

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



Advocacy is a powerful way to leverage the important work that your organization does. Board members – as influential community leaders – can help increase the likelihood of your nonprofit's success by engaging in advocacy. Being an advocate is directly connected to each board member's fundamental responsibility to champion the organization's work – to stand for your mission.

## An Opportunity. An Expectation. A Responsibility.

By joining a board, an individual is making a public commitment to support and strengthen an organization by providing her or his leadership, expertise, and influence to advance the organization's mission and impact. Many boards spend a lot of time "going inside," focusing on their organization's internal matters, such as accountability, finances, and programs. And while this kind of oversight is important, board members must also advance their mission by "going outside" the organization – serving as connectors, ambassadors, and advocates.

According to BoardSource's *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Board Members*, the definitive resource on the core roles and responsibilities of nonprofit board members:

- **The board's responsibility to advocate is about fulfilling your organization's mission.**  
*"A commitment to the organization's mission should drive the board's priorities...boards and their members should be conscientious ambassadors and advocate for their organizations."*
- **Each individual board member should be an ambassador for the mission.**  
*"While advocacy as an organizational strategy pertains to the full board, it is individual board members whose voices...matter the most."*
- **Board members have a unique and important voice that decision-makers need to hear.**  
*"The voice of the unpaid, volunteer board member, acting or speaking out of altruism and passion for a worthy cause, is potentially much more influential than the highest paid lobbyist. Never underestimate the impact that a volunteer board member [can have]."*

## How Can Nonprofits Engage in Advocacy?

Many organizations avoid advocacy because they think that it is somehow wrong. But the truth is, as a nonprofit organization, you have a right and a responsibility to advocate for or against decisions that could help or hurt your organization's mission.

Advocacy is a broad term that covers a range of activities, including the following:\*

- **Legislative Lobbying:** Working for or against a specific piece of legislation. Most nonprofits are allowed to engage in a limited amount of legislative lobbying, which can be a very important way to advance — or protect — your organization's mission and impact.
- **Election-Related Activities:** Nonprofit organizations may engage in nonpartisan voter registration, education and turnout activities. However, supporting or opposing a specific candidate (or set of candidates or a political party) is never allowed for 501(c)(3) organizations, and not what we are talking about when we talk about advocacy.
- **Everything Else:** There are many other forms of advocacy — public education, research, and seeking executive or administrative actions, to name a few. These are perfectly appropriate activities for nonprofit organizations.

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\* For more on nonprofits' legal right to engage in advocacy activities, visit [www.standforyourmission.org](http://www.standforyourmission.org).

## What Does Board Advocacy Look Like?

As a board member, what does it really mean to be an advocate for your mission? Broadly defined, you are advocating when you engage people in supporting 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.

Advocacy can be

- **asking the zoning board** for permission to have a farmer's market in an underserved neighborhood
- **requesting a parking variance** to allow for a meal truck to serve homeless people in a park
- **educating an elected official** about the value of a job training program that uses public funding
- **partnering with government agencies** to use a public building for a youth program
- **convening community leaders** at times of natural disaster or human crisis to develop solutions for the community and promote healing

If you have a passion and a voice, you have what it takes to be an advocate. And it starts by asking yourself:

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

## Stand for Your Mission: A Campaign for Nonprofit Board Advocacy

The Stand for Your Mission campaign envisions a reality where nonprofit and philanthropic missions are fully realized because board members are standing for the mission of their organizations and helping set priorities *in partnership* with government rather than waiting for the outcome.

There are more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States. And we have an estimated 20 million individuals leading our organizations who are among the most influential, dedicated, and connected leaders our society has — our board members.

**It is time for us to find our voice. It is time for us to stand up for our missions. Join us.**

[standforyourmission.org](http://standforyourmission.org)



Connect with the Kentucky Nonprofit Network, your state association of nonprofits, to learn more about the state and federal issues of importance to the nonprofit community at [www.kynonprofits.org](http://www.kynonprofits.org).

**The Stand for Your Mission campaign was initiated by:**

