

TAKE ACTION

It Starts with Advocacy...But It Doesn't Stop There

When the Jewish community wants to make a difference in the world, one of the first tactics we reach for is often advocacy with our elected officials. This can, indeed, be effective, though it should be one amid a number of tools, allowing us to select the right approach for each situation.

The first question is at what level of government to target our advocacy. Mass incarceration must be combated on multiple scales, as most policies are set at the state and local level, rather than at a federal level. Local and state leaders represent fewer constituents, so your voice may be more significant to them, and you may see results more quickly.

Once you know who your state representatives are, you need to know what Assembly or Senate committees they are on. A Senator or Representative who is on a committee that oversees the issue you care about (whether on the federal or state level) has significant influence over introducing bills or getting them out of committee and onto the floor.

Clergy—who are assumed to represent a whole community whether or not they actually work in a congregation—often have more influence with elected leaders than individual constituents do. Your long-term goal can be to build a relationship with a representative and her/his staff, so that you become a known and trusted voice on a cluster of issues. You don't want to be adversarial if it can be avoided; you do want to express your community's priorities and partner with the representative to shape public policy that benefits everyone. When there is a bill under discussion, it is helpful to be

specific about the name/number of the bill (e.g., H.R. 211) and why you support it. But your relationship-building efforts proceed even if there is not current legislation pending.

Choose the method of contacting your representative that is best for the particular moment and reason for your call, and that fits into your arc of relationship-building. An in-person

meeting generally has the most impact (more on these below). Phone calls tend to be more effective than emails, with ten or 20 calls having more influence than hundreds of boilerplate emails. A personalized message goes much farther than a generic one, via any medium, so plan to communicate a bit about who you are and why this issue matters to you. Representatives and their staff are human too, and a memorable message may stick with them longer. Due to security measures, postal mail can be very slow in reaching a member of Congress (two weeks' delay or more), so for an urgent message,

email or phone is preferable. You can find all the relevant contact information on your representative's website.

Another way to get your message across is to write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, mentioning the name of the representative you are targeting (e.g., "I hope that Congresswoman Smith votes yes on..."). Members of the representative's staff keep a close eye out for their boss's name, so if your letter gets published, they will see it. T'ruah can help you write and submit an op-ed, and if you are collaborating with a local advocacy group, they will have talking points to guide you.



Rabbi David Levy testifies before a legislative committee in Trenton, NJ, supporting a bill to reduce the use of solitary confinement.

Whether you are calling to express your opinion or to request a meeting...

- Don't be nervous! Your call will be answered by someone whose main job is answering the phone and being friendly to you.
- Identify yourself as a constituent.
- If you are looking for a meeting, ask whether it would be possible to meet with someone from the representative's staff to discuss the issue. Representatives always have local offices as well as offices in the state capital or Washington, DC, so you should be able to arrange a meeting without traveling too far.

If you are having an in-person meeting, plan it in advance!

- Decide who is going with you—a group of 4-5 people is best.
- Assign roles: who will introduce the members of your group and what part of your message will each of you communicate.
- You won't know in advance how much time you'll have with the staffer—and it may depend simply on how busy the schedule is that day—so plan for both the three-minute

version and the 30-minute version of the conversation.

- Don't worry about all the policy details you do or don't know. Present why the issue matters to you, relying more on emotion and values than facts. That is what you, as a religious leader or a member of a religious community, bring to the discussion.
- It can also help to bring with you a maximum of one sheet of paper with information about the bill or issue you are advocating for. You can leave this with the staffer to refer back to later, or to pass along to the representative.
- After your meeting, follow up with a thank-you letter or email. It never hurts for the staff to think you were pleasant to work with as well as passionate, and the thank you gives you an opportunity to add anything you weren't able to say in the meeting.

Rabbis and other employees of nonprofit institutions, including synagogues, are prohibited from endorsing candidates in a political race. But we are allowed to speak and educate about the issues we care about, and devote a small, but not “substantial” amount of our time and budget to directly advocating for policies or legislation.

PUTTING THE SYSTEM ON TRIAL

When we think about advocacy, the legislative branch usually comes to mind, but the District Attorney or State's Attorney can also be an effective person to target. In Cleveland, where police shot and killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice, the DA was up for reelection. Rabbi Joshua Caruso and his allies from Greater Cleveland Congregations organized an event called “Putting the System on Trial,” hosted at Rabbi Caruso's synagogue, where they would present public testimony about the problems with policing in Cleveland and what reforms they want to see. With hundreds of people guaranteed to turn out, the DA and his challenger were compelled to show up. (“If the people show up, the candidates will too,” says Rabbi Caruso, “so part of the work is educating the county that this matters.”) Caruso and his co-organizers published an op-ed⁵²¹ in advance of the event, which moved the paper to follow with an editorial⁵²² calling on the candidates to attend. With the power that DA's hold in our system (see p. 48), asking them to respond to public opinion can be a path forward towards change. DA's are also unusual among elected officials, in that incumbents run unopposed 85% of the time.⁵²³ That means that if the DA isn't responsive to public pressure, encouraging a challenger to run can be another way of holding him/her accountable. The event was a big success, with more than 1,000 people attending.⁵²⁴

521 http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2016/01/failed_justice_in_tamir_rice_d.html

522 http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2016/01/clergy_should_have_met_with_prosecutor_timothy_mcginty_editorial.html

523 <http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/ten-reasons-care-about-your-local-da-race>

524 For news coverage of the event, see http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2016/02/faith_group_puts_justice_syste.html or <http://wviz.ideastream.org/news/greater-cleveland-congregations-puts-county-justice-system-on-trial>. As it happened, DA McGinty lost the primary.