

# RELATIONSHIP-BASED GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

## An Overview

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### What is it?

- Relationship based, or face-to-face advocacy is tremendously more effective than email campaigns.
- Face-to-face grassroots advocacy involves constituents communicating in person with their elected officials, and developing an on-going relationship with legislative offices.
- The best way to do face-to-face advocacy is to set up a Key Contact network.
- Such a network allows constituents to develop on-going personal relationships with the legislator and/or his/her staff.
- A Key Contact network (KCN) has two parts – the “grass tops” and the “grass roots.”
- The term grass tops refers to the professional government affairs staff at the national office that create, maintain, and activate the network.
- The grass roots in this case are volunteer members of the organization who are recruited to be district leaders (DL) – ideally one in each congressional district (435 total).

### How does it work? Grass tops

- The grass tops set the organization’s legislative agenda, track legislation as it moves through the legislative cycle, design and direct grass roots actions and monitor their effectiveness.
- The grass tops are responsible for translating the organization’s policy positions into an effective political message.
- The grass tops recruit DL’s, train them and give them assigned tasks, usually monthly. DL recruitment can be delegated to local, state or regional chapters.
- The actions of the District Leaders must be simultaneously coordinated to have national impact.
- The actions must be timed to the Congressional legislative cycle, especially if the goal is to pass a particular bill.

### How does it work? Grass roots

- Although DL’s are volunteers, they must have a basic, yet specific job description and responsibilities. Volunteer DL’s should be sought who are willing to fulfill the duties of the position on a regular basis - typically monthly. DL’s who cannot fulfill their responsibilities should be replaced.
- The district leaders must be trained on both the issue(s) and grassroots advocacy tools.
- Periodic train-the-trainer conferences are the best way to train DL’s.
- Monthly teleconferences are useful to coordinate the monthly activity.
- Regular contact between the DL’s and the national office facilitates DL motivation and retention.

### Grass roots skills

- Grassroots skills include:
  - how to recruit new members
  - how to put together and conduct a meeting with a legislator
  - how to prepare informational/educational materials for the legislator
  - how to maintain relationships with legislative staff
  - how to follow up and maintain contact with the legislative office
  - how to make use of site visits
  - how to use the media
  - how to use social networking sites for organizing

## **Observations**

- Typically an organization will have an internal process for setting its annual legislative agenda. Position papers, and the research to back them up, are essential. However, in today's political climate, it is not enough to "let the facts speak for themselves". The success of any grassroots campaign depends on how well the message is translated and/or packaged for political consumption.
- Political messages must be simple, straightforward and hit the mark. Delivering that message face-to-face is far more effective than sending emails.
- National KCN's are complimented by the use of DC "advocacy days", where members fly to Washington, DC one or more times a year to visit their legislators on Capitol Hill.
- The organization should hold a grassroots training conference at the beginning of advocacy days. Additional local, state and regional trainings can be conducted if resources allow.
- An organization's advocacy efforts will be more successful with an experienced government affairs person(s) serving as the grass top(s), whether a member of the staff, board or a dedicated volunteer.
- An organization can provide its members with excellent policy information and urge them to visit their elected officials. However, face-to-face advocacy efforts will be tremendously more effective with a volunteer District Leader infrastructure in place coordinated by the government affairs staff in the national office.