

WHY ADVOCACY?

Transformational advocacy is a challenge to ourselves and our leaders to change attitudes, behaviors, and policies that perpetuate injustice and deny God's will for all creation to flourish. Throughout Scriptures, God calls people into community and sets the expectation that they care for one another. We reflect God's love when we call on leaders to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized people in our communities. As an interfaith community, we work toward a just world in which structures and institutions give every person the opportunity to thrive.

Our Holy Writings teach us to defend the cause of the poor. Providing direct assistance to people in need is vital, but it is also important to guard against policies that oppress, to partner with marginalized communities for long-term change, and to speak up for policies that empower all people.

ADVOCACY WORKS!

Part of an elected official's job is to listen to constituents. Because of this, members of the federal administration, the Governor's Office, members of Congress, the Michigan General Assembly and local officials will welcome perspectives and input from you. Without feedback from constituents and from organizations that work directly with vulnerable groups, elected officials may not modify their views or take action on a specific issue.

HOW TO ADVOCATE

NOTE: Interfaith Action maintains a list of Michigan elected officials and US elected officials serving the five counties of SW Michigan.

Meet

An in-person meeting with your elected official or their staff is the most effective way to advocate and have an impact as a constituent. To find your House representative, visit house.gov. To find your senator, visit senate.gov. To find state and local officials, check out the Contact tab on Interfaith Action's website.

Most U.S. members of Congress have an online form on their website through which you can request a meeting. If they do not have an online form, you can call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask to be transferred to your member's office. Once you are transferred, you can ask to speak to the scheduler or ask for the scheduler's email. The office aide who answers the phone should know the preferred method to contact the scheduler—either by phone or email. You can then request a meeting with either the member of Congress or a staff person. The scheduler will help you with your meeting request. In your meeting request, you should specify available dates, your desired location, a list of participants, and the subject of your meeting. Focusing on one issue in your meeting will be most effective. It is always important to follow up your online or email meeting request with a phone call to the office assistant or scheduler to politely remind the staff of your meeting request.

Before the meeting, prepare by doing research on your member's voting record and position on the issue you wish to discuss. You can search for your member on congress.gov to see which legislation they have supported. You can also search for your member's voting record on govtrack.us/congress/votes. After an in-person meeting, you should give your member or staff person "a leave-behind." This will ensure that the office has a record of your meeting, a way to follow up with you, and a clear request. The leave-behind is simply a paper that

- clearly states what action you would like your legislator to take following your meeting. The action could include voting for a specific bill, opposing a bill, or supporting future actions on an issue.

- gives brief relevant background information on the issue.
- lists reasons in support of your requested course of action.
- restates your request at the end. It is most effective if the request is achievable and realistic for your representative and if it has a requested time frame in which it should be accomplished.
- includes your contact information and any relevant history or connection you or your group has had with the issue.

When meeting with your elected official, it is most effective to engage in dialogue and have a conversation rather than talking at or demanding from your representative. During the meeting you should be prepared to negotiate a bit in terms of your request. You will be more successful if you know what needs to be firm and what can be flexible.

These meetings also provide an opportunity for you to give back to your representative by offering constituent feedback and further knowledge on your chosen topic. You will be most effective if you can relate your request back to your constituency and local context.

It is very important to send a thank-you note or email after a meeting, as a way for your meeting and request to be remembered and to stand out.

Write

Beyond the in-person meeting, studies show that handwritten, mailed letters, and personalized emails serve as the best ways to communicate with elected officials. You should make a clear request in only one or two paragraphs; your letter does not need to be lengthy to be powerful.

You can email elected officials online through their website. Most members of Congress have a “Contact” page through which you can submit an email. Email is the fastest way to contact your legislator, other than by calling. This is recommended if the subject of your message is time sensitive. You can also mail a handwritten letter to your elected officials. Their address can be found online through their website, usually also under the “Contact” page. All mail received at the U.S. Congress must go through extensive screening, so you should be prepared to wait more than a month for a reply. When writing or calling, be sure to introduce yourself and to identify yourself as a constituent. You can do this by providing your ZIP code and address.

Attend

Many representatives hold town hall meetings while they are at home in their district. These are important to attend in order to create a relationship with your legislator and their staff. Town hall meetings and other events also provide important personal opportunities for you to become more involved in your local political context.

Town halls give you a chance to ask your representative a question in public. This can be an effective way to raise public awareness about your issue and a way to hold your member publicly accountable. You should realize, however, that this does put your legislator on the spot. Asking your question in an open and friendly way can be more effective than posing a question that is accusatory or condemning. We recommend that you prepare a few questions ahead of time and think carefully about how you are framing your request or message. If your question requires background information, it can also be helpful to call or email your representative ahead of time with information regarding your question—this is another way to build a relationship.

Call

An effective and fast way to contact your member of Congress is by calling their office. You can call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask to be transferred to your member of Congress. Once you are transferred, you will likely speak to an office assistant in your legislator's office. You can tell this person that you are a constituent and that you would like to leave a message for your representative. Then clearly state the message you would like your representative to receive, whether it is in support of or in opposition to a specific bill, or it is a request to take a specific action. You can also ask to speak to a legislative aide who works on the specific issue about which you are calling.

You can say, for example, "I am a constituent; could I please speak with the legislative aide who works on immigration?" If you are not able to speak with an aide, you can still leave your message with the office assistant. Either method is a sure way to get your message to your representative. Offices track calls and messages. Your call can have a real impact on your representative's position on an issue.

Post

Social media is another great way to steward your voice to promote change. You can use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media tools to create awareness among your friends and invite them to join in advocating for just policies and systems. You can also use social media to communicate with your members on issues you are passionate about. To find your elected officials social media information, visit house.gov/representatives or senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm. There are several ways to communicate with your members of Congress:

- Facebook: Find your elected officials' Facebook pages and write on their wall or tag them in your posts about an issue. Following your elected officials on Facebook is also a way you can stay informed about what issues they are voting on.

- Twitter: Find your elected officials on Twitter. Find their handle and tweet at him/her. If you are starting the tweet with their handle, be sure to put a period in front of it so that other Twitter users will also see your tweet. Otherwise, Twitter will treat it like a direct tweet. You can also find hashtags that relate to the issue you are talking about and add them to your post to add your voice to the general Twitter conversation around that hashtag.

Partner

You can also partner with advocacy organizations, such as Interfaith Action or one of its partners, to help in communicating with your elected officials. members of Congress. You can ask for their help in arranging a meeting,