



ADVANCING AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE HEAD START!

Advocating with NIHSDA

The National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA) is dedicated to the issues that affect American Indian Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start. For NIHSDA, one of our primary objectives is to keep abreast of issues, trends and legislation that have the potential to affect Head Start, and let legislators know and understand our point of view about such issues. Secondly, to advocate for positive and creative changes within the Head Start policy and service delivery systems.

Help us work to strengthen AIAN Head Start programs through advocacy, education and leadership.

Why should you engage in advocacy and education?

Advocacy and education are extremely important to the success of Head Start. The goal is to improve the lives of children and families by educating legislators and policymakers regarding issues of importance to Head Start and encouraging them to support the matters valuable to Head Start. Your passion will be contagious. You will create new champions and educate those who need to know more about our programs.

Advocacy and Education on Behalf of AIAN Head Start – Basic Rules

Through advocacy and education, Head Start can have a powerful impact on the general public, elected officials, the media, and key opinion leaders. It should be noted that although 501(c)(3) organizations are permitted limited lobbying (but never with Federal funds), most advocacy and education is not considered lobbying by the Internal Revenue Service or the Congress.

Generally, if you are educating audiences about a topic, sharing illustrative stories, working on a solution to a problem, or communicating with elected officials about the effect of their actions, that is advocacy not lobbying. However, if you expressly urge support for or against a piece of legislation that is generally considered lobbying (and again, 501(c)(3) organizations can do some limited lobbying, but never with Federal funds). If you have concerns about whether a particular activity is lobbying, please contact NIHSDA with your questions.

How can you advocate?

Head Start directors, parents, staff, and others with a special interest in the program are in a perfect position to be heard by policy makers. Personal experiences and successes with the programs reinforce the impact that Head Start has on the lives of the families. There are no specific prerequisites for being an advocate. Most people advocate for something every day of their lives. It is in our nature when we believe in something or have a passion for the issue.

Many of our key audiences (legislators, legislative aides, agency staff, etc) often have very little time to discuss complex issues. Given these time constraints, it is imperative to communicate a clear and concise message.

Developing personal, ongoing relationships with elected officials is the most effective way to secure lawmakers' support on children's issues. You can build these relationships by contacting your legislators by phone, letter, or email; visit your legislators in person and invite legislators to visit your program. Legislators often make important decisions based on only a few contacts from their constituents. When they know voters "back home" care about an issue, they pay attention. Let them know what you think.

Identify your elected officials using your address at <http://www.contactingthecongress.org/>. Visit www.senate.gov and www.house.gov to learn more about your Members of Congress.

The U.S. Capitol switchboard at **(202) 224-3121** can transfer calls to the appropriate legislator's office. It can be difficult to contact federal representatives directly so when you call their offices, you will most likely speak to a staff member. You can ask for the legislative aide who handles the issue you are calling about.

When you are in Washington, DC, you can visit your elected officials in their offices. This can be a great way to build relationships and to advocate for issues directly. Even if you end up meeting with staff, which is commonly the case and is not a bad thing as it is the staff that does most of the work. Also, staff members are usually available to give tours and answer questions whenever the office is open. Call the office before your visit for more details.

Tips for Scheduling a Visit

1. Schedule an appointment with policymakers at least 4 weeks in advance of your visit. Visit <http://www.contactingthecongress.org/> to identify your Members of Congress.
2. Have several dates and times available for a face-to-face meeting. When calling to make an appointment with a member of Congress, ask for the scheduler, not the legislator. If the scheduler is not available, leave a message and follow up with another phone call.
3. Let the scheduler know what issue you want to discuss with the legislator.
4. If the representative won't be available during your visit, ask to meet with a staff person knowledgeable about your issue.
5. Find out how much time you will have with the policymaker.

6. After making an appointment, leave your name and contact information with the scheduler as well as the names of any relevant organizations you are affiliated with.

Meeting with Your Representative

1. Dress professionally.
2. Practice your talking points.
3. Allow the elected official time to ask questions and share observations or opinions.
4. Be friendly, firm, and positive in your messaging even if your legislator does not share your perspective.
5. Bring informational materials such as fact sheets, articles, or research studies to leave with the legislator and staff. When possible, use local data.
6. Do not forget a call to action. Let the legislators know what you want them to do: vote for a bill, talk with colleagues, sponsor legislation, etc.
7. Offer to provide relevant follow-up contact or materials after the meeting.
8. Take notes, particularly if further contact is expected.
9. Thank your legislators or their staff members for the time they've spent and any supportive actions they will take.

After the Meeting

1. Follow up with a personal note thanking the legislators or staff persons for their time and reminding them of any action commitments they made. Include pictures taken or artwork from the children.
2. Let them know what follow-up action they can expect from you if you offered to provide their office with further information.
3. Talk with other advocates about the meeting and strategize next steps.
4. Do not send photocopied letters to legislators. It is better to send brief personalized letters than to send letters that have clearly been duplicated.

General Tips

1. **Recognize that legislators deal with a wide range of issues.** Legislators cannot possibly keep completely informed on all issues. Be prepared to provide them with information or referral sources.
2. **Know your legislator.** Make a point of referring to something you know is of special interest. Making that personal connection can make him/her remember you more easily.
3. **Get to know the legislator's staff.** The staff in a legislative office can be very powerful.
4. **Be honest.** Decision-makers appreciate candor and forthrightness.
5. **Know your message.** Be prepared to state your case in a few short sentences.
6. **Use real-life human stories.** Abstract arguments are always given greater life when enhanced by real-life human stories that illustrate the points you are making.
7. **Recognize that a legislator's time is precious.** Be punctual. Be succinct in your presentation. Plan for no more than 30 minutes of the legislator's time.

8. **Be personal and respectful.** The tone of the message is as important as the message, maybe even more so.
9. **Bring success stories.** Tell the story of how the Head Start Program serves the legislator's constituents; give a few statistics on how much service is provided, and the way your program enhances your community.
10. **Listen.** Give them an opportunity to respond. Think about their responses. What interests them? Where are their comfort zones? Is their reaction positive or negative?
11. **Seal the deal.** Confirm what you think their opinion or stand is.
12. **Leave behind a reminder of your visit.** This could be pictures, children's artwork, cultural item, etc. This helps to remind the legislator of your visit and your organization.
13. **Follow-up.** Send thank you letters to the legislators or staff who took time to listen to your issue.

The guiding principle for contacting Congress or any other representative body is simple: personalized messages mean more. In advocacy, quality trumps quantity.

For additional information on ways to advocate with NIHSDA visit our webpage www.nihsda.org

Our voice is made stronger by the continuing involvement and commitment of all AIAN Head Start programs.