



The Health DATA List Serve January 2003

Building Healthier Communities through Advocacy

Although public health advocates have successfully advocated and won stricter laws against smoking, for clean air requirements, and expanded health insurance for low-income children, many community-based organizations steer away from advocacy because the relationship between their tax-exempt status and their policy involvement remains unclear. Non-profits have been particularly concerned about triggering lobbying rules, which are regulated by section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

To dispel confusion and foster greater involvement in public policy by non-profit 501 (c)(3) organizations, Congress passed legislation in 1976 that provided clearer guidelines on what public policy activities are excluded from the definition of lobbying. Charitable organizations can educate elected officials about community issues and advocate policy solutions without breaching restrictions against lobbying.

The following are some activities organizations can do to advance their cause **without** endangering their tax-exempt status.

- **Know your policymakers.** Data about the committees are they on, legislation they have authored, and their voting history can reveal the policymakers' position and how they are likely to vote on legislation impacting your issue.
- **Meet with policymakers and get to know their staff.** Meeting them face-to-face will let them know that you are interested in working with them. Staff often serves as the "gatekeepers" to the official and will be your primary on-going contact with the official.
- **Inform and educate policymakers.** Provide information about why your issue or policy solution is important to your organization and other constituents served by the official. Compile and present credible research data to support your message.
- **Disseminate information to community members about proposals and laws.** While a nonprofit organization cannot directly endorse or oppose a particular bill, you are allowed to educate community members about strengths and weaknesses of bills and policies.
- **Become a source of reliable information.** Create reports on issues of concern to your community and distribute to elected officials. Legislators do not have the time and money to conduct independent research. They depend on community sources to provide information and data to stay informed about issues relevant to their constituents.

For more information about lobbying and advocacy for non-profit organizations, go online to Charity Lobbying in the Public Interest at <http://www.clpi.org>

Health DATA Internet Quick Picks

Project Vote Smart:

<http://www.vote-smart.org> offers background information on candidates and elected officials, their voting records, campaign finances and position on various issues.

How to determine your California State Senator and Assembly Member

<http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/yourleg.html> identifies your State Senator and Assembly Member by your zip code.
