. Credit Others, Pass the Mic, Bring Others With You**
- IX. Privilege, Intersectionality, and Marginalization**
- a. Confronting Privilege
 - b. Color/Race/Ethnicity
- X. What it Means to "Win"**
- a. Incremental and Unexpected "Wins"
 - b. Victories and Losses and the Fruits of Your Labor
 - c. Moving on When You Aren't Making Progress
 - d. Following Through After a "Win"
 - e. Share the Wins
- XI. Personal Rewards**
- XII. Burnout and Keeping Your Strength Up**
- a. Take Breaks
 - b. Self-Care
 - c. Find Outside Support
- XIII. Miscellaneous Advocacy Tips**
- a. Advocacy Expenses
 - b. Employers and Advocacy
 - c. Advocating as a Parent
 - d. Other Legislative Advocacy Tips

The hope is this preface will empower any person entering the advocacy space to have the knowledge they need to make the biggest impact. The preface is also for seasoned advocates who will find commonality in their experiences, gather new perspectives, and help mentor those who join their efforts.

I. Committing to Advocacy:

When it comes to advocacy, do more than you think you can do.
Work harder than you think you can work.

Give more than you think you can give.

Advocacy can be exciting and rewarding but it is hard work. Many come to advocacy out of necessity and for personal reasons; perhaps a personal issue that has touched their life spurs them to want to make change. It's not rare to hear folks say as @ElenaHung202 (Elena Hung) does, "I often call myself an 'accidental activist' because I didn't plan to be involved in advocacy -- certainly not so publicly!" Or as @itsthebunk says, "Advocacy wasn't a choice for me!" In other words, many feel compelled to enter advocacy because it affects their every day.

While advocacy can bring great joy and meaning to advocates' lives, advocacy is hard work and as @ElenaHung202 (Elena Hung) says, it can be a "wild ride." At first motivated and energized, some are quickly disillusioned, discouraged, and disappointed by how hard making change can be. However, many find in the end that the rewards are well worth the effort.

a. Before You Decide to Commit

Anyone can be an advocate. You don't need to have any special education or certificate to prove your worth. And advocacy can happen at all levels of engagement – from making a phone call or sending a letter to showing up to marches to meeting with legislators and testifying. Deciding which level of advocacy is right for you is important. You need to consider your ability to commit to action, taking into consideration the amount of time you have after you take care of personal needs, family, jobs, and other commitments; your physical and mental health; the resources you have to contribute (time, energy, expertise, or money); and what might happen if you are unable to meet your commitments.

Before committing to advocacy, many suggest to start by looking inward. Know yourself and your motivations for advocating. Advocates note that it's important to

- "Define for yourself why a cause is important to you and to use this as a reminder why you continue to advocate even through difficult times." (@chickypilot/Angela Lautner)
- "Thoroughly understand and believe in your cause." (@KatriBertram/Katri Bertram)
- "Meditate on your values and stick to them in your advocacy." (@twitchyspoonie/The Disability Enthusiast)
- "Know your truth before you advocate for anyone else's." (@nealcarter/NealCarter)
- "Realize that you don't owe anyone your full story, that you can keep your privacy to the extent you wish." (@mssinenomine/Gabrielle Peters)
- "Try to process your own difficult experiences and trauma around the subject, before you start speaking about it publicly." (@LauraBloomify/Laura Bloom)
- "You need to be emotionally ready for what will be required of you. Sharing personal stories, and reliving difficult situations, is part of it." (@Megan_Janas/Megan Janas)

b. Seeing the Bigger Picture

Defining your values and motivations as well as acknowledging the hard work of advocacy is fundamental. Once you've done some self-assessment, it's important to look at the bigger picture. Advocacy is hard work precisely because it challenges the status quo. There are people

with a lot of money and power who do not want things to change – they hire lobbyists or use their inside influence to press their agenda. And they often rely on the fact that advocates do not have the time, money, or power to challenge them. They rely on people not meeting with elected officials, not showing up to hearings and testifying, and dropping out.

Most advocates are balancing a lot in their lives. They are advocating during their free time and not getting paid to wait in a committee room until 10pm at night for their turn to testify. Advocates are balancing jobs, families, their own illnesses, and many other constraints that make it hard to commit and follow through. Again, this is what the other side relies on. They know advocates have fewer resources (time, money, health), which is why advocates have to work harder and give more than they think they can give.

c. Come Prepared

Many people come to advocacy with great enthusiasm, but haven't prepared themselves for what it really means to join a movement or an initiative to make change. @prisonculture (DilettanteInChief) notes these four important questions to ask when thinking about injustice, questions that any advocate should ask themselves before committing to advocacy:

1. What resources exist so I can better educate myself?
2. Who's already doing work around this injustice?
3. Do I have the capacity to offer concrete support & help to them?
4. How can I be constructive?

Do your best to educate yourself about a topic before showing up. Google the issue, read news stories, read first-hand accounts from other advocates, look for community hashtags on twitter and follow the conversations. It's also a great "if you're going to advocate for a group or groups follow as many people in that group as possible for their insights" as @Elphaa117 (Em Richards) says. And remember that journalists or self-proclaimed experts aren't always the experts, the people working on the ground doing the advocacy work are.

It's also important to remember that, being new to advocacy, diving in headfirst can be counterproductive. As @simonejharding (Simone Harding on twitter) recommends talking to people centered in the advocacy before assuming your position as an advocate. Also "listen more" before jumping in as @Elphaa117 (Em Richards) recommends. @itsthebunk (Liza Bernstein) echoes this saying "LISTENING is key." This can better help you understand what role you might play in advocacy and clear up any assumptions about what has already been done and what is being done currently. Again, as @TowardsLessHarm (Kristina Alicia) says, "You may be new to a movement, but the work isn't new."

Coming prepared with education and research to learn what others have done can empower you and help you discover what already exists so you can support and build on existing movement, as @femmeofspoons (Joy) says. Over and over advocates recommend reading and educating yourself as part of advocacy (@RachaelGass/Rachael Gass; @darlaine_honey/Darlaine honey). You don't need to know everything, but starting with a good knowledge base will make a huge

difference. And that knowledge base will help you down the road as you connect with other advocates, present your cause to those in power, and grow your initiative to make change.

d. Committing to Those You Work With and Following Through

Once you've considered what you want your role to be in advocacy, started learning about the movement you're joining, and are ready to commit to advocacy, the next issue to address is how you will follow through with your commitment. Remember, you are not advocating just for yourself but for a community and you'll need to "be selfless" as @Anilkc74560568 (Anil Choubey) says. When you commit to advocacy (whether individually or as part of a wider movement), you are committing to help an entire group of people well beyond your own interests in the movement.

As @ConnConnection (Kathy Flaherty) says, "It's a huge responsibility and I don't think people who don't do this all the time always realize that you're working on behalf of a whole community not just yourself. That's pressure not everyone is up to..." When people do not realize the pressure and responsibility, they often become overwhelmed and drop out, leaving other advocates to pick up the pieces and take on more work. Attrition is high in advocacy – in part because of burnout (discussed in more detail below) but also because people have not fully realized the work to be done or confronted their own limitations.

Advocacy is a sacrifice that can take a lot of your time and energy. At its highest level of engagement, advocacy is like a job but most without payment. Understandably, people must prioritize what they can commit to and often advocacy comes last. But if you have jumped in and made a commitment, even if that commitment is as small as typing up a contact list or sending an email, it is imperative to follow through. As @kbashamilton (Kristina Bas Hamilton) says, "Keep your word no matter what." People are relying on you.

To that end, "Know your limits & respect them," as @SaraGreathouse1 (Sara Greathouse) says. She adds, "Be honest. Say 'no' or 'I expect to be able to help you (date/time)'. If you know you're not going to be able to, be honest, apologize, and either reset the deadline or refer them to someone [to someone else who can help]." In other words, we all have limitations and overcommitting and not being able to follow through will ultimately hurt you and the movement. @RaeofSunshine79 (Rachel Martens) echoes this, saying, "Learn to say no. Respect yourself and your limits. You aren't tasked with changing the world alone." She further reminds advocates that sometimes "the best you can do is to focus on a few things." You don't have to do it all and focusing on a few things at a time can make sure you don't become overwhelmed, but do make sure to follow through on the things you say yes to.

It is important to be clear about what time you have to give to a movement and what your other commitments are. And if you are unable to follow through with promises made, it is best to make that known as soon as possible and be transparent and upfront about why something fell through. Good advocacy leaders will understand these limitations and help you work within them and any boundaries you set. They will encourage you to continue helping in whatever capacity you can offer. But they can't help you be a successful advocate if you don't recognize your own

limitations first and reach out when you are struggling to follow through on tasks you pledged to undertake.

Know that the other side is depending on advocates to fall through. They have lobbyists who are paid large sums of money to do this work and know that most advocates are doing this in addition to their real jobs. They are committed and organized to influencing the narrative and outcomes and know that most advocates don't have the same resources (monetarily, financially, emotionally, or with time) to compete. Advocating means dedicating oneself despite all these limitations – doing more than you think you can do, working harder than you think you can work, and giving more than you think you can give.

II. Advocacy Takes Time

When someone decides to jump into advocacy, their fervor for change is apparent and their enthusiasm for change is invigorating. Unfortunately, change takes time. A lot of time. Far more time than you think. Far more time than it should.

The idealism of advocacy, that advocates can jump in and make change happen is one of the first hardest and most devastating bubbles to see burst. People think, “Here’s the issue, it’s clear as day! What we’re asking for is reasonable and would help people. Why are people not listening and making change right now? Why are we fighting over what seems so obvious?” Newer advocates believe that by shedding light on an issue and creating awareness will lead good people to make change but unfortunately, that’s not enough. The political aspects (discussed more below) run deep and the issue you’re advocating for, as discussed above, likely has a history that is more complex and/or overlaps with other complicated issues. Moreover, the simple truth of it is, there is a lot of apathy – not caring or not even seeing the injustice or the urgency of the issue you’re advocating for – and there is even more resistance to anything that will change the status quo.

Advocates remind each other that change takes a long time:

- [Advocates should know] 1. How long it takes to make change. 2. See #1 (@Born2lbFat/Sarah Bramlette)
- Transformation will be slow, but it'll come. (@Anilkc74560568/Anil Choubey)
- Fight for everything, but in many cases, change will be incremental. (@chickypilot/Angela Lautner)
- Progress can be horrendously slow. But when you make something happen it can be huge. Be patient and keep to the grind. (@deptofjamin/Ben Jamin)
- It's a marathon, not a sprint just like living with [a chronic illness]. (@MarissaBenchea/Benchea)

Often legislation means pursuing an issue for a long time. As @ConnConnection (Kathy Flaherty) reminds us, it can sometimes feel like Groundhog Day where “the same things keep happening over and over again.” The fight continues, the need to educate new legislators, having to counter the same arguments over and over, etc. It seems to never end.

But as @sefriedman (Sharleene Friedman) notes, sometimes “Timing is everything. Just because something didn’t work in the past doesn’t make it a bad idea. New players can make a difference. Build on it and toss it again. A good idea is never bad.” And as @SusanRuddick1 (Susan Ruddick) reminds us, “You have to knock on a lot of doors before you find the people with integrity and passion” to make change.

Advocates everywhere know that this is a marathon. You need to “pace yourself. It’s all urgent. You are in it for the long haul” (@healWRITEnow/Christine White).

III. The Emotional Side of Advocating

It is important to acknowledge and be realistic about the mental health aspects of advocacy. Because advocacy is a long, hard commitment to making change on issues that are personal, advocacy has an emotional side – one that can often affect your mental health. Advocacy can cause burnout, sleepless nights (@Anilkc74560568/Anil Choubey), or bring up issues of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and more.

In the very least, advocates should have a good support system. Have people around you who you can talk to about the work you are doing and the emotions around that work. If your emotions are affecting your daily life, taking a step back may be necessary. (Burnout, Self-Care, and Support will be discussed in more detail below).

It can also be helpful to think about getting a therapist or psychiatrist and talking about coping skills to deal with the taxing parts of advocacy or even medication. This does not mean you are weak or ineffective, it means that you are taking care of yourself so you can sustain your advocacy

IV. Presenting Your Advocacy Issue

Once you’re committed, you understand the realities that this will take a long time, and consider the emotional impacts this may have on you, the next part challenge is how to present your advocacy issue in a way to make it most effective. There are several advocacy toolkits out there that can help you craft your message and learn how to talk to elected officials or those in power. These toolkits may echo some of the messages below, but here the aim is to go beyond what is typically in a toolkit and give you insight on a more personal level.

a. Your Voice Matters

Many advocates are wary of speaking up because they fear they don’t have the right credentials. They fear they aren’t knowledgeable enough or worry if they don’t have a certain level of education or degree that they cannot contribute. But as @kbashamliton (Kristina Bas Hamilton) reminds us, “You are as smart as if not smarter than everyone at the table.” She continues to urge

advocates not to be intimidated and at times you'll find that others may be are "more intimidated by you than vice versa."

Advocates like @seastarbatita (Isabel Jordan) also remind others that *you* are enough, that your experiences and life give you the authority in themselves to be an advocate. As @crippastor (Chris Wylie) says, "Tell your story. You matter. Don't let anyone, even people you'd think allies, let you think otherwise." Ultimately, as @DrCSWilliam (Claudia William) similarly underscores, "Everyone's voice matters no matter what the system or [other] people say."

Knowing that your voice is important and you can advocate no matter what background or walk of life you come from is empowering. And with that empowerment, as @twitchyspoonie (The Disability Enthusiast) encourages advocates to, "Get together and start changing what you can now. Don't wait for anyone else." @questreadymd (QuestReadyMD) echoes this sentiment, "You don't have to be an 'expert advocate.' Sure, you can partner with people with experience and people who have been working on an issue longer than you. But being a person with a voice and a cause is enough to get started." In other words, you have the power to make change and you can start now; you don't have to wait.

b. No Right Way to Advocate

Advocacy varies. Depending on the issue you are pursuing, who is advocating with you or if you're advocating on your own, or the climate within which you are advocating. Multiple advocates echo that advocacy is different for everyone:

- I don't think there is a right way to advocate and I think people who tell you there is are less of an expert than they assert themselves to be. (@mssinenomine/Gabrielle Peters)
- There is no "one path". You don't have to adopt a style modeled after an existing leader. Do what feels natural to you, or don't. Don't feel forced to do performatory activism—it depletes your soul. (@RebeccaCokley/Rebecca Cokley)
- Learn from others but find your own way. (@GayesDavid/David Gayes)

At times you may follow other leaders and find toolkits that give guidance on everything from formulating the message around your issue to talking to legislators to testifying and more. At other times you may need to take different approaches than are out there and define what advocacy means for you independently. At other times, you may blend different types of advocacy and take a multidimensional approach as @Anilkc74560568 (Anil Choubey) suggests.

Remember, lobbyists and other advocacy organizations have been doing this work for a long time. Learn from them and take whatever will help your cause and make it your own.

c. Advocating as an Individual vs On Behalf of an Organization

Advocating as an individual can be very different than advocating on behalf of an organization points out @RobinCogan (Robin Cogan). This is an important distinction because there may be times when your advocacy conflicts with an organization. @ElenaHung202 (Elena Hung) shares her experience, stating, "I wish I knew how different it would be advocating in my personal

capacity vs advocating on behalf of a national organization. There are some limitations to the latter, but the community and strength in numbers is worth it.”

If you decide to advocate on behalf of an organization, make sure you learn as much about them as possible. Read about who runs the organization. For instance, if it’s a non-profit, learn who is on their Board. Look up their previous advocacy endeavors like what bills they’ve supported or opposed and what other organizations they work with. Know who funds them and how that may create conflicts of interest. Speak with people in the organization directly and ask them about their history and what their aims are now and for the future. Talk to other advocates who have worked with the organization and even advocates who left the organization. This can help you decide whether you want to work with them in the first place or what to expect if you do decide to join their work.

Further, set realistic expectations when working with an organization. As above, when you commit to advocacy, remember you are committing to advocating for more than yourself and you’ll need to follow through.

d. Authenticity in Telling Your Story

Much of advocacy is telling your story. It’s telling those in power why you think your issue is important. Telling your story helps ground the issue in reality. “It is your most powerful tool; your humanity” as @RachaelGass (Rachael Gass) notes. When advocates able to open up and tell their stories, they can connect at a deeper level to help their issue be heard and respected.

@NSmithholt12 (Nicole Smith-Holt) says of becoming an advocate, “I wish I knew before starting just how important my story would be. I had no idea that my story would resonate with so many people, I wasn’t prepared for all of the support that came my way.” In fact, “Your lived experience is going to be more powerful than facts with some people,” @policyprimate (Everything is Political) remarks. As such, “your voice can be the tipping point,” as @TheKittenBaskett (Jo) reminds us. Never forget that *your* story and *your* voice are powerful.

The first rule of telling your story and presenting your issue is to be authentic and honest (@jessicaxfoard/Jessica Foard; @NSmithholt12/Nicole Smith-Holt). You get to “Speak your truth however you wish... you tell what you want of it, how you want and when you want.” As @mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters) says. However, “Don’t try to embellish the story to have a bigger impact because it will backfire,” @NSmithholt12 (Nicole Smith-Holt) warns. And it’s important to stay true to yourself and not “just say what they think others want to hear,” as @AMG1028 (Aubrey) reminds us.

The second rule is not to be “gimmicky” or tell your story for personal recognition. As @AMG1028 (Aubrey) has observed, “it’s easy for people to become gimmicky in advocacy because they are more concerned with increasing their own follower count than raw, unfiltered discussions about their experiences.” Again, advocacy is about authenticity, as @mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters) puts it, “Be an individual, not a brand.”

“Learning how to craft and deliver your story is essential” as @policyprimate/Everything is Political has pointed out. Unfortunately, that is beyond the scope of this document but there are many resources to help you learn this skill if you simply do a few google searches. And as above with learning how to advocate, watching others can give you some ideas of how you want to tell your story and talking to other advocates can give you insights on how to be most effective.

The third rule of telling your story is to protect yourself when telling your story. People (often media and politicians) may try to use your story for their own gain. As @SnoringDoggo (Noor) advises, “If you’re going the radical vulnerability route, be damn sure that you have people around to help you see when others are taking advantage of it.” Telling your story authentically may bring up strong emotions and seeing your story taken advantage of may affect your emotional health and your willingness to keep advocating. So be careful.

e. Your Story’s Impact

When telling our stories, it’s often hard to see the impact we have. Because, as discussed above, advocacy takes a long time, we tell our stories over and over again and might not see change. It’s not uncommon to hear from advocates like @BifInMediasRes (Sydney), “I wish I’d known how much I would struggle to feel like I’m making an impact.” Many feel this way but as @BifInMediasRes (Sydney) goes on to say, “always remember that you are in fact making an impact.”

Some wonder if they are making an impact because they don’t see their advocacy on a larger scale. But as @itsthebunk (Liza Bernstein) notes, “Big, far-reaching advocacy can be as ‘small’ as one meaningful conversation.” Your actions as an advocate and telling your story has a greater impact than you might realize. Truly, “everything you do for good will have ripple effects for years to come” (@beaterast/Beate).

f. Using Evidence and Data

Telling your story will be impactful, but having evidence and data to present the scope of your issue is important too. This is especially important for elected officials who want the facts behind the stories, facts that will impact their constituencies like:

- How many people are currently affected by your issue? (specifically how many people in the area they serve – in their district, in their state, and/or in the nation)
- How much money will it cost to address your issue? Or How much money will it save to address your issue?
- What will happen if your issue is not addressed now?
- What does the research say about this issue?

This information can highlight the importance of your work in a concrete and objective way. As best you can, “link to policy and evidence,” suggests @ellenffb (Ellen Fraser-Barbour). But make sure to fact check and be able to cite your sources,” cautions @ChefGeib (VictoriaK). As such, @meganranney (Megan Ranney) encourages advocates to make friends with those in

academia. In sum, @meganranney (Megan Ranney puts it best by saying, “know your data and don't be afraid to use it.”

Data and evidence are important on multiple levels – not just to get your point across, but to counter the narratives and information that will come from those opposing your issue. Lobbyists are paid to have this information on hand and ready to offer on demand. They have the resources to dig into the research and other materials to make strong arguments against you. It's a heavy burden to be that prepared but it can be done.

This does not mean you have to memorize everything. Write notes for yourself. Print out and bring in the data and evidence you discover to meetings. Work with others to delegate research and put together talking points with these facts. This is not a test of what you know off the top of your head. Again, you don't need to be an expert just do your best to come prepared.

g. Knowing It's Okay Not To Know

It's okay not to know everything. Time and again, advocates point out that saying “I don't know” is okay:

- “Be honest about what you don't know, don't try to 'fake it' or 'wing it.’”
(@mssinenomine/Gabrielle Peters)
- “If you don't know something it's ok to say ‘I don't know but I will find out.’”
(@kbashamilton/Kristina Bas Hamilton)
- “You don't have to know everything about everything.” (@SaraGreathouse1/Sara Greathouse)
- “Don't make up answers to questions you don't know. Tell them you'll follow up with an email (and make sure you address all their questions in a follow up).”
(@jessicaxfoard/Jessica Foard)

In fact, no one knows everything. Thus, it's important to “pull in others around you to help you be the best you can be,” @chickypilot (Angela Lautner) advises. Working together will absolutely help you not just find answers to the questions you don't know but may bring new insight on how to be most effective.

Pretending that you know everything or making up answers will hurt your cause and may harm others. “Harm happens unintentionally as well as intentionally and either way it is harm. So think a lot. Think about what you don't know as well as what you do,” cautions @mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters).

Further, people will ultimately find out the truth and you will lose credibility going forward if you try to pretend you know more than you do. Saying “I don't know” gives you the opportunity to ensure that you get the facts straight and you have this knowledge at hand for future encounters. Also make sure to follow through if you're asked or you promise to follow up with answers you didn't have at the time.

h. Mistakes

Everyone in advocacy makes mistakes. The key is to admit that you made a mistake. Further, as @mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters) advises, it's important to "reflect on why you [made that mistake] and take whatever time is necessary to learn so you don't do same mistake again." And when your mistake has hurt someone, whether it was intentional or not, "make amends if possible," (@mssinenomine/Gabrielle Peters). It may even be wise to "learn how to make meaningful apologies before you actually need them" advises @femmeofspoons (Joy).

As with admitting that you may not know something, acknowledging your mistakes and saying sorry can do a lot to help keep your credibility. If you try to cover up or lie about your mistakes, people will find out and it can be the end of your ability to advocate. Be honest, even when it is uncomfortable.

i. Work Harder and Smarter, Not Louder

At the end of the day, remember it's about doing the work. "Be a better advocate rather than a louder advocate," counsels @RyanMarino (Ryan Marino). It's not about the attention but about focusing on the issue you care about. As @SaraGreathouse1 (Sara Greathouse) says, "You don't need to toot your own horn. When you're good enough, people will listen when you speak." When you make advocacy about your ego, you will lose sight of what's important and may lose any gains you make in advocacy altogether.

V. Political Realities

Presenting your advocacy issue is not as simple as it sounds. As discussed above, unfortunately, even when you think your case couldn't be clearer and more reasonable, many will still disregard you and disagree with your stance. There are often many politics at play – both overt and behind closed doors – that will affect your advocacy. Some of those politics will be devastating and crueler than you think possible. It's best to go into advocacy clear-eyed, knowing these political realities and to be prepared.

a. Know Your Opponent

One way to be prepared for advocacy is to know your opponent. For instance, in legislation, know who is behind a bill including what groups are advocating for or against it and why. Learn the history of a bill and who has voted for or against it in the past. Remember, many of these advocacy issues are not new and have a deep (and sometimes complicated) history. If the bill has been brought in other states, know the history of the bill in those states. Have on hand every negative word ever said about it on hand so you can address it with legislators and counter your opponent's arguments.

Additionally, keep your ear to the ground. Pay attention to social media and news sources to understand the messaging your opponent is putting out there. How are they trying to shape the

issue? And be wary of opeds, news articles, and even research, looking for those who may have substantial conflicts of interest.

b. You May Be Used

Part of that cruelty is realizing you have to be prepared to have your story used for someone else's gain as discussed above and you have to know your issue could be used as leverage in the fight over other issues. As @TyRagan (Ty Ragan) says, "be prepared to be used as the scape goat or sacrifice more often than not by others." And as @mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters), "if your gut says you're being tokenized you are."

You will be playing on an uneven field and possibly against forces you may never know. This reality is found over time and can lead many advocates to burnout or anger that is not productive. The key is to keep your ear to the ground and see the bigger picture of your advocacy in a landscape of many other advocacy issues and diverse interests.

Even though politics can be cruel, there are still people in power who want to help. Sometimes the problems you may face are simply lack of awareness on an issue which means it will be up to you to educate them (even on things you might expect them to already know).

VI. Talking to People in Power

Many people are afraid that they won't know what to say to a politician but remember that politicians are people. @SachaCartegena (Sacha Cartagena) is right in saying, "Don't be intimidated," and to "Advocate with the mindset of working together as a team." @ellenffb/Ellen Fraser-Barbour says that "counselling techniques really helped me engage in advocacy conversations. I learned to paraphrase what I heard from the other person, acknowledging or clarifying – before saying what I think." Whether you know techniques like this or not, just remember to be "open minded and respectful of their perspective" as she says. While you may not agree on things, letting the other party feel heard will open them up to hearing you.

Just know that even if they listen and say they agree with you, in the end they may still not publicize their support. Many people in power "actually do care and do work on important issues you advocate for" as @deptofjamin (Ben Jamin) points out, but the political realities of public support are complicated.

a. Meetings and "One-Pagers"

Part of getting your advocacy issue heard is simply showing up. Anyone can call and ask to schedule a meeting with elected officials. If you are able to meet with them in person, you can "offer information and resources to help them in their decision making" points out @CSquared913 (C2). Often it's great to bring along what is generally known as a "one-pager." This is a one page document (you can use the front and back if necessary, but try to keep it short) that presents the big bullet points of your issue. It generally starts by stating the issue, followed by facts on who is affected and how, and concluding with what you want the legislator to do

about it (i.e. file a bill, endorse/oppose a bill, etc.). It should contain your or your advocacy group's contact information so they can follow up with you.

A “one pager” does several things. First, you can use it as a cheat sheet to remember data and evidence you want to present as well as what points you don't want to miss telling the legislator. More importantly, it gives the person you meet with something tangible to look back on after you've left. Those you're speaking to may have a lot of issues they're focusing on besides yours. Without something tangible to refer to, they may forget your argument completely. Or if you leave something longer, they may not have the time to dive into the issue at all. They need short and meaningful information to make decisions and “one-pagers” can make a huge difference. And as an added benefit, it gets your name in front of them and a way to contact you so they can reach out to you as an expert as needed.

b. Connecting in Person

Multiple advocates point out the effectiveness of connecting with politicians in person. @jessicaxfoard (Jessica Foard) recommends finding out the events folks will be attending (or hosting) and taking time to “bend their ear” there. This can be a great way to introduce yourself and your issue in a more informal setting. Because many folks may have multiple demands in these situations and perhaps limited time to talk, you may want to “learn a quick elevator pitch,” suggests @jessicaxfoard (Jessica Foard). This means having a short, concise description of your issue that will stick with the person you're speaking with. Additionally, you may want to bring cards to hand out and get cards to follow up after the event.

And it's not just about meeting politicians or those in power. Going to these events can help you connect with other people who may be passionate about and advocating for the same issues you are interested in. Getting out there to meet people in person can help make alliances and partnerships to move your advocacy forward.

VII. Personalities

Advocacy brings people together from all backgrounds. That also means bringing people together with different personalities and sometimes those personalities might clash or get in the way.

a. Not Everyone Will Welcome You or Agree with You

“Don't think your advocacy will always be met with open arms” as @simonejharding (Simone Harding) says is a harsh but true reality in advocacy. “Not all advocates in the advocacy world will get your advocacy focus,” notes @DIPadvocate17 (Belinda Moore), “and that's ok.” You'll need to “be prepared to be unpopular at times,” says @RenzaS (Renza) who also notes that this can be a good thing, signaling “you've hit a sore spot that needs attention.”

Within advocacy groups and communities, you should always speak your truth even when it's unpopular (@ChefGeib/VictoriaK). As it is, groups and communities are diverse and some have

vested interests or clashing egos that need to be recognized according to @bosler_Aus (Brett Osler). Additionally, @TyRagan (Ty Ragan) warns advocates to, “Be prepared for ‘false hierarchies’ that folks create to make the voice of the marginalized smaller and more fragmented.”

Working on your interpersonal relationship skills can help smooth over some of these difficulties but it will take an active effort to ensure that things don’t devolve. The other side often depends on advocates efforts being weakened because of interpersonal challenges, which can include struggles for power, fights over priorities, and general personality discord between advocates.

While the issues are personal for advocates, it’s important that you “Don’t make it all about you” (@mssinenomine/Gabrielle Peters) and you “Don’t play power games” (@SaraGreathouse1/Sara Greathouse). Sometimes, you’ll need to have a hard look in the mirror to evaluate how your personal issues might be affecting the community or the cause. It is not easy to admit that we might be the ones who are hindering a movement, but it’s necessary to “examine your own biases and be honest about them” (@SaraGreathouse1/Sara Greathouse). In so doing, you can help build a strong, unified front will help ensure the advocacy comes first.

b. Advocating Can Get Ugly

Despite best efforts, advocacy can get ugly. “People are gonna be mean and try to squash you at times. People I don’t even know tell me they hate me,” reports @GaetaAmy (Amy Gaeta). @eatonhamilton (Hamilton) says, “I wish I had known how mean people can be” when advocating. Unfortunately, as @lareinedejade (Reine Jade) shares, “the very people I advocate for are generally suspicious of me, rarely appreciative, and often respond with hate. You have to take it on 100% because you think it’s the right thing to do, not because you think anyone will ever thank you.”

In advocacy, you’ll have to be aware your threshold for attacks, especially anonymous internet criticism and “take a break if your mental health is suffering” as @Rc_Tomato (R Tomato) says. It’s also okay to back out altogether if the situation is toxic. “If your gut says these people are toxic it’s better to get out of that situation early because it won’t improve,” @mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters). @ElenaHung202 (Elena Hung) reiterates this, “if someone is unkind or toxic, let them go and move on.”

Because advocacy can get ugly, it’s important not to take attacks personally. They will hurt and feel personal, but they really aren’t about you (@mssinenomine/Gabrielle Peters). Honestly, the people trying to hurt you are not worth your time (@GaetaAmy/Amy Gaeta). And while others may be hurling their attacks, you can model being a better advocate by “[avoiding] personal attacks or falling into the trap of criticising a person’s character or personality,” @ellenffb (Ellen Fraser-Barbour) advises. “Be the advocate other advocates want to work with,” @SaraGreathouse1 (Sara Greathouse) adds. In the end, focus on what is important and try not to get distracted or sidelined by the ugliness that might be directed toward you. You have a strong story to tell and a cause to pursue.

c. Allies

“Togetherness will bring change.” (@Anilkc74560568/Anil Choubey)

Allies are a critical part of advocacy they can help move your cause forward. As @creynoldsdc (Carloyn Reynolds) puts it, “Sustainable change often requires incremental steps and always requires allies inside the institutions you want to influence. Don’t just aim to burn down the house, build it smarter.” Or as @KatriBertram/Katri Bertram says, “Build bridges and relationships to every ally out there and those who make decisions.”

Making connections with other advocates can change the outcome of your advocacy. @chandan_khandai (Chandan Khandai) reveals, “I wish I hadn't tried going it alone at first. Build a community to help you carry the torch.” As discussed above, sometimes this can be hard given different personalities and egos, but do your best to work together, to “sit on the same side of the table, and solve the problem together,” @MannZiva (Ziva Mann) encourages. As @ElenaHung202 (Elena Hung) says, “no one does this alone. Build relationships with other advocates everywhere you go. Learn from each other. Support one another. Advocacy is not a competition; there's room for all of us.”

It may also be surprising who you find yourself allying with or at odds with. As the saying goes, advocacy can make strange bedfellows. Meaning, sometimes you will align with people with whom you disagree on almost everything else. To that end, as @DM007A (Nada) says, “be prepared to learn and receive assistance from unlikely sources.” @VdotW (Serena Williams’ Business Bun) adds, “Don’t be surprised if the people you’re working along side aren’t that far removed from the people you’re working to defeat.”

However, know that not all allies are truly allies. You need to “be careful who you partner with,” warns @Hassanah2017 (Janice Tufte). “Quality over quantity,” is a key part of allyship @_Jessica_____M (Jessica McEachern) reminds us because “Not everyone has the same intentions (agenda).” Just because you’re advocating for a similar issue does not mean that you have the same goals and, as mentioned above, this can play into the politics of advocacy. These sorts of allies may be working against you. They may also be tokenizing your engagement instead of actually recognizing you as a partner or colleague in advocacy (@seastarbatita/Isabel Jordan).

d. Play to Your Strengths

As you find your allies and build relationships, you’ll find that “Each member is skilled someway or other and we need those skills for togetherness and transformation” (@Anilkc74560568/Anil Choubey). Those personality clashes mentioned above can be reframed as assets to be utilized in the best way to pursue your advocacy. Many come to advocacy not knowing what their strengths are – are they a good public speaker? are they the folks who prefer the administrative type work? are they more inclined to work on issues behind the scenes? There are many roles to fill in advocacy and it’s okay to take time to find which best suits you.

@RebeccaCokley (Rebecca Cokley) gives a personal example of learning to play to her strengths, saying, “I have NO poker face. And I was made by men to feel bad about it. I asked a woman I looked up to how to be cool and chill like her. And she told me ‘we’ll be called bitches whether we run hot or cold. If you’re fire use it to set them ablaze.’” In other words, Rebecca knows her strength isn’t to be stoic but that she advocates with passion. In a world where many think showing emotion is unprofessional, she learned that this wasn’t a weakness. That she can use her strengths to spark the fires of change.

e. Mentorship

@RebeccaCokley’s story holds another lesson, the importance of mentors and people you can look up to in advocacy. As an advocate starting out, look for others with whom you can connect. Ask them questions (try googling the question first, and if you don’t understand or can’t find the answer then ask – remember to come prepared). Observe how they interact with others to find examples for how you want to advocate (remember there’s no right way to advocate). And reach out. As @abrewi3010 (Alan Brewington) suggests, “learn to ask for help quickly.”

However, know to that, as @SaraGreathouse1 (Sara Greathouse) says, “your mentors are human” and they mess up too. You should absolutely look for mentors who can help you define your advocacy and support you in your endeavors, still, it’s up to you to decide how and in what capacity you want to advocate.

For advocates who have been advocating for awhile, it’s important to remember to “teach others to advocate for themselves” and not simply solve their problems for them at @NicNicMS (Nicki) imparts. “Few advocates realize that the best advocacy is empowering those you’re advocating for to better advocate for themselves,” says @FeministaJones (Cultureless Black American). In this way, you are doing three things. First, you are ensuring you are not spending the emotional and physical labor of advocating for someone when you still have your own advocacy issues. When someone learns to advocate for themselves, you will still have room to help advise without burning out by trying to do so much. Second, you are ensuring the advocacy work being done is centered on those most affected by the issue at hand. You are helping those folks advocate for their issue in a way that is meaningful and will consider their lived experiences as well as the best outcomes for them. And thirdly, you are helping to empower a next generation which in turn will have the chance to empower the generation after and so on. As a mentor you create a ripple effect that will empower movements for years to come.

One way mentors can help new advocates start to advocate for themselves is to provide resources. While new advocates should come prepared as discussed above, if available, providing lists of helpful websites or putting together answers to frequently asked questions or a developing a list of terms, can help new advocates be more effective. @nerdymedzebra/Nerdy Zebra points out that those who are new to advocacy may want to start engaging but aren’t very knowledgeable about existing terms and ideas. Helping them along can create strong allies later.

VIII. Credit Others, Pass the Mic, Bring Others With You

a. Credit others

In advocacy, it is important to recognize, as was mentioned above, that a lot of work has likely been done in an area before you came along. When you start to advocate, you need to credit those who have been working in this space before. If you see an idea, do not just take it as your own but acknowledge where the idea stemmed from – whether from a particular individual, organization, or movement. Quite simply, “Credit others.” (@mssinenomine/Gabrielle Peters)

Crediting others is especially important if you have a larger platform than the person, people, or group whose work you are building on. As @fridawrites (RheumofHerOwn) says, “don't forget the power dynamic.” When you have a larger platform you have an even bigger duty to credit others. @fridawrites (RheumofHerOwn) goes on to articulate, “Think about who you are taking advantage of – intentionally or unintentionally – if you do not give credit.” As such, mention advocates’ names specifically. When asked about an issue by media or other advocates, refer to and cite the work that came before. In fact, don’t just refer to it, promote the work of those who came before you. “If you build on someone's work, build them up as well,” @fridawrites (RheumofHerOwn).

As said above, advocacy is not about you, it’s about something bigger than you. Taking credit for or not giving credit to other advocates, not acknowledging their work or pointing to how others can connect with other advocates, is a form of erasure and can even be a form of co-opting a movement.

b. Pass the Mic

Another version of giving credit, is by actually “passing the mic” – or giving others the opportunity to speak. Often in advocacy, people want to keep the spotlight on themselves. They may take credit for your work or simply not acknowledge your work at all. These are the folks who do not know how to pass the mic and it’s the opposite of how advocacy should be. You can be different though, you can change this dynamic. @RaeofSunshine79 (Rachel Martens) entreats, “Work with the intent of ensuring other voices have space too.”

Passing the mic can mean many things. Giving credit is one way. It can also mean you “boost others whose stories are not in the same lane” as @RachaelGass (Rachael Gass) says. In other words, you may see other advocacy issues that are just as important. Boost those advocates voices too by passing the mic and using your influence and platform. Another example might be when you find that you don’t have an answer to something (an issue discussed above), deferring to someone who does have an answer – let them speak. It also means allowing people who are part of the community affected by an issue to speak for themselves.

Again, advocacy isn’t just about you. Ceding your time and offering it to others can bring in new insight and energy to a movement.

c. Bring Others With You

“Bring others along with you as you move through the world. If a door opens for you, make sure to make room for at least a couple of others too” @prisonculture (DilettanteInChief). As with giving credit and passing the mic, it’s important to bring others with you as you continue with your advocacy. In fact, not just important. You have a duty to other advocates in this difficult realm of advocacy to do so. @seastarbatita (Isabel Jordan) underscores this by revealing, “As I’ve gotten more opportunities it’s both my responsibility and my opportunity to look around and realize who’s not there and advocate to bring them in to speak.”

IX. Privilege, Intersectionality, and Marginalization

Advocacy is often rooted in a history of marginalization by those with great privilege. We must give credit to marginalized individuals and groups for the work they have done over centuries to be heard and to make change including (but not limited to), people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, disabled people, poor people, and others. Their work allows us to do the advocacy work we do today. They laid down the first “advocacy toolkits” in their actions. They developed means to challenge those with privilege and who are in power whether through direct or indirect action everything from organizing marches to calling legislators to rallies to coalition building. Everything we do going forward must recognize the past, particularly because it came from marginalized groups.

@mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters) wisely imparts that we must “Honour those whose work came before yours by placing your work inside history - not just your own story. We are their legacy. Acknowledge how you have benefited from the anti-oppression work and wisdom of other communities. Don't contribute to erasure.”

a. Confronting Privilege

“Depending on your circumstances, you may be forced to realize your privilege. I sure have. If you are privileged, use it to help others who aren't whenever you can. And check your privilege every time you speak out and every chance you get.” @DocMcCookOKC (Clayton McCook).

Many of us have privilege in society but wanting to recognize and explore those privileges – including how they may be used to harm or help others – is uncomfortable. Thus, many people never do. Examples of privileges can include being:

- White
- Heterosexual
- Cis-gendered
- Abled
- Wealth (even simply middle-upper income or having assets)
- Practicing a dominant religion
- Nationality
- Educational attainment or professional degrees

There are many other types of privilege and it's important to remember that just because you are marginalized in one area does not negate other privileges you experience. For example, a white disabled person may be marginalized for being disabled but still have privileges of being white. Additionally, some people be multiply marginalized (also known as intersectionality) like a disabled black woman.

When privilege remains unacknowledged, harm can happen – either unintentionally or intentionally as @mssinenomine (Gabrielle Peters) notes, urging advocates to “Think about what you don't know as well as what you do. Think about whatever privilege you do have and use it to make space for those with less.” Reflecting on privilege is crucial to advocacy, for if we do not confront privilege we are contributing to upholding the status quo. If you want to make change, you have to acknowledge privilege no matter how difficult it may be.

People find talk of privilege as a personal affront, but as @Olas_Truth (Ola Ojewumi) implores us to confront, “We are ALL problematic. It doesn't matter how hard you try to be perfect or say the right thing. We all grew up in a society that is biased and we have biased ways of thinking or acting. The problem happens when you don't try and learn from it or check your privilege.”

Recognizing privilege goes beyond introspection. It also means reaching out to marginalized communities. For instance, “ask marginalized people what they need and see if you or others can help,” offers @twitchyspoonie (TheDisability Enthusiast). Often, white people who don't recognize the privilege of being white, ultimately leads to white people thinking they know what other marginalized groups need, as @christinetm333 (Christine Therriault-Merkel) points out. White people or people with other privileges cannot assume they know what is best for a marginalized group.

Recognizing privilege also means a commitment to use your privilege(s) to lift up other voices by crediting others, as discussed above. As @DrCSWilliam (Claudia William) says “Don't just advocate for people like oneself only.” In other words, it's important to learn to advocate for everyone. You can focus on your issue, but don't let your fervor for one issue blind you to the work being done all around you. Ultimately it's all connected.

Additionally, part of using your privilege means reaching out to marginalized groups directly and including them in your advocacy efforts – not just in a tokenistic manner, but to hear their voices and let their insight to contribute to change. Too often marginalized groups are marginalized even within advocacy groups. For instance, groups talking about inclusivity may leave out disability. Or folks discussing issues like medical care may leave out people of color and their unique experiences. In your advocacy, you must make a concerted and conscious effort to include *all* voices.

Further, when you have privilege, you must do your homework and coming prepared, as discussed above. Learn about the history of marginalized groups, because it is not up to marginalized groups to explain it to you. Marginalized groups often do a lot of unpaid labor in

explaining issues, history, and aspects of their lived experience. Google before asking someone to explain something to you. Additionally, don't ask marginalized people to do the emotional labor of making you feel good about your efforts – as many say, you don't get a cookie for showing up. Advocate because it's the right thing to do, not because you're going to get a gold star for your work.

b. Color/Race/Ethnicity

People of color have unique experiences in advocating that white people will never fully be able to grasp. As a white woman writing this, I cannot speak in depth to the to the unique experiences of advocacy for people of color. However, I can say that in any advocacy space, particularly those centered on issues that have a disparate impact on people of color, you must defer to people of color when they speak.

Here I defer to people of color in their experiences in their advocacy experiences. As @daintiersmarter (Lori Kessler) says, “you may think you know what intersectionality is, but if you're not a black woman you're probably wrong.” And @Rasheeradiara (Rasheera Dopson) discusses how intersectionality that includes race is isolating, saying, “Sometimes you can still feel like the only one in the room filled with other people with similar conditions. Being a disabled black woman in any room is still tough not matter what your fighting for.”

@DrJoftheDC (Jason L Campbell) echoes the discussion above of who may or may not be allies with a particular lens of race. He imparts “As a black you'll learn two things: 1) not all advocates look like you and 2) not all who look like you are advocates. Both important – the second point more shocking than the first.”

There is far more to say about the intersectionality of race in all advocacy spaces, but again, I cannot speak to those and can only share what was offered to me. I hope in time, I will learn more from people of color and can lift up their voices with my privileges.

X. What it Means to “Win”

Many people come to advocacy thinking that there will be straight forward “wins” – that their view will prevail, the legislation they are advocating for will pass, the people in power will hear them and make change, and so on. As discussed above in presenting your advocacy issue, for most it seems clear as day that their issue matters and their story and the data to back it up will carry a movement forward. But remember, advocacy takes time. And “wins” are hard to come by or may look very different from what you expected.

a. Incremental and Unexpected “Wins”

Sometimes “wins” are incremental. You may get part of your law passed or a small administrative change that most people won't ever realize took place. Sometimes a “win” is simply getting one person to listen, one person who will sit down with you. As I often say, you must realize that these actions are not nothing, and not nothing is indeed something. Thus, you

must “celebrate small victories,” as @DrPhilipVerhoef (Philip A. Verhoef) says, adding, “Big victories are so rare, so you gotta celebrate the small ones to keep going.”

Incremental wins can be frustrating. You can both be really glad a bill passed or you made progress with your issue and also be quite disappointed. Progress can simultaneously signal a big step forward while not being enough. It is okay to acknowledge the problems that have not been addressed and any exasperation you feel because ultimately, we all want more. We want to see change in its entirety. These are the times when you have to remember that even if progress is not complete, it is not nothing.

Also, understand that “wins” may look like something completely unexpected. As @seastarbatita (Isabel Jordan) realized, “Big changes are great,” but “the relationships I make with [others] who *want* to learn may end up having the biggest impact.” These are “wins” may not seem like wins in the traditional sense, but they are meaningful and impactful. Celebrate these connections too for they create that foundation and a legacy that will endure the peaks and valleys of advocacy.

b. Victories and Losses and the Fruits of Your Labor

A realistic view of advocacy is sometimes defeating. It’s a hard road in advocacy, that can be discouraging and sometimes leads to many advocates dropping out. “Wins” and “losses” are part of the rollercoaster that comes with dedication to fighting for your issue. “Be prepared to lose, and lose often,” warns @DM007A/Nada, yet they go on to with optimism to say, “the losses make the victories so much sweeter.” It can be hard to weather these ups and downs.

@ElenaHung202 (Elena Hung) advises, “There will be victories and losses. Take the time to process both. Don’t let the victories get to your head; don’t let the losses get to your heart.”

It’s hard to accept but many “activists often don’t experience the fruit of their labours” as @eatonhamilton (Hamilton), however there is still cause for optimism because “[happily] people who come along behind them do.” In other words, you might not see the outcome you wish in your time as an advocate, but the work you do is not for nothing, it is the foundation for future advocacy and change. As such, you must “Do things because you think they’re right, not because you think you’ll win,” says @wodewoselle (Rachelle C. Brown). Most importantly, as Mahatma Gandhi wisely said, “It’s the action, not the fruit of the action, that’s important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there will be any fruit. ...But that doesn’t mean you stop... if you do nothing, there will be no result.”

c. Moving on When You Aren’t Making Progress

More practically, it’s important to understand the bigger picture in advocacy. When you first start advocating, you will meet people who say they support you privately but not publicly. This is frustrating and teaches you that politics are at play, politics you may not fully grasp and will take time to fight. At other times, you may have a meeting or interaction only to hear “we’ll follow up with you” and you never hear back. This is where your diligence to follow up will serve you as you call back and reiterate that you hope for support, but know some folks will never listen or change their mind no matter how persistent you are.

Then there are those who will give you a “maybe,” hemming and hawing, stringing you along. Listen to the wisdom of others in these times. @LaureenNarro (Laureen Lazarovici) relays her experience: “A more experienced organizer once said, ‘a “maybe” is a “no.”’ I thought he was too cynical. Turns out he was right. Move on to cultivating your ‘yesses’.” Sometimes you just have to move on. Find other supporters and keep moving forward.

d. Following Through After a “Win”

Additionally, know that your “win” is not the end of your advocacy. A bill signing is not the end of creating a law. After a law is passed, there will be rulemaking processes that define just how a law will be put into effect. Lobbyists rely on advocates to stop advocating after a law is passed, with advocates thinking their job is done. But if you read laws carefully, you will note that a state or federal agency will be assigned to develop rules that essentially define the law. For instance, a state law may say that pharmacies are required to refill prescriptions in an emergency and all pharmacists must be educated on this law. The law seems straight forward – it defines what an emergency is and which drugs can or cannot be refilled. But it’s not so simple. The state will assign an agency to make rules – like what does the education for pharmacists look like – will it be an online video? Or a piece of paper to read? Does the state make the learning materials or do they outsource it to private companies? And so on. These details matter because they affect how effective training may be and thus whether pharmacists will be aware of the law when a patient shows up needing an emergency refill. But advocates have a chance to be involved in this process – to make comments on draft rules or meet with state agencies.

Know too that no bill is perfect. There are always ways to improve bills. You can help improve your bill by seeing if it’s been passed elsewhere and looking for flaws in implementation before bringing your bill. Or you may need to file a new bill to fix issues in the next legislative session.

Beyond rulemaking, many laws end up in court. Industries and organizations may file a lawsuit straight away claiming that the law enacted is unjust. They’ll use their substantial resources to fight a law that will hurt their financial interest or power. Unfortunately, many advocates do not have the resources to engage in these lawsuits (or what they call “standing” to do so). But advocates can look for non-profits, agencies, or other industry partners to fight. In other words, advocacy continues to make change in many different ways. You will have to work hard and find unique avenues to advocate, but continuing your work will ensure your previous win will be upheld.

Similarly, your “win” may be realized in your state or affect one portion of the population. Advocacy work, though, is not over until everyone is afforded this same change. Once you have won, look to other states where they might be fighting the same issues and trying to implement the same laws. If they want it, offer them insights on your experience. Or, as needed, offer practical support. Additionally, if a law passes that only includes some individuals but not all, keep fighting to ensure those left out are included. Know that your work is not done until everyone is included.

If advocacy for you as it is for @GaetaAmy (Amy Gaeta “about fighting structures and helping to provide access and rights to individuals and communities,” it’s important to recognize that changes in policy are not the end of making systemic change. You must follow through with your advocacy and continue to follow up. Make sure that policies are actually enacted. Make sure those policies follow the intent of your work and do not have unexpected, adverse consequences. This may take a lot of time. In fact, it may take years as you wait to see how the policy ultimately affects everyone. Advocacy takes time and you must remain committed to the work.

e. Share the Wins

Advocacy will always be bigger than you and any “wins” that are accomplished will be done in concert with other advocates. It may be humbling but as @VdotW (Serena Williams’ Business Bun) says, “There are very few actual heroes.” Because we’re all in this together, we have to share the wins. Or as @RebeccaCokley (Rebecca Cokley) relays, “@DayAlMohamed taught me to share the candy. Don’t be the jerk who hogs the rewards, share the work share the glory.” Thus, just like crediting others and passing the mic, with whatever wins you find yourself enjoying, make sure to lift up those around you who helped.

XI. Personal Rewards

Much of the above has focused on difficulties and hard realities. But at the end of the day, advocacy comes with many rewards – not just “wins” but far deeper personal rewards.

For instance, the people you meet. @itsthebunk (Liza Bernstein) says it best, “I had no idea I would meet so many incredible, amazing, wonderful people!” These people will have a huge impact on your life. @Megan_Janas (Megan Janas) shares her experiences: “You will get close to those who are advocates/patients and care about them. You will forever be affected by the journey of those you meet...It’s so worth it, though. Because you realize there is healing, strength and love to be found in this work. Let the love lead you.”

The rewards can be unexpected @anneto (Annette McKinnon) relays, saying, “I had no idea how much being an [advocate] trying to contribute to positive change in healthcare would change me. New horizons open in areas I was totally unaware of, like Regulation, Health Technology Assessment, the Value Equation.”

XII. Burnout and Keeping Your Strength Up

“Burnout and emotional fatigue are very real and happen to all of us at times, but the best way to combat both is to have good support,” are wise words from @ChefGeib (VictoriaK). @RenzaS (Renza) reiterates this, relaying that “burnout is real, and it is exhausting” and noting that when you have additional challenges like burnout from an illness.

Addressing burnout essentially means you will “Take care of your own needs,” which is important @Purple GoddessWA (Rayna Lamb) explains “because you won’t be effective and can risk harming others.” You can also harm yourself, affecting your mental health as discussed

above. Make sure to assess where you are in advocacy and be honest with yourself about burnout. When you realize you are burning out or to keep your strength up and avoid burnout, advocates have many suggestions including taking breaks, engaging in self-care, and finding support.

a. Take Breaks

Advocate after advocate advises that it's okay to take a break. And they're right:

- "Take a break if you start feeling like a martyr." (@beaterast/Beate)
- "Take breaks and step away when you need to." (@PurpleGoddessWA/Rayna Lamb)
- "It's ok to take breaks to recoup. It's hard, emotional work. No one owes anyone explanations or guilt, self-care should remain a priority." (@DrCSWilliam/Claudia William)
- "It is so exhausting. You are allowed to take a break and you *should* take breaks- your advocacy will be better for it...Don't be a martyr." (@gabrielbaberiel/Gabe)
- "Everything can seem *urgent* all the time. You are permitted to take a break any time you need to." (@ElenaHung202/Elena Hung)

You need breaks to keep your strength up. That can look like anything from a long nap to disconnecting from social media to disconnecting to engaging in self-care (see below). Whatever a break looks like to you, whether you schedule them or take them as needed, do what you need to do to avoid or treat burnout.

b. Self-Care

Self-care is crucial to avoid burnout or to take care of yourself when on a break. "Don't neglect yourself or relationships - if you can't take care of yourself, you can't help others," says @christinetm333 (Christine Therriault-Merkel). As with taking a break, there is no right way to self-care but advocates give many ideas. For instance, @RebeccaCokley (Rebecca Cokley) suggests any little thing that makes you happy like "knitting, drawing, etc," She calls these things, "part of your sustainability plan."

"Balance [and]...Find the joy in family, hobbies, and other things," says @bromally (Bryan Marcou O'Malley). He knows that these things "maintain you during the hardest fights and biggest losses." Additionally, he encourages using these things for respite because "They build you up."

Self-care also means taking care of your physical health needs. @Rebecca Cokley shares her experiences: "Never skip lunch (unless you have to). I used to skip lunch if I felt I hadn't done enough that day. I had a boss who talked crap about people who took breaks. Then I realized I was starving myself. Not ok. Eat lunch. Daily."

Self-care is personal and, like taking breaks, will look different to each person. Be creative, ask other advocates what they do for self-care, search google for ideas – just do what you need to do to keep your strength up.

c. Find Outside Support

Along with taking breaks and engaging in self-care, having outside support can make a huge difference in your advocacy. Sometimes advocacy can be isolating. It can feel like “We can only relate to other advocates,” @JessicaGimeno (Jessica Gimeno) observes. “Our family and friends don’t know what the hell we are doing and [how] we view the world differently analytically.” Having other advocates who can support allows you to vent with others who understand what you are going through. You may also want to “Sit down and talk to people one to one about what you are doing/want to do. Even advocates need advocates - find yours,” as @christinetm333 (Christine Therriault-Merkel) suggests,

However, it’s also important to have friends “on the outside” as @RebeccaCokley (Rebecca Cokley) puts it. She says, “Don’t feel like your only friends have to be movement friends. It’s so nice to have friends...who don’t care about what you do to the extent it impacts them.” You don’t have to go it alone, @InclusiveEdHelp (Trillium Inclusive Education Services) reminds us.

XIII. Miscellaneous Advocacy Tips

Finally, here are a few miscellaneous advocacy tips of note to consider in your advocacy.

a. Advocacy Expenses

Know that “Advocacy can be expensive, usually on your own dime,” (@IBCResearch/IBC Research Fdn). Everything from parking fees and gas to get to a legislative hearing to flying to conferences to renting rooms for advocacy meetings to coffees with other advocates – advocacy often involves spending money. Sadly this means many advocates are excluded because they cannot afford to engage. If you have the means, sponsor another advocate – pay for their parking or offer a lift, crowdfund to get them to conferences, etc. Everyone should have the chance to be involved.

b. Employers and Advocacy

If you’re working, “tell your employer, but do what is right by your conscience,” says @RyanMarino (Ryan Marino). You don’t want to lose your job or speaking up. On the other hand, do the right thing. You do not want to sit by the sidelines knowing you could have made a difference but were too afraid to speak up. At the end of the day, it’s a balance and a personal choice that only you can make for yourself.

c. Advocating as a Parent

“Always be respectful of your child’s privacy,” advises @ElenaHung202 (Elena Hung). She recommends to “Include them as much you can” and “Highlight their humanity in your advocacy.”

Some advocates also note that if your child can speak for themselves, do not speak for them. Let your child develop their own voice and support them in them as they learn how they want to advocate or if they do not want to be part of advocacy.

d. Other Legislative Advocacy Tips

Words have meanings. Be precise and clear when you offer a bill and ask other advocates with expertise to review a bill to ensure it is precise and clear. This means using Oxford commas and looking for words choices that could be misinterpreted. Entire court cases have been brought based on one word.

Consider too what the root cause of your issue is. Too many laws only address the surface problem and never address the systemic causes. This leads to bad policy and people who continue to suffer. To that end, consider what unintended consequences of your proposed solution might have. Consider who could be harmed in your efforts. Don't be selfish in your advocacy. If your ideal will hurt others, especially the marginalized and vulnerable, find a new way to address your issue.

As movements grow, people forget that there's more work that's being done behind the scenes than you might see. People are working tirelessly to educate the public and legislators, bring others in to fight with them, developing advocacy materials and more. Respect this work that comes without applause.

Conclusion

This Preface to Advocacy will never be fully complete. Perhaps in time, more will be added to this document, for it is a living document to be updated and edited to grow with the ever changing nature of advocacy. Yet this document will likely never contain every insight to help you through every situation you'll face as an advocate. Ultimately, "Expect the unexpected" (@Hanwarrior/Burce Warnsby) is some of the best advice you'll get.

About Erin Gilmer

Erin Gilmer is a health law and policy attorney. She has extensive experience in analyzing and crafting legislation in a vast array of issues and has worked with advocates worldwide to increase their effectiveness. She writes at www.healthasahumanright.wordpress.com.