

Guidance for Engaging with Policymakers

Tips on how to effectively engage with policymakers and advance your mission

Thanks to the following for much of the content included in this overview and visit the advocacy info pages of [AAM](#), [AZA](#), and [ASTC](#) as well as [Bolder Advocacy](#).

Engaging on policy issues is not only good for conservation, but it's also [good for your organization](#). The [research](#) is clear: The public expects, trusts and appreciates when zoos, aquariums, and museums provide information regarding environmental and conservation issues and also provide guidance about how to address them personally and societally, including [on policy](#).

Some zoos, aquariums, and museums are already very much involved in advocacy and policy change and our hope is that this overview may help many more get involved. Advocacy provides one of the best ways your facility can focus attention on the issues, help the animals you care for *and* help the people and the community you serve. This brief overview provides tools and information on how to get more involved and provides links for more information.

Regarding lobbying, it's good to remember (thanks to [Bolder Advocacy](#)):

- Most efforts to change public policy are not lobbying. Lobbying is an effort to influence specific legislation (including a ballot measure), either through communicating with legislators or with the general public. In many instances, efforts to influence executive branch (presidential, gubernatorial, or government agency) decisions will not constitute lobbying. Generally, analyzing broad issues and educating the public about those issues also do not count as lobbying.
- There are no limits on most advocacy activities. The law gives nonprofits plenty of room for supporting or conducting almost every type of advocacy. Lobbying and election-related activities face some legal restrictions, however. In addition, 501(c)(3) organizations are not allowed to support or oppose candidates for public office.

Several steps to engagement of policymakers and inviting them to your facility:

1. ***Find your elected officials.*** Click [here](#) for U.S. Representatives and Senators.
2. ***Learn more about them.*** Check their websites, recent news and events, press releases, and social media feeds so you can get a good sense for what they're interested in, committees they are on, and learn who are the key staff people.
3. ***Invite them to your facility.*** To connect, it's good to start with their local (not DC) office and be specific about why you are calling and what you are asking them to do (e.g., visit your institution or participate in a (virtual) meeting. Inviting elected officials and their staff members into your facility allows you to show them the unique work that you do.
4. ***Get your talking points together.*** Remember to tell your stories and provide a 'one pager' regarding what you're asking for your elected official to take home. Work

with your association (AZA, ASTC, or AAM) and/or ask us for overviews on some of the key issues.

5. **Make your case when meeting.** [AAM](#) has a great overview on this aspect of the process. Connect the issues you are discussing with local wildlife or the legislator (or staffer's) favorite wild animal.

6. **Make the meeting one of many over time to build relationships.** Remember the relationships are not just with the elected officials, but also their staff; staff will be key points of contact for you. Make sure they know you'll be accessible, be flexible and humble, and make sure to engage routinely. By doing so, they will get to know you better, build an emotional connection through the animals, and when you do make an ask of them, they'll be more inclined to readily respond and support your cause.

7. **Share your strengths.** Include that you are a highly trusted community anchor, how you are a key partner in education and outreach to your community and reach broad and diverse audiences. Remember to share your economic impact, and, as appropriate, how you are accredited and meet or surpass professional standards for animal care and welfare, are leaders for conservation and research, education, and more.

8. **Remember to follow up.** After your meeting, thank them and reinforce your message/ask, send any photos you may have taken. And share how it went with your association ([AZA](#), [ASTC](#) and/or [AAM](#)) and the government affairs or advocacy staff to help them in their work.

9. **Get on your elected officials' email and outreach lists.** Keep aware of constituent calls, virtual town halls, and other in-person or virtual community events your elected officials are holding so your institution can participate and grow awareness of the importance of issues you care about – encourage participation by staff, leadership, [board members](#), docents, members.

10. **Refresh every new legislative session.** Engaging early in a [new Congress](#) and regularly throughout it will help you build a long-term relationship and transform elected officials into champions for your cause.

Collaborate for greater impact. Consider working on issues in coordination with other AZA, ASTC and/or AAM members in your region to develop stronger relationships with your elected officials and advance collaborative advocacy. And/or consider connecting with other types of organizations that are pursuing action on similar issues (e.g., civic or conservation organizations).

Ask us: The Ocean Project is here to help. We're always happy to provide information on the issues and broker connections with the hundreds of organizations that are part of the global network we've developed over 20+ years (ZAMs, nonprofit community and advocacy organizations, youth groups, foundations, and more).

Additional resources:

- [Museums & Public Opinion](#) from AAM
- Research on [credibility and trust](#) from IMPACTS
- [Championing your mission](#) - IMPACTS presentation at 2019 AZA Annual Conference
- Museums as economic engines from [AAM](#) and [AZA](#)
- [Yes, Nonprofits, You Can Lobby](#), by Bolder Advocacy
- [Guidelines for 501\(c\)\(3\) Public Charities](#), by Bolder Advocacy
- [More from Bolder Advocacy](#)
- [Lobbying Guidelines for Public Charities](#), by Independent Sector
- [Tools to Advocate](#) from AAM
- [AZA Legislative Education Center](#)
- Resources for [Spanish-speaking activists](#) from Bolder Advocacy