

Influencing Public Decisions

Taking the role of citizen activist and advocate will require effective communication with people with similar interests to yours and with key decision makers. You may want to influence local officials, state legislators, or even members of the U.S. Congress. To be effective, you must be systematic and organized in your communication efforts.

Study the Issue

An issue is a topic of public concern on which you can act. It is a subject of fairly widespread public interest. To successfully influence public decisions, you must first carefully study the issue. If you are not familiar with the issue, you can be discredited and ignored. Be aware of recent studies, reports, and media releases related to the issue being considered. Studying the issue involves 4 steps.

1. Define the problem, its history, and its impact on individuals and families. Clarify your interest and the interests of other concerned people.
2. Explore the policy choices with other people. Identify supporters and opponents, including why they feel as they do about the issue.
3. Examine the probable consequences of each choice: who will be affected; how will they be affected; and how much will it cost?
4. Develop a course of action agreeable to many. Identify organizations and groups that can help.

Here are some questions you should be prepared to answer regarding the issue:

What is the problem?

Why is the problem of concern?

Can you document the impacts?

Does the issue arouse strong emotions or challenge deeply held values of large numbers of people?

Who makes the decisions regarding the policy?

What is the history of the issue?

What are the various solutions that have been proposed before?

What are the likely consequences of these alternative solutions?

What are the traditional arguments of supporters and opponents?

Which policymakers support and oppose the previous proposals?

Have the major political parties taken a position?

Reference:

Sanders, Larry, and Sue E. Williams. "How to Influence Public Decisions." Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.



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