



Advocacy Toolkit

Introduction to advocacy

Advocacy is the promotion of ideas and issues that are important to you and your family to governments, media and the general public. More than just making people aware of your concerns, advocacy is about persuading policy makers to act in your favour.

Many of us already advocate for ourselves and others on a regular basis without thinking about it (e.g. whenever participating in a job interview). When it comes to issues related to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, the subject matter is more complex, the audience often less informed and the cost of inaction far greater to the individuals involved.

As an organization, CADDAC assists individuals with their advocacy efforts on a daily basis. Equally important, CADDAC advocates on systemic issues such as more educational supports for students with ADHD and increased access to treatment options, as well as increasing government awareness of the socioeconomic costs of undiagnosed and untreated ADHD. We do this through written policy submissions to governments, meetings with elected officials, interviews with media that may influence policy makers, and other efforts.

This work takes time as our voice is just one among many seeking policy change. Further, governments have a process for decision making that also takes time. Some changes require legislation with new laws or amendments to specific rules called regulations. It can be many months for legislation to be passed, allowing ample time for public and political debate. However, some changes can be made that do not require new laws and those changes can be made more quickly. It may take many months or years though to prompt governments to take any action at all.

Our voice is strengthened with support from members and like-minded individuals speaking in unison. CADDAC has prepared this Advocacy Tool Kit to assist you in your own advocacy, both individually and in conjunction with broad campaigns initiated by our organization. We remain available for answers and advice to help you in your advocacy efforts.

To realize success, advocacy requires a commitment to continuously advancing your issues, presenting a clear request for change known as an “ask” backed by strong arguments and evidence and a critical mass of support for your position.

Why advocate?

One of the ways in which CADDAC serves the community is through our public advocacy of issues affecting individuals and families living with ADHD. But our efforts are enhanced with the active participation of our supporters, to the benefit of us all.

It is important to engage in advocacy because decision-makers react to those who most effectively bring their issues to the forefront of the public agenda. All governments have competing interests and concerns that must be addressed, as well as their own policy priorities and financial limitations. Those who can best engage in this process will have their voices heard. Those who choose not to engage will have no say in decisions that could fundamentally impact their lives.

We advocate, then, for the purposes of protecting and promoting our interests. If this sounds crass consider that there are plenty of other organizations and individuals that are willing to fill the void that would be created by our absence from the public debate. There is also a responsibility to speak up for not only ourselves but for others like us who may not be able to.

We must therefore be prepared to act, for ourselves, our families – especially our children – and our community.

How to advocate

There are a number of ways in which you can advocate, depending on the issue you are pursuing, whether you are participating in a larger CADDAC campaign or advancing something on your own, whether it is a national or local issue and whether you are advocating proactively in support of a policy or reactively against a policy that has been recently announced.

Some of the specific steps that may be considered as part of an advocacy effort include:

- Writing a letter to your elected representative(s) or more senior officials
- Attending a meeting with your elected representative(s)
- Drafting a petition to government and securing signatories
- Writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper
- Attending a government organized public consultation or “town hall meeting”
- Urging your family or friends to support your effort by calling or writing local politicians themselves
- Writing local candidates at election time asking for their opinions on issues you care about
- Joining CADDAC led online campaigns

Who to advocate to

Who you advocate to depends on the issue you are involved with. Does your issue fall within federal, provincial or local jurisdiction, or some combination? For example, a school-related issue may require you advocating to both your provincial representative and your school board representative.

Once the question of government jurisdiction has been settled, finding the most appropriate person to deliver your message to will be the next challenge. Some options may include:

Senior government politicians

- These could include Premiers or Ministers (Health Minister, Education Minister, etc.). They would be targets for a letter or as part of a larger campaign.

Local political representatives such as your local MP or MPP/MLA

- They would be your targets for in-person meetings and more direct advocacy. As you are their constituent and a voter there is a greater incentive for them to take your position seriously. Note, their ability to directly change laws would be impacted on whether they were a member of the government or a member of an opposition party.

Political staff

- All elected officials have staff members to assist with their scheduling, to advise them on policies, to liaise with community groups and help run their offices. Because politicians are often very busy, it is sometimes easier to meet with these political staff members. If they can be convinced to support your issue they can be very influential in getting the support of their boss (the MP, MPP/MLA, etc.).

Bureaucratic staff

- There are also many people who work for the government in non-partisan positions, collectively and commonly known as the bureaucracy. While elected politicians are ultimately accountable for government actions, some decisions may be taken by bureaucratic staff working in the various government departments (health, education, etc.). It may be advantageous at times to know who exactly in the bureaucracy is responsible for which files.

If you do not already have existing relationships with all of your local elected representatives, we suggest you contact them and introduce yourself and the issues that are important to you.

Advocating to the media and public through Letters to the Editor

Advocacy can go beyond government representatives. Speaking out on issues of concern through initiatives such as letters to the editor can be very useful.

What is it?

A letter to the editor is a short (no more than 150 words) commentary piece on a topical issue and/or an issue that has recently appeared in the newspaper. Letters to the editor are a forum for opinion and not for announcements. The letters page appears in newspapers opposite the editorial page (where the newspaper takes its own positions on public issues). Traditionally, several letters on a variety of topics are included daily. The letters page is the newspaper's way of giving the general public a direct voice in their news pages.

Why do it?

Letters to the editor are an excellent vehicle for expressing your point of view on a subject, correcting a factual error from a previous news article, or challenging an opinion that you disagree with. While there is no guarantee of publication, several letters are published in newspapers daily. The letters page is well read, particularly by an audience concerned with public policy and important issues.

How to do it?

Letters to the editor are addressed, literally, to the editor of the newspaper you are submitting them to. They should be brief (see above), opinionated but respectful, and have a specific point to make. Each newspaper has information on their specific requirements for letters to the editor and a local email address, fax and/or mailing address. When submitting your letter, remember to include your full name and daytime phone number, as the newspaper will want to confirm you are in fact the author of the letter. It may take a few days from the date you submit your letter to the day it is published in the paper.

Tips for advocacy success

Know your issue

You should be able to demonstrate that you can clearly explain what your issue is, why it concerns you and what you would like done about it (i.e. knowing what your “ask” is). Knowledge of key facts and supporting arguments, or at the very least, having access to them, is very important for establishing credibility and ultimately realizing success.

CADDAC can assist you with key messages – short points that persuasively explain the most important elements of your issue in simple language. There is also useful background information on CADDAC's website at www.caddac.ca.

Know your audience

Identifying who the audience is that will be receiving your advocacy pitch and knowing a little something about them can help you tailor your message and perhaps be more successful. By doing a little advance research (all politician biographies are available on the internet) and asking questions you will be better positioned to open a constructive dialogue.

Here are some additional tips:

- Keep informed about major political issues so you know the context for government decisions and what may be impacting them.
- Try to understand the perspective of the person you are meeting with. This will help you shape your ask. For example, if they have particular policy interests, find ways to connect your issue to their interests.
- Remember that politicians want to be re-elected – frame your issues with this in mind. Positions that represent a ‘win’ for both your cause and the decision-maker you are advocating to, are the best.
- Look for people within your circle of family, friends or colleagues who have established relationships with the people you need to see and may be willing to make introductions for you.

Determine the best way to get your message out

As outlined, there are a number of ways to advocate for your issues including letters to politicians, petitions, attending meetings and writing to your local newspaper. Different situations will require different actions. But you should consider of these factors:

- How urgent is my issue? Can it wait for a sit down meeting with your MPP/MLA or do you require an answer now, in which case you should call or write their office.
- Is your issue unique to your family or is it something affecting others in your community you could advocate together with or through CADDAC.
- Who is best positioned to secure the change you seek? Your local representative or a cabinet Minister?
- What else is going on politically? Is there an election taking place whereby you could ask all candidates for their thoughts on your issue?
- Can your issue be resolved easily with a simple overview from you or is it more complex and will therefore require more than one outreach to more than one person.

