



“We Are Not Just a Band-Aid”: How Homeless Service Providers in Chicago Carry out Policy Advocacy

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Homeless service providers in Chicago are a diverse group of organizations. They serve women, men, and families, the chronically homeless and those escaping domestic violence, those needing emergency shelter and those looking for supportive housing. They are located in all different geographical regions of the city and vary from small all-volunteer outreach groups to multi-million dollar multi-service organizations. Yet despite their many differences they all work towards the same goal: to improve the well being and circumstances of the vulnerable individuals and families that they serve.

This mission is primarily carried out by providing direct services to those in need, but another way many of these organizations serve their clients is through participation in policy advocacy. Involvement in policy advocacy, by which we mean efforts to influence government officials or other powerful stakeholders on behalf of the homeless population in general, helps these organizations address the economic and political inequalities that often disadvantage their clients while providing important feedback to policymakers about how policies are working and what emerging problems need addressing. As government programs are increasingly carried out by nonprofit organizations, advocacy by on-the-ground providers can help ensure that policies are sensitive to current needs and programs are carried out with appropriate levels of support. Advocacy can have a significant payoff, then, both in terms of improved policymaking and in terms of increased stability of funding streams. Previous research has demonstrated, however, that not all organizations choose to engage in policy advocacy and that the degree of participation varies widely among those that do.

Over the past year researchers at the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration have been talking to the executive directors of homeless service nonprofits located in the City of Chicago in order to learn more about their involvement in policy advocacy. We did this with several questions in mind. First, how active are homeless service providers in conducting policy advocacy? What motivates the organizations that are involved and what do they hope to get out of it? Second, how do organizations balance involvement in advocacy with their direct service provision? Does involvement in advocacy take needed resources away from services, or do managers see advocacy as a contribution in its own right? Third, do certain features of organizations—for example, high dependence on government funding or high rates of collaboration with other organizations—help or hurt advocacy involvement? If so, why?

A secondary purpose of this project was to see not only how and why homeless service organizations participate in policy advocacy, but also how they define advocacy, and what types of advocacy activities they most frequently participate in. Are they concerned about appearing too “political?” How well do they understand the IRS rules around lobbying and are those regulations a barrier to advocacy involvement? Finally, what can be done to facilitate their involvement and help boost effectiveness? This report is intended to share the findings from this research with the organizations who assisted in the project, other homeless service organizations, funders, government administrators and elected officials. Our goal is to help spark conversation about common struggles, share innovative ideas, and provide assistance and information to homeless service providers who wish to strengthen their advocacy presence.

Research Methodology

For this project, we defined homeless service nonprofits as those organizations with 501(c)(3) status where at least one of the organizations three largest programs specifically focuses on serving the homeless. These organizations range from supportive services providers to food distribution centers to large multi-service housing providers. Using databases and membership lists maintained by the National Center for Charitable Statistics, GuideStar, and the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, we found 84 such organizations located in the City of Chicago that were operational at the time of this research. We selected a representative sample of 52 of those organizations, and out of those, 42 organizations were able to be contacted and agreed to participate in the project. This resulted in a response rate of 81% with data collected from approximately half of the population of homeless service nonprofits in Chicago.

In order to learn more about their activities and involvement in advocacy, in depth semi-structured interviews were held with the executive director of each organization. These interviews generally took place at the organization itself and ranged in length from 35 minutes to 90 minutes. All interviews took place between August 2008 and April 2009 and were digitally recorded and transcribed prior to coding and analysis. We sincerely thank all our anonymous respondents who so generously donated their time and shared their knowledge with us.

Organizations are concerned about rising demand, decreasing revenue, and changes in government funding priorities

Policy advocacy is a tool organizations can use to express concerns regarding issues such as the adequacy of existing services, availability of funding, and the appropriateness of select policy responses. As a first step in understanding how involved homeless service providers are in advocacy, it is important to understand what their concerns are: for their clients, for their organizations, and for homeless services in Chicago in general.

Not surprisingly, concerns about the economy were at the front of many executive directors' minds. Organizations overwhelmingly reported that they have seen an increase in requests for services, and many reported seeing entirely new populations, particularly intact families, come to their door for help. They bemoaned a lack of "true" affordable housing in Chicago, as well as an inefficient public transportation system that they saw as reducing opportunity for their clients. Many expressed desire to make the general population as well as policymakers more aware of the large increase in service demand that they were seeing everyday.

Adding to their concern, the increased demand for services has been coupled with declining revenue for many organizations. Government contracts are being cut, particularly for supportive service providers, and individual donations were down for many organizations. Many leaders also worried that private foundations, being hit by the same recession, would reduce the size of awards they made to human service organizations. As one director stated, "the money is shrinking, but the need is growing." Thus, concern about maintaining resources and saving government funding streams, in particular, drove the advocacy agendas of many organizations.

Another major concern was changes in government funding priorities as a result of Chicago's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. This plan, now in its 6th year, is working toward moving individuals and families into permanent housing as quickly as possible and reducing reliance on emergency services. Many organizations, including the majority who were supportive of the plan "in theory," expressed frustration about how the plan has been implemented. There was broad concern that not enough money was available for the supportive services necessary to make the plan work. Others were disappointed at the seemingly slow progress in creating permanent housing units. Many felt that with the current problems in implementation more evaluation needed to be done. Other organizations, however, expressed concern with the plan in general, arguing that it could never succeed as written and was not reflective of the reality of day-to-day service provision. Many of these respondents felt that emergency services would always be necessary and that cuts in that area had been too drastic. As the implementation of the plan has affected the finances of many organizations, many directors felt the need to become involved with the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness (which oversees the plan as well as coordinating the city's funding application to HUD—the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), and advocate for their programs both within the Alliance, and in conjunction with the Alliance.

Almost all organizations are involved in advocacy, but barriers still exist

Perhaps partially due to the many concerns expressed by executive directors, we found very high rates of engagement in policy advocacy among homeless service providers in Chicago. Only three organizations out of the 42 we interviewed were not involved in policy advocacy in any way, meaning that 93% did participate. This percentage is much higher than has generally been revealed in large-scale surveys. However, the depth of each organization's participation varied much more widely. While some organizations limited their activities to occasional conversations with their alderman, others regularly make the trip to Springfield, collaborate with other service providers on advocacy activities, and frequently engage with their legislators.

In most organizations, the executive director heads up the organization's advocacy efforts. This is often by default because other staff members are perceived as busy serving clients and the executive director is serving as the public "face" of the organization anyway. Unfortunately, because executive directors are very busy with other tasks as well, reliance on this one individual often holds organizations back from being as involved as they would like. Some organizations that were committed to a larger advocacy presence resolved this problem by involving program directors in advocacy as well. In those organizations, program directors often had responsibility for going to advocacy meetings related to their area, although they were still less likely than the ED to have contact with legislative officials. A handful of organizations resolved the advocacy staffing problem by having interns work on policy advocacy tasks. This was seen as a large benefit to organizations with a small staff:

Just so you know it [advocacy] is something that we've tried to be more involved with recently. Because we're fairly small, we don't have a lot of staff... So we've been using interns actually to do some of this work and to work with our clients and to sort of get them involved. And so that's been a really good thing.

Many organizations we talked to mentioned that they wanted to be more involved in policy advocacy, but two issues in particular held them back: time and resources. When human service providers participate in advocacy, they must do so while simultaneously providing services to clients, maintaining relationships with their community, and raising funds. As one respondent stated, it is a very difficult task:

I mean, we [service providers] have a dual role. We have to push the envelope in terms of social change, and then we have to make sure that the work that we do gets done... And so, that means that we have to make sure that we're adequately resourced to do the work, and then also to push the envelope. And it's very hard to do.

A large percentage of the organizations interviewed said that they wanted to engage in more policy advocacy activities, but simply did not have the time. For the executive directors of these organizations, there simply isn't enough time to manage the organization and participate in policy advocacy as well:

[We] could be a lot better at advocacy, but we would say the reason we really haven't been is because we are just busy. That's really the main reason. It seems like every day we're putting out some kind of fire, whether it be funding or staff issues or, you know, being understaffed... although we know we need to do it more, we really haven't pushed for it.

Other organizations were explicit that though they saw advocacy as important, their need for resources and their direct service mission took precedence:

I mean not that I don't think advocacy isn't important, but... if I had \$50,000 I frankly would not spend it on an advocacy person. I'd put it into someone's pocket here, or mouth, or pay rent, or buy [medicine] for them. That's not the way I think we would choose to use money, honestly.

As would be expected, we found that larger organizations and those with more confidence in the adequacy of their funding were the most likely to find the time to be highly active in policy advocacy. Organizations with more funding tended to have greater access to stakeholders, more staff members (and interns), and better technology—all of which lead to "extra" resources that can be spent working on advocacy.

Multiple Motivations for Advocacy Involvement

Beyond alleviating the concerns mentioned above, we found that advocacy was often seen as a way of facilitating other goals important to the executive director. Directors reported motivations as varied as raising funds for their organization, increasing awareness about their organization or client needs, and expressing personal passion. For the most part, they felt that advocacy was an effective way of doing all of these things.

Overwhelmingly, advocacy was seen not so much as a political endeavor, but as a very pragmatic organizational strategy. The idea that policy advocacy is beneficial in obtaining resources for their organization was acknowledged either directly or implicitly by almost every advocating organization and was the primary reason why most organizations became involved in advocacy. Several organizations stated specifically that raising additional resources was their primary advocacy goal:

My assumption would be that in this day and age, any savvy executive director and senior leaders in an organization realize that they have to be involved in advocacy work to get a piece of the pie.

Advocacy has become a particularly important tool for securing organizational resources with the increased importance of government funding in homeless services. Over 83% of respondents were either partially or completely funded by the government and for these organizations interaction with government officials has become routine activity. Advocacy was seen as an important way to keep government officials connected with the activities of the organization, their successes, and their challenges. Many of these organizations engage in advocacy as a way of exerting some control over their finances so as to maintain consistent funding for their services:

Right now, we are trying to get the legislators to approve some additional money for supportive services in the state budget. Communicating with legislators is very new for us. We had to begin to consider alternative sources of funding, as some of the sources we previously had may not be there tomorrow. So we have to seek alternatives, and through the state legislator is one method.

Advocacy is not only about raising money, however. Organizations also use advocacy to increase public awareness about the needs of their clients. Sometimes these two missions are combined in that many directors who focused on raising awareness about homelessness also felt that better education on the subject would lead to increased private donations:

I think we need to change our perception of homelessness, change the face of homelessness, and I've done this in many different settings, with many different audiences. I ask people to close their eyes and picture a homeless person. And then come back and tell me what that picture is. And invariably it will be an old man, dirty, needing a shave, maybe drunk, asking for money. And then I start talking about the real homeless, a woman who is 26 years old, who probably has 4 or 5 children... she's struggling, the children are struggling, that's the people that we can work with to break the cycle of homelessness. And so when we start telling that story, we get a lot of Ah! We didn't realize that!

Other organizations participate in policy advocacy in order to meet client needs outside of the services that they themselves can provide and see it as a way of more completely meeting their mission. Although this kind of advocacy does not have any tangible benefits to the organization itself, the result can make a big difference in the lives of their clients:

For us it's primarily advocating on behalf of our [clients] for access to healthcare... We also try to advocate for affordable housing. Right across the street here, 22-unit condos are going in and we want to make sure that some of those units are affordable.

Finally, some organizations seem to be involved in advocacy due largely to the personal passion and commitment of the executive director. After all, the decision to advocate often lies with executive director. Not only is he or she the “leader” of the organization, but they are also the person with the greatest access to decision makers and stakeholders. Because it is the executive director who must take the time to spearhead the agencies’ advocacy efforts, having a leader with a personal commitment to advocacy work can greatly influence the degree to which an organization is involved. One director of an agency that, though small, was

very involved in advocacy described her role in spearheading their advocacy involvement like this: “I was an advocate before even I came to [this organization], so I was always out there doing my thing, so advocacy is in my bones.”

Government funding plays a strong role in guiding advocacy agendas

Conventional wisdom has often led people to believe that government funding might stifle policy advocacy activity among nonprofits—why would they want to “bite the hand that feeds?” Many have worried that social service providers, like the homeless service organizations we interviewed, would lose their independent voice or stay away from advocacy altogether in order to avoid potential retribution. Our findings demonstrate that the situation is much more complicated. In fact, having more government funding actually serves as an incentive for organizations to engage more deeply in policy advocacy—but that advocacy is very often focused on maintaining the funding streams the organization has come to depend on and is less focused on calling attention to client concerns.

All but two of the organizations that received government funding were involved in advocacy and all reported meeting with their elected officials, partly to talk about issues affecting their clients, but primarily to discuss funding issues, or to simply remind them they are “still around”. Many organizations were candid about the fact that these meetings are intended to serve organizational needs as well as client needs:

So I think we try to do both [change policy and obtain resources], but the first message that if you are a funder I would want . . . is [the name of the organization], and the secondary message is the needs of the population.

These organizations recognize the control that government has over their organizational stability by funding their programs, and see advocacy as a way of trying to gain some control over the funding process:

[Our reason for advocating] is self interest, ultimately. There's a lot going on at the state and federal level that really affects our programs and our funding.

There has also been a huge shift at the federal level, at least from HUD who's our primary funder, as well as at the local level with the Chicago Alliance who deals with all that HUD funding. This shift in funding is away from services, and we are primarily a service organization.

Even organizations that were primarily privately funded acknowledged that they would likely do more advocacy if they were more dependent on government funding. One respondent who felt that the time she spent raising money from private donors was the primary barrier to her organization being more involved with advocacy said:

I think if we were publicly funded then yes, we would be much more involved in [advocacy] because obviously if I were depending on state or federal money for my budget. . . I would feel that I would have to be much more vocal about public issues. Not that I don't have strong feelings about them, but that as I say, you only have so much energy to devote to whatever you're doing.

The idea that advocating with an eye towards funding was “self-interested” was not agreed upon by all of our respondents. Organizations experienced advocacy in pursuit of funding in different ways. First, many did not recognize a tension between what is good for the agency and what is good for its clients; directors of these agencies often felt that what their clients needed was increased stability of programs like the one they ran. Thus, in that view, advocacy in pursuit of funding is just as much to their clients benefit as to the organizations. Others, though, saw this as a problem that was endemic in government-nonprofit funding relationships:

So you're dealing with status quo, and then you're trying to create change at the same time. So in a way you're working in a system and then you're not working in a system. So it's always difficult, there's always a fine line you have to walk.

In walking this “fine line” many agencies emphasized that they felt they were partners with government in providing these services and saw their role as one of educating officials so that they would be more likely to understand the implications of their actions. To a large extent directors felt that government officials appreciated it when they approached them in this way. One executive director described a positive response she got from a state senator when he provided the senator with a packet of background information on the implications of a particular bill:

I'll tell you, our state senator, he said, “Thank you for giving us information. It would have taken so much time to even research it. But with you giving me this packet... I can read through it. I can ask you questions. I can meet with you. I can tell you what I like, what I don't like and then I can present it comfortably knowing that I'm capable of doing that because I've read through and I know what I'm talking about.” So they really, really appreciate it. And then you have to have relationship with them. You can't have someone, “Here. You need to do this and this and this.” “Well, who are you? I don't even know you” you know?

As indicated in the previous quote, overwhelmingly, agencies do not see their relationships with government officials as adversarial; rather, they work hard to maintain positive relationships that grow over the years. Many even talked about officials as being friends:

One of the things that we have done, and I think where a lot of agencies make a mistake is they do not establish a good relationship with the local HUD people. So, we have phenomenal relationships with the Regional Director for HHS, the Regional Directors for HUD, and the program staff. I mean, HUD came out and did a monitoring visit for our shelter, a couple weeks ago, and when the Program Officer came through the door, it's like, “Oh, how's your baby,” you know, we know them... I think that has always proven to be very beneficial for us.

To that end, most organizations felt that government representatives tried hard to be responsive to the needs of local providers and believed that the officials wanted to do the right thing. Mayor Daley, in particular, was given high marks as someone who was invested in their work. They knew that these officials were constrained by time and by their own budget constraints and in general believed them to be doing the best they could:

I just always felt like, first of all, we're all in this together. Our senator, our alderman, our mayor, want this to be a better city. And so if you can look at it as partnerships rather than, “I'm doing this and just leave me alone – send some money and leave me alone,” I think that that's helpful.

There was a darkside to this relationship, however. Many organizations mentioned that making sure to keep certain government officials happy was “part of the game” and chalked this up to the way politics work in Chicago:

You have to have your alderman behind you, so we have very much networked with our alderman in terms of where we're building property--will they fight for us on the floor. If the alderman approves it you're gonna get it. It's just the rules of Chicago.

While some directors, like the one quoted above, were not particularly bothered by this arrangement, others were frustrated that government officials expected a patronage relationship that they felt uncomfortable with:

Especially around election time, the politicians pass out literature, or things like, “we'll get your clients work,” and I'm like, wait a second. We already do work for your constituents, we provide people with affordable housing, job placement, with alcohol and substance abuse counseling and services. That's what we do for your constituents. We don't pass out literature for political campaigns, we don't allow it to be hung in our facilities, you know...some of the politicians don't understand. It's like the good ol' boy network where, you know, maybe that's the way things were done in Chicago for a long time.

Organizations participate in a wide variety of advocacy activities

Advocacy efforts are often divided into two different types of tactics. “Insider” tactics involve working directly with policymakers, such as government officials and administrators. This might mean setting up meetings with policymakers, sitting on government committees and commissions, or helping to rewrite policies. “Indirect” tactics are those that don’t require direct contact with policymakers. These include a wide variety of activities including writing letters to the editor, signing petitions, or participating in protests or rallies.

We found that most homeless service organizations in Chicago focus largely on “insider” tactics, primarily by meeting directly with elected officials, as discussed above. Their involvement in this was quite extensive and many organizations had a sophisticated understanding of the political process:

We’re involved in meetings with influentials in public agencies, and elected officials. I know all the complete roster of our city, state and federal, elected and appointed leadership. And they know me, so we have a new state senator for instance who’s a close associate of the governor. Working those relationships helped us get an increase in the supportive services line in the Department of Human Services, at least in the government’s presented budget. We are getting really good at getting to know our elected and appointed officials, and helping them to understand the scale complexity of the issue we’re facing, and getting them to become our advocates, our champions in the legislature.

To a large extent they stayed away from tactics that could be considered controversial, like protests. This was only partially because they were afraid of creating ill will with powerful stakeholders, though some organizations did mention that. To a large extent, director simply saw those activities as being ineffective:

Marches, we’re beyond marches, whoever is still doing marches is lost somewhere in the 60s. It’s a sound byte, people see the march, and things go back to where they were. Come on, get a grip, but if it makes the people who march feel good, fine... So now, what do we do to bring it into reality? Set up a series of crucial meetings with crucial players that either stand in the way, or that help in getting it done.

In order to foster relationships with those “crucial players,” the organizations that have been the most successful with advocacy efforts reported frequently picking up the phone and calling their funders (both public and private) about something other than the grant money. This could be as simple as calling and talking to them about a success story in a new program. Executive directors reported that this kind of relationship building and developed trust often led to a reciprocal helping relationship:

One of the things we’ve been able to do, and I think effectively, is when we’re talking to our private funders, as well as the city, we go beyond our grant. I’m not just picking up a phone and talking about our grant. I’m talking about anecdotal stories. I’m talking about, “Well, did you see this in the news”? Really trying to connect sort of external issues to the work that we do. I think that they appreciate that. They share themselves. I’ve had funders open up and tell me amazing things, because they feel a level of trust and community building. And I’ve had them call me for all sorts of stuff, for special focus groups, for surveys, for—you know, we want you to be at our table for the Donors Forum luncheon..... Or, there are three, four funders that I could call at the drop of a dime to get a letter of support. And there’s no convincing, or cajoling.

As alluded to in the earlier quote, foundations can also be an effective target for advocacy surrounding funding. Some organizations reported that because of the current instability of government funding, they were beginning to target private funders more:

We advocate with all of our private funders. We are much more aggressive and assertive with doing that. In fact, I’ve had a funder tell me “Why do I never need to call you? Because you’re always going to call me if something happens.” I think that’s very important... building my relationship with the [foundation] is much more important, and I’m going to get a more immediate win to that advocacy than I am with going to meet with my state senator, because that will be three years down the road, and it’s an investment... I know that that foundation advocacy will pay off in 11 months when I go for my grant renewal.

Many executive directors felt that organizations that were well-known and well-liked were more successful in their advocacy efforts than organization that were seen as agitators, or who did not have wide-spread name recognition. Indeed, many of the organizations that were the most involved in advocacy worked hard to raise their public profile and be a “name brand” organization. They agreed that this increased their access to decision makers and their political influence:

We've really developed our brand, so who our organization is—our market positioning, where we want to be. And so, as a result of having developed who we are, who our brand is, and the position we want, now we're implementing that by expanding our advocacy efforts... We are experts in our field. That is our market position.

Referencing a new program, another ED pointed out that good public relations work was a necessary precursor to successful advocacy:

We're starting out... and once we get those [programs] to run smoothly, then we can expand, and then that's where the PR comes in. And I think that goes a long way... because then the people that can change the laws see [what we are doing], and then they say, "You know what? We need to sink more money into this."

Involvement with the media is one way to increase publicity for organizations and most of the agencies we talked to did have good media contacts. Many of the organizations thought to provide us with a press packet, advertising the role of the agency to the public. In general, directors were very thoughtful about their approach to the media, acknowledging that it is important, but also recognizing that it requires work to make sure that your message is heard in the way you intend:

Any organization has to manage the media well in order to get your message out in a direct way. So when we're opening a building, when we're having a new event, we have a staff member in our development department that is central to our media relations. Generally speaking, I would say we have a positive relationship with the media.

Some of the larger organizations felt this was important enough that they hired specific individuals to handle media requests. For example, another organization pointed out that media management also requires getting out in front of a story that might capture the public's attention:

Usually the media wants to get involved if there is a big issue... then they all come with their cameras... We have a public relations person to try and get our story out there in a positive way rather than responding to some crisis that happened in the community.

As compared to insider tactics, many organizations felt that “indirect” tactics, like issuing policy reports, participating in boycotts, and writing letters to the editor, took up too much time and were not as effective. Because they are so busy, many executive directors noted that any advocacy they do must have maximum impact for minimum effort for it to be worthwhile. However, the handful of organizations with primarily private funding participated more often in these indirect tactics, partially because they were seen as a way of raising awareness among donors. Below is a quote from a director who has tried to get letters in newspapers that would help raise awareness of their organization at the same time as raise awareness about their clients needs:

Well, what I've been doing to a large extent lately is I've been trying to write letters to the... newspapers about our position about public issues. So when the CTA in Chicago afforded seniors free bus fare, I wrote a letter asking why they couldn't do the same for the disabled, because a lot of the people we have are on Social Security disability, which is very pitiful. Just last week I wrote a letter urging the community to when they're voting—that they all should vote. I urged them to think about social issues...

Clients also play a key role in advancing advocacy agendas

Many organizations were very creative about blending their direct service mission with their advocacy efforts by involving clients in policy advocacy activities. Although this strategy was often undertaken by organizations with more active advocacy programs, involving clients often served to underscore and strengthen existing advocacy efforts:

We have a client advisory committee that meets every month... So sort of through that, trying to encourage people to write letters and make phone calls about specific issues, such as the McKinney Vento Reauthorization, about the state funding for the supportive service dollars and supportive housing, the funding for the services to benefit homeless individuals through SAMSHA. Those are things that we've all been working on the past year. And we've had—we actually had a state issue where they said they received 18 letters from constituents and 8 of them were from our organization. My clients—yes, so I was excited about that.

This particular organization was able to involve clients in policy advocacy efforts through their client advisory committee. These sorts of committees are often formed to give clients more of a voice in the organizations programming and provide an opportunity to build feelings of empowerment. Most directors agreed that advocacy was very effective at giving clients a sense of power and possibility that they could change the system. One agency that involved homeless youth in advocacy felt this was particularly true for their clients:

The clients love it! Yeah. For them to have an experience ... before a decision maker and are able to speak their mind in an adult manner and get results or get positive feedback, for them I think that is a real mind-blower. I mean, it's very uplifting for them.

Another agency stated that it helped clients see that the system was open to them:

Next week we're going to be back in Springfield ... and so we always try to bring down participants... so the participants always get a chance to walk around from office to office, and introduce ourselves, drop off a packet, and talk about what's going on, and they, 99 percent of the folks that do that, come away with the feeling that they didn't know that legislators were that accessible and easy to talk to.

When clients are involved in advocacy efforts, it is often through the telling of their personal stories, which they then link to the need for programs like the one the organization provides:

We're always in city budget hearings, testifying. And a lot of that has to do [with] their personal stories. And how much [the organization] has helped them or other organizations have helped them. If that help wouldn't be there, if the funding wasn't there for them, that type of thing.

Some executive directors bring clients to meet with elected officials, in order to 'put a face on' the issue of homelessness. This was reported to be quite effective and several stated that government officials often asked after clients that they had met in the past, demonstrating that their story had stayed with them. Site visits also were highlighted as a helpful way to introduce clients to public officials and help raise the profile of an organization:

The mayor got to walk around... and then he got to go into the kitchen and talk to the graduates, and he lit up! Just lit up! You know, it's a lot of fun hearing about people whose lives were disasters, and fast forward a year of good intensive social services, and they're making money, they're paying taxes, they've reunited with their kids, they've bought a car, I mean it's like wow, this great stuff! So, the mayor lights up, he's passionate about this issue. He likes to talk about changing souls, saving people, or saving souls, transforming people.

It should also be noted that advocacy coalitions, particularly the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and the Supportive Housing Providers Association, play a key role in getting clients involved in advocacy. Many organizations, including those who do not otherwise involve clients in advocacy, reported that their clients have lobbied in Springfield with one of these groups. Many organizations stated that they really valued the

efforts of coalitions in this area because without them they probably wouldn't have the time to involve their clients to the same extent. As one executive director pointed out, "I mean, we aren't dumb, we know this is a good thing for our [clients], but we have to do it in collaboration with them because they are the experts."

Other executive directors, however, were reticent about involving clients in advocacy. This was often because they felt that putting clients in the public eye on behalf of the organization may be either exploitative or not beneficial for the client. The following respondent, while she did involve her clients in some advocacy efforts, explained why she declined to involve her clients in others:

For our agency, we don't typically go on bus trips where the Chicago Coalition will take the homeless down for lobby days. ...that's just my own personal [view] in that there are so many negative stereotypes... Our [clients] are our best spokespeople, but I tend to want to use those skills in ways that are going to highlight them and their strengths. We had a [client] who participated in a panel discussion about the homeless youth and transitional jobs, and she was on the panel. And she just made us so proud. We [clients] who go and speak at domestic violence rallies or participate in a peace march. So we do use our [clients] as advocates. But I'm just really, really careful. We always have [clients] go with staff because we want to teach them to be good solid advocates for themselves. So we don't participate in the big mass lobby.

Other directors did not involve clients simply because they believed that their clients would not want to be involved in advocacy. Many times this was because they felt clients felt ashamed about being homeless and would not want to be identified as such in public. Other directors felt that clients were so busy with the basics of survival that advocacy would just be an additional burden. Some of these clients, particularly those that struggle with mental illness and/or substance abuse, were seen as difficult to involve in advocacy or unable to participate in a way that was useful. A final concern about having clients meaningfully involved in policy advocacy is that it is very time and resource intensive. When directors considered the money and time involved in hiring someone to train clients in advocacy activities, to take trips to Springfield, or even to bring clients together at the same location to go through a training course, sometimes they felt the payoff would not be worth it.

Collaboration as an advocacy strategy

Collaboration is often thought to be a particularly important advocacy strategy as it is a relatively low-cost way to build more a more powerful advocacy presence, learn skills, and save on time and resources. The importance of collaboration for advocacy was startlingly clear in this study: we found that all of the organizations that were involved in advocacy were also involved in formal advocacy collaboration or members of organizations that advocated on their behalf. These groups included the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, the Supportive Housing Providers Association, The Lakeview Action Coalition, and the Developing Communities Project, among others. These advocacy organizations were highly valued among service providers, particularly for their willingness to tackle the advocacy tasks that service providers felt they did not have the time to do, such as engaging in more comprehensive public education campaigns, researching legislative histories, sending out email advocacy updates and spending time in Springfield with state legislators. Many organizations felt that these coalitions simplified getting involved in advocacy efforts, making it easier for them to participate:

So they've been pretty effective at getting people to be involved; via email they are very direct on who to call, what to say, here's an example of a letter. Those are really great for people like myself who are busy and just coming up with a letter just out of the blue is going to take more time that I don't always have. It's good to have a sample I can go from and go from there. So I mean ultimately, I think it's been pretty effective.

As participating in these coalitions does take time, respondents were careful to join coalitions they thought would be most appropriate for their mission and location. Some coalitions, such as the Lakeview Action Coalition, are multi issue organizations that focus on a particular neighborhood. Others, such as the Chicago Jobs Council and the Supportive Housing Providers Association (SHPA), focus on one particular issue. A typical profile for an actively engaged organization was to be involved in one issue related coalition, one neighborhood-based group, and also have strong links to both the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH)

and the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness. The wide reach of these last two organizations merits further discussion.

Although the Chicago Coalition and the Chicago Alliance are very different organizations in regards to history, mission, and advocacy posture, they each play a particularly important role in guiding the advocacy activities of homeless service providers in Chicago. Service providers are engaged with these organizations at very high rates (69% with the Coalition, 69% with the Alliance, and 62% with both) and, in general, service providers thought they each played an important coordinating role. Our findings reveal that, though distinct, their approaches were widely seen as complementary to one another.

The primary mission of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless is to organize and conduct policy advocacy that will help bring an end to homelessness in Illinois. A presence in the city for over 25 years, many organizations reported participating in the advocacy events and activities that the Coalition holds, including sending clients to Springfield on lobbying trips, contacting legislators as a result of an advocacy alert, and attending fundraising events. By and large, organizations considered the Coalition to be the local experts in policy advocacy around homeless issues and CCH was often cited for their lead role in educating organizations about policy change efforts. In fact, many organizations depend on the Coalition's expertise in advocacy in order to structure their own advocacy activities:

Well, I think our relationship with the Coalition has always been really great and to me, they are the premier advocacy organization. We do advocacy but a lot of this stuff, when it comes down to taking a look at certain initiatives or certain issues, if you will, if we know and believe that the Coalition has got a firm handle on it, then let them do it. That is their job, that is their expertise.

The Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness is much newer, formed in 2006 as a merger between the Partnership to End Homelessness (a membership organization of service providers) and the Chicago Continuum of Care (which managed the Plan to End Homelessness as well as coordinating HUD funding). This unique history means that the Alliance plays two roles: while it is the primary membership group representing homeless service providers in Chicago it also secures and administers both HUD funding and state and local homeless prevention funds. This dual role is both a strength and a challenge for the Alliance when it comes to advocacy.

Organizations felt that the Alliance played an important role in fostering collaboration between the agencies and, in general, were quick to point out that the Alliance's role is difficult and that "they wear a lot of hats." However, most organizations thought about the Alliance's role primarily as one of controlling and distributing money, and only secondarily as a larger representative of the service provider community. The Alliance does have an Advocacy Committee, which many organizations felt represented them as members, but because of the role the Alliance plays in making funding decisions, many organizations also described their participation in Alliance meetings and events as advocacy in and of itself:

Well, I mean the Alliance, you know, being involved with it is obviously very important because it's where a big chunk of our funding comes through. And it's making the decisions about what kinds of organizations or what kind of programs are going to be valued, how the rankings are going to be done. So I mean we have a very real interest in being a part of it. And then I personally want to make sure that the way we're going about it with this whole homeless system is comprehensive, it makes a lot of sense, it's valuing variety in programs.

Many respondents felt that because the Alliance is dependent upon government funding, they work more as relationship builders than as agitators or organizers. Organizations felt that the Alliance took a primarily cooperative approach, and believed that the Alliance would be more likely to try to appease funders than go against them. On the other hand, organizations perceived CCH as being more willing to engage in controversial actions and more willing to challenge the status quo, which they attributed to the fact that CCH is less tied to the city, and not dependent on government funds:

[The Chicago Alliance] is all about the nuts and bolts, it's not so much in issue advocacy, it's pretty quiet. It's pretty behind the scenes administrative advocacy...[The CCH] will go bare fisted after an issue, or a budget they think is unfairly crafted, whatever it is. And they had success on a variety of campaigns. The Alliance—it's a fine balance, and they are more tied to the city, Chicago Department of Housing, and they want to get grants from them. The Coalition doesn't have that, so they can—they're a little bit freer to say

what they think, to carry a bigger bat, take the gloves off a little. And I think that's important.

A few organizations, however, felt that perhaps the Coalition's approach was too heavy handed:

I love the Coalition... but we take a very non angry approach to advocacy here, so we feel that we do much better to always have personal relationships and friends in elected positions and to try to make the most of those and to work with those for the bigger picture to keep them informed. [This is] versus picketing, or demonstrating, and so we show up to public hearings and that type of stuff as well.

Comparing the differing approaches taken by the CCH and the Alliance, one organization described a situation in which the CCH took a directly confrontational stance with the city, while the Alliance walked a fine line between defending the city and avoiding offending their member organizations:

The city needs to be held accountable when they have a press conference, and they say this is how many number of homeless people there are, and the Coalition needs to be there to say, "Well, we've done that same counting, or informal figures and we have a number five times that." Or, if the city says, "There is no waiting list", and CCH says, "Well, all of our members say there's a waiting list." So, you know, so that's good. I think we need to hold our public entities accountable like that. Whereas, the Alliance is more likely to explain the city's numbers. "Okay, that was their count, and this is why their count is important, too." So, that's just one example that would've happened in the last year.

Regulations around lobbying are not well understood

Proponents of nonprofit advocacy and lobbying have long been concerned that many nonprofit organizations are not well-versed in the IRS rules governing lobbying activity for 501(c)(3) organizations and worry that this might serve as a chilling effect for advocacy involvement. This research revealed that confusion over the rules was indeed very common among homeless service providers in Chicago. However, these misunderstandings did not hold organizations back from participating in advocacy, and usually did not hold them back from participating in lobbying either.

Interestingly, the interviews revealed that 50% of organizations did participate in lobbying at some level, but only 24% responded in the affirmative when asked specifically if they lobbied. In other words, about half of the organizations that participated in lobbying were either unwilling to say so, or else did not understand what they did to be lobbying (even though it met the legal definition of lobbying). This difference between what they did and what they stated doing is primarily a result of two common misunderstandings. First, many were unsure about what lobbying actually was and so participated in it without knowing they were doing so. Second, many organizations felt that the term lobbying had a negative or 'slimy' connotation and simply preferred not to use it. These organizations thought of their lobbying activities as 'educational.'

In terms of lobbying regulations, many directors were unsure about the degree to which their organization could participate in lobbying, but felt that whatever they were doing, it certainly wasn't "too much." For example, only one executive director we talked to knew what the 501(h) election was (an option that provides clearer guidelines for allowed lobbying expenditures—see textbox), and he did not bother selecting it, because he felt there was no chance that they would go over the specified limits for lobbying. About half of the respondents did not participate in lobbying and most of these reported they were simply not interested in engaging in lobbying or did not have the time to go to Springfield. These tended to be the organizations who were less involved with advocacy overall. However, some directors were deterred by misunderstandings about the legality of lobbying. Overall, 21% of organizations specifically stated that they could not lobby due to their nonprofit status or because they received government funding.

Lobbying Regulations for 501(c)(3) Nonprofits

Lobbying is an effective advocacy tactic for organizations that wish to promote policy change that may benefit the organization or its clients. An organization is lobbying when they promote a position on a specific piece of legislation. Unlike other kinds of advocacy, lobbying is specifically regulated by the IRS. Here are some of the regulations governing lobbying for 501(c)(3) nonprofits:

- > Lobbying *is* legal for 501(c)(3) nonprofits. All 501(c)(3) nonprofits can lobby the government, even those who receive federal funds. However, organizations cannot lobby using those federal funds.
- > Unless they chose the 501(h) election, 501(c)(3)s may only spend an “insubstantial” amount of their budget on lobbying. As there are no clear guidelines as to what percentage of an organization’s budget may be considered ‘substantial,’ it is difficult to ascertain how much lobbying an organization can conduct.
- > To resolve this problem, organizations can choose to elect the 501(h) provision, located on IRS Form 5768. The 501(h) election provides specific expenditure limits for lobbying and further clarity about what activities count as lobbying.
- > Many activities that are sometimes considered “lobbying” do not count towards an organization’s lobbying limits. These activities include: giving technical advice to a legislative body, nonpartisan analysis of a piece of legislation, or lobbying administrative offices.
- > Electioneering, or working to elect a particular candidate for office, is prohibited for 501(c)(3) organizations.

For more information see the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest: www.clpi.org.

How can the advocacy of homeless service providers be strengthened and expanded?

This research makes clear that the two most common barriers to participation in policy advocacy are shortages of time and money. In order to overcome these barriers we found that two approaches in particular were helpful. First, when organizations collaborated on advocacy, or joined groups with established advocacy presences, like the Alliance, SHPA, or CCH, they increased the political credibility of their organization and were able to become more involved in advocacy with minimal additional costs. This may be a particularly important strategy for small to medium sized organizations that lack name recognition and for organizations new to the advocacy process as it helps them gain insight into the political process from more experienced organizations. As one director put it, “any organization that’s smart these days is going to be a part of all of those groups.”

Second, the most successful organizations tended to have multiple people in the agency involved in advocacy. Advocacy responsibilities often fall exclusively to the executive director, which necessarily limits the degree to which an organization can be involved. Going outside the executive director doesn’t always mean hiring an additional staff member, however. Many organizations make very effective use of interns, board members, and program directors. Board members, in particular, seem to be an underutilized resource in advocacy efforts, especially as they tend to be individuals who already have strong contacts with powerful stakeholders. Using front line staff to coordinate an advocacy program for clients to engage in also had a significant payoff for many organizations. As a side benefit, many executive directors reported that making sure staff and program directors are aware of policy issues and impending legislation can also help transform their understanding of their jobs, their clients, and issues that the organization faces in its larger environment.

In order to actually reduce time and resource barriers, many organizations could be more proactive in pursuing funding for advocacy. Some of our organizations were unaware that many foundations have grant programs for funding policy work or felt that money for advocacy was essentially unavailable to them:

[With] the private foundations, there’s no crossover, so for the private foundations that fund advocacy, they want to fund advocacy organizations. And the ones that provide direct services, who would really benefit from someone who is the point person for advocacy, where, whenever we get these things from AIDS Foundation, or when the Chicago Coalition says call your senator, we would actually have someone who has time to do that stuff, but no one is going to fund us for that.

Foundations could make an important contribution in helping homeless service providers become involved in policy advocacy by either providing this funding themselves, or by making sure that grantees are aware of other foundations that do provide funding for policy work. Foundations could also help by providing organizations with unrestricted funding or by providing technical assistance to grantees about how to better create benchmarks to evaluate their advocacy activities, which may help in future grant applications.

Government officials also can help homeless service providers become involved in policy discussions by recognizing the important work that homeless service providers do, being in contact with them on a consistent basis, and listening to these organization's suggestions for improving public policy. Human service agencies are essentially carrying out policy when they conduct work that the government has contracted for, and policy implementation can be smoother when their voice is in the mix. Our interviewees recognized the contribution they make and strongly felt that government officials should see homeless service providers as the on-the-ground experts in solving homelessness. As one respondent described the importance of being involved in advocacy:

I think that it's an opportunity. That's the way, that's the level at which you can really make broad changes. You can really increase access to funding or services for people and create awareness. So in the best sense, I think it's critical.

For More Information

We are happy to talk further with service providers, government administrators, funders or other interested parties about our project and findings. For more information please contact Jennifer Mosley at mosley@uchicago.edu, or Theresa Anasti at tanasti@uchicago.edu.