

# ADOPTION ADVOCATE

Chuck Johnson, *editor*

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## Adoption Advocacy Toolkit

BY MEGAN LESTINO

**A**t National Council For Adoption (NCFA), we know that the voices of those who are adopted, adoptive parents, birth parents, and the professionals who make the work possible are invaluable and credible voices for adoption. Many of you are advocating already in important ways working to promote positive changes that benefit everyone touched by adoption. Many others would be willing to speak out if only they knew how or where to target their talents and efforts.

We at NCFA believe that anyone can be an effective advocate for children and families when equipped with the right resources and information. To facilitate your advocacy efforts, we have created this toolkit to help you organize and advocate on the adoption issues you care about. We have talked to some of our friends in the adoption community – advocates, adoptive parents, adoption professionals, and those who work in the government – to gain their insights on the most effective strategies. It takes many voices, but we know that together we can bring about positive

*Special thanks to all of our advocacy expert friends who provided specialized tips out of their depth of experience and expertise including:*

*Mary Boo, North American Council on Adoptable Children; Barb Collura, RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association; Christen Glickman, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute; Bethany Haley, Office of Representative Trent Franks; Chuck Johnson, National Council For Adoption; Nicole Skellenger, MLJ Adoptions; Robin Sizemore, Hopscotch Adoptions; Kathleen Strotzman, Global Alliance for Children; Tom Velie, New Beginnings International Children's & Family Services.*



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change for children, birth parents, adoptive families, and everyone interested in or touched by adoption.

## Your Voice Matters

One of the first questions that often comes up in advocacy is: “Can my voice matter?” I get lots of questions from people who are nervous or even afraid to speak out, people who are concerned by their lack of advocacy experience or expertise. I actually think these concerns are a good sign—they mean that a person is conscientious and committed to doing a good job addressing issues important to them.

If you are willing to use your voice, learn just a little, and commit yourself to follow-up, you can be an extraordinary advocate. And that brings us back to the first question: “Can your one voice matter?” Let me make this very clear: Your voice and your opinions can absolutely make a huge difference. Congressional staff have told me on many occasions that they have acted because of the compelling story and persistence of just one of their constituents to draft legislation and pass laws. We also regularly hear that only a few calls received by a Congressional office can be compelling and make a huge difference. Make no mistake: Your voice definitely matters! I hope the tips shared here can help you use that voice well.

## Legislative Advocacy

Reaching out to your Members of Congress is one of the most common forms of advocacy. Many of these same processes can be used to connect with those in your State legislature, or other federal or state government policymakers or officials positioned to act.

### 1. Getting Connected

You can find your personal Representative or Senators’ contact information by visiting [www.govtrack.us](http://www.govtrack.us) (click “Members of Congress”). You can visit them in person in their DC office or district offices. There are always staff members available to meet with constituents. You can also meet with them at local events or town hall meetings, or invite them to participate in events you are hosting as a way of building connections.

The House member who directly represents your district and the two Senators who represent your state are a great place to start. It is also important, though, to think beyond them and investigate which Members of Congress might have important interests or assignments that impact the issue you are advocating for. A few things to look for:

- **Committee Assignments:** Every Member of Congress has committee assignments. It may be important to get to know the Members of the committees that will review your issue. If a bill already exists, you can look up the committee assignments at [www.congress.gov](http://www.congress.gov). You can also generally predict, depending by specific issues what committees a piece of legislation is likely to be referred.
- **Caucuses:** Most Members of Congress join Caucuses or Coalitions that unite around issues they are concerned. Members of Coalitions related to your issue are likely to engage and be interested on your thoughts to an issue they also care about. A few to be aware of are the Congressional Coalition on Adoption (CCAI), the Congressional Caucus on Orphans and Vulnerable Children, the Senate Caucus on Foster Care, and the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth.
- **Personal Connections:** There are many Members of Congress with personal connections to adoption in their own families. For many, this is an issue close to their heart and one they might be especially glad to know about and enthusiastically support.
- **Past Interactions:** Look up Members of Congress who have supported bills on similar issues in the past. They might be willing to provide support on your issue, too.

Initially, you can connect by phone, email, or in person. An in-person connection – at least to help start a relationship – is especially valuable whenever possible!

When you make the first call:

1. Ask for the person that handles the issue(s) you are calling about; for example: adoption, foster care, child welfare, education, medical needs, etc.
2. Make an appointment for a meeting or schedule a call with that person.
3. When calling, if no one is available, leave a detailed message with your contact information and ask for an email address to send a written message.

I would encourage you to avoid using Members of Congress “Contact Us” buttons on their websites. It is best to make a personal contact and speak with someone directly. Often, responses to those go to a general inbox which can cause delays or not reach the best staff contact. They may be answered by general correspondence staff when the best person to reach is the person specializing in your issue. Connecting to the right person can make all the difference! It takes a little extra time, but it is worth the extra effort to get a good response from the most appropriate and informed staff member.

### Advocacy Tip!

*Make sure the solution you are looking for is actually something that legislator has the jurisdiction to change.*

– Barb Collura, RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association

### Advocacy Tip!

*Know the interests and leanings of who you are talking to and frame your presentation to their way of thinking, while still staying true to the facts.*

– Chuck Johnson, National Council For Adoption

## 2. Preparing for a Meeting

If advocacy is new for you, it is important to be prepared. There are many ways to prepare and make the most of your meeting, call, or correspondence. One way might be to ask a friend to let you have a practice meeting with them. You can ask someone with advocacy experience who might be able to help guide you.

Whether or not you do a practice meeting, it is imperative to have a plan. Think about what you are going to say, why it's important to you, and what you're going to ask for. Find a way to say it all concisely and clearly. You do not have to cover every detail in your first meeting, so telling your own story and the reason an issue is important to you can be a great way to get started.

People often become advocates because they have a personal connection to an issue. This is very often the case with adoption. You might be an adopted person, an adoptive parent, or a passionate professional who has committed their life to this work. Practice can be essential to determining which are the most important details of your story to share in order to be persuasive. When talking about our own lives, people have unique reactions – sometimes, because we are connected to and passionate about an issue, we might overshare details that are not helpful or essential to the issue – and that can be a distraction. That is why practicing with another person and asking for feedback can be so helpful.

## 3. First Meetings

Introduce yourself and your concern. Be friendly – and respectful, even if you are advocating a position the Congressional office might not support. Take a few moments to get to know the person with whom you are meeting. It is likely they will be your new partner in advocacy to help meet your goals or you may convert them to your way of thinking. You want to start building a relationship and a conversation that you hope will continue over time, not just get through a meeting and check it off your list.

**Sample script:** *Hi, it's so nice to meet you. Thank you for your time! My name is Janet from Detroit, Michigan. My husband Joe and I are foster parents in the process of adopting, and we're here to talk about the Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act. Before we get started, we'd love to get to know you better. Where are you from? How long have you worked in Senator Jones's office? What are the issues you work on most often? Are you familiar with the issue that we want to discuss?*

### Advocacy Tip!

*If you're sharing a personal story, make sure you prepare in advance. Meet with someone who can listen to your story and help you figure out: 1) which elements of your story are most compelling and relate to your advocacy goals, 2) what information is too private or complicated to share, and 3) what data and other background information will help policymakers view your personal story as part of a larger issue that needs to be addressed.*

– Mary Boo, North American Council on Adoptable Children

### Advocacy Tip!

*So...you or your clients need legislative intervention. Don't wait until you need help to make a friend at the state or federal level. Stay engaged with our legislators, sign up for their newsletters, compliment them (when they do a good job), and visit them whenever possible.*

– Tom Velie, New Beginnings International Children's & Family Services

Don't rush the friendly "getting to know you" questions. Remember, your goal is to build a relationship with the staffer/office that you want to help advocate your issue over time. Stay friendly. Be memorable. Be kind. Share common state experiences. People remember people. You will get more than one chance to share information, but you only get one chance to make a friendly first impression. A bonus is, knowing the person is friendly can help ease nerves so you can move on to share your expertise calmly and confidently.

#### 4. Educate

Members of Congress and their staff are responsible for a number of issues. If they are not already aware of your concern, it doesn't mean they don't care. In fact, they might be grateful you have showed up with the expertise to help them solve this problem. Ask how much time they have and use your time accordingly. It's okay if a meeting is brief, particularly if it leads to future opportunities to engage with the person or the office. Advocacy always takes persistence! An introduction opens the door for more conversation. So, don't let a brief meeting feel like a closed door – it can be just the opposite.

Be concise and informative with your information. Use personal stories. If not your own, tell the story of someone you know, work with, or know about. Personalizing an issue makes it more relatable and more memorable. You want your great information and compelling points to stick in their minds!

It is also helpful to provide them with a handout summarizing your concern that includes contact information for follow up questions. (This can also serve as a reminder and resource to learn more about your concern.) More information will follow below on how you can create (or utilize existing) resources later in this article.

**Sample script:** *Thanks for taking time to meet with us today. I'm sure you have a busy schedule!*

*Right now, the adoption tax credit exists, but unfortunately, it doesn't really benefit families like ours with moderate incomes. Janet stays home and does the important work of caring for our kids. They are ages 1 and 3 and because of the hard things they faced before they came to us, they have some special needs that require extra attention and love and a lot of appointments. It's families like ours that this credit would really make a difference for. For example, we know that Jane, our 1-year-old, will need a wheelchair in the next few years. Our home isn't wheelchair-accessible and it will be costly to make sure that our home and vehicle can be a safe and welcoming place for Jane.*

#### Advocacy Tip!

*Try to be flexible as you may meet with someone other than who you originally planned, and you may have to meet in the hallway since congressional office space is limited. Do not let these circumstances deter you from your goal of educating Members of Congress on the barriers that remain for children in need.*

– Christen Glickman, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

#### Advocacy Tip!

*Make it personal. By and large, Members of Congress and their staff work on the hill because they want to help people. The more you can show how a policy (or lack thereof) impacted your life or the lives of those you are there to represent, the more likely it is to motivate them to act. And if they do, like your momma said — remember to say thank you. It can go a long way.*

– Kathleen Strottman, Global Alliance for Children

*Not only could the credit make a big difference for us, it makes a huge difference for other families with low to moderate incomes – the ones most likely to adopt from foster care. That’s important for a few reasons:*

- 1. The most important reason is that more kids will be able to have forever families. Common sense and science tell us that permanency is so important to healthy child development.*
- 2. It costs the government far more to pay for a child’s care in foster care than to support adoptive families through a one-time credit. It varies from state to state, and based on a child’s needs but some conservative estimates say it costs around \$47,000 to maintain a child in state care for a year – and that can go on for many years. A \$13,000 tax credit seems like a good investment for big savings.*
- 3. Family pays off in the long-term. Youth who age out of care face hard situations, often with major social costs. They are more likely to face homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, early pregnancy, incarceration, and are less likely to graduate from high school or pursue higher education.*
- 4. We also know that the families most often adopting from foster care don’t always receive the full benefit of the adoption tax credit. If the credit doesn’t benefit them, kids don’t benefit and the government remains responsible for the hardship to kids and the costs that come with their care.”*

At some point, it is likely you’ll get a question you don’t have the answer to. Don’t panic! That can actually create a great opportunity for follow-up. Just say: “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and let you know. What is the best way for me to get that information to you?” Be sure to get contact info and respond or ask an expert to help you respond.

Sometimes Members of Congress or staff may disagree on an issue. That can be hard, but do not consider it a defeat. Instead, be friendly and ask why. Ask what exactly they disagree on and what they think better solutions are. Sometimes disagreement is a barrier, but sometimes it can lead to a healthy discussion that may change a few minds, or at least make both parties a little more aware of the other person’s position – and a little less resistant. Remain respectful, curious, and learn as much as you can about the other side’s position. It might be a misunderstanding or only a small part of your concern they disagree with. Even if it is a complete disagreement, that’s okay – it’s good to know when to invest more time and when to move on. They might be a perfect partner for something else in the future, and they may be less likely to actively oppose something if they at least understand a little better why you are passionate about adoption. Kindness in the midst of disagreement is a positive memory to leave them with.

### *Advocacy Tip!*

*Even if the Member or their staff seem to disagree with your position, be positive; they may be able to help in the future and even if they can’t be supportive now, they may be less likely to oppose your concern if you establish a good rapport.*

*– Christen Glickman, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute*

## 5. Advocate

Advocacy and education will have much overlap, but great advocacy requires that you ask for something. Be clear when you do. Think: who, what, when, where, and why this will help. (The “why” is the great education on your concern.)

It can be as simple as this: “I would like you to contact Frank (who) at Senator Jones office (where) and tell them you want to cosponsor (what) the “Adoption is Awesome” bill by June 17th (when.)”

**Sample script:** *Please cosponsor the Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act. The bill number is S. 950. You can become a sponsor by calling the office of Senator Blunt. Lauren is his staffer working on this issue. Is there any more information I can provide that will help your office commit to sponsoring this bill? Will it be ok if I follow up with you in 2 weeks to see if you have had a chance to discuss this in your office? What's the best way to reach you – do you prefer phone or email?*

## 6. Follow Up

It seems simple and we all mean to do it, but when we get back to the everyday blur of life, it is easy to forget the follow-up after a call or meeting. Just like it is easy for them to go to the next meeting and forget about your important concern, compelling story, and clear ask! Do not let them forget you by not following up. Schedule it on your calendar to send a follow-up email or call by the next day. You can even write a thank-you note in advance that you can just put final edits in, and press send later. Do whatever it takes to be sure that follow-up really happens.

- Thank them for their time.
- Answer any questions they had or let them know you're looking into it (if you need a little more time to find an answer).
- Attach any resources you provided in the meeting, as a digital copy is often easier to keep track of.
- Ask if they have any other questions or other things you can help with.

Follow-up often needs to happen more than once! The first email is just a thank-you. The next email might be to share research or, later, a check to see if they have any questions about the research. Then, you might send a new resource or share an update in your story. The next is to ask if they are ready to cosponsor and if you can help them get any further information to do that.

**Sample script:** *Jeremy, thanks so much for taking the time to meet with my husband and me yesterday. We were so glad to meet a fellow Duke fan! It turned out to be a*

*really exciting day. We got to meet with you and after meeting with you we learned that we got a court date to finalize the adoptions of our kiddos!*

*We wanted to follow up to answer your question about statistics on outcomes for youth who age out of care. I've attached here some research and a factsheet on that subject. I also reattached the handout we left behind with you in case it might be helpful for you to have an electronic copy. Let me know if you have any questions or if I can get you any more information that might help!*

*Warmly, Janet and John*

Remember, follow-up takes dedication. The goal of good advocates is to build a lasting relationship that will lead to results, not just have a single meeting. Be polite and persistent. It is okay to resend an email that you don't get a reply to after a few days. Don't say: *I haven't heard from you in X days or this is the 12th time I sent this email.* Just copy it into a new email and try again. They are busy and will likely remember receiving it before without having to be told so. Respect goes a long way and many will be grateful for a reminder, particularly if done with kindness.

## Creating Great Resources

### Factsheets

It is helpful to provide a brief visual aid sharing some of the essential facts related to your issue of advocacy. Often, these are one-page documents called factsheets. You don't have to be a graphic designer to design a compelling factsheet or resource. There are a few questions a good resource will help answer:

- **What is the problem?** Give a brief description of your concern. Share some brief, compelling statistics about this concern. Who does it affect? How many people? In what way? Why should there be change?
- **What is the solution?** Address what you would like to see done to change your problem. Ask for them to help with legislation, co-sponsor existing legislation, or include a concern in existing legislation.
- **Where can I learn more?** Share links or citations to other resources with more in-depth analysis.
- **Who can help me learn more?** Provide your own contact information or the information of any organization or group who might be leading advocacy on an issue. Include individual and organization names, telephone numbers, contact email addresses, and, if one exists, a website where resources might be available.<sup>1</sup>

### Advocacy Tip!

*Refuse to give up! Keep meeting (a personal connection is really important), calling, emailing, and organizing for as long as it takes to succeed.*

— Bethany Haley, Legislative Assistant, Representative Trent Franks

<sup>1</sup> Check out some sample factsheets here: <http://www.adoptioncouncil.org/files/large/a31cbd86b6c9a4c>

Or here: <https://adoptiontaxcreditdotorg.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/atcfactsheet.pdf>



## Social Media

Social media can be a great tool both to communicate with legislators and policymakers and to help spread the word to the public about your concerns. Communicate with your Members of Congress in positive ways and when you disagree (just do so respectfully!) by tagging them in your comment on an issue. Don't just ask for things, remember to thank them when they take an action on your behalf.

Social media can also be a great way to spread the word and encourage others to understand your concern and join you in advocating. Infographics, photos and visual aids can be a great way to do this! Modern apps and services make it very easy to build simple infographics, images, or memes that can help compellingly relay your message. You can create some really attractive shareable resources even if you don't have a great deal of experience designing graphics.

## Raising Awareness & Grassroots Advocacy

There are endless ways you can raise awareness and build momentum around an issue. Be creative – any way you connect with people is a great way to spread the word. Grassroots advocacy can sound somewhat intimidating, but many effective campaigns begin in simplicity. My first action of grassroots advocacy was a call to my grandma. Shortly after I begin working at NCFA, I was catching up with Grandma and she asked if there was anything she could help with. Grandma was great at talking on the phone. So I gave her a bill number and explained an issue to her – and within a week, her representative had reached out to me to get more info and ultimately signed on as a co-sponsor.

Grassroots advocacy can be just as simple as using the networks you are already a part of. You would be surprised how willing friends and family are to make a simple call for you when you put the right tools in their hands to do so. You can also connect with pre-existing networks that are engaged on related issues. Adoptive parents might be members of support groups or ministries. Adopted or foster youth may have resource networks with which they are connected. Adoption professionals often have newsletters or events for the adoptive families they work with. A great place to start is with groups that already exist and care about similar issues. You can use these issues to raise awareness and to ask for help in calling their legislators.

## Advocacy Tip!

*Perhaps my generation is considered to be somewhat 'behind' when it comes to social media, but I'll share a few suggestions. 1) Don't carry out a negative campaign against someone or something without careful thought, 2) Respect the other person's opinion—even when you don't like their "comment" to your post, and 3) don't forget that personal letter writing can be a real winner.*

– Tom Velie, New Beginnings  
International Children's & Family  
Services

## Advocacy Tip!

*Newsletters or mass emails can be a great place to inform families about an issue needing advocacy. It's important that the issue is presented in a concise manner for families that only want the highlights. However, the communication should also contain links to regulations and articles for families wishing to dive deeper into the issue. Informed families are the best advocates.*

– Nicole Skellenger, MLJ Adoptions

It is important to remember that people are the most likely to act if you give them easy resources to do so. So if you have created a factsheet, written a script, or read a resource that is helpful, pass that along to others. You don't want to overwhelm people with information, but you do want to make it easy for them to share and pitch in. Don't feel like you are being demanding by giving them too many specifics or tools. Know that you are helping make the process easier for them.

## Building Coalitions

Coalitions require a commitment of time, connection, and sometimes compromise, but can pay off in important ways. Some of the benefits of coalition work include:

- Sharing the workload
- Showing the support of multiple individuals and organizations
- Diverse expertise
- Mutual support for draining and personal work

NCFCA is a partner organization in a variety of coalitions. We've found that great, productive coalitions do the following:

- Agree on clear, common goals from the beginning and stick to them.
- Set a regular meeting time.
- Keep and share meeting minutes and agendas to communicate goals, report tasks committed, and check back on progress over time.
- Assign tasks with deadlines and hold participants accountable.
- Recruit individuals with diverse skills. (Some factors to consider: advocacy experience, organizational skills, legal expertise, subject matter expertise, and ability to do research or help create resources.)

## State Advocacy

Many laws and policies related to adoption are made at the state and county level. NCFCA fields many questions on what the difference is between state and federal advocacy, and how to effectively advocate at both levels. Most of the information in this article is also relevant to state and local advocacy. As a national organization, many of our materials focus on federal policies.

Many laws related to infant adoption and many of the laws related to foster care and adoption from foster care are state laws. It's incredibly important to engage at the state level, where it's necessary for local

## Advocacy Tip!

*Family Reunions or other agency or organization events are a great time to reconnect to our clients and community, with a tangible reminder of the importance of protecting and supporting adoption. A reunion's opening welcome can be a time to share a very brief state of affairs and the closing remarks of the weekend can be the perfect time for a call to action. Everyone can be provided with a text containing a link or instructions to act while in the moment.*

— Robin Sizemore, Hopscotch Adoptions, Inc.

organizations to act on children's behalf. The good news is that state legislatures can be less complicated and have fewer limitations on changes. The federal process ensures a slow, thoughtful process; state advocacy can sometimes be more efficient because there are fewer requirements to accomplish change.

Here are just a few tips to help you think about state-specific advocacy:

- Get to know how your state legislature works. Most states provide some resources explaining how the legislature works, what committees exist, and how constituents are specifically represented.
- Get to know someone who is involved in state advocacy and ask for their insights on how to engage wisely.
- Get to know the individuals in your state who have already done work to improve the lives of children and families. These legislators are likely to be good allies on your issues!
- Invite legislators to meet your family or see the work your organization does. The local factor can be a huge bonus. Allowing legislators to more directly experience the needs and concerns you express may encourage them to help make change on your behalf.

## Conclusion

Regardless of your past advocacy experience, hopefully there were some tips here that would empower you to engage in advocacy for the things you care about most. We know the adoption community is a passionate, educated, and committed one. We're hopeful that many of you will use that expertise to advise policymakers at the local, state, and federal level to help make positive change for children. Don't be nervous to get involved. Your voice matters to those who represent you and your knowledge is valuable. Your willingness to speak out can mean positive change for children and families here in the United States and around the world.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan Lestino is NCFA's Vice President of Public Policy and Education. She oversees NCFA's Advancing Adoption Policies Initiative promoting NCFA's advocacy through federal and state government education and engagement, collaboration with like-minded organizations, and public awareness and engagement on adoption policy. She also manages NCFA's numerous education projects, online webinars, and other learning resources for adoption professionals and others impacted by adoption. She graduated from Regent University's School of Law in 2007, where she specialized in public interest law and especially enjoyed her studies in child advocacy and human rights. Megan received her B.A. in Public Law and Government from Eastern Michigan University in 2004.



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