**Going Beyond Advocacy**

**Note: This has been adapted from an article written/published on 1/17/17 by Thomas R. Rosenfield and Joel D. Kassiday.**

VisionServe Alliance members can play an important role in influencing policy and legislation through their advocacy efforts, especially when they take their government relations work beyond traditional lobbying. Remaining proactive, rather than reactive, is crucial.

The mission of nonprofit organizations is primarily to contribute to the public good. VisionServe Alliance members train guide dogs for the blind, provide vision rehabilitation training to people with vision loss, operate (pre)schools for blind children, produce Braille, operate low vision clinics, provide employment opportunities, and more; but our members can also leverage their expertise and influence on Capitol Hill by distinguishing themselves as objective, evidence-based promoters of the highest standards, while remaining steadfast to their core mission.

**Advocacy vs. Lobbying**

Advocacy can take several forms: lobbying, grassroots engagement, white papers or policy documents, education on specialized or technical information, and public relations and communications outreach.

Unfortunately, many people refer to these efforts collectively as lobbying rather than the more accurate term, government relations. In reality, lobbying is just one aspect of advocacy or government relations. This is an important distinction because often nonprofit organizations focus their advocacy efforts on creating policy documents and providing technical information, rather than traditional lobbying.

[**Under the Internal Revenue Code**](https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations/exemption-requirements-section-501-c-3-organizations), the lobbying activities of Section 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations are limited. While nonprofits may engage in some lobbying or advocacy work, the tax code requires that lobbying must remain an insubstantial part of their activities. This rule makes it important to understand what does not constitute lobbying, including these examples:

* Providing technical advice to a governmental body in response to a written communication
* Performing nonpartisan analysis or research that is an independent and objective exposition of a specific subject matter, even though it may advocate a particular position
* Communicating with governmental officials on non-legislative matters, such as regulatory rulemaking

These rules underscore the fact that there have been and will continue to be multiple opportunities for organizations and their constituents to engage in public policy debates and help shape legislative and regulatory developments in ways that support their missions, without running afoul of the tax code.

**The Task Force's Role in Advocacy**

Establishing a task force of experts in the field of blindness and low vision is an excellent way to advocate for a specific cause. A task force will be successful if it taps its knowledge base, creates strong messaging, develops a detailed strategic plan, and commits to ongoing work and continued follow-up efforts. Key components of a successful strategic plan for advocacy include:

* Defining the goal for engaging in advocacy
* Agreeing on a small number of clearly defined issues crucial to the organization's mission, where members can forge strong consensus
* Offering recommendations on clarity and consistency regarding legislation and serving as a resource to elected officials throughout the legislative process
* Developing strong and clear statutory definitions
* Providing assistance on the consistent use of terminology, technical explanations, and possible alternative statutory language, when requested
* Remaining honest, accurate, nonpartisan, and objective purveyors of factual information, all of which will help establish our organization as the go-to resource on select issues
* Committing task force members to traveling to Washington, DC, as needed to meet with congressional and executive branch officials
* Utilizing existing relationships where appropriate and piggy-backing on other organizations' efforts when possible to prevent duplication and save resources
* Creating talking points, one-pagers, and other written materials for congressional and agency leaders
* Providing Congress with analysis of important legislative drafts quickly and making specific requests from Congress for assistance
* Participating in informational panels and roundtables and meeting with key congressional members and their staff.

**Advocacy Takeaways**

Based on the work done by Misters Rosenfield and Kassiday, there are several consistent takeaways:

* Methodical, well-prepared organizations can make a difference.
* VisionServe Alliance members can impact legislation. It is difficult to change laws, but it can be done.
* Task force efforts help to find real solutions. Advocacy, creativity, responsiveness, and patience can persuade elected officials to support innovative, fact-based solutions.
* Policymakers need expertise. Accurate information and examples for legislators can be powerful tools to affect public policy.

To be successful in advocacy that goes beyond traditional lobbying, VisionServe Alliance members must stay focused, utilize their deep knowledge base, and remain both extemporaneous and patient as the legislative process unfolds. Most initiatives are multi-year strategies. Impacting public policy doesn't happen overnight.