Elevator Speech

When we train people to advocate, each person learns how to make their own "elevator pitch"—a super short, compelling speech for a cause. Elevator pitches become your own personal talking points, and help you make your case concisely (e.g., if you happen to be in an elevator for two minutes with the Texas governor). Use elevator pitches when talking to elected officials, journalists, or anyone you want to convince that your issue for children needs attention. Keep it short, and hit these four themes:

Open strong: Why this matters

Start your elevator pitch with something that gets your listener’s attention. This may be something that offers the big picture: whatever connects to a value that your listener holds dear. If you are talking to someone in your elected official's office, a strong opener to include is mentioning who you are and that you live in the district! Keep your opening statement to one sentence if possible. You'll know you've struck on the right opener if it answers why what you care about really matters, not just for you but for your audience and the community.

"I'm from your district, and I'm here to talk about how bringing health insurance to kids is good for communities, families, and the bottom line."

Discuss the problem: Context in a nutshell

Next, address the cause of the problem for which you are seeking a solution. Bring your personal story to bear, if you have one. Explain why this issue touches you and your community personally. Your authenticity and presentation will help get your audience past any roadblock in their thinking, and see eye to eye with you faster.

"As an E.R. doctor, I've seen firsthand what happens to children without health insurance. . ."

Provide the solution: The fix

Always follow your description of a problem with a proposed way to solve it. You might support your solution with evidence of how and where it has worked, how it has proven cost-effective, and the benefits it will bring to others. You can cite a recent study or report, or simply expand on your first-person account of how the solution would make a real difference for you or others.

"Simply providing coverage through CHIP or Medicaid allows kids to see a doctor in a doctor's office, not the E.R. This approach helps families, and it also costs far less to the community and taxpayers, in the end."

Deliver your call to action: The ask!

Finally, ask for action. Continue to try to connect to the values of your listener, and be clear about what you want. Ask for something specific, which you can follow up about in your next communication with this person. Often your call to action will be a simple yes-or-no question. Remember, your pitch isn't over until you make your ask!

"Will you vote for SB 123, so more children can get health coverage through CHIP and so communities like ours start spending less on routine treatment in the most expensive place--the E.R.?"

Once you have finalized your elevator pitch practice it. Soon enough, delivering it will feel natural and convincing. Now you are ready to go out, and spread your message!
Communicating with Elected Officials

Telephone calls, emails, letters, and faxes are all ways to educate your elected leaders about children's issues and make your position known.

Phone Calls

When you call an elected official's office, you won't speak directly with him or her, but with a member of the staff who relays your message. You may want to ask to speak with the staff member who handles your particular issue (e.g., health, education, etc.). Once you have the appropriate staff person on the phone:

- Identify yourself, including your hometown and any organization affiliation you have that's relevant. If you live in the elected official's district, say so! Constituents' priorities count most.
- Explain why you are calling. If it's about a specific piece of legislation, try to identify it both by the bill number (e.g., S.B. 123) and issue area (e.g., the Texas Youth Corrections Reform Bill).
- Make your "ask," offering one or two concise talking points that support your position.
- Provide local examples of why it matters, if you can.
- Thank the staff person for his or her time.

Email

Email is a convenient way to contact legislators, but it is generally considered to be a less effective means of communication than a phone call. Still, it can be a valuable way to register your position, especially when timing does not permit a call.

When you send an email, put your position in the message line (for example, "Please Vote No on HB 4"). That way, if the message isn't read, at least the message line will convey your position. Keep the email short, and use standard punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, as you would in a letter.

Letters & Faxes

Writing a letter to your elected official can have a lot of impact, but do keep in mind issues of timing; "snail mail" doesn't work for a vote happening tomorrow. Keep in mind that form letters do not carry the same weight as those that are personalized. Whatever method you choose, follow these guidelines:

- Keep the letter short and simple -- try to keep it to one page. Address only one issue per letter.
- Be courteous and to the point, and include key information.
- State the purpose of your letter in the first paragraph. If you are writing regarding a specific piece of legislation, identify it (e.g., S.B. 50).
- Personal stories work best! Include specific examples that support your position. Information about the local impact of legislation is also very powerful.
- Request a written response asking whether the legislator will support your position.
Legislative Visits

Personal visits are the most effective method of building a relationship with legislators.

Before the Meeting:

1. **Do your homework.** Find out what issues your Representatives or Senators care about and where your specific issue stands on their list of priorities. You can do this by visiting their website (http://www.house.state.tx.us and http://www.senate.state.tx.us), asking their local offices for their newsletters, or finding out what Legislative committees they sit on (available on their website).

2. **Contact in district.** You may have better luck arranging a meeting if you contact legislators during times when they are back in their district, such as in between sessions or during holidays. You can also work with staff if a legislator is unable to personally meet with you. Ask if you can speak with the staff member who is working on your particular issue area. Staff may have more time and knowledge about your issue than the legislator.

3. **Be prepared—practice speaking.** After you create an agenda for the meeting, create a brief two or three minute elevator speech and practice it with at least one other person. Be brief, clear and to the point, and don’t be afraid to show your passion.

4. **Choose individual roles for the meeting.** If you are going to go in a small group (no more than three people), plan out roles ahead of time. It’s generally best to have one main speaker. Choose one person who will be responsible for taking notes and writing down any commitments your legislator makes and any follow up that needs to be done after the meeting.

5. **Inspire yourselves.** Prior to the meeting, spend at least a few minutes having each person speak about why he or she cares about this issue and why you are going to this meeting.

At the Meeting:

1. **Be on time – but be patient!** It is not uncommon for a legislator to be late or to be interrupted. Be flexible. You may choose to continue by meeting with a staff member or reschedule the meeting with the legislator for another time.

2. **Connect with your Representatives, Senators, and aides.** Introduce yourself and your organization. If you live in the legislator’s district, let them know! Establish a personal connection with your legislator and your legislator’s staff in the meeting by asking them to share the issues they care about. Share your own vision and concerns.

3. **Acknowledge your legislator.** It is rare that our Representatives and Senators hear the words “Thank You” from their constituents. Thank the legislator for past or current support. Thank the legislator for meeting with you and for his or her consideration, even if you are not well received. More than likely your point person in the office will be a legislative aide, so be sure to take time to thank the staff as well.

4. **Be concise.** Prepare material with key points. Leave staff with a one page document with bullet points that includes your name, organization (if relevant), and contact information. Plan on having 5-10 minutes to communicate your position. Develop a clear message and practice staying focused on it!

5. **Be prepared to respond to opposition on the issue.** Know what the opposition is saying. There may be very articulate arguments against what you are asking for. Be prepared and do your homework on any opposition. Have talking points prepared to defend your position, but do not take time to focus on the opposing arguments, unless asked to.

6. **Be helpful.** If you don’t know an answer or how to respond to a question, tell the aide or legislator you will get them further information. Be sure to provide this information to them promptly!
7. **Don’t be a fanatic.** Fair, balanced and thoughtful conversations will keep the door to your member’s office open even if you don’t find common ground. Be a good listener and allow the legislator to voice his or her thoughts on the issue. Be prepared to respectfully refute the legislator’s arguments with strong points supporting your position, but don’t be argumentative! Always leave with a thank you and a commitment to follow up with relevant information.

8. **Make the issues real.** One of the most powerful ways we can advocate for our issues is to have someone speak who has been directly affected by these issues and can share their experiences. Be yourself! No one can tell your story better than you. You do not need to be an expert on the topic, but you must be prepared to discuss how the issue affects you or the group you represent.

9. **Paint the big picture and the small picture.** For example, one person could tell a story about how the issue has affected him or her personally (the small picture); then, someone else could provide the current state or national statistics and impact (the big picture).

10. **Make specific, clear requests and ask for an answer.** Often, the main reason groups have unsatisfactory meetings is that their requests were not clear and specific enough. Your legislators need to know what you want them to do (what bill you want them to sponsor, what other Representative or Senator you want them to speak to, how you want them to vote). However, in addition to the specific requests you bring, don’t be afraid to ask the Senator or Representative what else they see they could do on your issue, even if they say no to your original request.

11. **Know your next steps.** At the meeting, ensure that the next steps for follow up are clear (what your group will do next, what the legislator/aide will do next) and that you know which aides to contact for follow up. After the meeting, send a prompt thank you note and follow up on requests with the aide.