

## How Can a Social Work Student Be an Advocate?

### Quick Advocacy Tips:

- Read and learn something
  - Talk to someone who thinks differently than you
  - Sign a petition
  - Learn how to contact your representatives—and contact them!
  - Contact local business to get them to change their policies
  - Go to a meeting
  - Attend peaceful protests
  - Attend Social Work Advocacy Day!!! For more information, check out <http://www.naswnc.org/?page=292>
  - Invite a friend to join you!
  - Don't give up! YOU DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!
- 
- **Contact and Visit Your Representatives:** The best thing you can do to be heard and get your representatives to pay attention is to have face-to-face time - if they have town halls, or public hearings go to them. Go to their local offices. If you're in DC, try to find a way to go to an event of theirs. Go to the "mobile offices" that their staff hold periodically (all these times are located on each congressperson's website). When you go, ask questions. A lot of them. And push for answers. The louder and more vocal and present you can be at those the better. Below are a few steps to follow when reaching out to North Carolina legislators.
  - **Building a Relationship with Your Representatives—** As a social worker and a constituent, it is important to establish a relationship with your representatives as they make decisions on your behalf- whether it's to continue funding a program that serves your clients or funds your current position or a policy decision that impacts how your clients are served.
  - **Who Represents Me?** The first step in building a relationship with your legislator is learning who represents you.
    - **North Carolina Representatives:** You are searching for two different people here- one is your House Representative and the second is your NC Senator. It is easy to look up your legislators. Go to <http://www.ncleg.net/> (Legislative Homepage). On the right hand side of the page, you will see a tab entitled "Who Represents Me?" Once you click on the tab, you will be taken to a page where you can locate your districts. Please follow the instructions on this website.

**Step 1: Call your Legislator:** The easiest thing to do is make a quick (approximately 30 seconds) call to your representatives. Calls are what all the representatives pay attention to. Every single day, they get a report of the 3 most-called-about topics for that day at each of their offices (in DC and local offices), and exactly how many people said what about each of those topics. They're also sorted by zip code and area code.

- You should aim to make six calls a day — to your two senators and your one representative at their Washington, D.C., office and their local office.
- The phones are typically answered by staff. You do not have to ask to speak to your representative, rather you can simply state your thoughts and ask that your concerns be shared with your representative. You do not have to ask them to call you back. If you do want a call back, you may hear back from them within a few days and maybe not depending on how busy their schedules are.
- Be prepared! These are a few tips to help you make contact with your legislators, make your views known as a constituent, and hopefully build a positive relationship with him or her:
  - Do your homework: find out the correct pronunciation of his or her name! Nothing is more embarrassing than discovering you've mangled the name of the person you're trying to establish rapport with.

- Find out which committees your representatives serve on, which bills they have sponsored or co-sponsored, and their voting histories on issues important to you. This will give you an idea on their positions regarding issues you want to discuss. You can find out this information at [www.ncleg.net](http://www.ncleg.net) and find your legislator in the drop down box labeled “View Member Info” in the top right hand corner.
- If possible, find out the name of the administrative assistant or secretary and try to develop a pleasant relationship; they are the gatekeepers to their bosses’ access!
- Write out the gist of your ideas before you call so that you will be organized, succinct, and on point. Your legislator’s time is limited and valuable so get to the point quickly!
- Do a few practice runs with a friend who can critique your delivery or record yourself and play it back.
- Now you’re ready to call! Here is an **example of a phone conversation**:
  - “Hello, I’m [your name] and am a voting constituent. My zip code is [your zipcode]. I would like to tell representative [name] my concern about \_\_\_\_, and would ask him/her to vote FOR/AGAISNT \_\_\_\_.”
  - “Hello, I’m [your name] from Representative [Legislator’s last name] district. I would like to speak with him/her about (insert issue like House Bill XX) which proposes (tell them what it does). Is she available now to take my call?”
    - **If the response is Yes**, once your representative is on the line, repeat your introduction and give a brief reason why he/she should vote for (or against) the bill. As a social worker, you can speak to how this bill will impact your clients or the community directly or indirectly. Remember, social workers are advocates!
    - **If the response is No**, ask the legislative assistant when the legislator will be available to receive constituent calls, and say that you will call back during that timeframe. Make sure to thank him or her for her time.
- **Step 2: Email your Legislator:** This is the easiest step to building that relationship- reaching out via email. Most of us spend too much time sending emails anyway, what is one more to your legislator? To help break the ice with your legislator, send him or her a quick email that tells who you are and what you do in their community- working in an agency or going to school. Here are some **tips to writing an effective email**:
  - Always fill in the subject line with a topic so that your legislator knows what to expect when they open it (and so they know it is not spam).
  - Always specify what you’re writing about- wanting to schedule a meeting, concerns about a bill, concerns about a problem you see in the district, etc.
  - Be brief and polite
  - Add a signature with appropriate contact information (in most cases, your name, business address, and phone number, along with a legal disclaimer if required by your company).
  - Edit and proofread before hitting “send.” You may think you are too busy to sweat the small stuff, but unfortunately your legislator may think you are just careless and not someone they should rely on for helpful information.
- **Step 3: Send your Legislator a Postcard:**
  - Get Creative! Make a personalized postcard
  - See steps above about emailing to know what content to add to the postcard
  - See steps above about “Who Represents Me” to find correct addresses (use local address when possible)
- **Step 4: Schedule to meet your legislators in person.** You’ve emailed your legislator. You’ve sent them a postcard. You’ve called them on the phone. Now visit them in person! Ask your legislators if you could schedule a time to meet and discuss political issues relevant to your profession via email or phone.