


# Advocacy Toolkit





The North Carolina Community Action Association and its 34 member agencies have consistently been the voice for North Carolina families living in poverty—and we do not intend to stop now. The Community Action Network’s advocacy has helped make low-income voices heard from the White House to Congress to the North Carolina Legislature, and your voice is needed now more than ever! That’s why we have compiled this set of resources to guide you through a variety of tactics and actions in advocating for North Carolina’s most vulnerable families.

Nonprofit advocacy is not about partisan politics. And it’s definitely not about political candidates.

Advocacy is about educating decision-makers about the impact of the public-policy decisions they are contemplating. It’s about helping them understand how the people and communities we care about will be impacted. And it’s about making sure that we aren’t sitting on the sidelines while decisions that could positively or negatively impact our missions are being made.

NCCAA’s advocacy efforts seek to unleash the power of the entire Community Action Network. It flows from a deep belief in the role of CAAs to find and deliver solutions. And from an unwavering commitment to the communities and the people we serve.

The information provided in this toolkit serves as a basic blueprint about advocacy and how to engage in efforts to educate state and community leaders on public policy decisions that impact low-income people. This information is not all-inclusive, and a detailed plan of action is necessary to undertake a major policy campaign.

The greatest action that any CAA can undertake is to continue to represent and raise awareness of the causes and conditions of poverty. As such, the Network will galvanize and harness its collective power to mobilize low-income individuals and families to advocate and effect even greater change. Together, the Network will engage with state and local decision-makers to advocate for legislation and policy solutions that will create opportunities for all people to be successful and live a better quality of life. Through this effort, we will create communities that are not only resilient but also racially, socially, and economically equitable.

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Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for the work you do to serve and empower low-income families and communities across North Carolina. Collectively, our statewide human and economic impact is profound, employing more than 5,000 employees that yield an investment of more than \$23 million annually, while boosting local economies and benefitting hundreds of thousands of vulnerable families through a variety of program and services.

Throughout the pandemic, you remained steadfast in your mission, swiftly pivoting operations to ensure families suffering the most received services so desperately needed. As other human service organizations closed their doors during the height of this public health crisis, community action agencies scaled operations to rapidly learn and administer new federal, state, and local programs.

While much has changed, advocacy continues to be the most powerful tool to ensure the communities we serve are represented at the local, state, and national levels. Raising awareness of our mission and work will attract friends, funders, and partners to join our efforts to amplify the voices of low-income people and communities while promoting systematic change for good. Advocacy starts with each of us and ends with a unified message—we are 34 strong and we are community action.

The North Carolina Community Action Association board and staff are honored to represent the work you do each day and look forward to ensuring decision-makers at every level understand who we are, what we do, our statewide impact, and the causes and conditions of poverty. Together, we will ensure community action is widely recognized and respected for the work it has continued to do each day for nearly 60 years across our state and nation.

Sincere Regards,

Sharon C. Goodson, CCAP  
Executive Director

Dr. Landon B. Mason, CCAP  
NCCAA Board President

**A Member of the Community Action Partnership**

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# Purpose

This toolkit is designed to support the efforts of community action agencies across North Carolina in providing consistent and ongoing advocacy efforts for low-income and underserved families in local communities.



Unified messaging on individual and collective efforts to reduce poverty, while empowering low-income people to become independent of public programs and improving communities for all people is critical to effective engagement with elected officials and stakeholders.

The talking points, guidance, strategies, and information outlined in this toolkit are intentionally presented in a succinct and categorized manner to promote ease in accessing key points. Most importantly, please keep in mind that advocacy is an action.

The contents of this toolkit are only as valuable as our individual and collective advocacy efforts. We appreciate your commitment to raising awareness of community action, our priorities, and the needs of North Carolina's most vulnerable families.

## How can you make the most of this toolkit?

While navigating this toolkit, it is important to remember that these are only one set of potentially useful tools and that there is not one particular approach or method that should be ascribed to advocacy for marginalized people. While this toolkit is ideally examined in the sequence it is written, it has been designed so that users can quickly navigate to particular tools in which they are most interested and use them as they see fit.

# Who We Are

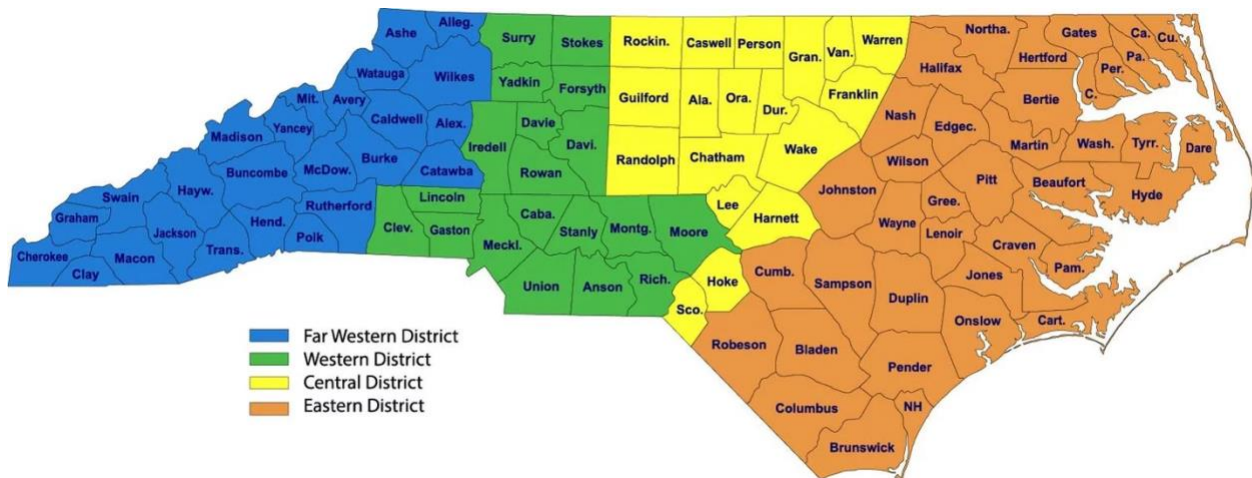


Community Action Agencies are nonprofit organizations created by President Lyndon B. Johnson’s signing of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

This landmark legislation in the “War on Poverty” represents the inception of community action and dozens of anti-poverty programs. Nearly 60 years later, some programs remain (e.g., Head Start, foster grandparents, Job Corps, and Community Action), however, many no

longer exist. Today, the community action network is as active as ever, serving 99% of the nation’s counties.

North Carolina is home to a network of [34 community action agencies](#) serving residents of all 100 counties.





# CAA Key Facts

**Identity**—Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) funds are administered through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services. While CSBG funds may represent a small percentage of a CAAs overall budget, these dollars give agencies one hundred percent of their identity as a designated community action agency.

**Locally Focused**—CSBG funds are flexible and are used to invest in community-based programs and services to improve the conditions in which low-income families live. Community needs assessments are required at least every 3 years to ensure agency activities and programs correspond to the needs of the families and communities served.

**Community Empowerment**—Community action embodies the philosophy that low-income individuals can best identify the issues their communities face and develop solutions to resolve them. The tripartite board structure (one-third of the CAA's board make-up is low-income representatives, one-third is public officials or their designee, with the remainder of the board representing the private sector) exemplifies this tenet.

**Economic Self-Sufficiency**—Community Action Agencies equip low-income citizens with the tools and potential to become self-sufficient and independent of public programs and services. Some agencies implement a whole family approach to service delivery, in which breaking the cycle of generational poverty is an intentional focus.

**Partnership and Coordination**—Poverty is multifaceted and effective solutions require strategic local, state, and federal partnerships. Resources from public and private sector partners, volunteers, and faith-based groups are coordinated to maximize impact and investments.

**Leverage**—A bedrock principle of community action is to leverage resources of all kinds to solve low-income individual and community problems. Every CSBG dollar spent leveraged \$15.85 of state, local, and private contributions combined (FFY 2019).

**System Changes**—Poverty is a systemic problem and community action is actively engaged in solutions to resolve these issues. CAAs listen to and amplify the voices of low-income citizens to promote community-level change. Advocacy efforts address the root issues and causes of poverty.

# What Makes Us Unique

Community action agencies are different from other nonprofit organizations in several ways:

## Federal Designation

Community Action Agencies are the only nonprofits mandated by federal legislation to serve the poor and disadvantaged. This fact is reflected in our national and state branding stating we are “America’s poverty-fighting network.”

## Board Structure

CAAs have a tripartite board consisting of private sector, public sector, and low-income community representatives. This board structure allows for “maximum feasible participation” of local low-income citizens and brings together community leaders from each of these groups to collaborate on developing responses to local needs. The tripartite board composition ensures low-income community members are empowered as actively engaged leaders in agency decision-making.

## Network

North Carolina’s CAAs represent the only network of agencies providing tailored direct services to low-income families and communities in all 100 counties. No other statewide network shares our direct experiences to understand the plight and complex needs of low-income citizens. The CAA network is well-positioned to efficiently administer statewide community-based programs and services. Our regional and national networks also offer unique opportunities for information sharing, peer support, leveraged resources, enhanced branding, and federal advocacy.

## Trusted Resource

With nearly 60 years of experience working directly with and in local communities, CAAs are a trusted local resource. Families in need know and respect our work. CAAs ensure all people and communities are treated with dignity and respect.



## Accountability

CAAs are held to high standards of accountability and are monitored annually for compliance on 58 federally mandated organizational standards. These standards measure CAAs on specific agency activities across nine areas: consumer input and involvement; community engagement; community assessment vision and direction; organizational leadership; board governance; strategic planning operations and accountability; human resource management; financial operations and oversight; and data and analysis. Additional accountability measures are in place for other agency programs and services.

## Responsiveness

CAAs swiftly respond to local emergencies and community needs. When disaster strikes, agencies immediately launch into action. This responsiveness has supported vulnerable communities and families during natural disasters, and economic turmoil, the COVID pandemic, and societal challenges affecting communities. In addition, CAAs conduct annual audits.

## Nonpartisan

The community action network has longstanding support from both sides of the aisle. The human and economic impact of our work has been acknowledged and respected by elected officials of all backgrounds for nearly 60 years. We are proud to be nonpartisan and conduct activities, including advocacy efforts, in a nonpartisan manner.

## Economic Impact

Investments in North Carolina's community action programs expand the size of the state's economy in significant ways. As revealed in NCCAA's latest [Economic Impact Study](#), In North Carolina, CSBG funds combined with certain economic self-sufficiency programs:

- Generated \$43 million in additional statewide economic output annually; when leveraged funds are included, statewide economic output rises by \$450 million. In short, every \$1 in program spending sparks more than \$2 in added economic output.
- Supported a total of 415 jobs across all industry sectors (CSBG funds alone); when leveraged funds are included, a total of 5,123 jobs are supported through funding for community action.

- Produced an estimated \$16 million annually in additional labor income; when leveraged funds are included, community action resources boost labor income in North Carolina by \$195 million annually.
- Yielded an estimated \$2 million annually in additional state and local tax revenues; when leveraged funds are included, community action resources expand state and local tax collections in North Carolina by \$23 million per year.
- Leveraged \$15.85 of state, local, and private contributions combined (FFY 2019).



# Impact and Challenges of COVID

## Family/Community Level

In 2021, NCCAA commissioned researchers at the UNC Kenan Flagler Business School to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its efforts to combat poverty and facilitate self-sufficiency in low-income communities throughout the state. Virtual focus group sessions were hosted to gain insight from low-income families and community stakeholders. Eight key takeaways were revealed:

- COVID-19 exacted a disproportionately heavy toll on low-income families, especially in terms of both exposure to and deaths from COVID.
- Above and beyond disparate exposures and deaths, the COVID-19 pandemic created major employment challenges and forced low-income households to make difficult decisions and choices about work versus personal safety and the health and wellbeing of their families.
- The shift to remote learning during the pandemic shed new light on deficiencies in infrastructure related to availability, access, quality, and cost of internet services for low-income families.
- The pandemic heightened personal and familial stress and anxiety posing, in the process, major socioemotional and mental health challenges for low-income individuals and families throughout the state.
- Government safety-net programs were an important lifeline but fell short of addressing the range of assistance low-income households needed during the pandemic.
- Beyond government support and private sector assistance, residents have pursued a wide array of coping strategies, tactics, and practices to survive the pandemic.
- Augmenting personal resiliency, nonprofit organizations were instrumental in creating a therapeutic community for the most vulnerable families, providing much-needed support—financial and socio-emotional as well as basic necessities such as food and personal protective equipment—during the pandemic.
- Compliance with safety precautionary measures—with only a few exceptions—is high but vaccine hesitancy is widespread among North Carolina’s low-income families and households.

# COVID: Impact and Challenges

## Agency Level

The federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic included the March 2020 CARES Act. The CARES Act appropriated \$1 billion of federal funding to the national community action network to serve low-income families adversely impacted by the pandemic. North Carolina's community action agencies received \$26 million of the funds and will continue to administer CARES programming through September 2022. Additional stimulus programs are administered through CAAs for COVID relief efforts including, but not limited to state and federal programs (e.g., Head Start CARES funds; Weatherization CARES funds; NC HOPE program), as well as public/private funded programs and initiatives (The Duke Endowment COVID support program, PNC Bank COVID kits, The Big Pop Up distribution events).

Stimulus funds assisted tens of thousands of North Carolinians struggling to make ends meet. CAAs quickly scaled operations to administer new programs and augment current programs. However, this rapid transition, in the midst of a global public health crisis, has come with its share of challenges. Common challenges experienced by CAAs include, but are not limited to:

- **Staff Shortages:** Staff with school-aged children were challenged with having to be at home when schools were not operating. Staff had to care for quarantined children once schools reopened. Some staff members had to quarantine, too. The huge demand for services created added stress to the workloads of CAA staffs. Staffs dealt with the anxiety at work, as well as, addressing the needs of their own family's well-being.
- **New Federal and State Mandates:** Early on, schools and businesses were closed and slowly entities providing essential services were allowed to open. NC CAAs are classified as essential service providers.
- **Safety Concerns:** Agency staff and clients feared exposure to the virus. Agencies quickly implemented safety protocols that allowed them to serve customers, but in a different manner (e.g., drop boxes, online forms, telephone, virtual meeting platforms, drive-through and social distancing).
- **Vaccine Hesitancy:** The politicizing of vaccines and the distribution of misinformation via social platforms has created on-going havoc for many to not trust being vaccinated.
- **Outgrowth of Office Spaces:** Due to the pandemic agencies had to socially distance. This meant fewer workers could room in spaces they were accustomed to working in. As a result, some agencies rotated staff, provided remoted work opportunities and utilized outdoor spaces as much as possible to assist families.
- **Community Engagement:** CAAs have historically worked with other nonprofits and public and private entities to meet the needs of low-income families. The pandemic shifted the way CAAs engaged to virtual platforms, outdoors and in socially distanced formats.

# NCCAA's Advocacy Priorities



## Recommendations

### **Seek funds to Identify and train trusted messengers and community influencers.**

- Community action agencies will identify trusted messengers in communities across North Carolina. These trusted messengers/community influencers including faith-based leaders will be trained to develop multi-channel communication strategies that focus on the trust and integrity of the work done in local communities during pandemics, and disasters.
- These trusted community influencers will be trained on the history and the impact of local CAAs. They will help generate the trust that is needed around key issues impacting low-income people and the community at large.

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### **Seek state/federal funds to develop a small business technical and managerial assistance program to encourage the development of new childcare facilities and to help strengthen existing childcare facilities in low-income communities.**

Women have been impacted the most during this global pandemic. Additional childcare is needed to help women re-enter the job market. The pandemic has greatly impacted unpartnered females with school-aged children.

## NCCAA's Advocacy Priorities (Continued)

**Seek funding from the state and federal governments to develop a multi-generational mental wellness program to support pandemic-induced anxiety and depression, as well as abuse and battery that affects families living in poverty.**

- Families living in poverty have been greatly impacted by anxiety and depression issues as a result of the coronavirus. Abuse and battery are often a direct result of mental wellness issues that impact families living in low-wealth communities.
- As trusted entities in local communities, community action is well-positioned to advocate for this critically needed funding to provide services to the multi-generations that often mirror low-income households.

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### Other (ongoing)

- NCCAA is continuing to meet with key leaders at Kenan-Flager Business School at UNC-Chapel Hill about the feasibility and suitability of Community Land Banks and Community Land Trusts to expand the inventory of affordable housing and workforce housing in CAA communities. (Research/Planning)
- NCCAA is continuing to meet with key leaders at Kenan-Flager Business School at UNC-Chapel Hill to develop a co-branded certification program that teaches community action agencies about impact investing that leads to less reliance on government philanthropic funds.

This program will create sustainable financing models to address the social determinants of health and generate unrestricted funds.



# Why Advocate



*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

**Margaret Mead**

The NC Community Action Agency Association is a powerful network that spans from the mountains to the coasts of NC. The Network provides services and much-needed resources to over 100,000 low-income families in all 100 counties in the state. In many instances, these agencies are often among a limited number of organizations available to assist low-income individuals and families. During the Network's nearly 60 years of existence, it has been on the front lines to eliminate poverty in North Carolina.

The Network has utilized various opportunities to raise awareness, empower individuals and families, and effect change to improve the quality of life in impoverished communities across the state. The Network recognizes that to sustain its effort to eliminate poverty, policies must be implemented at the local, state, and federal levels that will improve the quality of life and create economic opportunities for low-income individuals and families.

As such, the network is on a mission to expand its policy agenda, and build a strong coalition comprised of its leaders, those it serves, and supporters to participate in local, state, and federal level nonpartisan advocacy.

Advocacy is important because it educates decision-makers and the general public about the impact of a public policy decision or an issue. About decision-makers, advocacy helps them understand how people and communities will be affected if they vote in favor or against an issue. Advocacy helps to ensure that decision-makers know whether the decisions they make will help or harm the people served by the Network.

To address a policy and advocate in support of or against an issue at your local, state, or federal level, you need key information. The following information is not comprehensive but provides general information regarding the process to help get you started as an advocate and fulfill the mission to help low-income people become self-sufficient and independent of public programs and services.

# Advocacy vs. Lobbying

Advocacy is any action that includes speaking, writing, promoting, or protecting a group or cause. An “advocate” is a person who supports or defends an issue, cause, individual or a group.

The purpose of advocacy is to educate and influence decision-makers or the general public. Advocacy includes information, activities, materials and tools used to support, recommend or defeat a policy decision, and or impact public budgets. Effective advocacy uses various tools to bring about change including research, relationships, traditional and social media, and other forms of communication to educate decision-makers and the general public.

Advocacy is not lobbying. Lobbying is any activity that involves direct support of or opposition to an issue or a specific piece of legislation. Nonprofits can conduct lobbying to educate decision-makers, but the IRS has strict regulations regarding the use of staff time and funds that are used for lobbying activities. Note, federal funds cannot be used for lobbying. For more information on this topic visit: [Lobbying](#).

## Forms of Advocacy

**Grassroots Issue Advocacy** is one of the most common forms of advocacy used by the general public. Grassroots issue advocacy involves any form of contact with legislators and other decisionmakers that is used to affect change in a policy or budget issue. Large groups and coalitions often utilize this form of advocacy.

**Legislative Advocacy** is engaging in anyway in the state or federal legislative process as a strategy to create change. Legislative advocacy involves educating policymakers and the general public about how an issue or legislation is or could impact the people you serve. Legislative advocacy can be utilized by an individual or group that wants to address an issue and create strategic change.

**Media Advocacy** is the strategic use of traditional and social media to educate and inform individuals or groups to motivate them to take action on a public policy initiative. Media advocacy is one of the most effective forms of advocacy because it can quickly mobilize groups of people. Like legislative advocacy Media advocacy can be used by an individual or group that wants to address an issue and have a long-term impact.

# Create an Advocacy Plan

Before you start to advocate, it is important that you know and understand your advocacy goals and priorities. To begin, work in partnership with your group or coalition to make a list of your most important goals and what change you would like to make happen. Participate in a strategic priority process that will help you develop the top three to four issues that your group would like to see impacted.

Once this process is complete, create a strategic plan that will create systemic change to address the issue. Following are a few suggestions that can be used to help you create your strategic plan. Remember that the purpose of this entire process is to help you be a good advocate so that you can help to improve the quality of life for the individuals and families you serve.

## Step 1. Identify The Issue and How You Want to Make a Difference

The issues that impact low-income communities are broad and complex. Poverty is systemic and the factors that contribute to it often have a historical context. Because of the various dynamics that must take place in the process of creating an advocacy plan, it is best to have a specific and clear policy or issue that is tangible and can be achieved.

- Choose a policy issue or a cause that is significant to your constituents and determine the impact of it on those you serve.
- Research the issue or cause and have reliable data and other information to document whether it will help or harm your constituents. If it is the latter, propose an alternative solution to address the issue.
- Create a document that outlines the issue and how it impacts your constituents. Include important data, facts, firsthand stories of those impacted and your proposed solution. Include the action you want the decision-makers to take or the general public to know.
- Remember that as someone who knows about the issue or cause, you are an ideal advocate. Your knowledge and your constituents' lived experiences are valuable, and decision-makers need to know what you have to share.

## Step 2. Determine Your Allies and Your Opposition and Create Partnerships

Breaking the cycle of poverty cannot be done in isolation. Often, community problems or issues are too large and complex for one person or organization to solve. In these circumstances advocacy is much more effective when strong partnerships are developed.

- Identify individuals, coalition groups and supporters who have an interest or those who could potentially be impacted by the issue.
- Form a partnership with other allies or a coalition of organizations that share your interest and want to create change.

- Find out who are other groups in opposition to this issue or cause and find out why. This information will help as you build your plan and create your coalition.
- Educate and train those in the coalition continuously so that they are strong advocates on the issue or cause.

### Step 3. Identify the Decisionmakers and Develop Relationships

Advocating for a change to a policy issue or cause will involve doing research to determine what steps are necessary to change or impact the issue. If you are working on an issue that is decided by local government, the state legislature, or at the federal level you need to know the process, the decision-makers, and who can influence the decision-makers. Engaging elected officials or decision-makers involves doing some research that will prepare you to effectively advocate for the issue or cause. In order to move forward, you need to know which level of government can impact the change, who the key decision-makers are, and the steps for moving forward.

- Research and identify what level of government can make a decision about the issue.
- Determine the process for changing or impacting the decision.
- Identify the key decision-makers that have a role in the process and the decision.
- Find out their leadership role in the process or if they serve on a specific committee.
- Request a meeting to discuss the issue once you have identified the key decisionmaker.
- Visit the websites below to find key information and a list of decision-makers:
  - **NC County Officials:** [North Carolina Association of County Commissioners: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners \(ncacc.org\)](http://NorthCarolinaAssociationofCountyCommissioners.org)
  - **NC Local Government:** [Home-North Carolina League of Municipalities \(nclm.org\)](http://Home-NorthCarolinaLeagueofMunicipalities.org)
  - **NC State Legislators:** [North Carolina General Assembly \(ncleg.gov\)](http://NorthCarolinaGeneralAssembly.gov)
  - **NC State Government:** [NC.gov](http://NC.gov)
  - **Federal Representation:** <https://www.congress.gov/members>

### Step 4. Build Support and Awareness Through Traditional and Social Media

Social media is one of the most common tools used to engage individuals and stakeholders. It can effectively inform and quickly mobilize supporters. Because there are so many platforms that currently exist, it is best to find out which is most often used by your specific target audience but using other forms can also create new supporters and allies.

- Utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and text messaging to educate the public, broaden your reach and build a strong base of supporters.
- Establish relationships with members of the local media. Television and newspapers are still great tools to get an issue or cause covered in the media. Contact reporters that cover issues similar to the one you are interested in and develop trusted relationships. Use these relationships to share news and/or engage your community and the public.
- Share information or personal stories about the issue with the NCCAA staff and post and follow the NCCAA's social channels and other information resources [HOME | NCCAA](#).

# Advocacy 101

## Strategies and Best Practices

Following is a list of activities that your organization may consider undertaking in its efforts to affect change. This list is not exhaustive, rather it is a starting point for organizations to use to begin advocacy efforts.

- **Educate Legislators and Elected Officials:** Provide information to legislators and other elected officials about an issue or problem and its impact on constituents and the community.
- **Host An Advocacy Event:** Sponsor an annual event at the state legislature or in the district to introduce community members to their elected officials. The event will allow the community and the officials to get to know each other and discuss the issues that affect their lives.
- **Plan a Summit:** Invite supporters and like-minded organizations to convene to address a problem or impact a cause. Gather to learn, share information, and create a strategy or plan of action to address an issue.
- **Promote Your Organization:** Invite a legislator to visit your organization so that he/she may see firsthand how funding (federal or state) and policy affects day-to-day operations and the difference it makes. Tell your legislators how a state or federal grant your organization received has helped your community.
- **Provide Education and Training:** Educate and inform the public about the issues that impact the community. Hold community forums and training sessions that teach strategies on how to organize around the issues.
- **Publish a Report:** Produce nonpartisan research or other relevant information that provides key data about the effects of an issue on residents and the community. Having qualitative and quantitative data on an issue is an additional tool that can be used for advocacy.
- **Organize the Community:** Increase the power of the people. Organize the public around a specific policy issue or cause. Work in coalitions with others to collaborate and increase as well as build power in the community.

# What Does Advocacy Look Like?

<b>Organizing</b>	Forming a coalition of people with similar interests and goals. Strength in numbers!
<b>Contacting a Representative</b>	Calling, writing a letter to, emailing, or meeting your state representative in person to ask them to vote for or against a proposed bill.
<b>Educating</b>	Holding a class, community forum, or publishing a letter to the editor in your local newspaper.
<b>Rallying</b>	Organizing an event to bring public attention to an issue.
<b>Training</b>	Teaching others about how they can be effective advocates.
<b>Showing up</b>	Going to a town hall meeting and asking a question about hunger.

## Fast and Easy Ways to Be an Advocate

**In 15 seconds...** You could share an article or blog post about a current issue related to food insecurity to your friends and followers on social media.

**In 3 minutes...** You could call an elected official, share your view on a piece of legislation and ask them to vote for or against it.

**In 5 minutes...** You could invite an elected official to visit your agency or attend an event while they are in your district.

**In 10 minutes...** You could write an e-mail or a letter to an elected official, sharing why you care about a current issue, how it impacts your community, and what you would like them to do about it.

**In 45 minutes...** You could meet with an elected official or their staff at their office to share how important their votes are to the people you serve.

**In an hour...** You could write an op-ed or letter to the editor of your local newspaper, highlighting the work of your agency and how others can get involved.



# Build Your Case

Understanding and effectively utilizing both stories and data can help you develop a strong and balanced case for what you are advocating for.

Data can tell us that around 1.4 million North Carolinians are living in poverty but that doesn't convey the true impact of poverty, what it feels like on a daily basis, to the people experiencing it.

A personal testimonial from someone experiencing poverty may tell us that one person has to skip a few meals each week to make sure their kids get enough to eat, but that doesn't tell us how many other people might have similar experiences. Is this something experienced by just a few people in the area, or is this much more common?

Without one or the other of these pieces, you're leaving out a part of the story. By combining data and testimonial, you can communicate what poverty means on a personal basis, and how many other people are likely in similar situations.

People who actively use CAA programs are experts on the ground, and have the clearest perspective on how changes in policy would have an impact on their wellbeing. By centering the needs and wants of the people directly impacted, we can ensure our advocacy efforts are focused on what is most crucial.

An advocacy case that centers people with lived experiences is not only the fairest and most equitable to the people whom you serve, but also makes for a much stronger case. People with lived experiences of poverty should be centered in anti-poverty efforts, and be given the opportunity to fully participate in advocacy efforts whenever possible.

When you can, you should aim to encourage people with lived experiences to directly contact legislators or attend meetings with you. However, when that isn't a possibility, you can encourage their participation by asking them to share their personal stories with you, which you can then pass along to elected officials during advocacy efforts.

# Advocacy Meeting Guidelines

## North Carolina Legislature

The key to a successful legislative meeting is preparation and teamwork. Following is guidance on planning these meetings.

- **Create your plan of action and practice before your meeting.** Your meeting will last between 15 minutes to 20 minutes, depending on the availability of the member or their staff representative.
- **Choose one person to facilitate each meeting.** This person will “lead” the meeting and will provide a welcome and outline the purpose of the meeting. The lead person will help to ensure the meeting proceeds smoothly and ensure that everyone follows the outline or plan for the meeting.
- **Decide speaking roles if you have more than one member in your group.** Be sure to have brief talking points that identify the problem, a personal story for why you care, and the solution (the action you would like the member to take).
- **Practice your talking points** and what you are requesting of the member. Practice as a group so that everyone is familiar with what each person will say and what questions might be asked of the group.
- **Personal stories are critical.** A story is worth a thousand words so if you have a compelling personal story, share it. Explain why you care about the issue, share your reason for getting involved, or any other vital personal information.
- **Arrive at least 10 minutes prior** to the start of your meeting. Let the staff know that you are waiting to meet with the legislative member.
- **Thank the member and the staff after the meeting.** Let them know you appreciate their time and will follow up with them soon to see if action has occurred on the issue that was discussed.
- **Follow up with the member after the meeting.** Designate one person in your group to send a thank you note to the legislator’s office. A follow-up call to the legislator’s office is also necessary to continue to engage the member and to see if any additional information or follow-up is needed.
- **Share the results of your meeting with NCCAA staff and/or the coordinators of the legislative advocacy event.** Let them know if follow-up action needs to be taken and or if the member requests any additional information.

# Legislative Meeting Template

*\*COVID restrictions may determine the availability of in-person meetings with legislators.*

Use the following template as a sample for your legislative meetings. To be better prepared, please practice as if you are actually meeting with the legislator.

## Legislative Meeting Template

### Facilitator/Lead Spokesperson: Opening, Welcome and Introductions

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with us on behalf of the <Your agency's name> which is in <name> County (*Note: List multiple counties if applicable*). I am <your name> (*Participants introduce themselves and tell where they live*).
- Facilitator should give a brief agency overview.
- Today we are here to talk to you about the impact of North Carolina Community Action Agencies and to raise awareness about the issues our constituents face daily.
- We are also wanting to hear from you about the issues that you see moving forward in the general assembly that will help your constituents in our district.

### The Issue: Background Information About North Carolina Community Action Agencies

- North Carolina Community Action Agencies (NC CAAs) are the only nonprofits in the state-mandated by federal legislation to serve the poor and disadvantaged.
- Over the course of our almost 60 years of existence, our network has created thousands of jobs, entrepreneurship opportunities and decent affordable housing.
- We provide weatherization services to improve energy efficiency, affordability, and health and safety for homes of low-income families.
- Federal Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) funds are used to provide the tools, resources and supports vulnerable individuals need to pull their families across the federal poverty guideline.
- The recent pandemic has increased the number of individuals and families struggling to make ends meet. The work that we do is even more critical today than it has been in the past. During the pandemic, we helped thousands of North Carolina families receive emergency food assistance. Our Big Pop Up events have provided food, household items, baby supplies and personal protection equipment (PPE) to more than 7,000 families and nearly 22,000 individuals.

## The Opportunity

- Share a personal story of the impact of CAAs in your community.
- We have a new impact study that was just released which shows... (provide data)
- Over the course of our existence, our CAAs have proven what works to help create opportunities for struggling families in local communities.
- CAAs invest in projects that revitalize neighborhoods by creating jobs, housing, and financial empowerment for those who are low income.

## The Invitation

- We are one of the best investments of CSBG and federal funds that this state has, which enables us to improve the plight of low-income and impoverished people in North Carolina.
- We need your help to continue to do this work and address the issues faced by the most vulnerable families in <name> County.
- We know that as a member of the General Assembly you can help us achieve this goal.
- We invite you <Name of Senator/Representative> to visit our agency in person or virtually and see firsthand our impact.
- We ask you to work with our agency to share information about the impact of CAAs in this state and to continue to improve the quality of life for residents of <name> County.
- As we stated earlier, we are on the frontlines with families affected by this pandemic, and we know its devastating impact. As a result, we commissioned a report by the UNC Kenan Institute that shares the personal stories of those families. We will leave a copy of this report with you and will follow up to get your feedback.

## Questions and Answer Session

Allow the Legislator and staff to ask questions. If you are asked a question that you don't have the answer, be honest and say you do not know but that you will follow up with a response.

## Meeting Wrap Up

(Facilitator or Other Designated Speaker)

- Thank you for your time. We will email you with any follow up and additional background information about today's discussion.
- Ask Senator/Representative or the staff member if you can take a photo of the meeting and post it in the local newspaper and/or on social media.
- Other speakers should also express their gratitude for the meeting.
- Conclude the meeting by saying thank you.



## Next Steps

Follow up the meeting with a thank you note or email to the legislator. Publicize the meeting on social media and/or in the local newspaper and newsletter to thank and acknowledge the legislator.

# Media and Communications

## Why use the media?

The media—including radio, TV, print media such as newspapers and magazines, and web media, like blogs and issue-based websites—can be a hugely powerful tool for your advocacy efforts.

Whatever media you choose to target, there are some key things to know:

- What makes a good story?
- How to get noticed?
- How to write a news release (or press release)?
- How to give a good interview?

## What makes a good news story?

If you were writing the news, what would you be looking for? What is it that makes it news?

There are always at least two sides to every story, and no matter how passionately you feel about a subject remember that there are hundreds of other people who are equally passionate about theirs, and you are all competing for media attention.

## What's new?

This is the most basic and important feature of any news story—it tells you something new. Journalists spend their working lives coming up with stories that reveal something new. As an advocate, you must think: *What can I tell the reader that they don't already know?*

## Newsworthiness

- **'A big story'**—as well as being new, the media are after stories about: conflict, hardship, threats in the community, scandal and individual achievement.
- **A trend**—Small, single issues aren't of great interest. Journalists are more interested in stories that have something to say about society as a whole and how it is changing.
- **A surprise**—Something that shows evidence against what most people believe always gets attention.
- **Easy to understand**—Can it be explained in one short paragraph?
- **Accessible to all**—Your story should be interesting to as wide an audience as possible.
- **Unique explanation**
- **Memorable**—Is it powerful enough to be remembered?
- **A hook**—Does it relate to something that is already in the news or topical?



## Writing a press release

A press release is a summary of your story and messages that is used to get the attention of journalists and hopefully prompt them to follow it up.

When formatting a press release, you want to write it in a newsy, straightforward way so a journalist who might write about it can imagine it as an article on their news site.

- To start, here are the basics every press release should include:
- Your contact information, located on the top left corner
- The phrase "For immediate release," located on the top right
- A headline that quickly explains the announcement
- Your business location in the first sentence of the press release

A quick bio about your company at the end of your press release.

You also might want to include "###" or another signifier to show the journalist that the release has ended.

Now, onto the body of your press release:

- Your first paragraph should state what the announcement is while providing some context around your business and what it does.
- The next two to three paragraphs should include quotes from a company spokesperson or business executive to explain the "why" behind this announcement.
- Your last paragraph should be an "About Us" section that explains what your company is and what it offers.

## Sample press release



### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 21, 2022

**Media Contact:** Kelley Traynham  
North Carolina Community Action Association  
Mobile: (919) 824-4140  
Email: [kelley.traynham@nccaa.net](mailto:kelley.traynham@nccaa.net)

### Local community action agencies partner to supply goods to families in need *The Big Pop Up™ to serve up to 2,000 local families*

**RALEIGH, NC (March 21, 2022)**—North Carolina’s triad-area families still reeling from the effects of the pandemic can get some relief at the April 12 The Big Pop Up™ event to be held at the Four Seasons Town Centre in Greensboro from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Sponsored by the [North Carolina Community Action Association](#) (NCCAA), the event will be jointly hosted by [Alamance County Community Services Agency, Inc.](#) (ACCSA) and [Welfare Reform Liaison Project, Inc.](#) (WRLP). The Big Pop Up is a community-wide drive-through event that provides families in need with various food, home goods, and other items. NCCAA launched the event last year to help meet the needs of families struggling because of the pandemic. Since that time, the organization, recognizing a significant post-pandemic need has sponsored six pop-up events in various locations across the state. The April 12 event will be the first co-hosted by two community action agencies.

“The past two years have been economically devastating to many of the families that both agencies serve,” said Bernita Sims, executive director, WRLP. “Community action has historically assisted our most vulnerable populations. By partnering with ACCSA, we hope to broaden our reach to support those most in need.”

The Big Pop Up is open to the public at no cost on a first-come, first-served basis. During the event, individuals must remain in their vehicles at all times. Vaccinated and masked Community Action staff and volunteers will place items in car trunks or truck beds.

“This pandemic continues to hit our community hard,” said Annette Orbert, executive director, ACCSA. “Families are still hurting, and we are hoping this event will offer some aid. This is what Community Action Agencies do to serve our communities. This is Community Action in action. That’s what it’s all about.”

## Talking to the media—Interview skills

An interview is a good opportunity to get coverage and spread your advocacy messages.

### Know who you're talking to

- Get to know the journalist or interviewer.
- Get to know their publication or program.
- Work out who their main audience is.

### Know what you want to say

- Work out your key messages (probably no more than three).
- Prepare an introduction and finishing statement.
- Prepare some 'soundbites'—memorable phrases that will help the audience remember your important points.
- Know your facts, figures and personal stories, and remember where the facts have come from. You may be challenged.
- Ask the journalist to tell you what the questions will be.

### Practice

- Practice saying your key messages.
- Get friends or colleagues to give you a test interview.
- Think of the difficult questions you might be asked.
- Practice 'bridging'—taking whatever question comes at you and answering with one of your key messages.
- Learn from every interview. If it doesn't go well, don't be hard on yourself.
- Ask for feedback.
- Learn from what you did well and from your mistakes and do better next time!

### Be professional during the interview

- Remember the three Cs: confidence, clarity and control.
- Get your key messages in early.
- Don't get flustered—handle your interviewer calmly and with courtesy.
- Don't use a lot of jargon and complicated language.
- Don't try to bluff.
- Round off by repeating your key messages.

Having said all that – be human. Being authentic and passionate is more important than giving the perfectly polished interview.

# Social Media Engagement

Social media presence is an important part of advocacy—not only for your legislators, but for your agency and your community. Following your local legislators will help you get to know what they care about.

If your agency doesn't already have them, please consider creating social media accounts. Dedicated social media channels allow for more detailed content, direct communication with your audience, and an online community around issues affecting low-income families. Below is platform-specific guidance and general tips for better online engagement, which can lead to better legislative engagement.

## **Social media is a conversation. Don't...**

- Overload your message with too many issues that might take away from your core advocacy messages.
- Exhaust yourself. Try to choose one or two main platforms for your advocacy and use other social media to support or direct attention there.
- Be aggressive in your social media posts. Things can be misinterpreted online. Re-read what you write before you post it to make sure you come across as you would hope.
- Use jargon or slang. It can complicate or weaken your message.
- Expect to build an online community too quickly.
- Take too long to respond to people. Social media thrives on live conversations.
- Automate everything. It can be convenient but use some variety across your platforms to keep things fresh.
- Use social media to advertise.
- Let untrue or negative stories take root. Don't ignore them. News travels super-fast online, so step in quickly and make sure your side of the story is heard.

## Platform-Specific

**Twitter** is perfect for short updates and highlighting achievements in your work. Tweet frequently—at least once per week—to build follower engagement and validity. The account doesn't have as much of an impact if the most recent update is from several months ago. Although photos aren't required in a tweet, posts that include pictures or graphics tend to attract more attention.

**Instagram** can be utilized for longer posts, agency milestones spotlights, and staff and volunteer profiles. Choose one project per month (frequency can change depending on volume of outputs) and dedicate an entire post to explaining the project and its impact to your audience. Since Instagram allows for paragraphs-long captions, the post can include quotes, summaries of the project, and any notable highlights. As with any social media platform, ensure that the photo is interesting and high quality for best results.

**Facebook** can be a catch-all; share shorter updates, profiles, Instagram posts directly onto the page, etc. **Facebook Events** is a great tool to announce what's happening at your agency in-person or virtually.

## General tips

Apply for verification. Verified accounts have a blue or gray checkmark on the page so that users know it is a legitimate nonprofit website. Each platform has different requirements to receive verification, but the application can be found in the account settings. It should only take 10 minutes.

Consider video content. The impact of the work of CAAs can make interesting and informative videos, and while making those videos is more of an investment, it can yield impressive social media engagement. Short videos (1-3 minutes) can be posted to all of the above platforms, but YouTube and TikTok are ideal platforms for maximum engagement on video content.

Please ensure that your agency is following NCCAA on social media:

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NCCCommAction>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/NCCCommAction>

**Advocacy starts at home. Please engage your coalitions and partners to advance the conditions in which low-income people live, while making our communities better for all people. We must do this work collectively at all levels local, state, and federal.**

