

Tips on Engaging and Influencing Government

On Friday, April 29th, City Hall News and City Arts sponsored a panel, *Moving Government*, for nonprofit organizations looking to learn more about influencing government to move an agenda.

The panel was moderated by Peter Madonia, Mayor Bloomberg's former Chief of Staff and now the Chief Operating Officer at the Rockefeller Foundation. Panelists included Claudia Wagner, Partner at Manatt, Phelps and Phillips, Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer, Anat Gerstein, Principal at Anat Gerstein Inc., a communications and public relations firm, Anthony Ng, Director of Policy and Advocacy at United Neighborhood Houses, and Andrew Friedman, co-executive director of Make the Road.



Below is a brief overview of the advice offered by panelists.

Before you Start, Understand Government and Politics

Where does the power reside?

Who are the decision makers?

What are the roles of influencers and their staff?

What is the process for passing a budget or a bill?

Read the daily papers, read your local community paper, get involved with the community board.

For help in building capacity and learning about government, consider partnering with an umbrella group or coalition.

Getting Started: Create a Strategic Plan

Identify what you are trying to influence (funding, legislation, policy) and create a strategic plan taking into consideration the political environment, intergovernmental opportunities and challenges, and messaging/communications.

Your strategy should consider how you will work all government angles: the administration, select agencies, and the legislature.

Make advocacy one of your priorities and dedicate resources to it.

How Do You Get to the Influencers:

Be aggressive. There is no substitute for personal contact. You must establish relationships with your local elected official, the chairs of City Council committees important to your organization or cause, and other influencers.

Be persistent. If your calls are not returned, keep trying.

When building relationships with elected officials, it is very important to get to know the staff members, including the chief of staff, scheduler, and the legislative director.

If you are offered an opportunity to meet with the chief of staff, instead of the elected official, NEVER say no. Elected officials are very busy with events from morning to night; the COS is usually very influential.

Networking is very important. Advocacy is not a 9-5 job. Make sure to attend the events attended by the influencers you are trying to engage.

Good commissioners, deputy mayors and other senior influencers listen to line and program staff, so get to know the agency people that deal with your organization and start building positive relationships with them, by, for example, inviting them to visit your organization or recognizing them for their work.

How do you get Influencers to listen to you?

Relationships will get you in the door, but substance will help move your agenda.

Establish relationships by sharing your expertise, being credible and honest, sharing client success stories or stories of struggles, and introducing influencers to the people you serve.

Remember that the way you work on one issue will impact your relationship on all future issues.

Invite your local elected and other influencers to press conferences on your issues or organization, invite them to visit your center and take photos to share with them (perhaps they will include it in their newsletter), and send letters and emails to staff to update them on your organizations work, including outcomes and personal client success stories.

Communications Role in Advocacy

To generate more visibility for an issue, consider partnering with organizations that have a similar agenda. Your collective voice will more likely be heard in today's cluttered and noisy communications environment.

Be consistent with your strategy: don't criticize the Mayor on Tuesday and expect to stand with him on Wednesday.

When you disagree with someone whose support you need, don't blindsides them by going public, give them the heads up and explain that you need to go public on an issue.

Advocate for something rather than against someone.

Don't turn up the volume if you don't have the power.

Use your power to pressure someone publically only occasionally and strategically.