ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Advocacy means "being a voice." Just as our member programs help adult learners find their voice through reading and writing, ProLiteracy members are a voice, promoting adult literacy as an important social and political concern in the U.S. and internationally.

Public policy advocacy means using our combined voice to change laws, regulations, and public programs to advance our mission. Because our members are deeply rooted community-based organizations, we are uniquely positioned to put a human face on this large social problem.

We're involved in public policy advocacy because state and national leaders make key decisions that affect the adult literacy field. Such decisions include funding, eligibility for programs, GED testing fees, or whether tutors will be required to have a degree. These decisions all affect our ability to deliver on our mission.

Using all our strategic tools—direct services, fundraising, awareness campaigns, and public policy advocacy—moves the mission forward.

There are several ways to advocate, including:

- Influencing decision makers by offering our expertise and opinions about policy decisions through letters or testimony.
- Influencing opinion makers by writing letters to the editor, Tweeting, or blogging.
- Influencing your family and friends to tell policy makers or the media stories of how literacy has changed lives.
- Influencing your community by being a credible voice for positive change.

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**INDIVIDUAL ADVOCATE ACTIONS**

Here are a few steps we recommend you undertake to help raise awareness for adult literacy and basic education:

- Register to vote.
- Vote
- Join others on legislative visits to your local, state, and national elected officials.
- Contact Members of Congress via phone, email, or letter. (Tips for contacting a Member of Congress follow.)
- Write letters to the editor.
- Share your story at a public meeting or hearing, or with the media.
- Ask other family members and friends to do the same

**TIPS FOR CALLING AN ELECTED OFFICIAL**

Calling an elected official may be quicker and easier than mailing or emailing, and if an issue is moving quickly through Congress, calling may be the only way to get your message through in time to make an impact.

1. Prepare your remarks before you call. Don’t be surprised if you don’t speak to the official directly. Staff who answer or respond to the majority of constituent calls have the official’s “ear” and will see that your comments are recorded and passed on.
2. Identify yourself as a constituent. Say exactly what you are calling about (bill number or issue) and what action you’d like your elected official to take.
3. Leave your name, address, and phone number. Be positive and avoid debating.

Calling the local office of a federal or state official is acceptable, but calling his or her Capitol Hill office is best. To call a member of the U.S. Senate or House, call (202) 224-3121 and ask for her or him by name or use ProLiteracy’s Legislative Action Center under Advocacy at proliteracy.org to find the appropriate contact information.
TIPS ON SENDING A MESSAGE TO YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Because letters mailed through the Post Office are delayed by security procedures, a personal email is the most popular choice of communication with a Congressional office. (Faxing a personal letter is another option.) When you send an email, these suggestions will make it stand out:

1) Your purpose for writing should be stated in the subject line of the message and re-stated in the first paragraph. If your letter or email pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly.

   Example: House bill: H. R. ________, Senate bill: S. ________.

2) Be courteous, to the point, and include key information, using examples to support your position.

3) Address only one issue in each letter; if possible, keep your letter or email to one page.

4) Provide a complete postal address or an email address so that you can be identified as a constituent.

HOW TO ADDRESS A MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Senator
The Honorable (full name)
Dear Senator:

Representative
The Honorable (full name)
Dear Representative:

Note: To reduce the amount of spam they receive and to be sure they are hearing from constituents, some offices require you to register through a web form to send your email. Procedures change often, so don’t be surprised if the procedure changes every time you send a message.
TIPS FOR GETTING ON THE RECORD IN TOWN HALL MEETINGS OR PUBLIC HEARINGS

- Providing testimony, whether in person or submitted in written form to elected officials, allows adult literacy advocates to have key facts and information entered in the official record on a given issue. It is one of the most important ways of interacting with legislators, allowing you to impress upon them the urgency, importance, or dangers of specific legislation. Being on the record allows us to point to a specific time and day when we gave our insights and hold legislators accountable for being at least broadly informed.

- Sometimes this means we may need to take the time to be present in hearing rooms. In person, we can take what may seem simple and straightforward to us and communicate it with persuasion and passion to policymakers. The best way to clear up any misunderstandings is to be there in person and assist legislators or staff with any questions they may have.

Preparing for the Hearing

- Call ahead to verify the location of the hearing, and again indicate your intention to participate.
- Ask if there are testimony submission guidelines. Does testimony need to be provided in advance? If so, when and how? How many copies should you expect to provide? Are there formatting issues you must be aware of (for example, does the testimony need to be submitted in a folder or in a binder)? What are the time limits for speaking and answering questions?
- Most committees allow you to co-testify with someone who has been or may be affected by the proposal. These “real-life” examples are particularly powerful. Bring an adult learner who can effectively put a face to an issue.
- Practice several times making your points, so that you can make eye contact with members while you speak and are not just reading from a paper.
- Contact local reporters and news organizations and explain who you are and why you plan to testify. Provide a copy of your testimony after it has been given or submitted.

Providing Your Testimony

- Expect to provide copies of your remarks to legislators and staff. Customarily, your remarks are addressed to the Committee Chairs and Honorable Members of the Committee.
- Time is generally limited. Make your points concise and memorable. Explain what you are asking for and why it is important.
- Thank the Committee before and after you speak, and if you have time, wait until the end of the hearing and thank the committee members in person.

Following Up

- Write a follow up letter to the Committee Chairs offering to provide more expertise or to set up a meeting to continue the dialogue.
TIPS ON IN-DISTRICT GROUP VISITS

Every Member of Congress has one or more offices in their state or district in which they regularly conduct business. (In most of the larger states, state legislators also have offices too.)

Face-to-face visits with your elected officials (or their staff) in their district is a very influential form of advocacy, because there are a number of times in a year when members of Congress leave Washington, D.C., and return to their home districts/states for “Congressional Work Periods.” District visits can be fun, interesting, and highly motivating for those who participate. A small, dedicated group can have great influence because our issue is not yet well known.

Relationships are key to effective advocacy and organizing, so we encourage you to view all interactions with Congressional office staff as opportunities for building relationships. Ideally you want Members of Congress and their staff to see you, your organization, adult learners, and the network of ProLiteracy members as credible, powerful, and helpful voices for adult literacy.

This guide lists the steps of setting up a group visit in your area:

1. **Find the Office.**
   You can find contact information for your Representatives and Senators—including their district offices—on ProLiteracy’s website by entering your zip code.

2. **Assemble a Group**
   While it’s certainly possible and effective to arrange a visit for a single individual, we recommend convening a group, preferably one that includes one or more adult learners. Group visits are more influential, and the experience will build relationships and skills among all participants.
   
   Identify the issue you’ll be advocating for (pick only one!) and the kind of delegation you seek. Pick a date for your visit and make a list of all those who are potentially interested. This step is important because you may not get your first choice for a time to visit, so plan for some back and forth with the scheduler in the office. Plan to keep the group fairly small, with three to five people.
   
   It is usually most effective to have one member of your group take the lead working with the scheduler to put a meeting on the calendar.

3. **Work with the Scheduler**
   A number of Members of Congress post information on setting up a meeting in the district on their websites and many offices require a written request via a web form. If you cannot find this, call the office and ask to speak to the person in charge of scheduling. Identify yourself as a constituent and member of [name of your organization/coalition], and request a meeting with the Representative/Senator on [describe your issue]. Setting up a visit often requires several follow-up calls. Plan for the process to take two to six weeks to get an appointment settled.
4. Prepare for the Visit:
   - Research the official’s record on the issue. Ideally you’ll find something positive to thank him/her for and that connects with the request you’re about to make.
   - Once you know where the official stands, determine your ask and what arguments/materials best support you. A friendly official can be thanked for his/her leadership on the issue and asked to do more. An official on the fence can be educated about the issue with compelling personal stories. Always plan to have an adult learner tell a short version of how this issue affects his/her life.
   - Your ask should be a specific action, such as voting for or against a certain bill, joining the House Adult Literacy Caucus, or a similar request.
   - Identify your best arguments and assign each member of your group responsibility for covering one or more points. Learn about relevant legislation as well as effective arguments for your point of view. Ideally one member of your group can take notes.

5. During the Visit:
   - Remember to have someone take notes, and listen carefully to the Member or his or her staff’s comments and forward these to ProLiteracy.
   - Thank the legislator for his or her time and remember to follow up quickly to answer any questions he or she may have asked that the group could not answer.

6. Optional:
   - Your program is a unique resource in your community. Bring information about its services because public officials regularly get calls from constituents looking for assistance. If you publish a newsletter, offer to add the office to your mailing list to keep staff up to date.
TIP SHEET: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

One way to get a point of view across is to write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. These are often some of the most watched parts of local media by legislators and other elected officials.

If you write a letter to the editor, be concise, timely and above all, don’t assume that readers know jargon, acronyms, buzz words, and details about the issues.

Carefully follow the instructions for submitting letters to the editor described on the editorial page.

Here are some examples of letters to the editor:

Published in USA Today

“The cost of financial illiteracy” misses the mark on a vast population of adults who also need financial literacy. Thirty million adults function at below basic literacy and struggle with everyday budgeting and more complicated tasks like comprehending mortgage documents. These Americans are especially vulnerable to predatory lenders and financial scams that adversely affect them for years to come, derailing long-term plans such as home ownership and saving for their children’s education—which in turn drains the vitality of the communities in which they live.

For these reasons, financial literacy is a growing priority for community-based organizations around the country. About 10 percent of ProLiteracy’s member programs offer financial literacy instruction. An example is Project Read in San Francisco, which started the Financial Well-Being Project to help clients create spending plans, build emergency savings funds, and plan strategies to build wealth. The program also helps to connect participants with a nonprofit social enterprise organization that provides microloans to low-income individuals looking to start or expand a small business.

The economic stability of many American families depends on projects just like these. Without them, families will continue to be susceptible to decisions that leave them in the red.
Commented online at USAToday.com

This story, “Why Consumers Struggle to Understand Healthcare,” finally brings to light the reality that low literacy skills can often mean the difference between life and death.

Like the experts quoted in the article, we have found that patients with low literacy skills have a 50 percent increased risk of hospitalization, compared with patients who had adequate literacy skills. In fact, nearly half the adults in the U.S. have difficulty understanding and using health information, according to the Center for Healthcare Strategies. This lack of understanding in turn impedes their ability to make appropriate health decisions and increases the likelihood that they will incur higher health costs.

In short, low health literacy is a rampant problem for adults in the United States and presents an extraordinary cost burden on the health care system for all of us. We urge the health community to work with adult literacy and basic education community organizations to make health literature more accessible and easier to understand for the millions of American adults who have low literacy skills.

Submitted to the Seattle Times

Thank you for emphasizing the haunting question, “What happens to us?” in “Funding Cuts to Silence AmeriCorps Program that Helps Immigrants Learn English.” This question is echoed by thousands of adult learners around the nation who are experiencing long waiting lists or limited access when seeking the help they need to learn how to read, write, do basic math, use computers, or learn English. Losing funding for AmeriCorps volunteers leaves a hole in the lives of these adult learners and the programs that serve them.

Adult literacy programs are crucial to building a skilled 21st century workforce and to working toward sustainable economic recovery. More than 30 million adults in America read below a fifth grade reading level; the economic toll is enormous. Instead of experiencing funding cuts at every level, adult literacy and basic education programs from Washington to Florida need to be a renewed priority for our policy- and decision-makers—so no one is left questioning their future.