

Making change happen

Advocacy Tips to Get Real Results

By Niya Chari



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The 2013 Canadian Lymphedema Conference offered a unique opportunity for leaders from all of the provincial lymphedema associations, as well as members of the Partnership Working Group of the CLF, to participate in a National Lymphedema Advocacy Workshop. The Advocacy Workshop offered all of the provincial leaders the chance to share knowledge, build advocacy skills and coordinate key messages across the country for lymphedema advocacy.

The workshop identified four main issues for lymphedema advocacy; a lack of education among health professionals, a lack of awareness and information for patients and the general public regarding lymphedema, a lack of funding for new treatments, research, supplies and insurance coverage and inequitable access to diagnosis and treatment for lymphedema across provinces.

While these issues can seem overwhelming to address, in reality through targeted and well-planned advocacy, it is possible to effect real and measurable change. As a summary of the intensive 3-hour advocacy workshop, below you will find some helpful tips to get started on advocacy for lymphedema.

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Planning for advocacy

Proper planning is the essential first-step for any successful advocacy effort. When developing your advocacy strategy, consider the following:

- **What is the problem?** Carefully assess the actual need and how it is not being met by current policies or programs. Consider who is affected by the problem, what the impact is on their lives, as well as the impact on social and economic structures, such as the economy and use of government and not-for-profit services.
- **What are the potential solutions?** Identify what needs to happen to reduce or eliminate the gap between what is currently available and what needs to be implemented. Reflect on whether existing models, best practices or successes can be replicated or expanded upon to meet your needs. Consider whether changes are required at the policy level to review existing policies and programs to make it more equitable and responsive to actual need, or as an access issue, to examine the structural, economic, social and other barriers that are preventing some people from accessing, or benefiting from a policy or program. Also consider whether strategies to

better communicate or raise the profile of an existing policy or program can make it more effective in reaching the population in need.

- **What are the proposed outcomes?** Detail the tangible, measurable changes that will result from the proposed changes. Outline both the personal and individual benefits that will occur, as well as the larger systemic and governmental improvements that the changes will yield. Make sure to highlight any opportunities for potential cost-savings.
- **Who are the targets?** Ascertain the key individuals that have the authority and jurisdiction to implement changes, as well as the people and organizations that can advocate, promote or influence others to make changes. Consider both bureaucratic members, who are involved in program planning and administration and can promote internal change, as well as elected representatives involved in program planning and priority setting. Working through these questions will guide you towards developing your advocacy goals and implementing a strong and targeted advocacy strategy.

Engaging allies

For advocacy to be effective it is critical to engage and build strong relationships with the individuals, organizations and networks that will help support your advocacy goals. Some key tips to remember when working on strengthening your relationships are:



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- **Be prepared.** Always research your issue thoroughly and ensure that you have accurate and relevant facts and data to support your argument. Remember to frame the issue carefully and consider that not everyone has the same background or understanding of the issues. Your messages should always be stated in simple, concise and positive terms.



- **Get organized.** Understand the positions of both your supporters and your opponents. Aim to convert your audience by learning about their interests, and positions on related matters. Target your efforts towards your key audience.

- **Follow-up.** Ensure that you respect deadlines and send follow-up documents and information within reasonable timeframes. Seek to position yourself as a resource to others by being a reliable, consistent and accurate source of information. Remember to always thank everyone who got involved and helped in your efforts.

Communicating your message

It is also essential to know how to communicate your message effectively by understanding and connecting with your audience. Most people you will encounter will genuinely be interested in hearing your thoughts and opinions. Elected officials, in particular, are committed to making

a difference in their communities and appreciate hearing new suggestions on how to improve current policies and programs. In addition, keep in mind that for elected representatives, speaking to members of their community is a critical aspect of their position.

Generally, the people you meet will be committed to resolving problems and implementing changes for improvement. However, they will require your guidance and support. To be able to properly support your advocacy goals, they will need:

- 1 **To clearly understand the problem and the solution**
- 2 **To have a request that they are able to fulfill whether it be funding, partnership or a change in policy**
- 3 **To be able to count on you and your organization as a partner to help them fulfill your request.**

To gain the support of your audience you will need to:

- **Present a clear summary of the issue,** featuring a distinct problem and a proposed solution.
- **Demonstrate the impact and benefits of the changes you are seeking** to make so that your audience can feel that they are championing meaningful work.
- **Express how your proposed changes will benefit** constituents, program clients and patients.

- **Tell a simple story** that the audience can re-tell to illustrate the situation to colleagues and readers.
- **Frame your messages** to convey a sense of hope and opportunity.
- **Articulate how your audience can be useful** and help make improvements through concrete, specific actions.
- **Give your audience a request that they can fulfill:** Ensure that you limit your request to a single “ask.” This allows you to prioritize the issue of most importance and will allow you to more easily track your progress.
- **Ensure that the request that aligns** with their political party, foundation, or departmental priorities.
- **Provide your audience with help and support** from you to foster a sense of partnership.



Rigorous planning, strong relationship building and effective communication are the hallmarks of strategic advocacy. Implementing these handy suggestions will go a long way towards helping Canadians with lymphedema experience better awareness, understanding and greater access to treatment across provinces. 

You Are Not Alone

You have access to information, resources, contacts and support from people who know what you’re going through from their own personal experience. You have the following organizations on your side.

	Alberta: Alberta Lymphedema Association	www.albertalymphedema.com
	British Columbia: BC Lymphedema Association	www.bclymph.org
	Manitoba: Lymphedema Association of Manitoba	www.lymphmanitoba.ca
	Ontario: Lymphedema Association of Ontario	www.lymphontario.ca
	Quebec: Lymphedema Association of Quebec	www.infolympo.ca
	Saskatchewan: Lymphedema Association of Saskatchewan Inc.	www.sasklymph.ca