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The Ins and Outs of Advocacy

Stacy Etheredge

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THE INS AND OUTS OF ADVOCACY

Advice and best practices for getting involved in public policy.

BY STACY ETHEREDGE,
PEGGY ROEBUCK JARRETT &
KAREN WESTWOOD

When you run across an article promoting advocacy, are you curious about what it is and how to do it? Do you think it sounds great in theory but are unsure of the skills involved? In this article, three experienced advocates provide their insights, explanations, advice, and a lot of encouragement for getting involved in the world of advocacy. As law librarians, each of us has something to contribute. There is a cause out there for everyone. Find what interests you, and take part in this meaningful and rewarding professional activity.

What Is Advocacy?

Peggy: What do we mean when we say “advocacy?” Advocacy is working to influence the outcome of public policies on state, federal, and international levels. The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) has a robust and well-respected advocacy program—based on AALL’s Government Relations Policy—led by Emily Feltren, AALL’s director of government relations, and implemented by AALL members. Advocacy takes many forms, including organizing, calling, writing, meeting, and testifying. It all matters, and it’s most effective when we all participate.

Why law librarians? Why is advocacy a foundational focus of AALL, and what makes us well-suited to take on these tasks? To begin with, we have knowledge and passion. Librarians understand the big picture and can handle details. Further, the current political and technological environment calls for librarians to advocate even more strongly for access to government information, open government, and patron privacy.

Types of Advocacy

The great thing about advocacy is that whether you are introverted or extroverted, there is a role for you. If you are energized by interactions with people, get to know your legislative representatives and their staffs. Go to the places they’ll be, whether that’s a farmer’s market or an alumni reception, and introduce yourself. Make connections and have fun doing it. If you are energized by behind-the-scenes work, write letters, emails, or op-eds. You can also research, diving deep into the legislative process to track issues and keep people informed.

Advocacy work needs the talents natural to both introverts and extroverts, and my experience has shown that introvert and advocate are not mutually exclusive.

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Where to Begin

Stacy: Once you’ve had your “I’m in!” moment and decide to become an advocate, your next thoughts will probably be along the lines of, “Now what?” What do you actually want to advocate for? Where does your particular passion lie?

After you get into the groove of advocacy, you will find your way to your own special issues and they will find their way to you. But for the advocacy novice, get started by visiting the AALL Government Relations Office (GRO) website at bit.ly/AALLadvocacy. It is the perfect place to begin when you are trying to discern what all is out there, and where you might want to contribute your time, energy, and heart (valuable commodities, all).

As you look through the GRO webpages, you’ll quickly learn that these are easy times to be inspired into advocacy. It can seem like every day there is a new challenge, if not an assault, on issues that are critical to our profession—issues that affect the lives of the people we are committed to serving. You might be stirred up by the net neutrality debate. Perhaps you are worried about funding for libraries, law, or otherwise. Or maybe your interest lies with internet privacy, access to government information, or copyright and fair use. There will always be issues and challenges to take head-on.

As you keep sifting through the GRO’s webpages, you will start to feel

empowered because you will realize how easy they have made it for you to become involved, no matter the issue. You can subscribe to the Advocacy listserv, read the Washington eBulletin, respond to action alerts, and keep an eye out for advocacy trainings, both virtual and in person. The GRO will track the issues, supply the information and resources, and provide the opportunities for engagement. All you have to do is jump in and get to work.

For me, my journey started when I attended the yearly GRO Advocacy training at the AALL Annual Meeting, where I learned about the Uniform Electronic Legal Material Act (UELMA), which concerns digital authentication and preservation of online legal resources. Something about it sparked my interest and I found that the state I was living in at the time, West Virginia, had not enacted it. Now it has, and I was a part of it. It was a fabulous experience, and honestly one of the highlights of my professional life. So what are you waiting for? Jump in, already!

Take Charge

Karen: The best-case scenario is when AALL members spearhead legislative change, with plenty of time to prepare and lay the groundwork. But there are times when you may be suddenly and unexpectedly alerted to legislation as it is being proposed, particularly at the state level. Now you need to advocate. This scenario is certainly a challenge, but it is also an opportunity. Law librarians can still be effective, even in a reactive mode. A great first step is to contact AALL’s director of government



AALL QUICK LINKS

- Advocacy on AALLNET
bit.ly/AALLadvocacy
- Advocacy Toolkit
bit.ly/AALL-toolkit
- Legislative Action Center
bit.ly/AALLLAC
- Washington eBulletin
bit.ly/AALL-eBulletin

relations for sound advice and help in determining next steps and level of urgency.

Then it's time to be an organizer (something law librarians are highly trained to do). Find other law librarians who are likely to share concern over the proposed legislation. Reach out to legislative contacts you've developed over the years (this may be from your personal or professional life) and make your case. Nowadays these contacts can take the form of a letter, an email, a phone call, or testifying in front of a legislative committee. Be sure to always write to the elected officials from your own district, and emphasize that you are a voter. Especially at the state level, the local law librarian community can be a group that best understands the potential ramifications of proposed legislation. Don't let your expertise go to waste.

Things to Keep in Mind

As we all know from the work we do, legislation can be complicated and unreliable. But if legislation resonates with you (either positively or negatively), be emboldened to speak up. It's remarkable, particularly at the state level, how a clearly worded communication from a law librarian really catches the attention of a legislator. Many legislators have legal backgrounds and most have positive reactions to libraries and librarians. You may have more influence than you realize and, regardless of the outcome, it is gratifying and heartening to have legislators ask for follow-up information, take your remarks seriously, and thank you for your input.

Advocacy is one area where there truly is room for all levels of experience and all personality types. You may choose to work intensely

on legislation for a period of time, or you may opt to just contact your legislators on occasion. You might work alone or with a group of fellow librarians. You may visit legislators in person, or craft written material. AALL can help with any degree and type of involvement, and those of us with more experience are happy to share what we've learned with new advocates. We encourage you to get started—and we're sure you'll find the same professional satisfaction that we have in doing this important and meaningful work. ■

LEARN

Want to learn more and get involved with AALL Government Relations? For more information visit bit.ly/AALLadvocacy.



STACY ETHEREDGE
**ASSOCIATE LAW LIBRARY
DIRECTOR**

University of Idaho College of Law
Boise, ID
stacye@uidaho.edu

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KAREN E. WESTWOOD
LAW LIBRARY DIRECTOR

Hennepin County Law Library
Minneapolis, MN
karen.westwood@hennepin.us

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