



# THE BOARD'S ROLE IN ADVOCACY: AN EXPECTATION FOR ENGAGED LEADERSHIP

Advocacy is a powerful way to leverage the important mission work that your organization does in your community. Board members — as influential community leaders — can help increase the likelihood of your nonprofit's success by engaging in advocacy.

Fundamentally, board members are champions for their missions and have an opportunity to connect their passion for their organization's work with their influence within the community.

But what does it really mean to be an ambassador who advocates for your mission? And what — specifically — can board members do?

## What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is a broad term that covers a wide range of legal and proper activities for nonprofit organizations and includes much more than just legislative lobbying.

According to the Alliance for Justice:

*While all lobbying is advocacy, not all advocacy is lobbying. Advocacy is any action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for a cause, supports or defends, or pleads on behalf of others. It includes public education, regulatory work, litigation, and work before administrative bodies, lobbying, nonpartisan voter registration, nonpartisan voter education, and more.*

**"We know that boards are often composed of highly influential, connected, and committed individuals. Who better to make the case for why decision-makers should support an initiative that would make water safer to drink, or would enable students to participate in an after-school meal program, or would strengthen the local economy by providing job training programs to the un- or under-employed?"**

**Anne Wallestad**

Many organizations avoid advocacy out of misplaced myths that it is somehow wrong, which limits the impact and effectiveness of the nonprofit sector. The truth is, as a nonprofit organization, you have quite a bit of flexibility to advocate for (or against) decisions by others that could advance (or hurt) your organization's mission. For more on the legal ability of nonprofits to engage in fun and rewarding advocacy-related activities, download "[Being a Player: A Guide to the IRS Lobbying Regulation for Advocacy Charities](#)" from the Alliance for Justice or consult an attorney who is well-versed in the many legal ways nonprofits may engage in advocacy.<sup>1</sup>

## An Opportunity. An Expectation. A Responsibility.

*"Board members serve as a link between the organization and its members, stakeholders, constituents, or clients. They should think of themselves as the organization's ambassadors and advocates." – [Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Board Members, BoardSource](#)*

By joining a board, an individual is making a public commitment to support and strengthen that organization by providing her or his leadership, expertise, and influence — including external relationships — that will enable the organization's mission to flourish.

Board members of charitable organizations spend a lot of time "going inside," focusing on internal items, such as accountability, finances, and programs. Those topics are certainly important, but board members also must

<sup>1</sup> If you need help finding an attorney who is well-versed in nonprofit advocacy, the Stand for Your Mission campaign partners can help you. If you are a funding organization, we recommend that you reach out to the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers ([www.givingforum.org](http://www.givingforum.org)). If you are a charitable nonprofit, we recommend that you contact your state association of nonprofits ([www.councilofnonprofits.org/find-your-state-association](http://www.councilofnonprofits.org/find-your-state-association)).



accept the expectation that they will spend time advancing the nonprofit's mission by "going outside" the organization, serving as connectors, ambassadors, and advocates:

*"Members of exceptional boards extend the reach of the organization by actively using their own reputations and networks to secure funds, expertise, and access. They bring social and political capital to the organization, thereby enhancing its reputation and capacity. They use their personal and business relationships to expand awareness of the organization and actively participate in cultivating partnerships and collaborations. Serving as the community face of the organization, they advocate on behalf of the organization in appropriate public contexts." – The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance that Power Exceptional Boards, BoardSource*

### How Can Board Members Help?

Being an ambassador by advocating for your mission can take many different forms. It can be as simple as talking with a friend about why you care deeply about your organization's mission, attending events or meetings where your organization needs to be visible, or making connections with influential leaders within your network.

Simply put, you're an ambassador when you engage people to support your nonprofit's mission. Those people could be anyone in your community — government officials, business leaders, the news media, and others in the charitable sector — who is in a position to influence public opinion or decision making that will enable your organization to do its work better.

Being an effective ambassador and advocate for your mission starts by asking yourself the question:

*Who can I talk to today to advance our mission?*

If you have a passion and a voice, you have what it takes to be an advocate. Start a conversation in your boardroom about the potential for advancing your organization's mission through board advocacy. Download a free discussion guide at [standforyourmission.org](http://standforyourmission.org)



SC ASSOCIATION OF NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Connect with the South Carolina Association of Nonprofit Organizations, your state association of nonprofits, to learn more about the state and federal issues of importance to the nonprofit community.

[www.scanpo.org](http://www.scanpo.org)

**Stand for Your Mission is a campaign for board advocacy initiated by:**

